

[Draft; forthcoming in V. Caston, ed., *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, Vol. 62, February 2023]

Evaluative Illusion in Plato's *Protagoras*

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1. Introduction

In the late 1960's and early 1970's, a group of scientists conducted a series of experiments, which have since become known as the Stanford Marshmallow Experiments. A scientist would take a child between the ages of three and five into a room, sit them at a table, and place one delicious marshmallow chick in front of them. The scientist would then tell the child that they were going to leave the room, and that the child had a choice. They could eat one marshmallow now. On the other hand, if they waited fifteen minutes until the scientist returned, they could get two marshmallows instead. In the end, only about a third of the children were able to resist. A few of the children ate the sweet immediately, but many held out for some time, before capitulating to the lure of the marshmallow. Those who tried to resist would hide their heads in their arms, pound the floor with their feet, stare up at the ceiling, tug on their pigtails, or stroke the marshmallow as if it were a tiny stuffed animal.¹

¹ See W. Mischel and E. B. Ebbeson, 'Attention in Delay of Gratification' ['Attention'], *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 16.2 (1970), 329-37; W. Mischel, E. B. Ebbesen and A. Raskoff Zeiss, 'Cognitive and Attentional Mechanisms in Delay of Gratification', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 21.2 (1972), 204-18; and W.

What we see here appears to be a classic case of *akrasia*. Ordinarily, we would explain it as follows: the children judged that it was best to resist the marshmallow that lay before them, but were unable to control their desire for it, and therefore gave into their desire and ate the marshmallow. One might even describe them as ‘overcome by pleasure’ and ‘unwilling to do what is best, even though they know what it is’.² Readers familiar with the *Protagoras* will have noticed that, in describing the plight of these children, I quoted the account of *akrasia* that Socrates attributes to *hoi polloi* in that dialogue, an account that Socrates insists is false. He maintains that if the children knew, or even believed, that it was best not to eat the candy in front of them, they would not do so. Their decision is therefore the fault of ignorance, not weakness. What does this ignorance consist in? Socrates gives us a very specific account: just as objects of a given size appear larger when close at hand than at a distance, so proximate pleasures appear greater than those that are far off in time. The children’s error is one of poor hedonic calculus: the imminence of the pleasure from eating the marshmallow in front of them causes them to falsely

Mischel, Y. Shoda and M. Rodriguez, ‘Delay of Gratification in Children’, *Science* 244 (1989), 933-8.

² ὑπὸ ἡδονῆς φασιν ἠττωμένους (*Prot.* 352d8-e1); γινώσκοντας τὰ βέλτιστα οὐκ ἐθέλειν πράττειν (352d6-7). I use the translations in J. M. Cooper (ed.), *Plato: Complete Works* (Indianapolis, 1997) throughout, with occasional modifications; Greek texts are from the Burnet OCT’s.

overestimate its magnitude and to conclude that they can maximize their pleasure by eating the one marshmallow now rather than the two marshmallows later.

Interpreters of Plato's *Protagoras* have devoted a great deal of attention to determining Socrates' reasons for rejecting the common account of akrasia—Socrates declares that it is ridiculous, but it is controversial what its ridiculousness consists in.³ Many also raise the question of whether his treatment of akrasia does justice to its phenomenology: can it account for the feeling of inner conflict that so often characterizes

³ For discussion, see, e.g., A. G. Callard, 'Ignorance and Akrasia-Denial in the *Protagoras*', *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 47 (2014), 31-80; J. Clark 'The Strength of Knowledge in Plato's *Protagoras*', *Ancient Philosophy* 32 (2012), 237-55; M. Dyson, 'Knowledge and Hedonism in Plato's *Protagoras*' ['Knowledge'], *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 96 (1976), 32-45; D. Gallop, 'The Socratic Paradox in the *Protagoras*', *Phronesis* 9.2 (1964), 117-29; T. Irwin, *Plato's Ethics [Ethics]* (Oxford, 1995), 83-4; R. Kamtekar, *Plato's Moral Psychology [Moral]* (Oxford, 2017), 40-7; T. Penner, 'Socrates on the Strength of Knowledge: *Protagoras* 351B-357E' ['Socrates'], *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 79 (1997), 117-49 at 126-7; G. Santas, 'Plato's *Protagoras* and Explanations of Weakness', *The Philosophical Review* 75.1 (1966), 3-33; C. C. W. Taylor, *Plato: Protagoras [Protagoras]* (Oxford, 1991), 181-6; G. Vlastos, 'Socrates on Akrasia' ['Akrasia'], *Phoenix* 23 (1969), 71-88; and D. Wolfsdorf, 'The Ridiculousness of Being Overcome by Pleasure: *Protagoras* 352B1-358D4' ['Ridiculousness'], *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 31 (2006), 113-36.

our experience of akrasia?⁴ In this paper, I intend to explore a different problem. I want to take a closer look at Socrates' account of what actually occurs in supposed cases of akrasia, of the evaluative error he attributes to the would-be akratic. His account is, in fact, puzzling. Consider again our children and their marshmallows. On the face of it, it seems quite extraordinary to propose that what is going on is that the children judge that eating one marshmallow now offers *more pleasure* than eating two later. Why, then, does Socrates make this claim?⁵ Getting to the bottom of this is crucial, since Socrates'

⁴ See, e.g., D. Devereux, 'Socrates' Kantian Conception of Virtue' ['Kantian'], *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 33.3 (1995), 381-408 at 389-96; T. Penner, 'Plato and Davidson: Parts of the Soul and Weakness of Will' ['Plato'], *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 16 (1990), 35-74 at 67-71; N. Reshotko, *Socratic Virtue: Making the Best of the Neither-Good-nor-Bad [Virtue]* (Cambridge, 2006), 74-91; and R. Singpurwalla, 'Reasoning with the Irrational: Moral Psychology in the *Protagoras*' ['Reasoning'], *Ancient Philosophy* 26 (2006), 243-58 at 247 and 253.

⁵ Moss raises a closely related problem, why the desire for pleasure, more than other desires, should be susceptible to distance illusions ('Pleasure and Illusion in Plato', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 72 (2006), 503-35 at 509-10). According to Moss, the solution, which Plato recognizes in the *Gorgias* and *Republic*, is that the desire for pleasure is non-calculative, and hence unquestioningly accepts the appearance that proximate pleasures are better. Moss claims that this solution is unavailable to Plato in the *Protagoras*, since there, he takes the desire for pleasure to be responsive to the measuring

alternative explanation of the supposed phenomenon of akrasia stands at the heart of his denial of akrasia in the *Protagoras*.

On the standard interpretation of the *Protagoras*, the error is simply calculative. Henceforth, I shall refer to this as the *traditional interpretation*.⁶ Recently, several interpreters—notably, Devereux, Brickhouse and Smith, and Singpurwalla—have objected that this leaves too much unexplained.⁷ Why, exactly, should we perform this faulty hedonic calculus in comparing pleasures near and far? This has led these interpreters to reject the traditional interpretation as hopelessly arbitrary.⁸ Instead, they propose that Socrates must hold that there are non-rational desires; it is our non-rational desire for

art and hence calculative. By contrast, the problem I am examining concerns the appearances themselves, why proximate pleasures should appear greater than distant ones.

⁶ Among its numerous proponents are M. Frede, ‘Introduction’, in S. Lombardo and K. Bell (trans.), *Plato: Protagoras* (Indianapolis, 1992), vii-xxxiv at xxix-xxx; T. Irwin, *Plato’s Moral Theory* (Oxford, 1977), 78-9 and 117; Irwin, *Ethics*, 209-10; Penner, ‘Plato’; Penner, ‘Socrates’; Reshotko, *Virtue*; and H. Segvic, ‘No One Errs Willingly: The Meaning of Socratic Intellectualism’, *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 19 (2000), 1-45.

⁷ Devereux, ‘Kantian’; T. C. Brickhouse and N. D. Smith, ‘Socrates on Akrasia, Knowledge, and the Power of Appearance’ [‘Akrasia’], in C. Bobonich and P. Destrée (eds.), *Akrasia in Greek Philosophy* (Leiden, 2007), 1-17; Brickhouse and Smith, *Socratic Moral Psychology [Moral]* (Cambridge, 2010); Singpurwalla, ‘Reasoning’.

⁸ Brickhouse and Smith, ‘Akrasia’, 10.

proximate pleasures which causes us to falsely inflate their value. Henceforth, I shall refer to this as the *non-rational interpretation*. The non-rational interpretation takes an interpretive risk in attributing to Socrates the belief that there are non-rational desires, since on the most obvious and popular reading of the Socratic dialogues, he holds that all desires are rational, in the sense that all desires are aimed at the perceived good.⁹ However, if their reading could solve this puzzle, if it could explain why proximate pleasures appear larger than they actually are, then it would possess considerable appeal.

In this paper, I defend the traditional interpretation against the non-rational interpretation.¹⁰ I begin by outlining Socrates' argument against *akrasia* in the *Protagoras*,

⁹ Note, however, that Singpurwalla differs from Devereux and Brickhouse and Smith in defining non-rational desires as desires that arise independently of our *reasoned* conception of the good.

¹⁰ Like myself, Storey seeks to provide an account of the evaluative error in the *Protagoras* that does not appeal to non-rational passions ('Sex, Wealth and Courage: Kinds of Goods and the Power of Appearance in Plato's *Protagoras*' ['Sex'], *Ancient Philosophy* 38 (2018), 241-63 at 250). Our accounts differ sharply, insofar as Storey argues that the error is not that of miscalculating the relative magnitudes of proximate and distant pleasures, but, rather, of failing to recognize that goods such as health and wealth produce pleasure and are therefore commensurable with proximate pleasures such as those relating to food, drink and sex. Storey raises an important issue in observing that the goods being compared are different in kind. However, the fact that Socrates refers to the form of wisdom needed

paying particular attention to his discussion of the evaluative error of the would-be akratic. Next, I provide further motivation for my puzzle concerning Socrates' treatment of evaluative illusion. After setting out the non-rational interpretation, I then argue that it offers no advantage over the traditional interpretation in explaining the evaluative illusion, and, furthermore, that it is saddled with difficulties. In the final part of the paper, I offer a close examination of Socrates' treatment of evaluative illusion. In particular, I attempt to answer the following three questions: first, what, exactly, are the appearances that cause the agent to err? Second, what does their power consist in and how is the measuring art supposed to remove this power? And finally, what resources could Socrates appeal to in order to explain why proximate pleasures appear greater than distant ones? I propose that appearances in the *Protagoras* are vivid and imagistic mental representations that the agent forms of imminent pleasures; their power lies in the fact that they appear true and hence invite assent. I conclude by speculating that proximate pleasures appear greater than

to combat the power of appearance as the *measuring* art (ἡ μετρητικὴ τέχνη, 356d4), and specifies that it is 'the study of relative excess and deficiency and equality' (ὑπερβολῆς τε καὶ ἐνδείας οὐσα καὶ ἰσότητος πρὸς ἀλλήλας σκέψις, 357b2-3) weighs decisively against his interpretation. Furthermore, Socrates offers his alternative explanation of akrasia *after* securing the agreement of the many to the principle that pleasure and pain are the only goods and evils; if their error were a failure to recognize that the later goods are, in fact, to be valued for the sake of the pleasure they produce, then his subsequent discussion of the evaluative illusion would be redundant.

distant ones because we represent them more vividly, yielding greater anticipatory pleasure, which produces an overestimation of their magnitude.

2. Akrasia in the *Protagoras*

To begin, I will provide a brief summary of Socrates' treatment of akrasia in the *Protagoras*. In the *Protagoras*, Socrates famously argues that weakness of will is impossible; what appears to be weakness of will is in fact ignorance, due to poor hedonic calculus. In developing this argument, Socrates is opposing the position he attributes to *hoi polloi*; henceforth I will refer to this as the *common account* of akrasia. According to the common account, knowledge

....οὐκ ἰσχυρὸν οὐδ' ἡγεμονικὸν οὐδ' ἀρχικὸν εἶναι....ἐνούσης πολλάκις ἀνθρώπῳ ἐπιστήμης οὐ τὴν ἐπιστήμην αὐτοῦ ἄρχειν ἀλλ' ἄλλο τι, τοτὲ μὲν θυμὸν, τοτὲ δὲ ἡδονήν, τοτὲ δὲ λύπην, ἐνίοτε δὲ ἔρωτα, πολλάκις δὲ φόβον, ἀτεχνῶς διανοοῦμενοι περὶ τῆς ἐπιστήμης ὡσπερ περὶ ἀνδραπόδου, περιελκομένης ὑπὸ τῶν ἄλλων ἀπάντων. (352b4-c2)

is not a powerful thing, neither a leader nor a ruler....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.

As a result, we often fail to act in accordance with what we know to be best. Even when we know that it is best to, say, resist another drink, the pleasure of the drink somehow compels us to take another sip. Socrates, by contrast, insists that knowledge is invincible:

....καλόν τε εἶναι ἢ ἐπιστήμη καὶ οἷον ἄρχειν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, καὶ ἐάνπερ γινώσκη τις τὰγαθὰ καὶ τὰ κακά, μὴ ἂν κρατηθῆναι ὑπὸ μηδενὸς ὥστε ἄλλ' ἅττα πράττειν ἢ ἂν ἐπιστήμη κελεύη.... (352c3-6)

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.

According to Socrates, if one knows what is best, one will always act in accordance with one's knowledge; akrasia is impossible.

Socrates' attack on the common account of akrasia takes the following form. First, he takes great pains to establish that his hypothetical adversaries, the proponents of the common account, agree to the following hedonic assumption: pleasure is the only good, pain the only evil (355a1-5). Next, Socrates encapsulates the common account in the following two claims: Claim One—'...frequently a man, knowing the bad to be bad, nevertheless does that very thing, when he is able not to do it, having been driven and overwhelmed by pleasure' (355a7-b1)¹¹ and Claim Two—'...a man knowing the good is not willing to do it, on account of immediate pleasure, having been overcome by it' (355b2-3).¹² Socrates then uses the agreed-upon hedonic assumption to perform a series of

¹¹πολλάκις γινώσκων τὰ κακὰ ἄνθρωπος ὅτι κακά ἐστιν, ὅμως πράττει αὐτά, ἐξὸν μὴ πράττειν, ὑπὸ τῶν ἡδονῶν ἀγόμενος καὶ ἐκπληττόμενος....

¹²γινώσκων ὁ ἄνθρωπος τὰγαθὰ πράττειν οὐκ ἐθέλει διὰ τὰς παραχρῆμα ἡδονάς, ὑπὸ τούτων ἡττώμενος.

substitutions. First, he substitutes ‘good’ for ‘pleasure’ in Claim One, yielding the following: frequently a man, knowing the bad to be bad, nevertheless does that very thing, when he is able not to do it, having been driven and overwhelmed by the good. Then, he substitutes ‘painful’ for ‘bad’ into Claim One, yielding the following: frequently a man, knowing the painful to be painful, nevertheless does that very thing, when he is able not to do it, having been driven and overwhelmed by pleasure. Socrates specifies that in both cases, the good or the pleasure that supposedly overpowers the agent is less than the bad or the pain that he acquires through his action. According to Socrates, the two claims that result from these substitutions are somehow ridiculous; interpreters are divided over where the ridiculousness lies.

We now come to the section of the argument that interests me most. Socrates imagines his adversaries objecting that present pleasures differ very much from distant ones, to which he replies that they do not differ in any other way than in quantity. Pleasures and pains must be weighed against one another as if on a scale; the path which secures the greatest amount of pleasure versus pain is the one that must be pursued. What, then, accounts for the all the cases where we choose the less pleasant course of action? Here, I will quote Socrates’ exchange with his imagined interlocutors at length:

φαίνεται ὑμῖν τῇ ὄψει τὰ αὐτὰ μεγέθη ἐγγύθεν μὲν μείζω, πόρρωθεν δὲ ἐλάττω· ἢ οὐ; — Φήσουσιν. — Καὶ τὰ παχέα καὶ τὰ πολλὰ ὡσαύτως; καὶ αἱ φωναὶ <αἰ> ἴσαι ἐγγύθεν μὲν μείζους, πόρρωθεν δὲ μικρότεραι; — Φαῖεν ἄν. — Εἰ οὖν ἐν τούτῳ ἡμῖν ἦν τὸ εὖ πράττειν, ἐν τῷ τὰ μὲν μεγάλα μήκη καὶ πράττειν καὶ λαμβάνειν, τὰ δὲ μικρὰ καὶ φεύγειν καὶ μὴ πράττειν, τίς ἂν ἡμῖν σωτηρία ἐφάνη τοῦ βίου; ἄρα ἢ

μετρητική τέχνη ἢ ἡ τοῦ φαινομένου δύναμις; ἢ αὕτη μὲν ἡμᾶς ἐπλάνα καὶ ἐποίει ἄνω τε καὶ κάτω πολλάκις μεταλαμβάνειν ταῦτα καὶ μεταμέλειν καὶ ἐν ταῖς πράξεσιν καὶ ἐν ταῖς αἰρέσεσιν τῶν μεγάλων τε καὶ μικρῶν, ἢ δὲ μετρητικὴ ἄκυρον μὲν ἂν ἐποίησε τοῦτο τὸ φάντασμα, δηλώσασα δὲ τὸ ἀληθὲς ἡσυχίαν ἂν ἐποίησεν ἔχειν τὴν ψυχὴν μένουσαν ἐπὶ τῷ ἀληθεῖ καὶ ἔσωσεν ἂν τὸν βίον; ...Τί δ' εἰ ἐν τῇ τοῦ περιττοῦ καὶ ἀρτίου αἰρέσει ἡμῖν ἦν ἡ σωτηρία τοῦ βίου, ὅποτε τὸ πλεον ὀρθῶς ἔδει ἐλέσθαι καὶ ὅποτε τὸ ἔλαττον, ἢ αὐτὸ πρὸς ἑαυτὸ ἢ τὸ ἕτερον πρὸς τὸ ἕτερον, εἴτ' ἐγγὺς εἴτε πόρρω εἴη; τί ἂν ἔσωζεν ἡμῖν τὸν βίον; ἄρ' ἂν οὐκ ἐπιστήμη; καὶ ἄρ' ἂν οὐ μετρητικὴ τις, ἐπειδήπερ ὑπερβολῆς τε καὶ ἐνδείας ἐστὶν ἡ τέχνη; ἐπειδὴ δὲ περιττοῦ τε καὶ ἀρτίου, ἄρα ἄλλη τις ἢ ἀριθμητικὴ....Εἴεν, ὧ ἄνθρωποι· ἐπεὶ δὲ δὴ ἡδονῆς τε καὶ λύπης ἐν ὀρθῇ τῇ αἰρέσει ἐφάνη ἡμῖν ἡ σωτηρία τοῦ βίου οὕσα, τοῦ τε πλεονος καὶ ἐλάττονος καὶ μείζονος καὶ μικροτέρου καὶ πορρωτέρου καὶ ἐγγυτέρου, ἄρα πρῶτον μὲν οὐ μετρητικὴ φαίνεται, ὑπερβολῆς τε καὶ ἐνδείας οὕσα καὶ ἰσότητος πρὸς ἀλλήλας σκέψις; (356c5-7b3)

‘Do things of the same size appear to you larger when seen near at hand and smaller when seen from a distance, or not?’ They would say they do. ‘And similarly for thicknesses and pluralities? And equal sounds seem louder when near at hand, softer when farther away?’ They would agree. ‘If then our wellbeing depended upon this, doing and choosing large things, avoiding and not doing the small ones, what would we see as our salvation in life? Would it be the art of measurement or the power of appearance? While the power of appearance often makes us wander all over the place in confusion, often changing our minds about the same things and

regretting our actions and choices with respect to things large and small, the art of measurement in contrast, would make the appearance lose its power by showing us the truth, would give us peace of mind firmly rooted in the truth and would save our life....What if our salvation in life depended on our choices of odd and even, when the greater and lesser had to be counted correctly, either the same kind against itself or one kind against the other, whether it be near or remote? What then would save our life? Surely nothing other than knowledge, specifically some kind of measurement, since that is the art of the greater and the lesser? In fact, nothing other than arithmetic, since it's a question of odd and even?...Well, then, my good people: Since it has turned out that our salvation in life depends on the right choice of pleasures and pains, be they more or fewer, greater or lesser, farther or nearer, doesn't our salvation seem, first of all, to be measurement, which is the study of relative excess and deficiency and equality?'

Socrates begins by making an observation about visible objects: objects appear smaller when near at hand and greater when far away, even when their size remains fixed. He then extends this to the cases of thicknesses, pluralities and sounds: they are all subject to the same form of distortion. Socrates then draws a contrast between the power of appearance and the measuring art. The power of appearance causes us to wander in confusion, to change our minds and to feel regret in our actions and choices concerning the large and small. The measuring art, by contrast, through showing us the truth, makes appearances lose their power; it gives us peace of mind rooted in truth and it saves our lives. Socrates then applies this analysis to the case of pleasure. He implies that in the case of pleasure,

poor choices are due to the power of appearance. Since pleasure is assumed to be the good, our wellbeing depends on the correct measurement of pleasures and pains, and the measuring art is our salvation.

Earlier, I referred to what I called the traditional interpretation of Socrates' argument in the *Protagoras*. What sort of an account can this interpretation provide of the passage we are focusing on? First, Socrates makes clear that he is seeking to redescribe the phenomenon of *akrasia*. This means that, on the one hand, Socrates must do justice to at least some aspects of the experience that the common account views as *akrasia*; on the other hand, his explanation must differ from the common account in some significant way. According to the common account, knowledge is *dragged* (*περιελκομένης*, 352c2), by pleasure and pain, and hence does not determine how we act. Interestingly, in Socrates' redescription of *akrasia*, his language comes very close to that of the common account: he writes of how the power of appearance *makes us wander* (*ἐπλάνα*), often changing our minds (356d5). Nonetheless, there are two significant differences between these accounts. First, whereas on the common account, pleasure *drags us* and *enslaves us*, on Socrates' new account, it *causes us to wander*. This implies a greater degree of agency. Second, the cause of our downfall is subtly different. Whereas on the common account, it is *pleasure* that drags us, on Socrates' alternate account, it is the *power of appearance*. We can put these pieces together as follows. On the common account, pleasure somehow directly causes us to act against our judgment of what is best. By contrast, on Socrates' new account, what is operative is an appearance, an appearance of a pleasure as greater than it actually is; it is this appearance that causes us to commit an error. Thus, on the traditional

interpretation, the error of the would-be akratic is purely intellectual, it is a matter of her assenting to appearances that are false. It is in this sense that her error is due to ignorance and not due to irrational desire.

What does Socrates mean when he speaks of the appearances as making us wander and change our minds? What occurs is that the agent assents to shifting appearances depending on the proximity of the pleasure in question. When a pleasure is far off—either prospectively or retrospectively—it appears smaller, but when it becomes imminent, it appears greater, causing a shift in judgment.¹³ After the fact, the agent is able to look back

¹³ It is worth noting that nothing in how Socrates presents the case at 356c5-7b3 indicates whether the error is due to an inflation of the proximate pleasure, a deflation of the distant one, or an error at both ends of the spectrum. He merely states that the same objects appear greater when near at hand and smaller when far away (φαίνεται ὑμῖν τῇ ὄψει τὰ αὐτὰ μεγέθη ἐγγύθεν μὲν μείζω, πόρρωθεν δὲ ἐλάττω, 356c5-6). As I read these lines, the comparison is between how large objects appear when they are near at hand and how large they appear when far away (and not, say, between how large objects appear when near or far away and how large they actually are in some objective sense); Socrates' claim concerns the relative magnitudes of the objects as they appear to us. As I shall go on to suggest later in this paper, in the hedonic case, the distortion is a result of a key feature in how we represent proximate pleasures: the vivacity with which we represent proximate pleasures causes us to overinflate their value. This is why, as the common account captures, we blame the proximate pleasure for causing us to err (355b3). But, of course, this

and see that she misjudged the pleasure's value; it is this recognition that causes regret. These shifts in the agent's judgment are what make her case differ from mere intemperance: whereas the intemperate, say, consistently overvalues eating sweets in comparison to being healthy, the akratic shifts her assessment of their relative values depending on their temporal proximity. This instability in the akratic's evaluations enables Socrates to account for at least some aspects of the experience that the common account treats as akrasia. While Socrates cannot and does not allow for synchronic akrasia, he can allow for diachronic akrasia, the phenomenon of acting against an earlier, considered judgment of what is best.¹⁴ If the agent had the measuring art and hence knowledge of what is best, she would not, of course, be susceptible to this confusion. She would see through the power of appearance and it would fail to motivate her. The difficulty with mere belief, in the *Protagoras* as in the *Meno*, is that it is shifty, given to wandering; the power of knowledge lies in the fact that it remains unwavering in guiding correct action.

3. The puzzle of temporal distortion

Why, then, do I find Socrates' explanation of the evaluative error of the would-be akratic puzzling? Think back to our case of the child who chooses one marshmallow now over two later. It seems reasonable to assume that in many cases, consuming two marshmallows

overinflation of the proximate pleasure causes us to overestimate its magnitude relative to the distant one, consistent with Socrates' characterization of the case at 356c5-6.

¹⁴ See, among numerous others, Penner, 'Plato', and, following Penner, Reshotko *Virtue*, 80-2.

would actually give the child more pleasure than consuming one. And the fact that the children visibly struggled to resist the marshmallow that lay in front of them suggests that they recognized this fact. But according to Socrates, they were guilty of a very specific error. Their error was not desiring the present marshmallow more. It was not even supposing that eating the present marshmallow is better. It was believing that eating one marshmallow now would afford them more pleasure than eating two fifteen minutes later. And that seems both implausible and odd. It is important to emphasize that the error Socrates attributes to the would-be akratic is that of overestimating the *magnitude* of imminent pleasures. The reason this is worth emphasizing is that virtually every interpreter who discusses our passage slips into describing the error as though it concerned the *goodness* of the pleasure in question. Thus, for example, Devereux describes Socrates' position as follows: 'Just as an object's being very close may make it appear larger than it is, so the fact that some pleasant (or painful) experience is immediately at hand can make it seem *more important* or *valuable* than it really is' ('Kantian', 391, italics my own). Singpurwalla, similarly, writes, 'One likely explanation for the appearances is that how *good or bad* a certain pleasure or pain appears to us is a reflection of the strength of our current attraction or aversion for it' ('Reasoning', 249, italics my own).¹⁵ But, of course,

¹⁵ Though this tendency is less pronounced in Brickhouse and Smith, they describe non-rational desire as desire that 'inclines us to believe that what it is attracted to is a *good*, and if sufficiently strong it causes us to believe that what it is attracted to is *good* by preventing us from seeing or being persuaded by reasons for thinking it is *not good*'; they add that

Socrates does not argue that proximate pleasures appear more important, valuable or good than distant ones; rather, he claims that they appear bigger. This is why it is the *measuring art* that Socrates proposes as our salvation in life, describing it as ‘the study of relative excess and deficiency and equality’ (ὑπερβολῆς τε καὶ ἐνδείας οὕσα καὶ ἰσότητος πρὸς ἀλλήλας σκέψις, 357b2-3). Granted, on the hedonist assumption, in judging that an imminent pleasure is greater, one also judges that it is better. But it is telling that interpreters slip into treating the power of appearance as though it simply made imminent pleasures appear *better*. It is, arguably, difficult to determine which of two pleasures is better, and one can see how this might be a subject of confusion that could give rise to error. But if we identify the goodness of a pleasure with its overall magnitude, then the comparisons seem more straightforward and the error more odd.¹⁶

One might attempt to explain this miscalculation along a variety of paths. For example, one might propose that one who chooses proximate pleasures does so because he holds that their being proximate in itself makes them more valuable. However, Socrates cannot avail himself of this maneuver. If, on the one hand, we take *more valuable* to mean *more pleasant*, then we are back to our original question: why do proximate pleasures appear greater than distant ones? If, on the other hand, the agent values proximate

those with strong appetites are compelled ‘to see illicit pleasures or enjoyments as *good*’ (‘Akrasia’, 17, italics my own). The emphasis is on the pleasure’s appearing good, rather than on its seeming large.

¹⁶ But see A. W. Price, *Mental Conflict* (London, 1995), 22-4.

pleasures for their proximity, in addition to or independently of their magnitude, then, as Taylor (*Protagoras*, 193) observes, Socrates would not propose the measuring art as the solution to his woes. Furthermore, before offering his alternative explanation of akrasia, Socrates secures his opponents' agreement to a principle of temporal neutrality: pleasures only differ in magnitude; when they occur makes no difference to their value (356a5-c3).

Alternatively, one might argue that the one who chooses proximate pleasures does so because he wishes to minimize the pain of anticipation. In a similar vein, one might propose that people tend to choose proximate pleasures because the insecurity of future pleasures diminishes their value. The difficulty with both these explanations is that the agent would be acting rationally and not commit an evaluative error. But it is agreed upon by all that the agent who chooses the proximate pleasure commits an error.¹⁷

Finally, one might maintain that the evaluative error is due to the fact that the pleasures and pains are difficult to compare against one another. Thus, one might argue that my opening example of the marshmallows was overly simple, since it seems clear that two marshmallows later will yield more pleasure than one now. But the examples Socrates considers are eating, drinking and enjoying sex now, versus being poor and sick later

¹⁷ Would it help to modify this proposal such that the agent tends to overestimate the pain of anticipation or the insecurity of future pleasures? Not really—we would then simply replace our original problem, of why we overestimate the magnitude of proximate pleasures with a new one, of why we overestimate the pain of anticipation or the insecurity of future pleasures.

(353c6-d4).¹⁸ Perhaps these pleasures and pains are more difficult to compare, making the evaluative error less jarring. Against this, I would argue that we *do* tend to compare all sorts of disparate pleasures and pains: indeed, such comparisons are a ubiquitous feature of everyday practical deliberation. Furthermore, it is not clear how different in kind these pleasures are: sex and sickness are both corporeal conditions and, in that regard, similar in kind. Lastly, observing that certain pleasures and pains are difficult to compare gives us no explanation of why we tend to inflate the value of the proximate rather than the distant ones.

Suppose, though, that one allows that there is something odd or even implausible about Socrates' proposal that proximate pleasures appear greater than distant ones. One might still maintain, against me, that this does not call out for further explanation. The problem, such an interpreter might argue, is not *Socrates'* problem. It is commonly assumed that Socrates does not, himself, endorse the hedonist assumption; it is, rather, a view he attributes to *hoi polloi*.¹⁹ Thus, my opponent might argue that in proposing that

¹⁸ One might also take 354a4-b5 to imply the possibility of cases of akrasia where one foregoes athletic training or medical treatment or avoids military campaigns and as a result suffers ill-health, poverty or political defeat later; the same argument would apply.

¹⁹ See, e.g., Dyson, 'Knowledge', 40-3; G. R. F. Ferrari, 'Akrasia as Neurosis in Plato's *Protagoras*' ['Akrasia'], *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* 6 (1990), 115-39, at 131-2; Frede, 'Introduction', xxvii-viii; Vlastos, 'Acrasia', 78; and Wolfsdorf, 'Ridiculousness', 133-4.

what appears to be *akrasia* results from the tendency of proximate pleasures to appear magnified, Socrates is just pointing out to the hedonist that this is the only explanation *he* can provide of cases where people appear to behave akratically. If this is a poor explanation, then fault lies with the hedonist, not Socrates.²⁰

In response, I would note that this interpretation is *prima facie* implausible, in light of the fact that Socrates makes virtually the same claim in the *Philebus*, as part of his analysis of false pleasures (41a7-2c3). In that later dialogue, there is no reason to suppose that Socrates does not endorse the claim; thus, one cannot straightforwardly argue that it is so implausible that when Socrates advances it in the *Protagoras*, he must be doing so dialectically, and not *in propria persona*. Furthermore, if, indeed, Socrates were offering what he takes to be a patently implausible explanation of apparent cases of *akrasia*, then he would do little to convince his interlocutors that *akrasia* is impossible; rather than abandoning hedonism, they would more likely reject Socrates' analysis and conclude that *akrasia* is, indeed, possible. But this would be catastrophic for Socrates' philosophical aims in the dialogue: his denial of *akrasia* undergirds his subsequent argument that courage is identical to wisdom (358b6-60e5) which, in turn, serves as the capstone of his argument for the unity of the virtues. Relatedly, if, Socrates does not, in fact, hold that we are subject to hedonic errors, then there will be no role for the measuring art, but his praise of the measuring art is part of his overarching aim in the dialogue of promoting the value of

²⁰ Dyson, 'Knowledge', and Ferrari, 'Akrasia', offer dialectical interpretations of Socrates' argument in a similar vein.

wisdom.²¹ Finally, it is worth noting that the sorts of cases that Socrates seeks to explain in this passage are cases where the goods being weighed are naturally understood in hedonistic terms: when one chooses to pursue food or sex, then later regrets the consequent ill-health, one's calculations largely involve bodily pleasure and pain. This does not imply that Socrates thinks that bodily pleasure and pain are the only or the chief goods. But if he wishes to show that akrasia is impossible, he must have resources to deal with such cases, cases in which, if there is an evaluative error, the error involves miscalculating the relative values of proximate and distant pleasures and pains.

4. The non-rational interpretation

The worry that I have attempted to articulate, that Socrates' account of evaluative error as due to temporal distortion is somehow wanting, has led several recent interpreters to propose that the error Socrates is describing cannot be purely calculative. They argue that the only way to explain the evaluative error is to posit that the agent is subject to non-rational desires for proximate pleasures, desires which cause him to falsely judge the proximate pleasures to be larger than they actually are. I have been referring to this as the non-rational interpretation. Its primary proponents are Devereux, Brickhouse and Smith, and Singpurwalla; I will now briefly set out their views.

²¹ M. C. Nussbaum emphasizes the importance that Socrates assigns to making the case for an ethical measuring art (*The Fragility of Goodness [Fragility]* (Cambridge, 1999), 108-10).

In his article, ‘Socrates’ Kantian Conception of Virtue’, Devereux argues that the traditional interpretation lacks the resources to explain the evaluative error Socrates describes in the *Protagoras*. He writes:

If the distortion is understood as a ‘purely intellectual’ error, it is hard to see what might account for it. In the case of perceptual distortion, we can appeal to the fact that when an object is very near it takes up a large proportion of the visual field, and this can sometimes lead to overestimation of its size. But there does not seem to be an analogous factor, separate from desire, that might account for our ‘overestimating’ pleasures and pains that are near in time. (395, n. 27)

Devereux therefore argues that, contrary to the traditional interpretation of the early dialogues, we must attribute to Socrates the view that there exist non-rational desires. It is the agent’s non-rational desire for the proximate pleasure that accounts for his belief that it is greater.

Like Devereux, Brickhouse and Smith maintain that the traditional interpretation cannot offer an adequate explanation of temporal distortion. They offer the following case. Suppose that someone who has just eaten an enormous meal is presented with a chocolate tart. He considers the health repercussions and decides not to consume it. However, a little later, when he is not quite so full, he changes his mind and decides to eat the tart after all. What could possibly explain his shift in judgment? On the traditional interpretation, the error is purely calculative, but the agent has been given no new information. Brickhouse and Smith write, ‘If we are to avoid what appears to be the hopeless arbitrariness of the position the traditionalist ascribes to Socrates, we must think that Socrates recognizes that

nonrational desires have an explanatory role to play in [the person's] decision to devour [the chocolate tart] at [the later time]'.²² Brickhouse and Smith differ from Devereux in maintaining that the measuring art is compatible with the existence of weak, but not of strong non-rational desires. According to Devereux, knowledge makes appearance lose its power because it always generates stronger desires for what it knows to be best. Brickhouse and Smith worry that this will not secure the agent the peace which Socrates promised would ensue from the measuring art ('Akrasia', 14-5). They address this by distinguishing between strong and weak non-rational desires. The measuring art brings peace because it is incompatible with the existence of strong non-rational desires, desires that compel the agent to believe that their objects are good.

²² 'Akrasia', 10. Brickhouse and Smith's example is, perhaps, infelicitous for their purposes. For, in fact, it is not as though the agent gets no new information. Per their example, when the agent reconsiders, he 'has managed to digest enough of his previous meal to lose his feelings of complete satiety' ('Akrasia', 9)—thus, he does have new information about his bodily condition, namely that he is no longer so full as to be unable to enjoy the tart; this information supports a new assessment of whether the pleasure of the tart will outweigh the eventual health repercussions. Thus, this example would, in fact, seem to support the traditional interpretation, on which the appetites can provide information about our bodily condition that can then factor into our rational deliberation and desires. (See also R. Jones, 'Review of Thomas C. Brickhouse and Nicholas D. Smith, *Socratic Moral Psychology*', *Polis* 28.1 (2011), 147-52 at 150.)

Most recently, Singpurwalla, like Devereux, and Brickhouse and Smith, argues that we must take Socrates to assume the existence of non-rational desires in order to make sense of the evaluative error. She writes:

It is a fact that our judgments of value can be erroneously affected by the relative proximity of the goods or bads in question. But now *this* fact demands an explanation....One likely explanation for the appearances is that how good or bad a certain pleasure or pain appears to us is a reflection of the strength of our current attraction or aversion for it. Moreover, the strength of our attraction or aversion to certain pleasures or pains is, no doubt, often affected by the relative proximity of the pleasure or pain in question. But the strength of our attraction or aversion to certain pleasures or pains can arise independently of reason and can conflict with our reasoned judgment of the worth of the pleasure or pain. Thus, just as facts about our visual apparatus can cause us to see things differently from how they are, facts about the way we desire can cause us to ‘see’ things as worth more or less than they are. (‘Reasoning’, 249)

Singpurwalla differs from Devereux and Brickhouse and Smith in terms of her account of non-rational desires. Where they treat non-rational desires as pure feelings of attraction, she proposes, instead, that they are themselves beliefs about what is good, beliefs that are based on appearances and that are resistant, but not immune to rational revision.

While I am entirely sympathetic with these interpreters’ desire for a further explanation of the evaluative error, I will argue, first, that their proposed solution does not

provide any advantage over the traditional account in explaining the evaluative error and, second, that it is saddled with difficulties.

(i) That the non-rational interpretation offers no advance over the traditional interpretation in accounting for the evaluative illusion is troubling since, as we have seen, they present their superiority in this regard as one reason to favor their interpretation. But, in fact, their explanation multiplies, rather than dissolves the puzzle concerning the evaluative illusion. On the traditional interpretation, we are faced with the problem of why proximate pleasures should appear greater than distant ones. The non-rational interpretation addresses this by proposing that the proximity of the pleasures causes us to form a non-rational desire for them; this non-rational desire, in turn, causes us to overestimate their magnitude. But now we have two puzzles where before we had one: we must now ask, on the one hand, why we should desire proximate pleasures more than distant ones and, on the other, why our desiring them more causes us to overestimate their magnitude. In response to the first question, proponents of the non-rational interpretation perhaps take it to be a brute fact that we just do desire proximate pleasures more than distant ones. But if, indeed, the pleasures are of equal magnitude, then it seems that there is no good reason to prefer the proximate to the distant, rendering it odd, or even inexplicable that we should desire them more. Thus, it is not clear why proponents of the non-rational account should be in a position to, at once, criticize the traditional account for not explaining why proximate pleasures appear greater, while helping themselves to the claim that they are more desired.

Suppose, though, that we grant that we just do desire proximate pleasures more. The non-rational interpretation must now confront the difficulty of explaining how this desire causes us to overestimate their magnitude. Singpurwalla alludes to how ‘facts about the way we desire can cause us to “see” things as worth more or less than they are’ (2006: 249). But on the face of it, it is not obvious why wanting to enjoy a pleasure now, rather than later, should cause one to think that it will be more pleasant to do so. How, exactly, does the desire cause the inflated hedonic prediction? Brickhouse and Smith attempt to address this by claiming that non-rational desires are present-focused: ‘Because a nonrational desire demands immediate satisfaction, it can explain why the pleasure of C appears to be larger at t_2 than it did at t_1 , when P did not possess a nonrational desire for C’ (‘Akrasia’, 10). But why should the fact that the non-rational desire demands immediate satisfaction cause us to overestimate the ensuing pleasure, whereas desires that are future-focused do not introduce such a distortion? They later add, ‘Something acquires the power of appearance when it becomes the object of a nonrational desire and so becomes recognized by an agent as a way to satisfy some appetite or passion—for example, as a pleasure or as a relief from some pain’ (‘Akrasia’, 11). If their thought is that the non-rational desire introduces a new reason to pursue the proximate pleasure, in virtue of the pleasure that satisfying this new desire will produce, then what we have is a version of the traditional interpretation: one would be revising their assessment of the worth of the proximate pleasure in response to new information.²³ Alternatively, proponents of the non-

²³ See Reshotko, *Virtue*, 86.

rational interpretation might argue that our heightened desire for the proximate pleasure causes us to focus on it more, ignoring other alternatives.²⁴ But per the parameters of the problem of akrasia, it is not as though the agent is ignorant of other alternatives; at most, she is less attentive to them. And it is not obvious why increased attention should result in overestimation and not, say, underestimation or some other form of cognitive distortion.

This second problem, of why, exactly, non-rational desire should cause overvaluation does not arise on Singpurwalla's account; at most, she faces the first difficulty, of explaining why we should form greater non-rational desires for proximate, rather than distant pleasures. The reason the second problem does not arise is that on her interpretation, the non-rational desire just is the belief that the proximate pleasure is better and hence bigger. Thus, there is no question of how the desire should give rise to the belief, since it simply is the belief. But this reveals a different challenge for her account. Namely, if Singpurwalla treats the non-rational desire as an evaluative belief, then it is not clear why her account should offer any improvement over the traditional interpretation. The supposed advantage of the non-rational interpretation, that it appeals to something besides belief to explain belief-formation, is lost if the non-rational desire simply is an evaluative belief.²⁵

²⁴ I owe this suggestion to Rachel Singpurwalla.

²⁵ I am indebted to Singpurwalla for generous correspondence that has enabled me to develop a better understanding of her position. For the purpose of simplicity, I focus on the role of non-rational desire in Singpurwalla's account, but a more precise rendering of

(ii.a) In addition to possessing no explanatory advantages, the non-rational interpretation faces significant difficulties. First, as Singpurwalla concedes, it lacks direct textual support.²⁶

her position would be that we have a heightened attraction towards proximate pleasures, where the attraction just is their appearing to be better and hence greater. When we assent to this attraction, we form a non-rational desire. My worry can be reposed as follows: if it is puzzling why proximate pleasures should appear greater than distant ones, it will not help to attribute this to our being more attracted to them, if our being more attracted to them is identical to their appearing greater.

²⁶ ‘Reasoning’, 247-8. Devereux (‘Kantian’, 388-9) and Brickhouse and Smith (*Moral*, 50-62) offer an extensive discussion of passages from the early dialogues that they take to imply that Socrates does acknowledge the existence of non-rational desires. In this paper, I do not take a stand on whether Socrates allows for non-rational desires in other dialogues; I am simply claiming that there is no evidence that he deploys such desires to explain evaluative illusion in the *Protagoras*. Devereux cites *Protagoras* 357c3-4, where Socrates claims to agree with Protagoras that knowledge ‘always prevails, whenever it is present, over pleasure and everything else’ (ἀεὶ κρατεῖν, ὅπου ἂν ἐνῆ, καὶ ἡδονῆς καὶ τῶν ἄλλων ἀπάντων) as evidence for the existence of non-rational desires. He parses this line as claiming that ‘in other words, there *are* resistant motivating factors, but knowledge always has the upper hand’ (‘Kantian’, 389). But it is far from clear that by ‘pleasure and everything else’ Socrates means resistant *motivating* factors. Indeed, he has just argued

(ii.b) A further set of difficulties arises for Devereux and for Brickhouse and Smith, depending on whether or not non-rational desires can coexist with the measuring art.²⁷ On Devereux' account they can; as he concedes, this raises the problem of what guarantee there is that they will not overpower reason. Furthermore, as Brickhouse and Smith argue, even if we grant Devereux that reason will always generate stronger, rational desires, the agent does not appear to have secured the tranquility which the measuring art promised. Brickhouse and Smith address this difficulty by maintaining that the measuring art cannot coexist with strong non-rational desires; it is only active in relation to desires that are 'weak, and thus, disposed to fall in line with knowledge of what is best' (2007: 15). But then, as they acknowledge, we are left to wonder what role there is left for the measuring art ('Akrasia', 15). Assuming it is not totally impotent, these weak non-rational desires must still possess some force, but then we are back to Devereux' problem—what non-

against the many that if pleasure compels us to act against our perceived best interest, it does not do so by directly causing us to act, but rather by generating a mistaken assessment of its magnitude.

²⁷ This constellation of difficulties does not arise for Singpurwalla since, on her account, the measuring art prevents the agent from assenting to the appearance that the proximate pleasure is better and hence from forming the non-rational desire for it. Insofar as the agent lacks a non-rational desire for the proximate pleasure, she has achieved tranquility.

arbitrary reason is there to suppose that knowledge will prevail?²⁸ Furthermore, this appears to mischaracterize the role of the measuring art. Socrates describes it as saving our lives by making ‘the appearances lose their power by showing us the truth’ (...ἄκυρον μὲν ἂν ἐποίησε τοῦτο τὸ φάντασμα, δηλώσασα δὲ τὸ ἀληθές.... 356d8-e1). But if the measuring art cannot even emerge until some other faculty extinguishes strong non-rational desires, then it would appear to be that other faculty that deserves the title of a life-saving capacity to defeat the power of appearances.

(ii.c) Finally, Devereux and Singpurwalla each face difficulties when it comes to accounting for the synchronic conflict that appears to characterize akrasia. This is striking, since each maintains that it is an advantage of the non-rational interpretation that it can explain the phenomenology of conflict, whereas the traditional interpretation cannot. Devereux claims that only on the non-rational interpretation can Socrates’ alternate account plausibly explain the phenomenon that the common account wishes to see explained; in positing the existence of non-rational desires, it has the resources to explain the ‘inner conflict between [the agent’s] belief as to how he ought to act and his desire for the immediate pleasure’ (‘Kantian’, 396). Similarly, Singpurwalla complains that the traditional account cannot explain how ‘if we do take the action that is in fact bad, we feel

²⁸ For a similar line of criticism, see G. R. Carone, ‘Calculating Machines or Leaky Jars? The Moral Psychology of Plato’s *Gorgias*’, *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 26 (2004), 55-96, at 89.

conflicted about it at the time of action' ('Reasoning', 247), and promises to explain this by positing non-rational desires.

Devereux accounts for the phenomenology of inner conflict by proposing that the agent's non-rational desire causes his belief to shift at the time of action: 'The agent starts out with a true belief, but this belief is unable to withstand the opposition of a strong desire for an immediate pleasure, and it is temporarily displaced by a belief supporting the desire' ('Kantian', 395). Thus, 'Socrates *has* argued that an agent will never act contrary to his belief—at the time of action—as to what is best' (393). It is hard to see how Devereux has preserved the phenomenon he wishes to account for: at most there will be a diachronic tension between the agent's desire for the immediate pleasure at the time of action, and his belief, prior and posterior to acting, that it is not worth pursuing. But in that case, his account is no improvement over the traditional interpretation, since it, too, can account for diachronic conflict in terms of shifts in the agent's evaluative judgments.²⁹

Singpurwalla does better when it comes to synchronic conflict, but this comes at a cost. She writes, 'So we have a *prima facie* reason at least for thinking that in both the *Protagoras* and the *Republic* the irrational part of the soul is home to beliefs based on appearances, and that motivational conflict is a conflict between two beliefs—one based on reasoning and one based on the way things appear' ('Reasoning', 256). Singpurwalla

²⁹ Thus, I am in agreement with Devereux's account of the form of conflict that Socrates' account allows for, namely belief instability; my point is that neither his account nor the traditional interpretation allows for synchronic conflict.

is able to give a robust account of synchronic conflict, since she proposes that the agent has compresent opposed beliefs: her non-rational desire for the present pleasure and her rational belief that it would be best not to pursue it. But this interpretation appears to contradict Socrates' explicit position in the dialogue. Socrates claims at 358b7-c1 that 'no one who knows or believes that there is something else better than what he is doing, something possible, will go on doing what he had been doing when he could be doing what is better'.³⁰ This decisively precludes the possibility of an agent pursuing a present pleasure in the face of a belief that it would be best not to do so.³¹

³⁰οὐδείς οὔτε εἰδὼς οὔτε οἰόμενος ἄλλα βελτίω εἶναι ἢ ἃ ποιεῖ, καὶ δυνατά, ἔπειτα ποιεῖ ταῦτα, ἐξὸν τὰ βελτίω.

³¹ Singpurwalla perhaps seeks to address this when she continues, 'When these beliefs are about the value of a certain object or course of action, then no matter which belief we act upon we will be acting in accordance with our beliefs about value' ('Reasoning', 256). But even if in acting on our non-rational desire, we act on a belief about value, we would still be acting *against* our rational belief that it would be best to resist, and it is this possibility that Socrates explicitly rejects at 358b7-c1. It is worth noting that, to the extent that Singpurwalla is able to account for the phenomenology of conflict, it is not, in fact, because she posits non-rational desires but, rather, because she allows for the compresence of opposing beliefs about value. But most would maintain that there is no strong evidence that Plato allows for such a possibility until we come to the *Republic*.

In fact, though Devereux and Singpurwalla attack the traditional account as unable to account for the phenomenon of synchronic conflict, this does not pose an interpretive problem for the traditional interpretation. For it is far from clear that Socrates wishes to preserve this aspect of the common account. He appears to reject the phenomenon of synchronic conflict precisely because he holds that it is impossible to act against what we believe to be best.³² This does not mean, however, that Socrates is unable to capture any of the experience of conflict that characterizes akrasia. Though this may fail to do full justice to the experience of akrasia, Socrates is able to appeal to the diachronic instability of the akratic's evaluative beliefs in order to preserve at least some of her experience of conflict.³³ The power of appearance is said to 'make us wander all over the place in confusion, often changing our minds about the same things and regretting our actions and choices with respect to things large and small' (356d5-7).³⁴ What Socrates is describing

³² See also Reshotko, *Virtue*, 89-91.

³³ Here I am in full agreement with Devereux 'Kantian', 391-2. Devereux goes on to argue that 'the desire thus explains the fact that the pleasure appears greater than it is, and not the other way around' (395); claiming that this is the most plausible way to explain Socrates' claim that knowledge is more stable than belief. But as I shall argue, the instability of belief lies not in its being easily overcome by desire but, rather, in its lacking full justification and hence being susceptible to appearances that merely appear true.

³⁴ ...ἡμᾶς ἐπλάνη καὶ ἐποίει ἄνω τε καὶ κάτω πολλάκις μεταλαμβάνειν ταῦτα καὶ μεταμέλειν καὶ ἐν ταῖς πράξεσιν καὶ ἐν ταῖς αἰρέσεσιν τῶν μεγάλων τε καὶ μικρῶν....

here is the phenomenon of changing one's mind repeatedly in response to shifting appearances. And since these conflicting judgments all belong to the same agent, she might look back upon herself as having been in tension with herself, insofar as her beliefs and ensuing desires shifted back and forth and conflicted with one another.³⁵ Singpurwalla complains that the traditional interpretation cannot account for why, 'if we do take the wrong action, we hold ourselves culpable; we blame ourselves' ('Reasoning', 247). But, in fact, the instability of belief can explain post factum regret: what we regret is not that we acted against what we knew to be best at the time of action, but rather, that we let ourselves be taken in by appearances.

Perhaps, then, we should not be so quick to dismiss the traditional interpretation. If it can explain at least as much as the non-rational interpretation, while falling prey to fewer difficulties, then it has much to recommend it. In the final part of this paper, I take a closer look at what sort of account the traditional interpretation can provide of the power of appearance. In particular, I address the following three questions. First, what are the appearances that cause the would-be akratic to err? Second, what is their power and how does the measuring art counter it? And finally, how might Socrates account for the fact that these appearances tend to exaggerate the magnitude of proximate over distant pleasures?

5. What are appearances?

³⁵ Cf. *Phaed.* 79c2-8.

(i) To turn to our first question, it will be helpful to first consider Socrates' motives in introducing appearances into his discussion of *akrasia*. He does so at a very specific juncture: they enter as part of his alternate explanation of why the agent chooses what is in fact worse. Socrates begins by making a series of claims about how objects near and far appear—the same magnitude appears (φαίνεται) larger when nearby, smaller when far off, and so forth (356c5-8). Next, he contrasts the art of measurement with the power of appearance. The power of appearance (ἡ τοῦ φαινομένου δύναμις) causes us to wander and change our minds concerning the same things and to regret our choices and actions regarding the large and small (356d4-7). The measuring art, by contrast, robs the appearance (τὸ φάντασμα) of its power. This passage presents us with an account of perceptual illusions concerning distance: appearances confuse us by causing proximate magnitudes to appear greater than distant ones. This is intended to suggest a parallel analysis of evaluative illusion: the power of appearance causes proximate pleasures to falsely appear greater than distant ones. But here we should pause to observe that there is an important disanalogy between the perceptual and the evaluative cases.³⁶ In the perceptual case, the two objects being compared are potentially both present to the viewer

³⁶ See also Dyson, 'Knowledge', 40-3 and Taylor, *Protagoras*, 195-6. I do not agree with Dyson's further argument that, since the pleasures and pains being measured do not yet exist, there can be no knowledge of them. According to this line of argument, Socrates must hold that we can have no knowledge whatsoever of the future, since future events do not yet exist, but such a conclusion goes far beyond anything explicitly stated in the text.

at the time when he is manipulated by the power of appearance. But this cannot occur in the evaluative case. Whereas in the perceptual case, we might, say, compare a nearby tree with one that is at a distance, in the evaluative case neither pleasure is present at the time when the agent compares them.³⁷ At the moment of decision, the agent is not undergoing either pleasure; he is deciding which of two prospective pleasures to pursue—one that is in the very near future, or one that is in the more distant future.³⁸ But if the agent is comparing two pleasures, neither of which currently exists, then what is the appearance that deceives him? It must be an internal mental representation that the agent forms of the imminent pleasure which falsely represents it as larger than it in fact is.³⁹

The role played by the agent's mental representations of prospective pleasures is obscured on the common account of *akrasia*, which describes the agent as dragged by pleasure to act against his knowledge of what is best, as though the pleasure itself were a force external to and separate from the agent that compels him to act. This error is facilitated by the fact that 'pleasure' is ambiguous between the source of the pleasure, the

³⁷ Thus, when Socrates describes the many as claiming that the agent is defeated by *αἰ παραχρήμα ἡδοναί* (e.g. 355b3), he presumably means pleasures that are imminent but not currently occurring.

³⁸ This is occasionally missed, since *akrasia* often occurs when we directly perceive that which will occasion the proximate pleasure. But even when we perceive the cake before us, we still represent to ourselves the pleasure of eating it in the not-too-distant future.

³⁹ Cf. Plato's discussion of desire at *Phileb.* 35b1-d3.

pleasant activity, and the ensuing psychological state.⁴⁰ Thus, at 353c1-8, being mastered by pleasure (ὁ ἡμεῖς ἤττω εἶναι τῶν ἡδονῶν) is equated with being mastered by food, drink and sex, they being pleasant (ὑπὸ σίτων καὶ ποτῶν καὶ ἀφροδισίων κρατούμενοι ἡδέων ὄντων): pleasure (ἡδονή) is treated as roughly equivalent to the objects that produce it. But whereas the psychological state is something internal, its sources—food, drink, beautiful people etc.—are typically external to the agent. The conflation of these senses of pleasure, in turn, gives rise to a tendency to view akrasia as involving the agent’s being mastered by something external to himself—the food and drink, or the beautiful person—and hence beyond his control. Thus, the common account describes the agent as ruled (ἄρχειν, 352b7), dragged (περιελκομένης, 352c2), overcome (ἡττωμένους, 352e1, 353a1, 353a5) and conquered (κρατούμένους, 352e2, 353c6-7) by pleasure, suggesting that he is the victim of outside forces. The common account of the *Protagoras*, in fact, appears to reflect a general tendency among Plato’s contemporaries to externalize the emotions, and to treat them as having compulsive force.⁴¹ Thus, Gorgias famously proposes that if Helen left

⁴⁰ See V. Harte, ‘The *Philebus* on Pleasure: The Good, the Bad and the False’ [*Philebus*], *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 104 (2004), 113-30 at 114.

⁴¹ Thus, Dover: ‘...we may be struck by their treatment of sexual desire as an irresistible god, their externalization and personification of emotions, and their readiness to believe that a god may pervert the course of a man’s thinking without his necessarily displaying to others any outward sign of insanity’ (*Greek Popular Morality in the Time of Plato and Aristotle* (Indianapolis, 1994), 144).

due to sexual desire, she acted out of compulsion, not choice.⁴² Again, Aeschines describes Timarchus as ‘a slave to the most shameful pleasures, to fancy food and dining extravagance, to flute-girls and prostitutes, to dice, and to all other things, none of which should master a man who is well-born and free’.⁴³ Timarchus is described as enslaved to sex, gambling and other pleasures; while he can be faulted for failing to develop sufficient strength of character to resist their allure, the pleasures themselves are presented as if they were external forces that compel him to give in.⁴⁴

Thus, we can see that Socrates is introducing a radical innovation in proposing that it is not pleasant things or pleasure itself that lead the agent to choose poorly, but, rather, the agent’s own mental representation of these.⁴⁵ The introduction of these mental representations, on his argument, is required to even make sense of supposed cases of *akrasia*. On the common account, there are only two players at work: the present pleasure

⁴² *Hel.* 19.

⁴³ ...δουλεύων ταῖς αισχίσταις ἡδοναῖς, ὀψοφαγία καὶ πολυτελεία δειπνῶν καὶ αὐλητρίσι καὶ ἐταίραις καὶ κύβοις καὶ τοῖς ἄλλοις ὑφ’ ὧν οὐδενὸς χρῆ κρατεῖσθαι τὸν γενναῖον καὶ ἐλεύθερον (*Against Timarchus* 42, Budé ed., trans. my own).

⁴⁴ Here, one might compare G. Watson’s contemporary treatment of *akrasia*, on which the agent can be held to blame for not developing strength of will, but is powerless to resist his desires at the moment of action (‘Skepticism about Weakness of Will’, *The Philosophical Review* 86.3 (1977), 316-39, at 334).

⁴⁵ For a similar analysis, see Kamtekar, *Moral*, 44-9.

and the future one. This would suggest that the present pleasure compels the agent to act by being greater than the future one; the problem, as Socrates points out, is that this is precluded by the shared assumption that the agent is committing an error, forsaking a greater pleasure for the sake of a smaller one (355d3-6). Socrates is able to resolve this by introducing a third player: the agent's mental representation of the present pleasure. It is the gap between the apparent and actual magnitudes of the present pleasure that can explain, at once, why the agent pursues the present pleasure and, at the same time, why in so doing, he errs. But once Socrates proposes that the agent is led to act by his mental representation of the present pleasure, then he is also able to internalize the source of the agent's error and assign him full responsibility. Far from being driven to act by food, drink and sex, the agent is being driven by his own faulty representations of the pleasures of enjoying these, as being greater than they actually are. Thus, at 356c5, when Socrates introduces appearances, part of what he is doing is pointing out that the responsibility for his poor choices lies with the agent himself: it is not pleasure that compels him to act, as though he were at the mercy of some external force, but rather, it is the appearance that he himself generates that is the cause of his downfall.⁴⁶

(ii) What sort of a mental representation is this appearance (*phantasma*)?⁴⁷ Here, it will be helpful to consider Plato's use of the word, *phantasma* (pl. *phantasmata*),

⁴⁶ Cf. *Phaed.* 82d9-3a1.

⁴⁷ Storey offers a helpful discussion of appearances in the *Protagoras* ('Sex', 247-8). Like myself, he takes appearances to be quasi-perceptual mental presentations that incline us to

throughout his corpus. Plato's usage is by no means univocal; indeed, *phantasma* has considerable semantic range. Plato uses it to refer to ghosts (e.g. *Phaed.* 81d2), shadows and reflections (e.g. *Soph.* 266b9-10); to mental items such as dreams (e.g. *Tim.* 46a2), illusory mental representations (*Rep.* 584a9) and, more broadly, to imagistic mental representations (e.g. *Phileb.* 40a9); as well as to artistic products, such as poems (e.g. *Rep.* 599a2), to name a few. Nonetheless, there are certain threads in his usage that shed light on his deployment of the term in the *Protagoras*. First, the term, *phantasma*, has obvious connections to *phainesthai*, to how things appear. Plato therefore frequently uses *phantasma* to denote representations that have an imagistic aspect. These can be external representations, such as artistic products, or internal ones, such as mental imagery or dreams; the latter are of primary interest for our investigation into the *Protagoras*. For example, in the *Philebus*, Plato refers to the painted images in our souls that accompany our judgments alternately as images (εἰκόνες) and as *phantasmata* (e.g. 39b7, 40a9). And in the *Timaeus*, he describes reason as generating visible images, *phantasmata* and *eidōla*, on the surface of the liver so as to persuade appetite, which is resistant to reasoning (71a3-d4). Second, in both these passages, we see, coupled with an emphasis on the imagistic

believe them. Storey emphasizes the passivity of appearances (248) more than myself—on my account, it is important that appearances are representations that we generate and for which we are responsible; I also place greater emphasis on the tendency of φαντάσματα to be deceptive.

aspect of *phantasmata*, an implicit contrast with *logoi* (assertions, propositions).⁴⁸ In the *Republic* (599a2) and *Sophist* (234e1), though Plato presents the poet and sophist as creating *phantasmata* with their words, the implication is that they are not presenting arguments, but, are instead, using words so as to create vivid and hence persuasive images; in the *Republic*, Plato attributes this to their use of rhythm, meter and harmony (601a4-b4). Finally, related to this imagistic and vivid aspect of *phantasmata* is a tendency to be deceptive.⁴⁹ Plato thus frequently uses *phantasma* to denote appearances that are manipulative or even false.⁵⁰ To name just a few examples, in the *Republic*, Plato writes that when a state of calm occurs after pain, it falsely appears pleasant, and calls this an unsound *phantasma* and witchcraft (584a7-10). He describes the poet as devoid of knowledge, because he produces *phantasmata*, not *onta*, images, not realities (599a1-3). Earlier, Plato specifies that the gods would not wish to lie by word or deed, by producing

⁴⁸ See, e.g., *Phileb.* 40a6-9 and *Tim.* 71a3-5. For further discussion of the relation of these passages, see H. Lorenz, *The Brute Within [Brute]* (Oxford, 2006), 99-110 and J. Moss, 'Appearances and Calculation: Plato's Division of the Soul', *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 34 (2008), 35-68 at 55-7.

⁴⁹ This may draw on the primary sense of φάντασμα, namely an apparition or ghost.

⁵⁰ See also M. Schofield's excellent discussion ('Aristotle on the Imagination', in M. C. Nussbaum and A. O. Rorty (eds.), *Essays on Aristotle's De Anima* (Oxford, 1992), 249-76, at 265-6). For a broader discussion of the deceptiveness of φαντασία, see A. Silverman, 'Plato on *Phantasia*', *Classical Antiquity* 10.1 (1991), 123-47, at 139-47.

phantasmata, illusions (382a1-2). In the *Sophist*, the sophist is defined as one who deceives us via *phantasmata* (240d1-2); *phantasmata* are contrasted with likenesses (εἰκόνες), since they are distorted representations that nonetheless appear true (235d6-6c7).⁵¹ Later, Plato suggests that if there are no falsehoods, then there can be no *phantasmata* (264c12-d1).⁵²

Thus, consideration of Plato's use of *phantasma* in other dialogues suggests that *phantasmata* are vivid and imagistic representations that have a tendency to be false. Applied to the *Protagoras*, the implication is that the appearances that cause the agent to err are misleading but vivid, imagistic mental representations that she forms of imminent pleasures. Are they full-fledged beliefs? No. As, for example, Singpurwalla and Storey argue, the measuring art removes the *power* from appearance, but does not remove the appearance itself.⁵³ The agent who possesses the measuring art clearly no longer forms the

⁵¹ See J. Beere, 'Faking Wisdom: The Expertise of Sophistic in Plato's *Sophist*', *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 57 (2019), 153-90 at 161.

⁵² Note that this feature appears to be absent from Plato's usage in the *Philebus*, where φάντασμα appears to be used more broadly, to refer to images that accompany λόγοι in our souls, but not exclusively to false appearances.

⁵³ Singpurwalla, 'Reasoning', 252; Storey, 'Sex', 247-8. See also, e.g., M. D. Boeri 'Socrates, Aristotle, and the Stoics on the Apparent and Real Good', *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* 20 (2004), 109-41 at 120; N. Denyer, *Plato: Protagoras* (Cambridge, 2008), 192; and J. Warren, *The Pleasures of Reason in*

belief that the proximate pleasure is greater and hence better; the role of the measuring art is to forestall such belief-formation by revealing that the appearance is non-veridical. The appearance, therefore, is a mental representation we form of the pleasure, which gives rise to belief when we accept it as veridical.⁵⁴

6. What is the power of appearance?

To turn to our second question, what does the power of appearance consist in? Socrates specifies that the power of appearance makes us wander, exchange the same things many times and feel regret. I take this to mean that appearances cause us to believe them; as the appearances change, so they cause our beliefs to shift. In virtue of what do appearances have the power to cause us to believe them? Here, it will be helpful to take a closer look at Plato's treatment of appearances in the *Sophist*. In the *Sophist*, Plato contrasts the art of making likenesses (εἰκαστική) with the art of making appearances (φανταστική). The art of making likenesses preserves the proportions of the subject it is imitating. However, when sculptors make very large statues, if they were to reproduce the

Plato, Aristotle, and the Hellenistic Hedonists, (Cambridge, 2014), 114. For a contrasting perspective, see Penner, 'Socrates', 137.

⁵⁴ I should emphasize that I am not making the more general claim that Plato subscribes to a proto-Stoic appearance/assent theory of belief formation. My discussion solely concerns Plato's treatment of hedonic error in the *Protagoras*; my argument is that in his discussion of hedonic error, Plato is proposing that proximate pleasures cause us to err because they look a certain way, namely they misleadingly appear greater than they actually are.

proportions of their subject, then its upper parts would appear smaller than they ought, and its lower parts larger. Plato writes that such craftsmen ‘say goodbye to the truth, and produce in their images the proportions that seem to be beautiful instead of the real ones’ (236a4-6).⁵⁵ He then describes this appearance as that which ‘appears to be like a beautiful thing, but only because it’s seen from a viewpoint that’s not beautiful, and would seem unlike the thing it claims to be like if you came to be able to see such large things adequately’ (236b4-6).⁵⁶ The sophist, in turn, creates appearances with his words in order to deceive and manipulate his audience. Appearances, in the *Sophist*, are not merely representations that are false; they are also deceptive, manipulating us into believing that they are true. They do so because our undeveloped perceptual and cognitive faculties are such that in certain circumstances, appearances seem more true to us than faithful representations.⁵⁷ They possess what Stephen Colbert famously refers to as *truthiness*.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Ἄρ’ οὖν οὐ χαίρειν τὸ ἀληθὲς ἐάσαντες οἱ δημιουργοὶ νῦν οὐ τὰς οὐσας συμμετρίας ἀλλὰ τὰς δοξούσας εἶναι καλὰς τοῖς εἰδώλοις ἐναπεργάζονται;

⁵⁶ τὸ φαινόμενον μὲν διὰ τὴν οὐκ ἐκ καλοῦ θέαν εοικέναι τῷ καλῷ, δύναμιν δὲ εἴ τις λάβοι τὰ τηλικαῦτα ἰκανῶς ὁρᾶν, μηδ’ εἰκὸς ᾧ φησιν εοικέναι....

⁵⁷ Thus, the cave-dwellers in the *Republic* initially find images more persuasive than reality (515c4-6a3), and in Book X, *hoi polloi* are presented as finding the images produced by poets more persuasive than the truth (602b1-4).

⁵⁸ ‘We’re not talking about truth, we’re talking about something that seems like truth’ (*The Colbert Report*, October 17, 2005).

The power of appearance, then, resides in its tendency to appear true and hence to induce assent.

How, then, does the measuring art counter this power? Socrates states that the measuring art is the ‘study of relative excess and deficiency and equality’ regarding pleasures and pains (*Prot.* 357b2-3).⁵⁹ It makes ‘the appearance lose its power and by showing us the truth, gives the soul peace of mind firmly rooted in the truth and saves our life’ (356d8-e2).⁶⁰ Thus, the measuring art is the art of correctly determining the relative magnitudes of pleasures and pains. Through showing us the truth—that is, showing us the correct relative magnitudes—it disables the power of appearance. Since the power of appearance resides in its tendency to appear true and compel assent, the measuring art must

⁵⁹ ...ὑπερβολῆς τε καὶ ἐνδείας οὕσα καὶ ἰσότητος πρὸς ἀλλήλας σκέψις....

⁶⁰ ...ἄκυρον μὲν ἂν ἐποίησε τοῦτο τὸ φάντασμα, δηλώσασα δὲ τὸ ἀληθὲς ἡσυχίαν ἂν ἐποίησεν ἔχειν τὴν ψυχὴν μένουσαν ἐπὶ τῷ ἀληθεῖ καὶ ἔσωσεν ἂν τὸν βίον. Plato’s use of the μὲν...δέ construction in this passage might be taken to imply that the measuring art *first* disempowers the appearance, *then* shows us the truth. However, given that Socrates describes the measuring art as the study of ‘relative excess and deficiency and equality’ (357b2-3) the mechanism by which it disempowers the appearance must be by measuring the pleasures correctly, i.e. by showing us the truth. Thus, I take the contrast implied by the μὲν...δέ construction to not be between two distinct mechanisms deployed by the measuring art, but rather to be between two distinct, albeit related results: first the appearance is disempowered, then we gain stable knowledge and peace of mind.

reveal that this appearance is not, in fact, true, so that it ceases to appear true and compel assent. Thus, the measuring art undermines the power of appearance not by changing how things appear, but by robbing appearances of their truthiness. Compare this to how an oar in water might continue to look as if it were bent even to those familiar with the illusion, but they will see this as a mere seeming. The measuring art accomplishes this via a two-step process. First, it generates a correct judgment of the relative magnitudes of pleasures and pains. Second, the correct judgment conflicts with the appearance, revealing it to be a mere appearance and causing it to no longer produce assent. The resulting state is one of knowledge, which is stable and unaffected by appearance. We might compare this to the perceptual case. Suppose that, unaware of distance-illusions, I form the false judgment that a nearby horse is larger than a distant one. The way to disabuse me would be to take a measuring stick and place it next to each horse. While the distant horse might continue to look as though it were smaller than the nearby one, I would cease to believe that it is.⁶¹

This account raises two difficulties. First, as we have seen, there are certain disanalogies between the perceptual and the hedonic cases. In the perceptual case, we can frequently counter the illusion by putting ourselves in the same perceptual relation to both objects being compared. We might walk up to the distant horse, place it next to the nearby horse, or compare the size of both horses to an identical object, the measuring stick. But despite Socrates' appeal to the image of hedonic scales, it is not as though we can literally

⁶¹ Cf. *Euthph.* 7b2-c8; it is not clear how optimistic Socrates is in the *Euthyphro* concerning the possibility of objectively measuring evaluative properties.

place the two pleasures next to one another; as noted earlier, the pleasures do not even exist yet. So how does the measuring art generate a correct comparison of their magnitudes? Socrates punts: ‘What exactly this art, this knowledge is, we will can inquire into later’ (357b5-6).⁶² But what the image of the scales and the comparison to the perceptual case suggests is that, just as in the perceptual case, we often correct the illusion by placing ourselves in the same perceptual relation to the two objects being compared, so in the evaluative case, we must place ourselves in the same cognitive relation to the two pleasures being compared. This will forestall a tendency to represent the proximate pleasure differently than the distant one, such that it appears greater than it actually is.

A second concern is whether this will in fact work. Earlier, I raised a problem for the non-rational interpretation: what guarantee is there that knowledge will escape the distorting effects of non-rational desires? But one might raise a similar difficulty for the traditional interpretation: what guarantee is there that, once we correctly assess the relative magnitudes of the proximate and distant pleasures, we will cease to be taken in by the appearance of the proximate pleasure as greater? In response, both the non-rational and the traditional interpretations can appeal to the nature of knowledge: to have knowledge is to have a stable grasp of the truth. Thus, as a matter of definition, the one with knowledge will not be taken in by appearances. But the traditional interpretation has an advantage in terms of explaining why this is so: whereas it is difficult to see how, exactly, knowledge disempowers non-rational desires, it is relatively uncontroversial that, when presented with

⁶² Ἦτις μὲν τοίνυν τέχνη καὶ ἐπιστήμη ἐστὶν αὕτη, εἰς αὗτις σκεψόμεθα....

compelling evidence, we will abandon a belief that conflicts with it. It might take a while to get there: the cave-dwellers are initially strongly persuaded by the shadows among which they dwell; eventually, however, they are compelled by the sight of truth to revise their beliefs (*Rep.* 515c4-6c6). In the case of hedonic errors, this process might be assisted by coming to realize the ways in which appearances tend to manipulate us. Once we become aware, through repeated experience, of the tendency of proximate pleasures to appear inflated, then we will become less likely to be taken in by them.⁶³

7. Why do proximate pleasures appear greater?

This brings us to our final question: what resources does Socrates have to explain why proximate pleasures appear greater than distant ones? Socrates does not offer an explanation of this phenomenon; he simply treats it as a brute fact. Proponents of the non-rational interpretation find this unsatisfying; they therefore propose non-rational desires as the means to fill in this lacuna in his account. But before we consider what sort of explanation we might offer on Socrates' behalf, we should first ask whether Socrates might not, after all, be entitled to treat the tendency of proximate pleasures to appear greater as a basic psychological fact. In fact, there is considerable empirical evidence that people often commit precisely this sort of evaluative error. Psychologists have repeatedly demonstrated that our preferences for rewards over time tend to shift according to hyperbolic and not exponential curves.⁶⁴ The rate at which we discount future rewards does not remain

⁶³ Cf. *Rep.* 595b5-7.

⁶⁴ See, e.g., G. Ainslie, *Breakdown of Will* [*Breakdown*] (Cambridge, 2001).

consistent over time; instead, as a reward becomes more proximate, we tend to inflate its value more rapidly. Thus, for example, people will sometimes choose a short period of relief from a noxious noise over a longer, later period of relief from that noise, but only if the shorter period is imminent.⁶⁵ However, this does not settle the question of whether our preference for proximate pleasures is due to a calculative error; perhaps, as on the common account, we simply desire them more. But in a recent study, Kassam, Gilbert, Boston and Wilson set out to answer exactly that question. Instead of presenting their subjects with an intertemporal choice, they asked them to predict how happy they would be now to receive \$20 now, versus how happy they would be at a series of future times to receive the money at those future times.⁶⁶ The subjects consistently predicted that receiving \$20 now would make them happier now than how happy receiving \$20 at some future time would make them at that future time. The authors conclude: ‘The standard account of temporal discounting suggests that there is something wrong with people’s *decisions* about the future but nothing wrong with their *perceptions* of it. Our studies show that shortsighted perception is, in fact, one of the causes of time discounting. One reason why people appear

⁶⁵ Ainslie, *Breakdown*, 30. This result has been replicated in animals: pigeons will choose earlier access to less grain over later access to more grain, but only when the earlier access is imminent, and not when it is delayed.

⁶⁶ In drawing upon this study, I am, admittedly, assuming that the results would remain consistent if the question were posed in terms of future pleasure rather than future happiness.

to be so unconcerned about the future is that they mispredict how they will feel when it arrives'.⁶⁷ What this suggests is that the sort of evaluative illusion that Socrates describes in the *Protagoras* is, in fact, fairly widespread, and hence, even if he cannot offer a further explanation for what causes it, perhaps we ought not to demand this of his account.

I have to confess that this leaves me unsatisfied. In the perceptual case, we can appeal to various facts about optics to explain the illusion, and this seems to call out for a parallel explanation of the evaluative illusion. Granting that Socrates does not offer any such an explanation, what we need to ask is whether, as the proponents of the non-rational interpretation claim, the only possible explanation is non-rational desires. I have argued that non-rational desires, even if they exist, would not do much to explain the evaluative illusion. I shall now propose an alternate explanation of the evaluative illusion. I should be very clear that I am not claiming that Socrates offers this further explanation. I am simply arguing that we do not need to appeal to non-rational desires to provide such an explanation, that there are resources within the traditional interpretation of Socrates' position to account for the evaluative illusion.

To see this, we should return, briefly, to the psychological research I alluded to earlier. According to construal level theory, we tend to represent proximate events

⁶⁷ K. A. Kassam, D. T. Gilbert, A. Boston and T. D. Wilson, 'Future Anhedonia and Time Discounting' ['Future'], *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 44 (2008), 1533-7, at 1536.

differently from distant ones.⁶⁸ While we represent proximate events with a high degree of specificity and detail, we represent distant events more schematically and abstractly. Kassam et al. offer the following account of how this might affect our hedonic predictions. Since we represent proximate pleasures with more specificity and concrete detail than distant ones, our representations of them cause more intense affect. And since people often use the affect they experience upon representing a future pleasure to predict its magnitude, this leads to an overestimation of proximate pleasures.⁶⁹ Applied to our problem in the

⁶⁸ E.g. N. Liberman, M. Sagristano and Y. Trope, ‘The Effect of Temporal Distance on Level of Mental Construal’, *Journal of Experimental and Social Psychology* 38 (2001), 523-34. This difference in representation is reflected in the neural systems at work: when we select proximate rewards, the limbic system is activated, while when we select distant rewards, there is increased activity of the lateral prefrontal cortex and the posterior parietal cortex (S. M. McClure, D. I. Laibson, G. Loewenstein and J. D. Cohen, ‘Separate Neural Systems Value Immediate and Delayed Monetary Rewards’, *Science* 306 (2004), 503-7).

⁶⁹ ‘Future’, 1533. In a later iteration of the marshmallow experiment, W. Mischel and N. Barker demonstrate a related, and highly suggestive result (‘Cognitive Appraisals and Transformations in Delay Behavior’, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 31.2 (1975), 254-61). If the children were instructed to think of the rewards in consummatory, arousing (‘hot’) imagery, they capitulated significantly faster than if they were instructed to think of the rewards in non-consummatory, abstract (‘cold’) imagery. Thus, for example, if the rewards in question were pretzel sticks, the children capitulated faster if

Protagoras, the proposed explanation is that we tend to represent proximate pleasures with more specificity and concrete detail than distant ones.⁷⁰ This causes greater anticipatory pleasure, and, since we use the anticipatory pleasure we experience upon representing a pleasure to forecast the amount of pleasure we will experience, this causes us to overestimate the magnitude of the proximate pleasure.⁷¹

they were instructed to think about how crunchy pretzels are when you bite into them and how salty they are when you lick them than if they were instructed to think about how pretzels are brown, long and cylindrical (257). This demonstrates that one factor influencing how likely we are to pursue a reward is whether we represent it via imagery related to enjoying the consumption of it.

⁷⁰ D. Parfit also attributes this view to Plato (*Reasons and Person [Reasons]* (Oxford, 1987), 162); he does not offer a defense of this as an interpretation of Plato but, rather, sets this up as a theory that cannot fully account for the phenomenon of future discounting.

⁷¹ One might wonder whether this account of evaluative error depends on ethical hedonism, or whether it could be applied to other conceptions of the good. Whether it can be applied to other kinds of goods will depend on whether we tend to forecast the magnitude of such goods based on vivid, imagistic representations of ourselves experiencing such goods. Thus, this account will work best for goods whose value lies in our experience of them, less well for goods whose value is independent of our experience of them. At *Philebus* 40e2-3, Plato extends his analysis of anticipatory pleasure to fear, anger and ‘everything

Given the role of anticipatory pleasure in causing us to pursue the proximate pleasure, is it still fair to say that knowledge is not dragged around by pleasure, as on the common account? Yes, for two reasons. First, on the common account, what it means for knowledge to be dragged around is for the agent to pursue the proximate pleasure, despite knowing that it would be better not to do so. By contrast, on my proposed interpretation, at the moment of action, the agent acts in accordance with her erroneous belief that the proximate pleasure is better. Second, on the common account, the agent is directly caused to act by pleasure or, perhaps, a non-rational desire for pleasure. By contrast, on my interpretation, what causes the agent to act is her belief that the proximate pleasure is greater and hence better. This belief is affected by her mental representation of the proximate pleasure, and the resultant anticipatory pleasure, but it is ultimately her belief

of that sort' (περὶ φόβων τε καὶ θυμῶν καὶ πάντων τῶν τοιούτων). Thus, at the very least, we could extend this analysis to all the παθήματα that the many list as causes of akrasia at *Protagoras* 352b7-8: anger, pleasure, pain, *eros* and fear. That this account could not be applied to goods whose value is independent of our experience of them does not seem problematic, as we are much less likely to show present-bias in the case of such goods, if indeed they exist. For example, it seems probable that people are less likely to show present-bias in pursuing posthumous goods; if that is the case, then this may be due to the fact that they do not imagine themselves enjoying those goods when deciding what to do.

that it would be best to pursue the proximate pleasure which determines how she acts.⁷²

As I have noted, Socrates simply does not offer any explanation of the evaluative error in the *Protagoras*. Nonetheless, the explanation I am proposing is clearly consistent with his presentation of the evaluative error: it explains why the appearance we form of the proximate pleasure misleads us into thinking it is greater than it actually is. Furthermore, if we look forward to the *Philebus*, we see some indications that Socrates might not be averse to this explanation. In the *Philebus*, Plato again observes that proximate pleasures appear greater than distant ones; his discussion is complicated by the fact that he blends into his treatment of temporal discounting another phenomenon—namely that proximity to pain causes us to overestimate the magnitude of pleasure.⁷³ For our purposes, what is significant is the following. First, Plato describes the vehicle by which we experience anticipatory pleasure as an appearance (φάντασμα). Accompanying the assertion (λόγος) in our soul that describes a future pleasure—for example, that I will be rich—is an appearance, that Plato depicts as an image painted in our soul (40a6-12). Plato emphasizes

⁷² Note that this interpretation differs from the non-rational interpretation insofar as it claims that it is our representation of the proximate pleasures that cause us to erroneously form an inflated judgment of its magnitude, and not, instead, a non-rational desire for this pleasure.

⁷³ S. Delcomminette takes the minority view that temporal distortion is not at issue, only distortion due to the comparison of pleasure to pain ('False Pleasures, Appearance and Imagination in the *Philebus*' ['False'], *Phronesis* 48.3 (2003), 215-37, at 231-2).

that it is through this appearance that we experience anticipatory pleasure: he invokes the painted images at 40a9-12 as part of his analysis of anticipatory pleasure, and describes the anticipatory pleasure as involving envisioning (ὄρᾱ) oneself taking great pleasure in the possession of heaps of gold.⁷⁴ Why does Plato need to introduce an appearance here, in addition to the assertion? Because we don't experience anticipatory pleasure when we dispassionately consider propositions about the future; we have to actively imagine ourselves undergoing the pleasure.⁷⁵ Thus, the appearance brings with it the level of

⁷⁴ There is some controversy over how, exactly, to understand Plato's treatment of anticipatory pleasure: does he take it to be the anticipation of future pleasure, pleasure taken in the anticipation of future pleasure, or, as Harte puts it, 'an advance installment of the pleasure anticipated' ('*Philebus*', 125)? I favor the last option, in part because, as Harte (n. 12) and S. Delcomminette (*Le Philèbe de Platon [Philèbe]* (Leiden, 2006), 384) observe, this is suggested by Plato's use of προχαίρειν at 39d4. For a contrary perspective, see A. W. Price, 'Varieties of Pleasure in Plato and Aristotle', *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 52 (2017), 177-208, at 180-2; Delcomminette's suggestion that in experiencing anticipatory pleasure, one identifies with the representation, contained within the φάντασμα, of oneself being pleased (*Philèbe*, 386) goes some way to addressing Price's concern that Plato is depicting a central imagining.

⁷⁵ See Delcomminette, *Philèbe*, 385 and J. Moss, 'Pictures and Passions in the *Timaeus* and *Philebus*', in R. Barney, T. Brennan and C. Brittain (eds.), *Plato and the Divided Self* (Cambridge, 2012), 259-80, at 266. Delcomminette, 'False', 228 and Lorenz, *Brute*, 105-

vivacity and immersive detail required for us to experience some version of the future pleasure now.⁷⁶

Second, in the *Philebus*, Plato considers two cases of false anticipatory pleasure. In the first, the judgment (δόξα) infects the anticipatory pleasure: a mistaken judgment that one will be rich renders the anticipatory pleasure one feels false.⁷⁷ But in the second case, the causal direction switches (42a5-9). Plato explicitly claims that when we overestimate

6 emphasize the role of φαντάσματα in representing future pleasures when perception is not available.

⁷⁶ I understand vivacity to refer not only to the content of the representation—its concrete detail, but also to its mode of presentation. Part of what is distinctive about φαντάσματα is that they present their content in an immersive, quasi-perceptual manner; this is the key to their verisimilitude. Plato alludes to this in his account of the manipulative power of poetry in the *Republic*: poets' words only seem true to us when clothed in meter, rhythm and harmony; stripped of these, they lose their power of bewitchment, like a boy who has lost the bloom of youth (601a4-b7). Thus, it is not so much the propositional content of poetry as its mode of presentation that accounts for its ability to deceive.

⁷⁷ There is considerable debate over the content of this false judgment: possibilities include the judgment that a certain event will occur, that it will occur under a certain description, and that it will be pleasant should it occur; for helpful discussion, see Harte 'Philebus'. For my purposes, all that matters is that there is some judgment made about what the future will be like and that it is this judgment which renders the anticipatory pleasure false.

the *amount* of pleasure we will feel—either due to temporal proximity or the proximity of pain—the falsehood lies in the pleasure itself. In claiming that the falsehood lies in the pleasure itself, and not the judgment, Plato suggests that it is the appearance that is at fault. How does it deceive us? As in the *Protagoras*, Plato explains the hedonic error by a comparison to visual distance illusions: ‘Does it happen only to eyesight that seeing objects from afar or close by distorts the truth and causes false judgments? Or does not the same thing happen also in the case of pleasure and pain?’ (41e9-2a3).⁷⁸ Just as the way that objects appear to vision can cause us to misestimate their size, so the way the pleasures appear in advance—that is, the appearances we form of them—can cause us to misestimate their magnitude. In the visual case, the objects look larger or smaller than they actually are; similarly, in the hedonic case, the pleasures must appear greater or lesser than they will be. Plato goes on to refer to the amount of excessive anticipatory pleasure we feel as an appearance (φαινόμενον) that should be cut off as false (42b8-c3). This suggests that our representation of ourselves enjoying future pleasures contains a certain quantity of pleasure and, furthermore, that this quantity can be distorted. Thus, the appearance renders judgment false because we use the quantity of anticipatory pleasure we experience to predict how great a future pleasure will be. In sum, it is the image we form of ourselves as pleased through which we experience anticipatory pleasure; the amount of anticipatory

⁷⁸ ἐν μὲν ὄψει τὸ πόρρωθεν καὶ ἐγγύθεν ὄραν τὰ μεγέθη τὴν ἀλήθειαν ἀφανίζει καὶ ψευδῆ ποιεῖ δοξάζειν, ἐν λύπαις δ’ ἄρα καὶ ἡδοναῖς οὐκ ἔστι ταῦτόν τοῦτο γινόμενον;

pleasure we feel, in turn, is the basis of our false hedonic prediction.⁷⁹

Of course, this does not get us all the way to the account that Kassam et al. offer of the evaluative illusion. In particular, Plato nowhere claims that we tend to represent proximate pleasures more vividly than distant ones. But what we do get from our consideration of the *Philebus* is not insignificant. It makes clear that Plato conceives of our representations of future pleasures as imagistic appearances, and that it is in virtue of the anticipatory pleasure we feel through these appearances that we forecast the amount of pleasure we will experience.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ For a full defense of this interpretation of *Philebus* 41a5-2c5, see N. Mooradian, 'What To Do About False Pleasure of Overestimation? *Philebus* 41a5-42c5', *Apeiron*, 28. (1995), 91-112. Our interpretations of the passage differ insofar as I take the false hedonic prediction to derive from the amount of pleasure contained in one's representation of the future pleasure, whereas Mooradian treats the anticipatory pleasure as an additional cognitive state, that is directed at one's representation of the future pleasure, but is not identical to it. J. Moss, *Aristotle on the Apparent Good* (Oxford, 2012), offers a similar treatment of the role of φαντάσματα in Aristotle's account of practical deliberation.

⁸⁰ Storey offers a different account of the source of the error in the *Protagoras*. According to Storey, the error of the many is not to falsely measure the relative magnitudes of the pleasures, but to fail to recognize that the later goods against which they measure the imminent pleasures are also pleasure-producing (2018: 252-4; see also Nussbaum,

8. Conclusion

In this paper, I have sought to defend the traditional interpretation of the *Protagoras* against the non-rational interpretation. The non-rational interpretation, importantly, draws attention to the need to explain why Socrates should hold that proximate pleasures appear greater than distant ones. However, introducing non-rational desires into Socrates' account does not, I argue, solve this difficulty and, furthermore, it generates additional problems. I then offer a close examination of Socrates' account of the evaluative illusion. I claim that in the *Protagoras*, appearances are vivid and imagistic mental representations that appear true and hence invite assent, but that have a tendency to be false. I conclude by suggesting that proximate pleasures have a tendency to produce inflated hedonic predictions because we represent them more vividly than distant ones, yielding greater anticipatory pleasure

Fragility, 115-6, who makes the case that the many fail to recognize the commensurability of the goods being weighed). While I do not agree with this aspect of Storey's analysis (see my note in Section 1), his observation concerning the kinds of goods being compared is significant. The immediate pleasures are things like food, drink and sex, the later goods things like wealth and health. One confronted with an opportunity to eat a cake might immediately and vividly represent to himself the pleasure of eating the cake. However, as Storey notes, it requires instrumental reasoning to conclude that eating the cake will lead to eventual pain via ill-health. The fact that a more complex reasoning process is involved in representing the later evil as unpleasant may explain why we are less likely to represent it imagistically and so undergo anticipatory pain.

which, in turn, causes us to overestimate their magnitude.

This final proposal is, of course, speculative. My aim is not to claim that Socrates had this sort of account in mind but, rather, to demonstrate that he had the resources to develop his account along these lines. Some will find this explanation unsatisfactory.⁸¹ It might seem dubious that it could fully account for the marshmallow case with which I opened this paper. Could the children really forecast less pleasure when the temporal gap is a mere fifteen minutes? Perhaps, though, that case is complicated by the fact that children tend to experience time differently than adults: thus, while fifteen minutes might seem a short stretch of time to an adult, it might seem an eternity to a child.⁸² This account also forces us to accept certain phenomena as brute fact, namely that we represent imminent

⁸¹ Parfit argues powerfully against Plato that, even if the vividness of our representations of proximate pleasures accounts for some of our present bias, it cannot fully account for the phenomenon (*Reasons*, 161-2).

⁸² It is generally held that children do not have a solid grasp of time until around the age of seven (see, e.g., S. Droit-Volet, 'Children and Time', *Psychologist* 25.8 (2012), 586-9). As regards hedonic forecasting (rather than intertemporal choice), I am not aware of any studies that focus on such short temporal distances. However, it is noteworthy that in Kassam et al.'s study, 43% of the discounting occurred at a gap of a mere 24 hours ('Future', 1535).

pleasures more vividly and that this causes us to overestimate their magnitude.⁸³ But in the end, every explanation requires us to accept certain phenomena as given; the question is whether these phenomena seem implausible and mysterious, or whether we are comfortable accepting them. Part of what is distinctive about Socrates' intellectualism is that he does not treat desire as given; he views desire as reasons-responsive, and when someone claims to desire something, he maintains that it is reasonable to ask, 'Why?' At the same time, Socrates does recognize that our cognitive mechanisms can become distorted. Thus, at the very opening of the dialogue, Socrates warns Hippocrates that the danger of going to the sophist is that one's very reasoning capacity will be perverted

⁸³ One might attempt to explain this fact in a variety of ways. Generally, we have more detailed and reliable information about proximate, rather than distant pleasures, which would account for a tendency to represent proximate goods in more vivid detail (see, e.g. K. Fujita, Y. Trope and N. Liberman, 'On the Psychology of Near and Far: A Construal Level Theoretic Approach', in G. Keren and G. Wu (eds.), *The Wiley Blackwell Handbook of Judgment and Decision Making* (West Sussex, 2016), 404-31, at 405-6). Furthermore, more detailed representations might be of more use to us regarding proximate goods than distant ones, given that we are more likely to have to act soon in relation to proximate than distant goods, and low-level construals are more germane to action. It is possible that both of these general facts produce a tendency to represent proximate goods with greater specificity and detail than distant ones, even in cases where these facts do not, in fact, obtain.

through their teachings, so much so, that one will become incapable of recognizing the same teaching's falsity (313c7-4b4). What recourse is there? How can we prevent this distortion from occurring? Here, we might call to mind Socrates' comment in *Republic X*, that imitative poetry has the power to ruin one's intellect unless one possesses the antidote of knowing what it is (595b5-7). Thus, in the case of the sophist, the solution—apart from avoiding him altogether—is perhaps to be taught to recognize the distortions he threatens to introduce into our reasoning. Similarly in the case of pleasure: in highlighting the tendency of proximate pleasures to appear inflated, Socrates is, perhaps, enabling us to safeguard ourselves against being deceived.⁸⁴

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⁸⁴ I am extremely grateful to Victor Caston for his invaluable, extensive comments on this paper, as well as to my anonymous referees. I am also indebted to Rachel Singpurwalla and to Nick Smith for their generous written comments; this paper would not have been possible without the springboard provided by their provocative engagement with these issues. Thanks also to my colleague, Piercarlo Valdesolo, for introducing me to relevant areas of psychological research; and to audiences at the West Coast Plato Workshop at UCSD, the Ancient Philosophy and Science Network at Humboldt University, and the Munich School of Ancient Philosophy at Ludwig Maximilians University.

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