

IS SOCRATES A REAL ENEMY OF AKRASIA?

*Barbara Botter **

Abstract: Recently the topic of *akrasia* has become a favourite subject of discussion among the scholars and has contributed to reintroduce ancient philosophy into contemporary philosophical debate. *Akrasia* has been a persistent concern of philosophers throughout the history of philosophy since the time of Socrates. The Socratic insight into the way human action should be grasped is always puzzling in its details, and Aristotle, and probably the mature Plato, disagreed with it at some important points. In spite of this fact, our claim in this article is to show that Plato in the *Protagoras* does not represent Socrates as explicitly denying the possibility of something called *akrasia*. It is probably best to suppose that what is at stake in Socrates' words is only denying that anyone can act as a result of his feelings, knowing that what he is doing is base. This argument does not seem presuppose the denying of *akrasia*, once we have become clear that with this word we intend a manifest phenomenon of our lived lives, like acting against what we know to be the best. To support our claim we will try to show the presence in Plato's *Protagoras* of another cognitive element, which is involved when the particular object of desire appears. This is the element that in the cases of *akrasia* will determine what happens, although the moral knowledge is present and persisting.

Key words: *akrasia*, Knowledge, Belief, Virtue, Pleasure.

Resumo: Recentemente, o tema da *akrasia* tornou-se um assunto favorito de discussão entre os estudiosos e contribuiu para introduzir a filosofia antiga no debate filosófico contemporâneo. O tema da *akrasia* foi uma preocupação dos filósofos ao longo da história da filosofia desde os tempos de Sócrates. A reflexão socrática sobre a ação humana é enigmática em seus detalhes, e Aristóteles,

* Doutora em Filosofia pela Universidade Cà Foscara (Veneza) com pós-doutorado na Universidade de São Paulo (USP), professora do Departamento de Filosofia da Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio). Artigo submetido a avaliação no dia 09/03/2010 e aprovado para publicação no dia 17/05/2010.

e provavelmente o Platão maduro, entraram em desacordo com Sócrates sobre alguns pontos importantes. Apesar disso, o objetivo do presente artigo é mostrar que Platão no *Protágoras* não representa Sócrates como o filósofo que recusa explicitamente a possibilidade da *akrasia*. Acho melhor supor que o que está em jogo nas palavras de Sócrates é apenas negar que quem comete uma injustiça a comete em *plena consciência* de estar agindo mal. Esta afirmação não parece pressupor a negação da *akrasia*, se com esta palavra indicamos o fenômeno bem conhecido de cometer uma ação moralmente não correta, embora o sujeito conheça a conduta moralmente excelente. Para justificar esta hipótese proponho examinarmos a possibilidade da presença no *Protágoras* de um segundo elemento cognitivo que age na presença imediata do objeto de desejo. É este o elemento responsável da conduta do agente nos casos de *akrasia*, embora o conhecimento moral permaneça presente no sujeito, mas não ativo no momento da ação.

Palavras chave: *Akrasia*, conhecimento, crença, virtude, prazer.

1) The affective state of being overcome by pleasure

The Greek philosophical treatment of the theme of *akrasia* is complicate. According to the tradition, reflection on that phenomenon began with a denial of *akrasia*: Socrates thought that there is no such thing as *akrasia*¹. Plato and Aristotle challenged that denial in *Republic*, Book IV, and in Book VII of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, so that we in fact see the Greek philosophical treatment of *akrasia* becomes the story of its rehabilitation. But such a story is not without many problems. A first question is the reliability of the testimonies: the standard story seems to ignore the fact that we simply do not find, in Plato's dialogues, the explicit denial of *akrasia* under that designation. The blurry term in question was not Plato's term at all: he does not use the word *akrasia* in his surviving dialogues. On the *Platon Corpus* the word shows up only twice, both times in the plainly spurious *Definitiones* at 416a1 and 416a23. The first offers a definition of *akrasia* as a violent disposition against right reason directed towards pleasant-seeming things; the second occurs in the definition of *prattle* (*lalia*), which is treated as a irrational weakness (*akrasia*) pertaining to speech. This may be compared with Aristotle, who uses the word 87 times, primarily in his ethical works but also scattered elsewhere through the *Corpus*.

¹ ARISTOTLE, *NE* VII 2, 1145b25-26. It is not clear whether this is a doctrine of the historical Socrates or of Plato. The *Protágoras* is included in the "early dialogues" but, along with the *Meno*, exhibits difference from other Socratic dialogues. Elenchus is still present and the outcome is still aporetic, but in the course of driving his interlocutors into confusion Socrates seems to rely on some substantial doctrines, such as the virtue is knowledge.

The philosophical phenomenon of *akrasia* has been known at least since the time of Socrates, but the Greek word “*akrasia*” appears only in Xenophon and was used by Aristotle. In fact, Socrates only uses this general account “*this pathos of theirs, which they call being overcome by pleasure*” (τοῦτο τὸ πάθος, ὃ φασιν ὑπὸ τῶν ἡδονῶν ἡττᾶσθαι)².

According to the common sense³, this happens when an agent X intentionally and knowingly performs an action Y against his better judgment and when his psychological condition is weak with respect to the unavoidable sources of pleasure⁴. The point of view of the majority of people is that this affective state (*pathema*) consists in being overcome by pleasure of eating, drinking, and having sex⁵.

“Do you not say that this thing occurs, good people, in the common case of a man being overpowered by the pleasantness of food or drink or sexual acts, and doing what he does though he knows it to be wicked?”

ἄλλο τι γάρ, ὦ ἄνθρωποι, φατὲ ὑμῖν τοῦτο γίνεσθαι ἐν τοῖσδε, οἷον πολλάκις ὑπὸ σίτων καί ποτῶν καὶ ἀφροδισίων κρατοῦμενοι ἡδέων ὄντων, γινώσκοντες ὅτι πονηρὰ ἐστίν, ὅμως αὐτὰ πράττειν; ⁶.

This experience is usually indicated as “lack of control” or “incontinence”, and sometimes as “weakness of the will”, but these translations do not cover satisfactorily the complexity of the phenomenon. We should agree, in part, with Schiffer, who asserts: “Weakness of the will is an unfortunate if picturesque term of art and has never had better than a vacillating reference – one would be rash to try to provide for all its applications ...”⁷. We should agree with him, because we find some authors treating *akrasia* as a case of acting against an all-things-considered belief (*doxastic akrasia*); others as acting against knowledge (*epistemic akrasia*); others who speak not in terms of action but of choice or intention; and cutting across these differences, we find some who treat *akrasia* as peculiarly moral, peculiarly prudential, both, or neither. Still, we should agree with Schiffer only in part because there is nothing unfortunate about one term or another, once we have become clear about what we intend to ask⁸.

So, it is important to see what Aristotle thinks Socrates is denying in the *Protagoras*.

² PLATO, *Prot.* 353a.

³ See Plato’s *Protagoras* 352b-357e and Aristotle’s critical presentation in *Nicomachean Ethics* VII 4, 1147b24-8.

⁴ PLATO, *Prot.* 352b7; d8; e6-351a1; c2.

⁵ PLATO, *Prot.* 353c6.

⁶ PLATO, *Prot.* 353c6-8.

⁷ SCHIFFER 1976, pp. 196-197.

⁸ MELE 2004 offers a lucid overview of some approaches to *akrasia*; see also CARONE 2001.

In the face of a millennial tradition deriving from Plato's dialogue, it may seem paradoxical to think that Socrates himself had relatively little interest in the phenomenon we call *akrasia* and that he ignores the distinction between *akrasia* and vice.

The *Protagoras* both begins and ends on the subject of the teachability of virtue. Socrates and Protagoras are represented as each changing his mind, but disagreeing initially and subsequently. Initially, Socrates appears skeptical whether virtue can be taught⁹, but later argues that it can¹⁰. Protagoras's situation is reversed. He begins by defending the teachability of virtue and ends by questioning whether it can be taught. It is not surprising that Protagoras would begin by claiming that virtue is teachable, because teaching virtue is his professed vocation. What would be more surprising is if Socrates himself thought virtue could not be taught. For his inquiries and his craft analogy suggests that that is precisely what he is searching for. Of course, he might think that virtue is not in fact taught. But that virtue is not yet taught, does not entail that it cannot be taught.

At 392b5 there is a fairly abrupt shift to the topic of the relationship among the virtues. But this new topic is connected with the old one so long as the prospects for teaching virtue depend upon the nature of virtue, especially its cognitive aspects¹¹.

At 351b the discussion makes another abrupt transition to the topic of hedonism and ultimately to a discussion of being overcome by pleasure. But, again, there is continuity of concern if the prospects for the unity of the virtues depend on the cognitive account of virtue, which itself depends on the impossibility of being overcome by pleasure. Socrates can defend a cognitive account of the virtues, unity and the sufficiency of knowledge for virtue by denying the possibility of the phenomenon that occurs when A knows (or believes) that some action y is all things considered (and not just morally) better than some alternative action x, it is in A's power and he has the opportunity to perform either x or y, and he fails to do what is best though he has knowledge of it, because he is conquered by pleasure¹².

This is the form of experience Socrates denies.

⁹ PLATO, *Prot.* 319a-320c.

¹⁰ PLATO, *Prot.* 361a-c.

¹¹ See PLATO, *Prot.* 329c6-d1.

¹² An interesting analysis of Socrates' thesis on *akrasia* in the *Protagoras* is offered by Martha Nussbaum. She believes that Socrates sees *akrasia* as "a case where ordinary deliberative rationality breaks down" (NUSSBAUM 1986, p. 114). Nussbaum believes that what Socrates has done "is not so much to prove that there can never be such breakdowns as to clarify the relationship between a certain picture of deliberative rationality and the *akrasia* problem" (p. 114). Contrary to most scholars, Nussbaum is convinced that "something more is going on" (p. 115). Via his account of *akrasia* Socrates offers us "a radical proposal for the transformation of our lives" (p. 117).

In the *Protagoras* Socrates denies this phenomenon by appeal to hedonism, but this recurs seems weak and artificial. According to hedonism, the ultimate good for human beings is pleasure¹³, and pleasure is not only good¹⁴, but also the criterion of good and bad. Thus, one cannot say that people having determined the best fail to do it, because they are conquered by love, pain, desire and pleasure.

“Then do you pursue pleasure as being a good thing, and shun pain as being a bad one? [...] So one thing you hold to be bad – pain; and pleasure you hold to be good, since the very act of enjoying you call bad as soon as it deprives us of grater pleasures than it has in itself, or leads to greater pains than the pleasures it contain”

Οὐκοῦν τὴν μὲν ἡδονὴν διώκετε ὡς ἀγαθὸν ὄν, τὴν δὲ λύπην φεύγετε ὡς κακόν; {-} Τοῦτ' ἄρα ἡγείσθ' εἶναι κακόν, τὴν λύπην, καὶ ἀγαθὸν τὴν ἡδονήν, ἐπεὶ καὶ αὐτὸ τὸ χαίρειν τό τε λέγετε κακὸν εἶναι, ὅταν μειζόνων ἡδονῶν ἀποστερήῃ ἢ ὅσας αὐτὸ ἔχει, ἢ λύπας μείζους παρασκευάζῃ τῶν ἐν αὐτῷ ἡδονῶν.¹⁵

Protagoras and the many initially deny hedonism¹⁶, asserting that there are bad pleasures and good pains, but Socrates claims that their beliefs commit them to hedonism¹⁷, inasmuch as bad pleasures are short-term pleasures that cause more pain or less pleasure overall and good pains are short-term pains that cause more pleasure or less pain overall.

How does hedonism support the Socratic denial of *akrasia*? Here is one reconstruction of a central part of Socrates' argument.

1. goodness = pleasantness
2. if A intentionally does x rather than y, because he is overcome by the F in x, then A believes x is more F than y.
3. sometimes A knows (believes) x is worse than y but still chooses x, because he is overcome by the pleasure in x (the many claim).
4. hence, sometimes A knows (or believes) x is worse than y but still chooses x, because he believes that x is more pleasant than y (by 2 and 3).
5. hence, sometimes A knows (or believes) that x is worse than y but still chooses x, because he believes that x is better than y (by 1 and 4).

¹³ PLATO, *Prot.* 354b5; d1; d7; 355a3.

¹⁴ PLATO, *Prot.* 351c; cf. 351b4.

¹⁵ PLATO, *Prot.* 354c3-d1.

¹⁶ PLATO, *Prot.* 351c.

¹⁷ PLATO *Prot.* 354c.

We might ask whether Socrates' argument is sound and has the significance he supposes. It is not uncommon to read the argument as offering a reduction *ad absurdum* of the people's hypothesis that *akrasia* is possible. But this can't be quite right, because the conclusion takes the form of contradictory beliefs, rather than on outright contradiction. The conclusion is

B(P) & B(not-P) and not B(P) & not-B(P)

Only the second is a contradiction. However, the people's position might be thought to be absurd in another sense if it they are committed to inconsistent beliefs. Indeed, if one can only maintain inconsistent beliefs through ignorance, this might still suggest that so called *akrasia* really rests on ignorance. Now, is the argument sound?

There are two issues: 1) one concerns its validity; 2) the other the plausibility of the premises.

1) In many contexts, co-referential terms can be substituted for each other without changing truth values. Would the truth of hedonism make the substitution in 5 legitimate, or does the intentional context mean that the substitution of co-referential terms is illicit? Compare:

- a. Barbaa likes a hot bath.
- b. Barbara likes a bath with mean kinetic molecular energy x.

Here the substitution seems good, even if Barbara would not assent to a sentence expressing b. because, say, she is ignorant of the fact that heat is mean kinetic molecular energy.

- c. Barbara believes his bath is hot.
- d. Barbara believes his bath has mean kinetic molecular energy x.

Here the substitution does seem problematic, and this may seem to wreck Socrates' argument. However, if the substitution failure depends on the agent's ignorance, in the case of Socrates' argument, ignorance of hedonism, this may vindicate Socrates' cognitive account after all.

2) Other question concerns the plausibility of the premises. The first one: does really Socrates endorse hedonism, or is the hedonist denial of so called *akrasia* merely an argument *ad hominem*?

Here are some reasons to think that Socratic hedonism is authentic.

- hedonism is introduced as Socrates' thesis, not an explicit commitment of his interlocutors or conventional Greek ethics¹⁸.

¹⁸ PLATO, *Prot.* 351c4-5, e5, e10.

- Socrates needs hedonism if he is to have an argument for his otherwise puzzling theses about the unity of the virtues, the cognitive account of virtues and the sufficiency of knowledge for virtue. Socrates denies the phenomenon of being overcome by pleasure in an elaborate dialectical revision of the virtue of courage, as knowledge of what is and is not to be feared (“*this will be a step towards discovering how courage is related to the other parts of virtue*”)¹⁹. Socrates’ account of courage would collapse if the interlocutor could reply: the coward knows that he should not run away, but he is simply overcome by fear. The point is that a person would not even be touched by fear, if he truly knew that death in battle was preferable to life with dishonour²⁰. But this point cannot be effectively made in a dialectical exchange with Protagoras as representative for the common sense and common experience. So a formally equivalent but more superficial version of the same point is made by establishing the virtue of courage in term of knowledge of what is fearful, on the basis of the denial of the so called *akrasia*. Socrates takes the denial of the possibility of being overcome by pleasure to support the sufficiency of knowledge for virtue and to undermine Protagoras’s reason to resisting the inseparability and unity of the virtues²¹. While the Protagorean conception of courage, which recognizes independent affective components, would allow *akrasia*, Socrates appeals to the denial of *akrasia* to reject this conception and support unity. There is not *akrasia*, according to Socrates, because no one does anything that is bad knowing in the time of action that is bad²².

Now, the argument we have been considering does attribute an error to *akratic* agents, but it does not need to invoke Socrates’ diagnosis of the error in the *Protagoras*, viz. a miscalculation of the pleasurable and painful consequences of an agent’s option due to the temporal proximity of pleasures and pains²³. Socrates suggests that the person suffers from a temporal bias: the proximity of certain pleasures and pains leads the agent to an inflated estimate of their value. It seems that the agent oscillates between a cool and a hot judgment. If it is so, the person does not change his mind and at the time of action, he does not act contrary to his optimizing desires knowing that what he is doing is base. Note that this argument is compatible with hedonism, but does not seem to presuppose it. The basic of the argument is the intellectualism²⁴.

A different question concerns the assumption implicit in 2. and 3. that all action reflects desires based on beliefs about what is best all things

¹⁹ PLATO, *Prot.* 353b1-3.

²⁰ See MCDOWELL 1980, p. 370.

²¹ PLATO, *Prot.* 358d5.

²² PLATO, *Prot.* 358c2-3.

²³ PLATO, *Prot.* 456a-457e

²⁴ PLATO, *Prot.* 357b7: (“...the mere fact of its being a science will suffice for the proof”
ὅτι δὲ ἐπιστήμη ἐστίν, τοσούτον ἐξαρκεῖ πρὸς τὴν ἀπόδειξιν).

considered. Is this a reasonable assumption? Are all desires optimizing? Alternatively, we might recognize non-optimizing desires in one of two ways: 1) completely good independent desires; 2) good dependent but non optimizing desires. If in Socrates' theory such desires exist and can influence the action, then acting against what we know to be the best is possible, therefore *akrasia* is admitted.

2) The possibility of the akratic action

In the famous passage 352b3-358d2, Socrates takes up the question of whether "*the many*" (*hoi polloi*), as Socrates calls them, are correct when they say that knowledge can be "*dragged around like a slave*" by desire, pleasure, pain, love, and the like. Socrates makes quite clear at the outset his opinion: "*If someone knows what is good and evil, then he could not be forced by anything to act contrary to what knowledge says; understanding is sufficient to aid a person*"²⁵.

The object of moral knowledge is something that is a real good and it is an unconditional good, i. e. it does not depend on another thing to be good. This is why only wisdom (*sophia*) is the real good and it is the condition of the other things to be good²⁶. Real knowledge is very solid; it cannot be overruled, nor become affected by pleasure, pain, love or fear: knowledge cannot be "*pushed around or dragged about like a slave*".

τοτὲ μὲν θυμόν, τοτὲ δὲ ἡδονήν, τοτὲ δὲ λύπην, ἐνίοτε δὲ ἔρωτα,
πολλάκις δὲ φόβον, ἀτεχνῶς διανοούμενοι περὶ τῆς ἐπιστήμης
ὥσπερ περὶ ἀνδραπόδου, περιελκομένης ὑπὸ τῶν ἄλλων ἀπὰ
ντων²⁷.

For Socrates, it is impossible for a person to do one thing if he willingly (*ekousion*) and knowingly (*gignoskon*) holds that he ought instead to do something else, that is, if he believes that there is another possible course of action, better than the one he is following. For Socrates, deliberative judgements have a special character. A judgement such as that one course of action is *better* than another, or *the best* (*beltista*)²⁸ have the special character of evaluative judgements. Such judgements seem to have properties that differentiate them from merely descriptive judgements such as that one thing is more expensive than another, or sweeter than another.

²⁵ PLATO, *Prot.* 352c4-7.

²⁶ PLATO *Euthydemus* 278e-281e; 281d-e. I follow on this point the analysis of Santas 1979, pp. 42-44.

²⁷ PLATO, *Prot.* 352b7-c2.

²⁸ PLATO, *Prot.* 353a2.

The possibility of *akrasia* springs from the fact that the descriptive judgement regard and describe the goods surrounding us as having heterogeneous qualities, for example, a cookie can be expensive, healthy, tasty, sweet, tender, fatty, fry, bake, pleasurable: we attach to them plural values that often cannot be compared²⁹. It is this heterogeneity that causes the development of behaviour which don't respect moral knowledge of the good and the bad. Without it, the ground on which *akratic* actions flourish would be missing. The judgements of the ethical science bear a special connection to action. According to Socrates, the judgements of deliberative rationality are intended to "guide conduct" (*archein tou anthropou*)³⁰. The special function of a judgement of the ethical science is to entail an answer to the practical question "what shall I do?", and Socrates does not hold this judgement as a descriptive statement, but as a sort of ethical command or imperative ("there is nothing stronger than knowledge, and knowledge, whenever it may be found, has always the upper hand (*kratein*)³¹ of pleasure or anything else")³² addressed to ourselves to save our life (*boethein*³³, *he soteria tou biou*³⁴). Now, just as sincere assent to a statement involves believing that statement, sincere assent to a moral statement addressed to ourselves, involves doing the thing in question. In fact, such a judgement could be verbally expressed as "Let me do *a*". For Socrates it's a non sense to know and to sincerely assent to a judgement of reason, like a first-person command, that says "Let do *a*" and at the same time not perform it, if now is the occasion for performing it and it is in our physical power to do so. So, provided it is within my power to do A now, if I do not do A now it follows that I do not genuinely judge that A is what is best according to deliberative rationality.

On this view, then, *akratic* actions seem to be impossible. There could not be a case in which someone willingly and knowingly held that he ought to do A now, where A was within his power, and yet did B. On this view, which presupposes that the motivation is uniform and self interested, it becomes analytic to say that everyone always does what he thinks he ought to do and failure to achieve one's aim must be explained by (1) a cognitive and intellectual defect, a failure to grasp properly what is good for S, in other words, an implementation failure; (2) by a presence of another cognitive element.

We think that it is possible to defend both the possibilities, but the first one represents an instance of failure of execution. Only the second one makes possible the presence of good independent desires, as we said at the end of the previous paragraph, and therefore justifies the possibility of *akrasia*.

²⁹ See NUSSBAUM 1986, pp. 114; 115; 117.

³⁰ PLATO, *Prot.* 352c4.

³¹ PLATO, *Prot.* 357c3.

³² PLATO, *Prot.* 357c2-4.

³³ PLATO, *Prot.* 352c7.

³⁴ PLATO, *Prot.* 356e7; 357a1.

Socrates develops the first point starting from the point of view of the many. The passage 351b-357e of the *Protagoras* begins with an example of what the many say happens in certain case: “*They maintain that many people are unwilling to do what is best, even though they know what it is and are able to do it, but do other things instead [...] they say that those who act that way do so because they are overcome by pleasure or pain or are being conquered*”³⁵. Socrates portrays the many as presupposing a form of agency similar to an unified agency. Such an agent would be unified *internally* by the postulation of a single hegemonic calculative faculty, reason, which is authoritative in the etiology of action as a tribunal before which all deliberation must pass before action eventuates. Such an agent would be unified *externally* by the existence of one known goal, whose acquisition provides the sole focus of all deliberative consideration³⁶. Following this theory “*oi polloi*” are forced to assume the consequence that any willing choice of what is bad is unintelligible. What they want to maintain is that knowledge can fail to be hegemonic, because it can be displaced by other, non-cognitive state, like example pleasure or another emotional state³⁷. Socrates rejects their proposed explanation, given in terms of the power of pleasure to rule reason. This Socrates finds objectionable, but only relative to the hypothesized psychology of highly unified agency.

To become clear about the phenomenon we have in view, let us begin by recounting an apparently incontestable experiential datum: we sometimes resolve to pursue a course of action A in preference to B, because we suppose, or suppose that we suppose, that A is all-things-considered preferable to B, and yet then at the moment of action opt for B, only to indulge in post-act self-recrimination and regret, followed by renewed resolve not to swerve away from the good we seek, when it next presents itself to us. We may safely acknowledge a version of realization failure as follows: an action A is an instance of implementation failure for some subject S just in case: (i) S avowedly and sincerely prefers in an all-things-considered way some action B to A, (ii) S supposes that both A and B are equally available alternative actions; and (iii) S intentionally performs A rather than B. As stated, such a failure should not be objectionable even to Socrates, since he may acknowledge that people act this way. What Socrates rejects is a familiar explanation given in terms of pleasure acting against the knowledge. One might, after all, explain S’s avowedly and sincerely preferring B to A while doing A intentionally by observing that S is self-deceived, confused about her own motives, or cognitively unstable at the moment of action. Socrates rejects not the possibility of a failure of execution; he rejects rather *akrasia*, if *akrasia* is the reason pushed around like a slave by passion and other emotional states. His general argument is the following:

³⁵ PLATO, *Prot.* 352d6-e2.

³⁶ See SHIELD 2007, pp. 61-86.

³⁷ PLATO, *Prot.* 352c-d.

- (1) Suppose that *S* is an agent, who has in view a single aim and with a authoritative reason.
- (2) If *S* is such a subject, then *S* has in view a single end, e.g. pleasure.
- (3) If *S* is such a subject, then *S* makes complete all-things-considered judgments with respect to every intentional action *A* by means of a single, authoritative faculty.
- (4) If (1), (2), and (3), then whenever *B* is all-things-considered preferable to *A*, if *S* willingly pursues *A* over *B* while knowing *B* to be a viable option, *S* has made a cognitive mistake.
- (5) If *S* has made a cognitive mistake when acting, *S* is inappropriately described as having her knowledge overcome by pleasure or some emotional or affective state.
- (6) Hence, if *S* is an agent who has in view a single aim and with a authoritative reason, then whenever *B* is all-things-considered preferable to *A*, and *S* willingly pursues *A* over *B* while knowing *B* to be a viable option, then *S* is inappropriately described as having knowledge overcome by pleasure or some emotional or affective state.

But, without a specification of what a willing agent is supposed to be, Socrates' argument does not commit him to the impossibility of *akrasia*, because we have no reason to suppose that according to Socrates the agents are unified internally and externally. The only thing we can be sure is that Socrates rejects an explanation of *akrasia* in terms of knowledge overcome by emotional states.

Let see now the second possibility. In this case, the failure to achieve one's aim is explained by the presence of another cognitive element.

In the *Protagoras* Socrates never claimed to detect a contradiction in the case of execution failure. What he does say is this: "*Those things which one regards as bad, one neither goes toward nor accepts willingly*"³⁸. Until we unpack Socrates' conception of the willing agent, we have no grounds for regarding him as making any kind of paradoxical claim about failure of execution or *akrasia*. In fact, we have to ask how Socrates in the *Protagoras* conceives moral motivation.

Socrates is right to say that proper knowledge is not dragged around by passion. Proper knowledge is the universal knowledge of the good and is not affected by the immediate presence of the things or by the onset of passion.

In the *Protagoras* Socrates declares that no one who posses knowledge acts otherwise than in accordance with it. Aristotle says that this conviction causes a puzzle, because this view (Socrates' *logos*) is manifestly in

³⁸ PLATO, *Prot.* 358e5-6.

disagreement with the appearances (*amphisbetei tois phainomenois enargos*)³⁹. As Aristotle puts it just before⁴⁰, Socrates fought altogether (*holos emacheto*) against *ton logon*, on the ground that there isn't such a thing as *akrasia*. This passage is not immediately clear: 1) what are the *phainomena* Socrates is in disagreement with? 2) What is the *logon* Socrates have fought against?

1) According to Ross, Aristotle says that Socrates' view disagrees with the observed facts; according to Barnes, Socrates disagrees with the plain phenomena. If Socrates disagreed with something that appeared manifestly true, Socrates' view is false. On the contrary, Aristotle informs us that Socrates' view is one of the most authoritative *endoxa* that must be preserved. Another possibility is that Aristotle is referring to the phenomena listed at the end of chapter 1⁴¹ and these include the *phenomenon* that *akrates acts knowing that what he is doing is base*, and Socrates' view manifestly disagrees with this⁴².

2) What is the *logos* Socrates have fought against?

There are two possible answers: Socrates does allow that there is such a thing as the *pathema* which is called "being defeated by pleasure", but he disagrees with this description for it. He says that the *pathema* is not a matter of being defeated by pleasures, but ignorance about what is best (*agnoia*, 357c6-d2). But there is also the possibility that Aristotle is referring to the *legomenon* which he has mentioned in chapter 1, when he set down the *phenomenon* that "*akrates acts as a result of his feelings, knowing that what he is doing is base*"⁴³. In fact, what Socrates and Aristotle find problematic is the popular assumption that the agent in cases of *akrasia* knows that he is doing something wrong.

So, how is it possible to justify the experience that people know what is best, but do other things instead? We cannot give an answer without considering Socrates' view of moral motivation. Socrates is an eudaimonist in the sense that the agent's own conception of happiness provides the ultimate justification for all actions and the ultimate explanation. This means that the agent takes something to be good if and only if believes that it contributes to happiness and the agent thinks that all actions are, in some sense, motivated by agent's desire to promote his happiness. This last point is the starting point for the idea that all evil pursuits are, in some sense, the product of the agent's ignorance, because anyone does what is bad, believing at the time he acts that it is bad for him.

³⁹ ARISTOTLE, *NE* VII 3, 1147b28

⁴⁰ ARISTOTLE, *NE* VII 1, 1145b25.

⁴¹ ARISTOTLE, *NE* VII 1, 1145b10-14.

⁴² See COOPER 2005, pp. 34-35.

⁴³ ARISTOTLE, *NE* VII 1, 1145b13-14. The *logos* of the many, which we see Socrates fighting against is equivalent to Aristotle's *legomenon* cited in the text.

In general, Socrates' thesis is that *oudeis hekon hamartanei* ⁴⁴:

"I am fairly sure of this – that no one of the wise men considers that anybody ever willingly errs or willingly does base and evil deeds" (ἐγὼ γὰρ σχεδόν τι οἶμαι τοῦτο, ὅτι οὐδεὶς τῶν σοφῶν ἀνδρῶν ἡγεῖται οὐδένα ἀνθρώπων ἐκόντα ἐξαμαρτάνειν οὐδὲ αἰσχροῖα τε καὶ κακὰ ἐκόντα).⁴⁵

In ancient Greek, the verb *hamartanein* means "doing wrong or evil", in particular in moral contexts, but also signifies "failing an objective" or "missing a mark" in non-moral contexts. Therefore, *oudeis hekon hamartanei* means "no one intentionally makes mistakes" and "no one intentionally acts counter to what he knows to be the best". Moreover in the *Gorgias*⁴⁶ and in the *Meno*, Socrates argues with Meno that no one can even desire what he thinks to be evil, so the desire is always for the good:

"Well, does anybody want to be unhappy and unfortunate? I suppose not. Then if not, nobody desires what is evil, for what else is unhappiness but desiring evil things and getting them? It looks as if you are right, Socrates, and nobody desires what is evil"

Οὐκ ἄρα βούλεται, ὦ Μένων, τὰ κακὰ οὐδεὶς, εἴπερ μὴ βούλεται τοιοῦτος εἶναι. τί γὰρ ἄλλο ἐστὶν ἄθλιον εἶναι ἢ ἐπιθυμεῖν τε τῶν κακῶν καὶ κτᾶσθαι; {-} Κινδυνεύεις ἀληθῆ λέγειν, ὦ Σώκρατες; καὶ οὐδεὶς βούλεσθαι τὰ κακὰ.⁴⁷

Now the question: how to explain that at t1, the person judges that A is best and better than B and so desires to do A; at t2, the same person judges that B is best and better than A, so desires B.

We have seen that Socrates rejects the explanation of *oi polloi* that the subject was defeated between t1 and t2 by some appetite or passion. Does Socrates follow the many by endeavouring that there exists a unified intentional agent, unified internal and external? Imagine such an agent and suppose him faced with a choice between A and B such that he *knows* that B is the optimizing alternative, and he *knows* that he prefers *eudaimonia*/good to its absence. Now imagine him, at the moment of action, consciously, opting for A to the exclusion of B. There would be no contradiction in his so acting. Still, his acting would be puzzling, deeply puzzling, we could say, *hypothetically* impossible, once we know the epistemic status of the agent. It would be difficult to understand him as having made an intentional and rational choice. We may call this kind of failure *akrasia* and we may

⁴⁴ PLATO, *Prot.* 345d-e.

⁴⁵ PLATO, *Prot.* 345d9-e3.

⁴⁶ PLATO, *Gorgias* 467-468.

⁴⁷ PLATO, *Meno* 78a-b.

ask how *akrasia* could be possible, e.g., how an agent with a determinately qualified and desired end in view might act contrary to her all-things-considered judgment.

It seems that the agent changes his mind between t1 and t2, coming to believe that B is actually better than A. The judgement that B is best is false, but is explained by the person overestimating the near pleasure (B). At t3, the person judges that A is better than B and regrets choosing and doing B. It is sometimes suggested that in order to explain the change of idea we need to posit the assault of a non rational desire between t1 and t2, but we don't think it is necessary. It is reasonable to suppose that the proximity of a smaller good can focus the attention on it and takes to a miscalculation on proximity effects⁴⁸.

Socrates' idea is that the "power of appearance" (*dunamis ton phainomenon*) accounts for our choice⁴⁹ at t2 and our later regret at t3. Things can appear to be better or worse than they really are and the "...power of appearance can often make us wander all over the place in confusion, changing our minds about the same thing and regretting our actions and choices ..."⁵⁰. What explains B's possession of the *dunamis ton phainomenon*, a power it did not seem to have moments before the agent acts?

On Plato's account, when the pleasures are temporally close, they seem greater than they are. The temporal proximity helps explain when an object comes to have the power of appearance, because just as spacial proximity alters the appearance of the size of an object, so temporal proximity alters the appearance of the quantity of pleasure or pain an object will yield. An object that provides immediate gratification always appears greater than does the same if it takes pleasure in the future.

It is important that we don't assume that Socrates equates the availability of an object of a sort that provides a person with pleasure with temporal proximity, for Socrates' theory of eudaimonism requires that at the time an agent pursues an object, the same must judge that it is good. Let us do an example. At t1 S has just finished a very substantial dinner. He has a piece of Saint Honoré placed directly in front of him. Although the piece of cake is available, he declines to eat the dessert, declaring that the doctor's advice doesn't permit him eating sugar foods. At t2, after a brief interval, during which he has managed to digest enough of his meal, we see S devouring the Saint Honoré. What happened between t1 and t2? Since any object is seen as pleasurable only if it is in some way desired and the desire's basic feature is demanding immediate satisfaction, at t2 the subject has formed a desire for the piece of cake and he devours it.

⁴⁸ NISBETT AND ROSS 1980, pp. 49-51.

⁴⁹ PLATO, *Prot.* 356c8-e4.

⁵⁰ PLATO, *Prot.* 536d4-7.

If we are right, Socrates is not an intellectualist extreme about motivation and he does not accept the psychology of highly unified agency, because he recognizes that the desire plays a role in the performance of an action. A desire demands immediate satisfaction, and this is the reason why the piece of cake at t2 appears to be larger than at t1. The desire for the cake is not necessarily a irrational desire which fights against the reason. Were that the case, Socrates' position would be indistinguishable from that of the many, who think that people act from desire contrary to the reason. At t2 S forms the judgment that eating the Saint Honoré is good for him and thereupon he satisfies the rational desire to pursue the cake.

Now, we have to justify why, at any rate how, at t3 the power of appearance should also cause forgetfulness of what happened at t2.

Plato can say that in this case I might form a choice at t1, remember at t3 vividly, but that at t2 I acted on a different judgment of what is best. This is a possible option, but it is difficult to justify why and how a person can change two times his thoughts in a very short period of time.

A second thing to explain is this. The person says "A is best" before and after the action of eating the cake, but it seems that he cannot continue saying the same during the action, because at the moment of action the person believes that B is better and does B. This suggestion relies on the hypothesis that the utterance "A is best" is excluded by the judgment that B is best. What excludes the possibility that a person can sincerely say one thing and in fact believing other thing? It is not unusual that a person fails of self-awareness⁵¹. In the *Gorgias* Plato gives two examples, some with respect to beliefs⁵² and others with respect to desires, in which the person is mistaken about his current mental state. We mention the second one in the following:

Polus (P) What do you mean? do you think that rhetoric is flattery? **Socrates (S)** Nay, I said a part of flattery-if at your age, Polus, you cannot remember, what will you do by-and-by, when you get older? **P** And are the good rhetoricians meanly regarded in states, under the idea that they are flatterers? **S** Then my answer is, that they are not regarded at all. **P** How not regarded? Have they not very great power in states? **S** Not if you mean to say that power is a good to the possessor. **P** And that is what I do mean to say. **S** Then, if so, I think that they have the least power of all the citizens. **P** What! Are they not like tyrants? They kill and despoil and exile any one whom they please. **S** My friend, you ask two questions at once. Why, did you not say just now that the rhetoricians are like tyrants, and that they kill and despoil or exile any one whom they please? **P** I did. **S** Well then, I say to you that here are two questions in one, and I will answer both of them. And I tell you, Polus, that rhetoricians and tyrants have the least possible power in states, as I was just now saying; for they do literally nothing which they will, but only what they think best. **P** And is not that a great power? **S** Polus

⁵¹ See BOBONICH 2007, pp. 41-55.

⁵² PLATO, *Gorgias*, 473e-474b.

has already said the reverse. You say that power is a good to him who has the power. P I do. S And would you maintain that if a fool does what he think best, this is a good, and would you call this great power? P I should not. S Then you must prove that the rhetorician is not a fool, and that rhetoric is an art and not a flattery-and so you will have refuted me; but if you leave me unrefuted, why, the rhetoricians who do what they think best in states, and the tyrants, will have nothing upon which to congratulate themselves, if as you say, power be indeed a good, admitting at the same time that what is done without sense is an evil. P Yes; I admit that. S How then can the rhetoricians or the tyrants have great power in states, unless Polus can refute Socrates, and prove to him that they do as they will? P This. S I say that they do not do as they will-now refute me. P Why, have you not already said that they do as they think best? S And I say so still. P Then surely they do as they will? S I deny it. P But they do what they think best? S Aye. P. That, Socrates, is monstrous and absurd. S Good words, good Polus, as I may say in your own peculiar style; but if you have any questions to ask of me, either prove that I am in error or give the answer yourself. P Very well, I am willing to answer that I may know what you mean. S Do men appear to you to will that which they do, or to will that further end for the sake of which they do a thing? when they take medicine, for example, at the bidding of a physician, do they will the drinking of the medicine which is painful, or the health for the sake of which they drink? P Clearly, the health. S And when men go on a voyage or engage in business, they do not will that which they are doing at the time; for who would desire to take the risk of a voyage or the trouble of business?-But they will, to have the wealth for the sake of which they go on a voyage. And is not this universally true? If a man does something for the sake of something else, he wills not that which he does, but that for the sake of which he does it. P Yes. S And are not all things either good or evil, or intermediate and indifferent? Wisdom and health and wealth and the like you would call goods, and their opposites evils? P I should. S And the things which are neither good nor evil, and which partake sometimes of the nature of good and at other times of evil, or of neither, are such as sitting, walking, running, sailing; or, again, wood, stones, and the like:-these are the things which you call neither good nor evil? P Exactly so. S Are these indifferent things done for the sake of the good, or the good for the sake of the indifferent? P Clearly, the indifferent for the sake of the good. S When we walk we walk for the sake of the good, and under the idea that it is better to walk, and when we stand we stand equally for the sake of the good? And when we kill a man we kill him or exile him or despoil him of his goods, because, as we think, it will conduce to our good? Men who do any of these things do them for the sake of the good? And did we not admit that in doing something for the sake of something else, we do not will those things which we do, but that other thing for the sake of which we do them? P Most true. S Then we do not will simply to kill a man or to exile him or to despoil him of his goods, but we will to do that which conduces to our good, and if the act is not conducive to our good we do not will it; for we will, as you say, that which is our good, but that which is neither good nor evil, or simply evil, we do not will. Why are you silent, Polus? Am I not right? P You are right. S Hence we may infer, that if any one, whether he

be a tyrant or a rhetorician, kills another or exiles another or deprives him of his property, under the idea that the act is for his own interests when really not for his own interests, he may be said to do what seems best to him? P Yes. S But does he do what he wills if he does what is evil? Why do you not answer? P Well, I suppose not. S Then if great power is a good as you allow, will such a one have great power in a state? P He will not. S Then I was right in saying that a man may do what seems good to him in a state, and not have great power, and not do what he wills?⁵³

To explain what happen at t2, e.g. to explain the possibility of the *akratic* action, we have to suppose another cognitive element, insulated from the optimizing desire for the good⁵⁴. In fact, it is not moral knowledge that is involved when the particular object of desire appears.

There is in the *Protagoras* an intriguing passage that supports our interpretation that there are two cognitive elements with their rational desires. Near the end of the Plato's argument, Socrates says: is it not the power of appearance that causes us to wander, often causing us to take things topsy-turvy and to regret our actions and choices with respect to things large and small?

"But the art of measuring would have made this appearance ineffective [akuron], and by showing us the truth would have brought our soul into the repose of abiding in the truth and would have saved our lives?".

ἡ 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;⁵⁵

What is interesting in this sentence is the expression *akuron*. What does it mean that the art of measuring makes the power of appearance ineffective? Plato is not saying that the measuring art destroys the appearances, or annihilate the power of appearance, so that it no longer exists. *Akuron* is surprisingly rare in Plato. The only other reference in the *early* dialogues is *Crito* 50b4⁵⁶. There the personified Laws of Athens suggest that Socrates running away would render the verdict of the court *akuron*. Socrates' disobedience wouldn't take the verdict off the books or render it legally void, what it would do is make it the case that the verdict, although present and persisting, would not determine what actually happens. If the parallel holds, what this passage suggests is that even in a person with the moral knowledge an appearance could be present, it would just not determine how the person acts. But if Plato were to allow this, we seem to get two potentially conflicting sources of judgments. To have the *metrike techne*

⁵³ PLATO, *Gorgias* 466a-468e.

⁵⁴ See the alternatives and in particular the first one ("completely good independent desires") at the end of § 1.

⁵⁵ PLATO, *Prot.* 356d4-e2.

⁵⁶ There are only five other instances in Plato, all in the *Theaetetus* (169e2, 178d9) and *Laws* (715d4, 929e6, 954e6).

does not guarantee that we will always make the optimizing choices; but it serves, at least, to allow us to continue considering all of the reasons available to us for making choices, and thus allows us to continue making choices, rather than leaving us in a condition where our capacity to judge has been diminished by the power of appearance of the closer situation, where the moral science cannot immediately act.

We could maybe say that in the immediate action the moral science is *enouses*, but not *parouses*. On the contrary, the perceptual judgment that this thing is good for me now is *parouses*. This distinction between *enouses* and *parouses* is clear in Aristotle's discussion but not in Socrates' exposition and this is the reason of Socrates' limited success. The former indicates what is within a given place; the latter indicates what is immediately present or ready⁵⁷. *Parouses* is used advisedly in the *Nicomachean Ethics* at 1147b16 to signify the immediate target of *akrasia*: perceptual knowledge.

In Plato's *Protagoras* the onset of *akrasia* does not occur in the immediate presence of the moral knowledge, but at a place closer to action, in the immediate presence of the particular and the perceptual knowledge. In fact, Socrates insists that people miscalculate, induced by the nearness of the object of pleasure:

"Like a practised weigher, put pleasant things and painful in the scales, and with them the nearness and the remoteness, and tell me which count for more" (ἀλλ' ὥσπερ ἀγαθὸς ἰστάναι ἄνθρωπος, συνθεῖς τὰ ἡδέα καὶ συνθεῖς

τὰ λυπηρά, καὶ τὸ ἐγγὺς καὶ τὸ πόρρω στήσας ἐν τῷ ζυγῷ, εἰπὲ πότερα πλείω ἐστίν.)⁵⁸.

3) Conclusion

Like Socrates, Aristotle at 1147b13-17 of the book VII of the *Nicomachean Ethics* explains that the onset of *akrasia* does not occur in the immediate presence of the universal science of the goods, but at a place closer to action, in the immediate presence of the actual situation. For Aristotle, Socrates was right to say that proper knowledge is not dragged around by passion. Proper knowledge, as Aristotle understands it, is the knowledge of the universals and it is not immediately present (*parouses*) or affected by a desire. Proper knowledge is not immediately present at t2, when the subject forms the judgment that eating the piece of cake is good for him and thereupon he satisfies his desire to pursue the cake. What Socrates was

⁵⁷ See L.S.J. For a use of *parousia* suggesting immediate presence, see *NE* 1171a28. Contrast the use of *enouses* at 1145b23.

⁵⁸ PLATO, *Prot.* 356a8-b3.

after was a true claim: proper knowledge is not immediately present and directly affected (“*dragged around by passion*”) when *akrasia* occurs. What is affected by the desire is another cognitive element, which judges that now it is good to devour the piece of cake.

All that is possible only if I conceive a mechanism for forming desires that is independent of my conscious thoughts in the following way:

- 1) The generated desire always aims at the good.
- 2) The object of my desire is fixed by a mechanism whose operation is not fully open to conscious reflection in such a way that I can say that what I correctly desire is A, although I do B⁵⁹.

The claim 1) does not create problems. We have seen the Socrates’ theory of motivation. Following Socrates, the agent’s conception of happiness provides the ultimate justification for his actions. This means that the agent takes something to be good if and only if believes that it contributes to his happiness. Anyone desires what is bad, believing at the time he acts that it is bad for him.

With respect to (2), we have seen that Plato accepts that we can fail to recognize the real object of our desires over a very short time interval. What we need is some reason to privilege the belief that B is best and the desire related to this judgment, when we know that A is best. The reason for doing so is that the belief that B is best and the desire for B are the result of the calculation that the agent makes closer to action at the moment of choice and action. At this moment what is *parouses* is that “B is best” and what is *enouses* is that “A is best”. If we are right, there would be not need for an agent to stop saying “A is best” at the time of action, even though he is wrong about what he really believes at the moment of action. There would be a overlap between an *enouses* knowledge and a *parouses* belief, like in the *Gorgias*.

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⁵⁹ BOBONICH 2207, p. 51-55.

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Endereço da Autora:

Av. Nossa Senhora de Copacabana 534, apto 1201
Copacabana
22031-000 Rio de Janeiro — RJ
e-mail: barbarabotter@gmail.com