

On Becoming Fearful Quickly: A Reinterpretation of Aristotle's Somatic Model of Socratean *akrasia*.

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The Protagoras is the touchstone of Socrates' moral intellectualist stance. The position in a nutshell stipulates that the proper reevaluation of a desire is enough to neutralize it.¹ The implication of this position is that *akrasia* or weakness of will is not the result of desire (or fear for that matter) overpowering reason but is due to ignorance.

Socrates' eliminativist position on weakness of will, however, flies in the face of the common-sense experience regarding *akratic* action and thus Aristotle was at pains to render Socrates' account of moral incontinence intelligible. The key improvement Aristotle makes to Socrates's model is to underscore that the conditioning of the akratic's body plays a critical role in determining the power of one's appetites and, accordingly, the capacity of one to resist the temptations these appetites present for rational evaluation. As Aristotle puts it, "For the incontinent man is like the people who get drunk quickly and on little wine, i.e., on less than most people." (1151a 3-4). Aristotle presents what I shall call a somatic paradigm (i.e. the drunkard analogy) in order to tackle the problem of *akrasia* and it is this somatic solution that marks a significant improvement over Socrates's intellectualist or informational model or so the tradition tells us.

In this paper, I wish to push back on the above Aristotelian explanation. I argue that when one fully examines Socrates' account of weakness of will that Aristotle's solution is less effective than is traditionally thought. In fact, Socrates can bring Aristotle's model into his own; just as Aristotle absorbs what is right about Socrates's model, namely, that akratic action utilizes reason but to a limited degree, Socrates in *Meno* (77C-78A) develops his own somatic model of weakness of will that connects to the intellectualist paradigm of the *Protagoras*. To achieve this *rapprochement* between the two models, I zero in on the description provided by Socrates of those individuals who desire bad things knowing they are bad as "ill-starred" or "bad spirited" (κακοδαίμων). The "bad-spirited" is the coward and, in contrast to Aristotle's drunkard, becomes fearful quickly from little danger. This additional somatic component, when connected to Socrates's position on *akrasia* in *Protagoras* adds a new twist to Socrates's model in the following way: while no one wishes to be ill-starred such that more harm than good will befall one, one may become so as a result of the bad choices one knowingly makes.

¹ "After him came Socrates, who spoke better and further about this subject, but even he was not successful. For he used to make the virtues into sciences, and this is impossible. For the sciences all involve reason, and reason is to be found in the intellectual part of the soul. So that all the virtues, according to him arise in the rational part of the soul. The result is that in making the virtues into sciences he is doing away with the nonrational part of the soul and is thereby doing away with passion and character..." (Aristotle, *Magna Moralia* 1.1. 1182 a15-26)

Socrates's explanation of weakness of will or *akrasia* as found on lines 352A-E of Plato's *Protagoras*, has caused considerable consternation and puzzlement for centuries.² Some philosophers believe that Socrates got it right all those years ago—weakness of will, moral incontinence, *akrasia*, does not exist—full stop.³ The argument against the existence of weakness of will is elegant yet powerful. According to Socrates—and in contrast to what he and Protagoras regard as the “common view” of agential action—reason cannot be overcome by desire, and, therefore, weakness of will is impossible: one cannot act against one's best judgment, all things considered. So-called, ‘weakness of will,’ Socrates explains, is caused by ignorance and, in particular, mismeasurement. It is the proximity to painful or pleasurable circumstances that causes agents to either over or underestimate the real value of such things and, therefore, leads them to make bad choices, even though said ‘choices’ are involuntary. The upshot of Socrates' approach, often called (moral intellectualism in the literature) is that the mere re-evaluation of a destructive desire is enough to neutralize its efficacy.

The puzzlement regarding the Socratic model—as fully recognized by Plato and Aristotle—pertains to the cause of this so-called ignorance. As Aristotle puts the matter plainly, “If he acts by reason of ignorance, what is the manner of his (the incontinent's) ignorance?” (NE 1145b 29-30. Trans. W.D. Ross). In homing in on this question, some philosophers believe that this puzzlement over ignorance in relation to *akrasia*, was articulated and solved by the Stagirite. Aristotle, they argue, successfully explains what is correct about Socrates's model and offers an olive branch of sorts to the “many” or popular opinion of *akrasia* by declaring that one can act against one's better judgment but only in a “muddy-eyed” kind of way.⁴ Scholars in this camp hold that Aristotle's account of qualified *akrasia*, as it is called in the literature, subtended as it is by the analogy of the drunkard, successfully brings Socrates' position into the orbit of common-sense.⁵

² For the classic definitional account of weakness of will, see Donald Davidson's “How is Weakness of Will Possible”, in *Essays on Actions and Events, Philosophical Essays*, Vol. 1 21-42, (Oxford University Press, 2001),

³ The most prominent contemporary denier of weakness of will is R.M. Hare see *Freedom and Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963).

⁴ Aristotle employs the drunken analogy to explain weakness of will in a number of passages in *Nicomachean Ethics*. The most relevant are as follows; (1147a 14, 1152a 15, 1151a 3-4)

⁵ There are two principal interpretations of the drunkard analogy. The first, led by Amelie Rorty, I call the general befuddlement camp and the second, led by Irwin, is the particularist.

In this paper, I wish to push back on the above Aristotelian explanation. I argue that when one fully examines Socrates' account of weakness of will, at least as presented in *Protagoras*, that Aristotle's solution is less effective than is traditionally thought. I then investigate if the bridge of sorts between the two models, (e.g. the Socratic and Aristotelian) namely the drunkard analogy and specifically the line from the *Nicomachean Ethics*, "For the incontinent man is like the people who get drunk quickly and on little wine, i.e., on less than most people" (NE 1151a 3-4 Trans. W.D. Ross) may be a two-way lane in that it allows the core of Aristotle's somatic position (as I shall call it) on *akrasia* to be transported to the Socratic, intellectualist paradigm. In other words, Socrates can bring Aristotle's model into his own; just as Aristotle absorbs what is right about Socrates's model, namely, that akratic action utilizes reason but to a limited degree, the drunkard analogy may be applicable to an ontological state of damnation a la Socrates. To help with this *rapprochement* I invoke a passage from the *Meno* (77C-78A). In particular I zero in on the description provided by Socrates of those individuals who desire bad things knowing they are bad as "ill-starred" or "bad spirited" (κακοδαίμων), which, I believe, provides a new exposition on the original, Socratic, moral intellectualist model in the following way: while no one wishes to be ill-starred such that more harm than good will befall one, one may become so as a result of the bad choices one knowingly makes. In other words, one has full knowledge that one is making a sub-optimal choice in the here and now, but one is ignorant as to how deleteriously impactful this choice will be on one's capacity to choose *simpliciter*.

My paper is divided into four sections. In section one, I explain the traditional understanding of Socrates's account of *akrasia* and moral psychology. This account posits what some have dubbed an "informational role" to urgings. While this interpretation is well-supported in the secondary literature, I demonstrate that this explanation takes up a limited view of human psychology.

In section II, I reexamine *Protagoras* with the aim of looking at Socrates's more totalizing view of human psychology. To wit, the secondary literature has examined Socrates's account of pleasure as it relates to weakness of will, but few articles focus on the painful practices Socrates's describes in *Protagoras*, such as cautery. This failure to examine the excruciating ancient medical procedures Socrates mentions in *Protagoras*, is a serious lacuna in the literature.

In section III, I explain Aristotle's interpretation of Socratic *akrasia*. One advantage of Aristotle's approach is that he provides, following the drunkard analogy, a physiological

model of misinformation—something scholars have thought was deficient in Socrates’s initial rendering. This account, which we might call somatic, informs and colours how and why a subject acts on false valuations. While Aristotle’s proposal provides a platform for understanding how emotional states lead to weak-willed action, it is incomplete because, again, it examines incontinence through the framework of pleasure and excitement and not pain and fear.

In section IV, I then show how the Socratic model may absorb Aristotle’s solution. By looking at a passage from *the Meno* through the somatic framework of *akrasia*—helpfully provided by Aristotle—and connecting it to Socrates’s analysis of weakness of will from *Protagoras*, I demonstrate that Socrates’s fulsome account of philosophical psychology, too, is somatic despite appearances to the contrary. Specifically, the ill-starred person Meno and Socrates discuss mirrors Aristotle’s description of the incontinent individual as drunkard—except where the incontinent person for Aristotle is conditioned to overestimate the true value of some pleasurable action, the ill-starred individual (or coward) underestimates the deleterious effects fleeing from fearful circumstances will have on his capacity to reason in the future. In other words, just as Aristotle claims that “the incontinent man is like those people who get drunk quickly on little wine” the coward becomes fearful, quickly, from little danger. The difference between the two accounts, however, is that where Aristotle seems to think of the incontinent as a type, Socrates would argue that the coward is a person in a state of wretchedness that is the direct result of one exaggerating the true magnitude of threats in one’s environment until the very capacity to measure at all is unrepairable.

Section I: *The Standard View of Socratic Moral Intellectualism: The Informational Account*

Before examining Socrates’ model of *akrasia* in any considerable detail, it is important to highlight that Socrates’ chief interlocutor in this dialogue is not Protagoras but with the “many” or the common. Both Protagoras and Socrates are of the opinion that people do not knowingly commit bad actions. Reason, in other words, is the most powerful force we possess as human beings and can neither be overcome by passion nor driven underground by fear. Indeed, in an interesting twist on the early Socratic dialogues, we have the main thesis that will be argued in the text uttered from the mouth of Protagoras and not Socrates. It is Protagoras who declares: “It would be shameful indeed for me above all people to say that wisdom and knowledge are anything but the most powerful forces in human activity.” While

Socrates simply replies with a curt: “Right you are.” (*Protagoras*, 351D Trans Lombardo and Bell)

However, as the dialogue proceeds, it begins to dawn on both philosophers that this position, where reason rules and the passions follow, is only a minority view. Most people, they argue, assume that wisdom is powerless when it is suddenly overcome by pleasure. Socrates now begins to pick-up the argument to justify Protagoras’ claim and states:

What do you think about knowledge? Do you go along with the majority or not? Most people think this way about it, that it is not a powerful thing, neither a leader nor a ruler. They do not think of it in that way at all; but rather in this way: while knowledge is often present in a man (πολλάκις ἀνθρώπῳ ἐπιστήμης οὐ,) what rules him is not knowledge but rather anything else---sometimes anger, sometimes pleasure (ἡδονήν), sometimes pain (λύπην), at other times often fear (φόβον).” (*Protagoras* 352 B, Trans. Lombardo and Bell)

Socrates then goes on to express, rather vividly, the true picture that the common have of knowledge. As he famously states: “They (the many) think of his knowledge (ἐπιστήμης) as being utterly dragged (περιελκομένης) around by all these other things (*Hedone, Eros, Thumos, Lupe, Phobos*) as if it were a slave (ἀνδραπόδου).” (*Protagoras* 352 B-C Trans. Lombardo and Bell)

With Socrates’s introductory remarks on knowledge out of the way, he begins his opening volley against the common-sense view of *akrasia*, which posits that weakness of will is a fundamental feature of the human condition, by getting Protagoras to consider the very nature of knowledge itself. In the simplest terms, Socrates hopes to establish that thinking about knowledge as powerless compared to either (*hedone, thumos, lupe, eros, or phobos*), is mistaken. The first part of Socrates’ argument is an attack on unqualified psychological hedonism. Psychological hedonism, in contrast to a more robust normative hedonism, holds that individuals *in fact* seek pleasure and avoid pain. Such a view, however cannot be correct, so Socrates argues because pleasure and pain are infused with cognition. They are irrevocably qualified. For example, before taking an action, an agent must understand how to weigh its benefits and detriments. The benefits, according to the many, are measured in pleasure while detriments are measured in pain. If that is right, then what humans are really after is the good, all things considered and neither the pursuit of pleasure nor the avoidance of pain *simpliciter*. What an individual should be always and necessarily asking is: What affords me the most pleasure overall, that is, over the course of my entire life? Or perhaps a better way of stating the above is to suggest that agents are always evaluating: What makes for the most pleasant life and where the calculation of pleasant incorporates both the

pleasurable benefits of some action and the corresponding negative consequences? Hence choosing is always an all things considered judgment. As Socrates puts it: “Weighing is a good analogy; you put the pleasures together and the pains together, both the near and the remote on the balance scale and then say which of the two is more.” (Protagoras 356 B Trans. Lombardo and Bell)

The key move that illustrates what Socrates is up to is made in 355 C. There Socrates performs what contemporary philosophers would call a “substitution instance.” Specifically, he substitutes pleasure (*hedone* ἡδονή) with pleasant, good (*Agathos* ἀγαθός). We see this in 355c:

Just how absurd this is will become very clear if we do not use so many names at the same time pleasant and painful, good and bad but since these turned out to be the only two things let us instead call them by two names: first good and bad then later pleasant and painful on that basis then let us say that a man knowing bad things to be bad does them all the same if then someone asks us why having been overcome we shall reply by what he will ask us we are no longer able to say by pleasure for has taken on its other name the good instead of pleasure (ἡδονῆς) so we will say and reply that he is overcome by what he will ask by the good ἀγαθός we will say for heaven sake if by chance the questioner is rude he might burst out laughing... (γέλασεται)” (Protagoras 355 C Trans. Lombardo and Bell)

There are two things to notice in this passage: 1) that wants are cognitively infused: as above a want is necessarily considered to be an evaluation. For assume, for a moment, that the many are correct: reason can be overpowered by some desire. Nevertheless, we call that desire good. But to call a desire good (*agathos*) is to employ a normative notion and, as such, requires an evaluation.⁶ Thus reason has not been overpowered but is at best an accomplice in satisfying the desire. 2) that Socrates is providing an account of human motivation *per se*. *Akrasia* is merely the lens through which to view our own psychology. If that’s true, then Socrates needs to provide a substitution instance for each motivational force within the psyche and not just for *hedone*. My argument is that Socrates’s philosophical psychology, as a whole, is largely undertheorized in the secondary literature because scholars seem to have restricted their analysis to the substitution instance of *agathos* for *hedone* with the result that Socrates’s moral psychology *en toto* is assumed to be a naïve intellectualism. Let me explain.

⁶ See Panos Dimos, “Good and Pleasure in the Protagoras” *Ancient Philosophy* Vol. 28, 2008, 253-284. Dimos makes a convincing case for the co-instantiation thesis: Socrates is arguing that practicing virtue instantiates a pleasant life where moderate pleasures are enjoyed with little pain and that conversely a pleasant life is conducive to acting virtuously.

Take a look at this substitution instance more closely. Because both wants and dislikes are cognitively infused, scholars like Penner and Reshotko call Socratic desires, despite straining against our intuitions, “informational.” The pursuit of pleasure is never raw, it is never a mere “hot” or “go” source of propulsion, as Alfred Mele would call it.⁷ According to the standard view, desires are first and foremost evidentiary; they serve as reasons within a broader belief system. The traditional approach to Socratic *akrasia*, suggests that non-rational desires or fears are causally inert; they are only efficacious once a judgement has been made about them. As Penner explains Socrates’ account of action using one of his favorite go-to examples, the eating of pastry:

If in the particular circumstances I come to believe that eating this pastry is the best means in the circumstances then in plugging this belief into the desire for *whatever is best in these circumstances*, my rational desire for what is best becomes the desire to eat this pastry. Rational desires adjust to the agent’s beliefs. The only way to influence my conduct is to change my opinion”.⁸ (Penner’s italics)

Naomi Reshotko agrees. She evinces, “Unintellectualized drives and urges...in my view never play a role that is more instrumental than any other piece of information that the intellect used in order to determine what is best to do as motivated by the desire for the good. I hold that appetites are like sense impressions: they are phenomena that help us to form judgments but they do not interact with judgments that have already been formed”.⁹

What Socrates has initiated, so this reading affirms, is a transmutation of sorts: rational desire (*boulesis*) becomes what we contemporary thinkers might call “interest.” To quote Penner once more there is “a plugging in or an infusion of belief into desire when one chooses.” In following my self-interests, I pursue not just what is appealing to me or drives me full stop, but what I also take to be, *via* rational judgment, the why or justification behind this appeal—I rationalize my desire and bring it in line with my belief system. By substituting good for pleasure, I am committed to a normative account for my actions: I must give an account of why I pursued the action both to an interlocutor who might inquire about it and *to myself*. Thus, according to Socrates, one cannot act against one’s best interests because to act

⁷ For more on the empirical psychology of “hot” and “cool” responses see Alfred Mele’s discussion in *Backsliding: Understanding Weakness of Will*, (Oxford University Press, 2014), 81-84.

⁸ Terry Penner, “Socrates and the Early Dialogues” *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*, Richard Kraut Ed. (Cambridge University Press, 1992) 121-169, 128.

⁹ Naomi Reshotko, *Socrates Virtue: Making the Best of the Neither-Good-Nor-Bad* (Cambridge University Press, 2006: 86

against one's best interest would entail knowingly choosing to do X instead of Y at time T even though one knows X to be the best course of action, all things considered. Therefore, the three conditions required for *akrasia*: 1) X is viewed as the best course of action all things considered; 2) one is free to choose X but 3) one instead chooses Y cannot be fulfilled.¹⁰ Socrates reasons that Y must have appeared to be better than X prior to the subject making the choice. Thus, the very concept of *akrasia* explodes.¹¹

The above rendering of agential motivation deflates *akrasia* on illocutionary grounds—the conditions for weakness of will cannot be fulfilled if one accepts the assumption that one always acts according to what one believes to be best for one. Socrates' position, is, in fact, tautological. But so too, it then logically follows that if one ends up acting against one's best interest, such an act must be involuntary. Sub-optimal choosing is the result of ignorance.

The next part of Socrates argument purports to show the causal disconnect between one's suboptimal action and one's knowledge. In other words, Socrates seeks to explain how one may come to act in a sub-optimal fashion, even when one is free to do so and where one, of course, always pursues what appears to be in one's interest. This account is, again, in keeping with Socrates's overall thesis which is to provide an explanation of the motivational sources of the *psyche*. It would seem to me that the second part of Socrates argument, then, must explain or explain away feelings of regret one often feels when one engages in what is later 'known' to be the wrong choice in order to reduce *akrasia* to mere ignorance.

Socrates introduces his measurement analogy to help explain what we might call the emotive valence that is often attached to a moral failing—the knowledge that one was uncoerced in choosing the action one now regrets but chose the action out of ignorance and therefore was acting involuntarily. The analogy explains a fundamental phenomenological component of *akrasia*, namely, that some choice appears to be the right action to make in a given circumstance *ex-ante*, but it is obviously the incorrect choice when viewed *post facto*. Socrates's solution to this puzzle is telling:

Well then my good people: Since it has turned out that our salvation in life depends on the right choice of pleasures and pains (λύπης), be they more or fewer, greater or lesser, farther or nearer,

¹⁰ For the classic definitional account of weakness of will, see Donald Davidson's "How is Weakness of Will Possible", in *Essays on Actions and Events, Philosophical Essays, Vol. 1* 21-42, (Oxford University Press, 2001), 22.

¹¹ See my previous book, Brian Lightbody, *Dispersing the Clouds of Temptation: Turning Away from Weakness of Will and Turning Towards the Sun*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock 2015).

doesn't our salvation seem first of all to be measurement (*φαίνεται*) which is the study of relative excess and deficiency and equality?

Protagoras: It must be.

Socrates: And since it is measurement, it must definitely be an art, and knowledge.

Protagoras: They will agree. (*Protagoras* 357B Trans. Lombardo and Bell)

In looking at how an object may appear to be larger or really more desirable due to its temporal and perhaps spatial proximity to an agent, I shall turn to another baked good example used by Penner in his paper titled, "Knowledge vs Belief in the Socratic Psychology Theory of Action." Penner writes:

I see the oatmeal and raisin cookie on the counter as I am about to pass through the kitchen. I form the belief that it would be best for me over all not to have the cookie. This belief is in full force as I begin to pass through the kitchen, but just as I come close enough to see more clearly the delectable and mouthwatering features of the cookie (and as chance—or nature—has it, I am at that instant also within closer reach of the cookie), I suddenly change my mind, reach out for it, and start eating it—saying to myself immediately it is in my mouth, 'what a fool I am'. In this sort of case I do, at the moment of action, believe that it will be best to reach out, grab, and eat the cookie. My vice at that moment is ignorance.¹²

Penner's argument is that the warm cookie directly before me appears to have properties that it would not otherwise have if it were more temporally and spatially remote. In other words, properties that I now assess to be more important in having than, say, the positive feelings I possess when I stick to my diet, are now assessed, by me, as being less significant than they were just a few moments earlier. What causes me to reassess my previous judgment according to Penner? It is not a raw desire, caused by the tempting properties of the cookie, as the common view of agential action would have it. No, the impetus for a reevaluation of the cookie rather, is confined to the epistemic—it is my cognition and not my appetitive capacities that are affected by the cookie. As Penner explains (it is the (in)ability) ... "to hold on to one's intellectual grasp on the situation as different *gestalts* on the same situation successively present themselves to the agent throughout the temporal context of the action".¹³ The irresistibility of the cookie, then, according to *my* new *measurement* of the mere *gestalt* or *perception* causes me to rationalize why it is in my best

¹² Terry Penner, "Knowledge vs. True Belief in the Socratic Psychology of Action", *Apeiron*, 3 1996, 199-230, 200-201.

¹³ Penner, "Knowledge vs. True Belief in the Socratic Psychology of Action", 200.

interest now to eat it. Neither the cookie nor the desire to have it are causally efficacious in themselves.

If, then, Socrates' account is correct then what does the phrase being overcome by pleasure denote? According to Socrates, simply ignorance: "So this is what being overcome by pleasure ἡδονῆς is---ignorance ἀμαθία in the highest degree, and it is this which Protagoras and Prodicus and Hippias claim to cure." (*Protagoras* 357E Trans. Lombardo and Bell) To be overcome by pleasure is simply to fail to measure correctly. Indeed, Socrates goes further and suggests that, "To give in to oneself is nothing other than ignorance ἀμαθίαν, and to control oneself is nothing other than wisdom." (*Protagoras* 358 C Trans Lombardo and Bell) Socrates, in a word, reduces to absurdity the phrase "being overcome by pleasure or fear" by claiming that it does not denote a substantive thing, nor causal power. It is nothing more than ignorance.

Following Brickhouse and Smith in their now classic, *Socrates's Moral Psychology*, I call the above reconstruction of Socrates's argument against weakness of will an informational account of philosophical psychology. As they note, there are two problems with this position. First, it appears to be inconsistent with some of the things Socrates says about human psychology, as seen in the *Apology* and *Laches*.¹⁴ I cannot explore this concern here. The second issue they have with the account is the substitution of urgings with data—bits of information do not, on the surface, seem synonymous with cravings. Whereas cravings, phenomenologically, have a strong propulsive force that causes an agent to move towards some object, mere evidence or information clearly lacks this feature.¹⁵ This, too, is a significant problem, but I will not treat it either. Instead, I wish to examine a third problem that, to my knowledge, is grossly undertheorized in the secondary literature: What is the full motivational etiology behind our actions? To wit, can Socrates's model provide a complete causal account of our actions, and if not, can we supplement it so as to make it more fulsome and warranted? While it would be beyond the scope of this article to offer a complete account of Socratic psychology, nevertheless, my paper intends to make at least some progress in the area. In what follows, I use pain (and the emotional state of fear very often attached to it), as a stalking horse of sorts in order to provide a component of Socrates's psychology that is often undertheorized. In other words, just as information does not map phenomenologically

¹⁴ See Thomas Brickhouse and Nicholas Smith, *Socrates's Moral Psychology*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press), 2010, 83

¹⁵ Brickhouse and Smith, *Socrates's Moral Psychology*, 56

onto the propulsive essence of cravings, mere information does not match the repulsive qualities of things agents find fearful or dangerous. I now examine how Socrates's explanation for *akrasia* applies to states of fear in the next section.

Section II: *Ignorance and Algos (pain): A Lacuna in the Secondary Literature*

If Socrates' mismeasurement solution to *akrasia* is a global argument meant to explain psychological motivation writ large, then the same informational approach should also explain the behavior of agents who commit 'weak willed action' when encountering potentially painful or dangerous circumstances. Yet the secondary literature on *the Protagoras*, beginning with Aristotle, has not adequately addressed this issue. Such a lacuna is rather odd and particularly striking when one considers that Socrates begins the demonstration of his thesis by providing examples of painful procedures such as cautery and unpleasant activities such as military exercises.

"You who say that some painful things are good, do you not say that such things as athletics (γυμνάσια) and military (στρατείας) training and treatments by doctors such as cautery (καύσεών), surgery (τομῶν), medicines (φαρμακειῶν), and starvation diet (λιμοκτονιῶν) are good things though painful (ἀνιαρὰ)? Would they say so?"

Protagoras: "Yes."

Socrates: Would you call these things good for the reason that they bring about intense pain and suffering (ὀδύνας), or because they ultimately bring about health and good condition of bodies and preservation of cities and power over others and wealth? Would they agree?

Protagoras: Yes. (*Protagoras*, 354 A-B Trans. Lombardo and Bell)

The example of cautery is particularly important to consider as the procedure was a much-practiced ancient remedy for hemorrhoids (a common malady in ancient Greece). Indeed, the topic of αἱμορροΐς (*haimorrhōís*) is discussed at length no less than by famed physician Hippocrates, who devotes an entire treatise to the topic, *De Haemorrhoidibus*. Part 2 line 2 11-12 of that treatise gives us a vivid description of just how painful the ancient cure for this affliction was: "When the cautery is applied, the patient's head and hands should be held so that he may not stir, but he himself should cry out, for this will make the rectum project the more" (*Haemorrhoids 2 11-12* Trans. Adams).¹⁶ How might this example fall

¹⁶ Hippocrates, *The Genuine Works of Hippocrates*. Trans. Charles Darwin Adams. New York. Dover. 1868, 353.

under the measurement model? Notice that this incredibly tortuous and excruciating procedure is performed with the aim of alleviating one's discomfort over the course of one's life and therefore would seem to fall under the informational model given above. A reconstruction, from the standpoint of this framework, might look something like the following: the cauterization of a wound (e.g., inflamed, bleeding hemorrhoids) appears to be more painful than allowing the wound to go untreated. Thus, the person decides not to treat his hemorrhoids. The problem with this evaluation of the data (information) is that this analysis is short-sighted; it fails to consider that by not treating one's physical maladies (whether hemorrhoids or some other), one's physical condition will worsen over time and perhaps lead to death. The person who, therefore, reasons to leave the wound as it is without treatment mismeasures. Such a miscalculation, however, is not ascribable to fear, *simpliciter*, but because of a new evaluation: it is not in my interest to have the wound cauterized at this time. (*Protagoras* 354 A-E)

The question is whether the two states (i.e., the state of seeking pleasure, which is connected to the emotion of excitability, and the state of avoiding pain, which is connected to the emotion of fear) are comparable such that the measurement analogy can be equally applied to both. My argument is that they are provided that one has the correct framework of weakness of will available, namely, a somatic model. Before articulating a possible solution to this problem, I briefly look at some articles in the secondary literature to note the neglect of examining the above passages on pain.

At first glance, it appears that Socrates's solution to *akrasia* is successful. However, as Brickhouse and Smith argue, such an explanation has two problems. The first is a philological problem. The second is phenomenological, in that information does not accurately map onto urgings. I now examine a third problem, which it is perhaps more accurate to describe as really an elaboration of the phenomenological problem related to situations or objects that provoke strong feelings of aversion. Situations that provoke such fierce fears are ones that we might like to avoid, even though we might realize that evading these situations is not in our best interest (e.g., cauterizing a hemorrhoid or the fear of public speaking). Although I cannot survey the entire secondary literature, the scholarship's engagement with the *Protagoras*' as it pertains to hedonism, is one where the weight and focus of analysis are given to understanding the measurement analogy in terms of the pursuit of pleasurable objects/activities and not on the other side of the hedonism dyad, namely, the aversion to events that might be painful or dangerous.

I will flag several articles where overemphasis has been placed on pleasure and not on pain. For example, Josh Wilburn writes, “Drawing on this Platonic characterization of Protagoreanism, I would like to suggest that on Plato’s view, the Man-Measure doctrine leads naturally (even if not necessarily or as a matter of logical entailment) to hedonism”.¹⁷

Hedonism, for Wilburn, is narrowly defined. He writes, “From a Platonic perspective, the hedonistic identification of the good with pleasure is a predictable psychological consequence of the view that perceptual experiences and the judgments derived from them are always true. For pleasure is an especially salient and compelling sensory experience, and pleasant objects and pleasure itself have an apparent value to those affected by them”.¹⁸ There is no treatment of pain—pain does not require a distinct analysis, or so it is assumed because it is nothing more than the negation of pleasure. This assumption is carried over to Wilburn’s evaluation of the measurement doctrine. The assumption is that if pleasure can be equated to mere information, then the same analysis applies to pain *ceteris paribus*. Wilburn summarizes by stating: “By their very nature, experiences of pleasure and pain have the power to incline us toward the view, not only that pleasures are good and pains bad, but that there is nothing more to goodness or badness than pleasure and pain”.¹⁹

Terrence Irwin, too, takes up the same assumption: that since pain is just the negation of pleasure an analysis of pleasure, in terms of the Socratic intellectual model, as noted above, applies to pain. He notes,

Socrates suggests that this explanation of our claims about good and pleasure applies to all our actions in pursuit of pleasure. He asks the many, ‘Don’t you pursue pleasure as good and avoid pain as evil?’ (354c3–5), and they agree. Then they also agree that in pursuing x rather than y as good they pursue x in the belief that it yields greater overall pleasure than y. Socrates is entitled to conclude that whenever we pursue x rather than y for x’s pleasure, we pursue it because we believe that x yields greater overall pleasure than y.²⁰

Again, Irwin does not provide a separate analysis of pain; he assumes that if the Socratic solution applies to cases of pleasure, then it should apply to cases involving pain.

¹⁷ Josh Wilburn, “Plato’s Protagoras The Hedonist” *Classical Philology* 113 (3) 2016 224-244, 233.

¹⁸ Josh Wilburn, “Plato’s Protagoras The Hedonist” *Classical Philology* 113 (3) 2016 224-244, 233

¹⁹ Josh Wilburn, “Plato’s Protagoras The Hedonist” *Classical Philology* 113 (3) 2016 224-244, 233.

²⁰ T.H. Irwin, *Plato’s Ethics*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 6.

Similar one-sided treatments of psychological hedonism are given in earlier articles in the scholarship.²¹

There are two problems with these approaches. 1) it is questionable that pain is just the counterforce of pleasure. The treatment of the two as equivalent becomes more in doubt when one considers that pain is often connected to fear just as pleasure or the anticipation of pleasure is connected to excitability. 2) That moral intellectualism—the idea that the urge of an immoral desire can be negated via cognitive reassessment and where proper reassessment means measuring accordingly, represents Socrates’s philosophical psychology. There is evidence to suggest that Socrates’s model psychological motivation is more encompassing as Brickhouse and Smith in a recent work, “Socrates and the Emotions” and show. They demonstrate that while Socrates is a cognitivist about emotions in that feelings are appraisals of a situation and therefore have an intentionality or an aboutness to them, this does not entail, as it is often supposed, that the feel of emotional content, the raw *quale* as Dewey put it, can be intellectualized. In other words, the non-rational component of an emotion must be addressed in a non-rational manner in order to prevent it from clouding our judgment—that is, overpowering reason.²²

To demonstrate this point, the authors examine another dialogue considered to be one of the last of the ‘Socratic’ writings of Plato: *the Gorgias*. They note,

Given that the procedure he seems to be using is conversational, it is not surprising that scholars have understood Socrates’ “therapy” here in purely rational terms: His “punishment” of Callicles is to be understood entirely in terms of philosophical dialectic. But our response to this line of interpretation should at this point be obvious: the kind of dialectic Socrates is using here does not seem to be well understood if we think of it in purely rationalistic terms. Instead, we think we should take more seriously, as other scholars have more recently done, the idea that an important part of what Socrates attempts to do in his conversations is to shame people whose pretense of wisdom has put them at risk of even further damage to their souls.²³

The purpose of shaming Callicles *in Gorgias* is to repair the damage Callicles has done to his soul. Rational elenchus, which purports to demonstrate to an interlocutor that his reasoning is absurd or lies in tension with some other established principle, will be ineffective

²¹ See Gregory Vlastos, Introduction. *In Plato: “Protagoras,”* trans. Benjamin Jowett, rev. Martin Ostwald, vii–lviii. Indianapolis, 1956, Also see I.M. Crombie, *An Examination of Plato’s Doctrines*. Vol. 1. London. Rudebusch, George, 1962.

²² John Dewey, “The Theory of Emotion.” *Psychological Review* 1 (1894): 553–6
<https://doi.org/10.1037/h0069054>

²³ Thomas Brickhouse and Nicholas Smith, “Socrates on the Emotions”, *PLATO journal* Vol 15 2015 9-28, 22.

in the case of Callicles and Socrates realizes this fact, or so Brickhouse and Smith argue. They reason that what Socrates is advancing is a hybrid account of self-discipline that incorporates distinct, ascetic practices for body and soul respectively:

...the more we keep our appetites — those natural attractions and aversions we have been discussing — in a disciplined condition, the more able we will be to engage in and appreciate the epistemic value of reasoning. But the more one indulges those natural attractions and aversions, the stronger their role in belief-production becomes, with the effect that one becomes increasingly less responsive to reason in one's cognitive processes".²⁴

To understand Brickhouse and Smith's thesis, it is critical to recall that Callicles is an advocate of *Pleonexia*—the position that advances the thesis that one should allow one's appetites to get as large as possible and not restrain them. Moreover, Callicles notes that, "When they are as large as possible, he ought to be competent to devote himself to them by virtue of his courage and intelligence, and to fill him with whatever he may have an appetite for at the time." (*Gorgias* 491e-492a trans. Zeyl). Although Brickhouse and Smith do not clarify precisely why rational elenchus will prove ineffectual on Callicles, we can fill in the missing piece of their argument by returning to the *Protagoras*. The many claim that weakness of will exists and thus claim that desire *can* overpower reason. Implied in this belief is that such a circumstance is lamentable but the many are making a factual claim. *Akrasia*, as the many understand it, is clearly not virtuous as it literally means lacking power. Therefore, they believe that reason, all things considered, *should* rule over a person but make the empirical claim that it does not. Callicles's stance is the mirror opposite of the many's position. He advances a normative argument, too, but reverses the importance between appetite and reason by claiming that appetite should rule, and that intelligence should be nothing more than an instrumentalized tool of desire. Reason's rightful place, so Callicles argues, is as a servant of the appetites. The suggestion by Brickhouse and Smith is that an individual who argues thusly is so beyond the pale, his soul so damaged that he would not be receptive to the epistemic value of reasoning. They then argue that Socrates must appeal to non-rational cures (such as provoking shame in his interlocutors and, in extreme cases, advocating beatings and imprisonment) in order to bring the soul back under the control of reason.²⁵

²⁴ Brickhouse and Smith "Socrates on the Emotions", 22.

²⁵ Brickhouse and Smith, "Socrates on the Emotions," 26

Brickhouse and Smith's reinterpretation of the role of elenchus offers a new perspective through which to view the Socratic framework of moral psychology. However, while the authors explain Socrates's cure for those the Gadfly of Athens deems unreceptive to reason, they have not fully explained the diagnosis. For consider that if the cure is non-rational then the cause must be non-rational too (i.e., somatic). I submit that by returning to Aristotle's insight, we can glean how a soul might become damaged through its somatic conditioning.

Section III: *Aristotle's Treatment of Socratic Weakness of Will*

My argument in this section examines another problem with Socrates's solution to the mystery of weakness of will. Aristotle, or so I argue, demonstrates that what Socrates's account is lacking is a somatic component. If we examine the measurement analogy more closely, it seems obvious that Socrates has trouble explaining why, when an appetite is fulfilled, that our judgment returns to us; that is, we possess full knowledge that the weak-willed action we have just committed is wrong. The account Aristotle provides is a somatic one in that he argues there is a causal relationship between the satisfaction of our appetites and the return of, what he calls, occurrent knowledge. In examining the somatic side of our desires and their relationship to our ability to judge, Aristotle seemingly gloms onto a critical component of our collective philosophical psychology. Despite this seemingly novel insight, I demonstrate that Aristotle's solution is less successful than it initially appears because his drunkenness model of weakness of will is, once again, limited to the pleasure side of the hedonism dyad—pain is neglected.²⁶ Nevertheless, Aristotle's gloss on the *Protagoras* provides a clue to thinking about Socrates's own somatic account of weakness of will in *Meno*. The account of *akrasia* given in the *Meno* fills in an important component of Brickhouse and Smith's model of Socratic philosophical psychology.

²⁶ Although one might suggest that Aristotle does offer an incontinent account of pain when discussing the soft (effeminate) individual, this person, "...who is defective in respect of resistance to the things which most men both resist and resist successfully..." (NE 1150b 2-3 Trans. Ross) is not anathema to the man of continence but rather the man of endurance. "While the incontinent man is opposed to the continent, to the soft is opposed the man of endurance; for endurance consists in resisting while continence consists in conquering..." (NE 1150a 33-35 Trans. Ross). Socrates's account of incontinence, it should be recalled, applies equally to cases of *hedone* and *phobos* as well as several other emotional mental states.

Even in the early texts *Eudemian Ethics* and *Magna Moralia*, Aristotle already recognized that the real crux of Socrates' argument hinged on the idea of "when knowledge is in or present to a man." However, in *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle homes in on the difficulty in interpreting this line with precision. He writes,

But there is no paradox in the incontinent: "...for it would be strange so Socrates thought—if when knowledge was in a man something else could master it and drag περιέλκειν it about like a slave ἀνδράποδον. For Socrates was entirely opposed to the view in question, holding that there is no such thing as incontinence; no one he said, when he judges acts against what he judges best—people act so only by reason of ignorance ἄγνοιαν. Now this view plainly contradicts the observed facts, and we must inquire about what happens to such a man; if he acts by reason of ignorance ἄγνοιαν, what is the manner of his ignorance? (τίς ὁ τρόπος γίνεται τῆς ἀγνοίας) (NE 1145b 10-38 W.D. Ross).

This objection zeroes in on the real issue with Socrates' eliminativist view of *akrasia*: What exactly does Socrates mean when he reduces incontinence to ignorance? What does it mean to say that ignorance is mismeasurement? Does mismeasurement only consist in failing to see how large something truly is, as it relates to Socrates' tower analogy, or does it also consist in using the wrong tool of measurement?

Aristotle's second objection to the Socratic account hits a little harder: he demonstrates that questions pertaining to moral matters cannot be reduced *simpliciter* to intellectual virtues. Aristotle develops this point in broad brushstrokes in *Magna Moralia*, while the *Nicomachean Ethics* fills in the insight with finer details and more precision. He writes, "For that the man who behaves incontinently does not, before he gets into this state, think he ought to act so, is evident." (NE 1145b 30-31 W.D. Ross). This obvious piece of introspective evidence seems to target the deepest problems with Socrates' own account. For first, even if we accept that all desires are interests, nevertheless, it seems plain that we sometimes choose to act from a self-interest that is not in our best interest all things considered. We are sometimes so in the grip of passion, anger, or fear, and our thinking so muddled and confused as a result, that it is difficult to understand how the action we are thinking of performing can be framed as an interest; that is as a considered intention to carry out some action undergirded by self-reflective thinking. If this seems correct, then the mere intellectualization of choice may be causally inert vis a vis pursuing a virtuous life. What is needed, Aristotle extols, is habit.

The second problem has to do with another typical aspect of actions perceived as weak-willed: How do we explain the return of *orthos logos*, as it were, once our thirst has been quenched, once our desire has been fulfilled? Does this phenomenon of the return of

reason not show that appetite, broadly construed, can obstruct our capacity for right reason? Can Socrates' model of mismeasurement explain the return of our senses as it were?

Aristotle offers several, at times, perplexing and competing models to help explain *akratic* action: the man sleeping, the drunkard, and those who fly into a rage. I wish to discuss the second of these analogies, namely the akratic as drunkard and will begin by looking at how Aristotle understands the analogy in *Magna Moralia* before turning to a more sophisticated version of the model in *the Nicomachean Ethics*.²⁷

In *Magna Moralia* Aristotle writes,

For it happens as it does in the case of drunk people. For drunk people, whenever the drunkenness has worn off, are the same people again. Reason was not expelled from them, nor was knowledge, but it was overcome by the drunkenness; and when they have got rid of the drunkenness, they are the same people again. The same applies, then, to the incontinent. For his passion having overcome, made reasoning inactive; but whenever the passion like the drunkenness has gone away, he is the same person again.²⁸

One reading of this passage suggests that reason is deactivated, *en toto* by passion—a powerful appetite grabs hold of a person and renders practical reason not just impotent but annihilated, at least until the desire is fulfilled. There are, however, two problems with this reading as Terrence Irwin dutifully notes in his seminal article, “Aristotle Reading *Protagoras*.” First, if reason is completely immobilized by passion, then Aristotle's position does not support the common-sense view of weakness of will after all. For the common-sense view holds that one can both *know* that some action is bad and yet perform the action anyway. If the anticipation of some kind of pleasure, however, acts to deactivate reason completely, then one is acting from pure appetite *sans* reason. Second, this response would not account for Socrates' rather nuanced understanding of reason. For Socrates acknowledges that a bad action may require a sophisticated calculus—both in order to achieve the aim of desire but also in terms of rationalizing the choice to the individual in question. The incontinent, is, at least at times, like the man using a metre stick to measure the wingspan of a mosquito—the man may justify, to himself, that he has reached an accurate measurement of

²⁷ Whether the *Magna Moralia* is an authentic work of Aristotle's is much disputed in the secondary literature. Whether it is or isn't is tangential to my argument. For a recent and compelling article that suggests the work is authentic see Karen Margrethe Nielsen, “Deliberation and Decision in the *Magna Moralia* and Eudemian Ethics” in *Virtue, Happiness and Knowledge: Themes from the work of Gail Fine and Terence Irwin* Eds Brink, Meyer, Shields Oxford Oxford University Press, 2018, 1-25.

²⁸ Quoted from Terrence Irwin's “Aristotle Reads the *Protagoras*”, in *Weakness of Will from Plato to the Present* (Studies in Philosophy and the History of Philosophy Volume 49 Ed. Tobias Hoffman, (Washington D.C. Catholic University of America Press), 2011, 22-41, 31.

the insect in all sorts of ways and defend his measurement to others. Still, if he can't see that his measurement model is categorically off the mark then he is simply ignorant. Some kind of 'reason' is still operant under the Socratic model, Reason *en toto* is not neutralized.

Aristotle's account of *akrasia* in *Nicomachean Ethics* is much more sophisticated and constitutes a significant refinement of the drunken analogy, when compared to *Magna Moralia*. But because the analogy of drunkenness is complexified further here than in *Moralia*, new problems emerge. First, Aristotle still compares the incontinent to the drunkard but not the drunkard in the blacked-out state vis a vis the *Magna Moralia*, but paraphrasing the words of Justin Gosling: "the incontinent is just tipsy enough to have off-beat knowledge".²⁹ Aristotle refines the analogy by making a distinction between dispositional and occurrent knowledge as we say that a drunken mathematician knows Pythagoras' Theorem but only dispositionally so, that is, in potential. He does not have occurrent or actualized knowledge of the theorem when drunk because he cannot express his knowledge. Indeed, even if he says the theorem, he is only mouthing the words—he does not in fact understand what he is saying (NE 1147b 11-13). Coupled with this insight, Aristotle is at pains to distinguish the incontinent individual from the self-indulgent, an important addition that is also lacking in *Moralia*. For although, behaviourally speaking, both the incontinent person and self-indulgent individual appear to be expressing the same desire, with the self-indulgent individual, his judgement aligns with his appetite and is therefore according to Aristotle beyond redemption (NE 1146b22–23). He is, in the words of Amelie Rorty, "...a bad man not a weak one. He is self-indulgent as a matter of principle".³⁰ In other words, the self-indulgent person pursues pleasure with the *full knowledge* that he is engaging in some decadent activity. He is, therefore, incorrigible. However, the incontinent's understanding of virtue is not compromised; it is just that he has trouble engaging this understanding when it is put to the test. It is for this reason, Aristotle suggests, the incontinent is curable.³¹

²⁹ Justin Gosling, "Mad, Drunk or Asleep, Aristotle's Akratic", *Phronesis*, Vol. XXXVIII/I, 1993. 98-104, 100. "In the examples of sleep and drunkenness it seems fairly easy to interpret off-beat having. They have knowledge in that they have acquired it and not forgotten, as shown by their apparent use of it; but they do not have it in the normal way, in that only when they wake or sober up will they be in a position to use it."102

³⁰ Rorty, Amelie, Rorty, Rorty, A.O. (ed.), "Akrasia and Pleasure", in *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*. Berkeley: University of California Press 1980, 267–284, 272.

³¹ Roochnik's parsing of the relevant sections explains Aristotle's reasoning on this matter clearly. He writes: The morally weak and the intemperate person might perform the same action with regard to the same object, for they both pursue sensual pleasures, specifically those of taste and touch (1150a9, 1118a28), which they ought not pursue. This explains why Aristotle suggests that "in some way

The drunkard analogy of incontinence may be further fleshed out by turning to Aristotle's respective examples of the good and bad syllogism. In NE VII 3, Aristotle shows that incontinence is a struggle of sorts between practical wisdom and the use of reason to satisfy some appetite. So one begins with a universal premise:

1. All sweet things are bad for one's health.

2. This thing is sweet,

Conclusion: I should not eat it.

When compared to the bad syllogism

1. All sweet things are pleasant,

2. This is a sweet thing

Conclusion: I should eat it. (NE 1147a 25-25)

The incontinent individual employs the bad syllogism instead of the good syllogism and does so because the anticipation of pleasure has served to deactivate his capacity to actualize, correctly, his dispositional knowledge.

There are two main views as to why this occurs. According to what I shall call the general befuddlement camp, to be explained below, appetite so obfuscates one's reasoning capacities that the mere thought of receiving some pleasure from an object obscures the reasoner's ability in a broad sense. Rorty is perhaps the clearest spokesperson for this position. She writes,

Sometimes the [akratic man] acts impulsively: he can fail to think about whether the situation before him falls under his general principles about what is good (1150b–19). Or if he does think about what he is doing, he does not see the particular case properly: he misperceives or misdescribes what is before him. Or even if he gets it right, he can fail to connect it with his general principles, fail to see the import of his knowledge. He then fails to draw the right conclusion about what to do, either making the wrong decision or failing to act from the decision implicit in his beliefs.³²

The anticipation of pleasure, *simpliciter*, then, seems to be the causal engine behind the unwise choice made by the akratic. As Henry Devin puts it, following Rorty, the akratic is

perhaps [moral weakness] is" vice (1151a6). In spite of these similarities, the intemperate and the morally weak are fundamentally different. The former "is guided by having made a choice and supposes that he must always pursue the present pleasure, while [the morally weak] does not suppose [that he must always pursue the present pleasure], but nevertheless does pursue it" (1146b22-24. See also 1148a17). See David Roochnik, "Aristotle's Account of the Vicious: A Forgivable Inconsistency" *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (Jul., 2007), pp. 207-220, 208.

³² Amelie, Rorty, Rorty, A.O. (ed.), *Akrasia and Pleasure*, in *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*. Berkeley: University of California Press 1980, pp. 267–284. 280

a, “‘pleasureaholic’ who ‘gets drunk on little wine’ (1151a1–3). He is the type of person who is easily intoxicated by thoughts of bodily pleasures to the point where he temporarily loses the capacity to exercise his moral knowledge”.³³ Yet, the akratic still exercises his intellectual knowledge, although it too may be restricted, according to Rorty, in that he understands the steps required to procure what he should not desire. This answer solves the problem highlighted in the *Moralia*. What Devin and Rorty claim is causally efficacious, however, is not pleasure *per se* but excitability—it is the excitement that one could indulge in some pleasurable activity that causes one to act akratically.

In contrast to the general befuddlement group who claim that the anticipation of pleasure (or excitability) puts the incontinent into such a tipsy-like state that they have problems in relation to reasoning, (e.g. both practical and intellectual virtues) as a whole, there is what I would call, the particularist camp best represented by Irwin. Irwin argues that Aristotle thinks that the many are correct after all—reason does get dragged around as if it were a slave but, according to Irwin, it is always the minor premise of the good syllogism namely, “this is sweet” that is then yanked about and employed in the bad syllogism. The perceptual content of the minor premise is veridically true and thus is knowledge, but this correct perception and *even the intellectual understanding of that thing* is then made use of by a bad universal. So, for example one might claim,

1. Sweet things should be indulged in from time to time.
2. This is a sweet thing before me
3. Therefore, I should eat it.

For Irwin, the anticipation of some pleasure knocks out our ability to employ the good universal in relation to some object or event full stop. One may even have complete knowledge of the particular thing in question, but such knowledge remains disconnected to *phronesis* or moral virtue. Once the appetite is fulfilled, however, the full access to *phronesis* returns—much like the drunk mathematician, who, now sober, fully understands Pythagoras’s theorem when he recites it.

Despite these differences between general befuddlement and particularist camps, one item remains in common: they are somatic approaches. Both accounts hold that the akratic’s

³³ Henry Devin, ARISTOTLE ON PLEASURE AND THE WORST FORM OF AKRASIA *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 5: 255–270, 2002. 260-261

appetites have a causal and detrimental influence on the incontinent person's rational capacities.

What is most critical here in Aristotle's account is the emphasis he places on the physiological component of incontinence and specifically that of unfulfilled appetite. An unsatisfied appetite causes one to make choices that one otherwise would not if satiated. This is proven, so Aristotle claims, because once the appetite is fulfilled the excitement is extinguished and the incontinent person's good sense returns just as one gains full use of one's reason when the drunk sobers up. Aristotle's model represents an important improvement over Socrates's while not completely undermining it because it takes into account a feature of the common-sense attitude namely, that there is causal connection between the somatic and the mental.

Traditionally it is thought that Aristotle's muddy-eyed account of moral incontinence improves on Socrates's initial, intellectualist explanation of *akratic* action. But is it possible to bring Aristotle's account in line with the Socratic? If *akrasia* is underdetermined because it may be applied to cases involving fear or sorrow, then it follows, as a matter of course, that Aristotle's model is incomplete and thus just as one absorbs the Socratic model of *akrasia* into the Aristotelian, one may also be able to absorb Aristotle's account into the Socratic. I intend to use Aristotle's statement that the akratic is like those who get drunk on little wine and quickly, as an interpretative touchstone for this line, seems to suggest that the akratic's unfortunate situation is the result of some habitual flaw that has now manifested itself in some pre-disposition to mismeasure both pleasure and pain. In point of fact, Aristotle does hedge here in regard to whether incontinence is a choice, claiming that "...incontinence is not vice (though perhaps it is so in a qualified sense)" (1151a 5 Trans. W.D. Ross). In my view, the *Meno* provides us with a clue as to how we may absorb Aristotle's somatic insights into a more robust Socratic model.

Section IV: *A Somatic Account of Weakness of Will: Meno*

Meno makes a strong case that some individuals knowingly pursue actions which will cause them untold suffering. Interestingly, Socrates appears rather confused at this part of the dialogue (section 77 B) where Meno makes the claim, but, after some delaying tactics, the gadfly of Athens draws an interesting distinction that both elucidates Meno's contention and defends the measurement doctrine evinced in the *Protagoras*. According to Socrates, there

are those who choose some action thinking it will produce more good than bad when in fact, the opposite is the case. Such individuals mismeasure and Socrates's doctrine is upheld. But there is a second group, so Socrates reveals. There are those who are in such a state of misery or wretchedness that their very capacity to measure *simpliciter* is compromised. What I shall argue is that this state of wretchedness is similar to the state of drunkenness described by Aristotle. Where Aristotle argues that weak-willed individuals get drunk quickly and on little wine, analogously, Socrates here suggests that those who are *kakosdaimon* (bad spirited) become "fearful quickly and from little pain/danger." Both the pleasureholic and what I shall call the coward are so somatically conditioned that they cannot provide the proper evaluation of the choices before them. I now pick up the argument Socrates makes against *Meno*.

The passage on the impossibility of incontinence begins on line 77C:

Socrates: "Do you imply that there are some that desire bad things, and others good? Don't you think, my dear fellow, that all desire good things?"

Meno responds: "By all means."

Socrates: Do you imply that there are some that desire bad things, and others good? Don't you think, my dear fellow, that all desire good things?"

Meno: No I don't

Socrates: But some desire bad things?

Meno: Yes.

Socrates: Thinking the bad things to be good, you mean, or even recognizing that they are bad, still they desire them?

οἰόμενοι τὰ κακὰ ἀγαθὰ εἶναι, λέγεις, ἢ καὶ γινώσκοντες ὅτι κακὰ ἐστὶν ὅμως ἐπιθυμοῦσιν αὐτῶν;

Meno: Both, I think.

Socrates: "Do you really think my dear Meno that anyone knowing the bad things to be bad, still desires them?"

ἢ γὰρ δοκεῖ τις σοι, ὦ Μένων, γινώσκων τὰ κακὰ ὅτι κακὰ ἐστὶν ὅμως ἐπιθυμεῖν αὐτῶν;

Meno: Certainly. (Meno, 77C Trans. Waterfield)

In an interesting move, Meno proceeds to divide the group of those who seek bad things into two: there are those who are mistaken; they believe that bad things will bring them greater good when in fact, they won't. Socrates challenges the existence of such a group, and he is successful in this regard: Socrates' position on *akrasia* as simply mismeasurement is upheld. Those who seek bad things only do so because they believe that bad things are really good. They are ignorant. However the second group presents significant problems for

Socrates. Socrates's simple theory on *akrasia* seems ineffective with regard to explaining the behavior and motivational structure or *hexis* of such individuals who clearly know that they are pursuing things that will cause them harm.

We pick up the argument again on line 77E:

Socrates: "Those who desire the bad things as you say, but yet think that bad things injure whoever gets them, know I suppose, that they themselves will be injured by them? ἀλλὰ τοὺς βλαπτομένους οὗτοι οὐκ οἴονται ἀθλίου εἶναι καθ' ὅσον βλάπτονται;

Meno: They must

Socrates: But do not these believe that those who are injured are miserable in so far as they are injured?

Meno: They must believe that too?

Socrates: Miserable means wretched?

Meno: So I think

Socrates: Well, is there anyone who wishes to be miserable and wretched? (ἔστιν οὖν ὅστις βούλεται ἄθλιος καὶ κακοδαίμων εἶναι);

Meno: I think not, Socrates

Socrates: Then nobody desires bad things, my dear Meno nobody unless he wishes to be like that. For what is the depth of misery other than to desire bad things and to get them? (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);

Meno: It really seems that is the truth Socrates and no one desires what is bad. (Meno, 77E Trans. Waterfield)

To be certain, there is a logical jump made by Meno here, which Socrates also affirms. The argument does not purport to prove what the two interlocutors propose. Meno believes that Socrates's argument reaffirms the standard moral intellectualist tradition. But clearly it doesn't. The proper conclusion is that no one desires to be wretched (*kakosdaimon*) or bad spirited—instead of no one desires bad things. No one desires to be in a permanent state of misery. How might we integrate this conclusion with Socrates' position on *akrasia*?

Fleshing out a more charitable reconstruction of Socrates' argument, we might say that when one pursues bad things, one is not *really aware* that such pursuits will lead to a life of misery. This condition can be explained, so I argue, by turning to the opposite state of the pleasureholic namely the coward. In this context, I define the coward as one who is so fearful of some proximal state of pain or danger that they will avoid that state at all cost, often

leading to some distal state that will afford far more pain and misery over the long run. Put another way, just as the *akratic*, under Aristotle's framework, is driven to chase down objects and activities that bring about pleasure, the main driving force of the coward is not to pursue *agathos*, as such, but to flee from situations that may bring about pain. Fear so clouds the coward's thinking that they mismeasure: they cannot adequately evaluate some event or situation. Likewise, where the anticipation of receiving some pleasure is the etiological source for the *akratic*, under Aristotle's model, to pursue some action, it is the fear of enduring some pain that drives the coward to flee. Both character types, the incontinent's on the one hand and the coward's on the other, however, are countervailing to the pursuit of *agathos* writ large, for where the incontinent should resist some temptations because they are not conducive to leading a pleasant life when such a life is viewed in its totality (i.e., weighing the pains and pleasures as Socrates says), the coward should face some of the fears and challenges that life inevitably presents with equanimity. Moreover, just as the *akratic*, for Aristotle, is like those who get drunk quickly on little wine, so too, the person who leads a miserable life, Socrates would now seem to argue, is equivalent to the one who does not understand the true, deleterious effects of bad choices. What are these effects, we might ask? The qualities of a bad choice have a cumulative or snowballing effect on subsequent choices made in the future, leading to greater misery and less resiliency to tackle directly, necessary yet difficult circumstances in life. Let me concretize this point with the example of Meno himself.

My interpretation of the above passages of *Meno* seems to be further corroborated in thinking about why Plato chose Meno as Socrates' interlocutor in a dialogue concerning the nature of virtue. For the real Meno, the Thessalian, was anything but virtuous. As Xenophon reports, he was an ambitious, dishonest, power-grabbing individual who famously led a contingent of men to overthrow the king of Persia on the ill-fated march of the ten thousand. (Xenophon, *Anabasis*, 2.6 21-28 Trans. Brownson) According to Xenophon, in *Anabasis*, Meno became so consumed by attaining greater power and influence that, through a series of poor decision-making, he became embroiled in a circumstance where to save his life, he had to betray his fellow countrymen. This Meno did, but in hindsight, Meno mismeasured; he would have preferred immediate death. For although his life was spared, Artaxerses, the Persian King, tortured Meno for an entire year before beheading him. As Xenophon recounts:

Now when his fellow-generals were put to death for joining Cyrus in his expedition against the King, he, who had done the same thing, was not so treated, but it was after the execution of the other

generals that the King visited the punishment of death upon him; and he was not, like Clearchus and the rest of the generals, beheaded—a manner of death which is counted speediest—but, report says, was tortured alive for a year and so met the death of a scoundrel”.³⁴ (Xenophon *Anabasis* 2.6. 29 Trans. Brownson)

Poor decision-making, Plato seems to intimate, leads to a fate worse than death; one becomes miserable, a wretch, either because uninformed decisions have a cumulative effect on one’s future circumstances, leading to increasingly sub-optimal situations or on a more metaphysically robust reading because reasoning itself becomes corrupted by fear which in turn leads to greater and greater suffering until, like Meno, reasoning becomes truly impotent as it is constrained by a very real foreign and alien power that drags the person around just like a slave.

Such passages in the *Meno* suggest that a revision of Socrates’ moral intellectualist position is in order. Whereas prior to the *Meno*, Socrates suggests that one chooses bad actions not because one knows such objects to be bad, but because one has failed to measure such objects correctly, the claim now is that one sometimes chooses bad actions knowing they are bad, because of some somatic state like fear; the person in a dangerous situation is so conditioned by fear that he cannot accurately weigh the pros and cons of some circumstance. Furthermore, the full ontological consequences of one’s choices are not entirely known; the individual is ignorant about how making bad choices based from fear, will come to corrupt her very moral being. Given this new model, reason is still free to some extent, and redemption remains a live option, but salvation increasingly becomes less likely over time, much in the same way where the Aristotelian incontinent (e.g., the drunk) becomes more likely to be overcome by options that seed more pain than they do pleasure. Thus, part of Socrates’ moral intellectualism is preserved, but here, in *Meno*, Socrates admits that when reasoning goes awry, these poor intellectual choices follow the individual, as it were. They so impair reason that one does not and cannot know the correct action to take.

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³⁴ Xenophon. *Xenophon in Seven Volumes*, 3. Carleton L. Brownson. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA; William Heinemann, Ltd., London. 1922.

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