

KNOWLEDGE AND HEDONISM IN PLATO'S *PROTAGORAS*

THE argument in the *Protagoras* which starts with an analysis of giving in to pleasure in terms of ignorance, and leads into a demonstration that courage is knowledge, is certainly one of the most brilliant in Plato and equally certainly one of the trickiest. My discussion deals mainly with three problems: (I) Precisely what absurdity is detected in the popular account of moral weakness, and where is it located in the text? On the basis of largely formal considerations I believe that the absurdity is a much less subtle affair than has been thought, and that it is located at 355c–d. (II) What is the connection between knowledge and belief in 358b–d, and how do these two concepts figure in the arguments which precede and follow this passage? Here I want to comment on differences between the *Protagoras* and other Socratic arguments. (III) How good is the argument at 356–357e which analyses moral weakness as ignorance? There are several problems here, including a fundamental puzzle of the dialogue, namely that, apparently, Plato uses a non-Socratic hedonism to establish the Socratic thesis that virtue is knowledge. Here I agree with those critics who see irony at the expense of the sophists—sophistic teaching is shown to be grounded in hedonism—but in addition I suggest that Plato also offers an oblique criticism of hedonism itself in the course of which basic points of real substance are made. This interpretation fits in with various other features of the dialogue, including the curious fact that, though the main argument proceeds on a thorough-going hedonistic basis, Socrates is subtly but distinctly not committed to that basis. Hence the unity of the dialogue is supported, and as well an attitude to hedonism is given which is more consistent with that of other dialogues, while we are able to see the Socratic paradox in its regular role as a tool of ethical exploration.

I

Socrates undertakes to show that, in conjunction with the hedonistic view that 'good' and 'pleasant' are identical, the popular belief that a man may know what is best and not do it, or may know that a course of action is bad and still do it, because he gives in to pleasure, is absurd, 355a–b. The method is to substitute 'good' for 'pleasant' and 'bad' for 'painful' and vice versa as required, 355b. Thus on the first substitution we get: 'A man does bad, knowing it to be such, when other courses are open to him, because he gives in to good'. What is it precisely that is absurd about this proposition, or about its equivalent with the second substitution? There appear to be three main possibilities:

- A It reduces to an assertion that a man does what he cannot do, a contradiction shown at 356c3 at the latest.
- B It reduces to an assertion that a man knows what he does not know, and the contradiction is not shown until 357d–e.
- C It is immediately felt to be fatuous at 355c–d3, but no logical inconsistency is spelled out.

My contention is that only C is tenable, although this means that we must be reconciled to the fact that the popular belief is not subjected to such a damning critique as in A and B.

Let us look at type A absurdities first, stressing the way Plato actually presents his argument.¹ In order to produce an inconsistency the argument has to be shaped so as to include 'psychological' hedonism, i.e. a premise to the effect that no man voluntarily takes what he thinks to be a course less pleasant than others open to him, or, with the substitution, less good. Over and above the identification of 'good' and 'pleasant', this thesis maintains

¹ The view here criticised has been extracted, without I hope injustice, from two articles which are vital to the study of this disputed passage: G. Santas, *Philosophical Review* lxxv (1966) 3–33, and G. Vlastos,

Phoenix xxiii (1967) 71–88. A similar version (in the main) is given by N. Gulley, *The Philosophy of Socrates*, (Macmillan 1968) 101 ff.

that all voluntary action is aimed at achieving pleasure. Thus, if people must seek to maximise pleasure, the popular belief becomes inconsistent on the second substitution, 355e7–356c (a man takes a known greater pain in return for securing a known lesser pleasure). And if it is accepted (as the identification of pleasure as the good allows) that no one can ever knowingly take the lesser of two available goods, the popular thesis is untenable on the first substitution, 355c–e. Now, though I would not deny that Plato's argument might be set up so as to include such a premise, it seems clear that this was not his aim, and that type A absurdity is ruled out on two main grounds, first that there is no such premise in the text, and second, if there were, so much has to be supplied which Plato suppresses that there is nothing in the text which would count as a demonstration of absurdity.

The only evidence of psychological hedonism in the immediate context of the alleged demonstration, which is where such evidence would naturally be found, is the use of verbals, *ληπτέα, πρακτέον, πρακτέα* at 356b–c. These forms, which are in themselves ambiguous, can in this context only mean 'ought to' or 'must if one is to achieve one's objective', for they are used to develop the implications of what it is for pleasure to be 'worthy' or 'unworthy' to overcome pain. 'Worthy', *ἄξιος*, implies (a) that an option contains more pleasure, and (b) that it should be taken. The irresistible conclusion from the run of the passage is that the verbals, following the imperative *εἰπέ*, b3, are used to express this second implication, and mean 'ought to', not 'cannot help but'.² The same double implication has appeared already at 355d–e: one goes wrong, *ἐξαμαρτάνειν*, in succumbing to a good which is not worthy, i.e. such a good should not have been taken; and the analysis of 'worthy' in terms of relative quantity follows at once. If a good which one does wrong or errs in taking is 'unworthy', a 'worthy' good is one which it is right to take.

This conclusion is so clear that it could only be over-ruled by very emphatic contrary indications from outside the immediate context, and these are simply not to be found.³ Admittedly it is said at 354c3–5 that 'the people' pursue pleasure as being good and avoid pain as bad, but this is hardly emphatic enough. It might be interpreted in terms of psychological hedonism, but this is not the point it is used to make, which is that 'the people' have no further *criterion of value* beyond pleasure, i.e. it is a description of their ethics in practice. More promising might seem to be 358b–c: 'If then pleasure is good, no-one who knows or thinks that a better course is open to him will do what he is doing when he could do the better.' And again: 'Nor apparently is it *in human nature* to be willing to go to what one *thinks* is bad rather than what is good' 358d. The introduction of 'thought' as an alternative to the knowledge with which the entire argument has been operating up to this point makes all the difference. One can only do what one thinks, rightly or wrongly, to be best, and this is undoubtedly a Socratic doctrine which could be used to reveal an inconsistency in the popular thesis. However, the crucial clause asserting that men must do what they think best (or, in this context, pleasantest) is offered here not as a premise, but as corollary to the conclusion that wrongdoing is ignorance. The section 358b ff., to be dealt with more fully later, is extremely difficult, not to say treacherous, and it is undeniable that the crucial *οἶόμενος* on its first appearance is given equal standing with *εἰδώς*, 358b7. But if we look in the preceding argument for justification of its inclusion, there is only the gerundival series in 356b–c, which itself is sorely in need of support from the very passage it is now required to help. Everywhere else there is abundant reference to knowledge, while opinion, true or false, and its bearing on successful action have not been mentioned. For reasons to be

² *καὶ τίς ἄλλη ἀναξία ἡδονῆ πρὸς λύπην ἐστίν, ἀλλ' ἢ ὑπερβολὴ ἀλλήλων καὶ ἔλλειψις; ταῦτα δ' ἐστὶ μείζω τε καὶ σμικρότερα γινόμενα ἀλλήλων. . . ἀλλ' ὥσπερ ἀγαθὸς ἰστάναι ἄνθρωπος συνθεῖς τὰ ἡδέα καὶ συνθεῖς τὰ λυπηρά. . . εἰπέ πότῃρα πλείω ἐστίν. ἐάν μὲν γὰρ ἡδέα πρὸς ἡδέα ἰστίης, τὰ μείζω ἀεὶ καὶ πλείω ληπτέα κτλ.* 365a–b.

³ The gerundives in 356 are admitted on all hands to be (at least) ambiguous and supporting evidence for psychological hedonism is sought elsewhere. Possibly relevant considerations are listed by J. P.

Sullivan, *Phronesis* vi (1961) 19–20. Both Santas (*op. cit.* note 12 and p. 10) and Vlastos (*op. cit.* p. 85) agree that the presentation is hardly conclusive. The dilemma is well represented by Gulley (*op. cit.* p. 107), who observes that 'ought' is the more natural meaning here, but thinks psychological necessity is intended because Socrates refers to human nature, 358d, and because the present argument *requires* more than 'ought'. The correct view, I believe, is taken by D. Gallop, *Phronesis* ix (1964) 117–29, who insists that the only available meaning is 'ought'.

discussed later, Plato has tried to show that wrong-doing is ignorance without the aid of the proposition that men do what they think best.

This is the first reason why type A absurdity is not to be found in the popular thesis. The second is that if, in spite of all, we read 'must' instead of 'ought' in the gerundival expressions of 356b–d, even so to reach a demonstration of an inconsistency we require a most elaborate exercise in supplementation and cross reference, in which Plato gives us no assistance. For instance, first we have the popular thesis with the substitution 'good', and its elucidation to show that it implies that a man does wrong in taking a known greater harm as the price of a known lesser good, 355c–e. Then we have the thesis and its elucidation with the substitution 'pleasant', which is followed by the weighing section, 355e–356c, in which is worked out the principle of psychological hedonism which, it is alleged, yields the conclusion that no one can avoid taking an option which he sees to contain the greater pleasure.⁴ Now this certainly contradicts the popular thesis with the substitution 'pleasant'. Socrates does not make the contradiction explicit, but perhaps we might allow it to be understood. But what about the popular thesis with the first substitution, 'good'? We have to construct a parallel principle, using 'good' for 'pleasant', and derive from it a parallel conclusion which, if we work backwards, will be seen to contradict the popular thesis with 'good'. This I maintain is incredible. It may be that Plato expects his readers to construct and apply the parallel principle on the basis of a hedonistic principle which is itself not explicitly enunciated, but surely, within the dramatic scene of the dialogue, Socrates could not have left the gap unfilled if he is *showing*, as he claims to be, that the popular thesis is absurd.

Similar considerations seem to me to rule out the possibility that, with reference to the popular thesis with the first substitution, an inconsistency can be obtained by relying on the basic Socratic tenets that all men desire welfare and desire anything else only as a means to welfare. Thus if one knows that a course is better than another, one will want it more. Add to this the proposition that one always chooses what one wants most and one can conclude that no one can choose a course which he knows to be less good than another available to him, contradicting the popular thesis.⁵ One trouble with this account is that the same dubious passages are required in order to establish a link between the Socratic tenets and the popular thesis, for there is not the slightest hint in the context of any other connection. But, as I have argued, this ground is not available. Another trouble is that none of the propositions made explicit in the version can be found clearly presented in the text; again, therefore,

⁴ Santas' account (*op. cit.* p. 14–18) is, in outline: 'D₂. Sometimes a man does something which contains good and bad where the bad outweighs the good, knowing that this is so, when he can avoid doing it' because 'E₃. the man takes (chooses, prefers, decides to take) the (known) greater harm (evil) contained in what he does in return for securing (as the price of) the (known) lesser good contained in what he does'. Then, keeping *λαμβάνειν* in the sense of 'chooses', the thesis is similarly restated with the substitution of pain and pleasure. Next Socrates 'proceeds to elaborate a principle which is implied by the hedonism of the *hoi polloi* (which we may remember is a premise of the whole argument) and which contradicts the explanation E₃', i.e. the principle that people always seek to maximise pleasure. The conclusion is that an action containing more pain than pleasure must be avoided, which contradicts the popular explanation with the second substitution, 'and a similar principle, obtained by substituting "good" for "pleasant" and "bad" for "painful" in the above principle, contradicts directly the explanation of the *hoi polloi* that is obtained by the first substitution (that is, E₃). This indeed is the absurdity that Socrates is talking'.

⁵ Vlastos argues that the popular thesis is absurd

because no-one could knowingly choose the smaller of two goods offered him, a proposition which follows from two others: (S₁) If one knows that X is better than Y, one will want X more than Y, and (S₂) If one wants X more than Y, one will choose X rather than Y. Vlastos says that (S₂) has been virtually taken for granted: Socrates 'repeatedly speaks of "wanting" (*ἐθέλειν*) a given option to express the very notion of choosing it', and (S₁) follows from fundamental Socratic tenets, i.e. that all men desire welfare and desire anything else only as a means thereto. And since the better action is the one which secures the greater aggregate good to the agent, it is impossible to choose the lesser in preference to the greater. Likewise with the second substitution: taking the smaller pleasure-package would be preferring the lesser good, which is a patent impossibility. But the next comment seems to me, in the context, to give the game away: 'If his adversaries had not seen the impossibility of that consequence, Socrates would stand ready to derive it from the principle of psychological hedonism to which they had agreed at an earlier stage of the debate.' (*op. cit.* p. 83–5). This is tantamount to an admission that Socrates has not shown the impossibility.

though a reader might make the necessary calculation, the absurdity cannot be said to have been *shown* if it amounts to an unexpressed contradiction derived from merely implicit principles, one of which ('if a man knows that a course is better he will want it more') might reasonably be considered the very antithesis of the popular supposition.

The combination of these two grounds, i.e. the absence of any indubitable sign of psychological hedonism and the need to supply unexpressed but vital premises, rules out type A absurdity. It need only be added that neither at 355e2 nor at 356c3, at which points the absurdity is supposed to have been shown, is there anything in the text remotely resembling the conclusion of a demonstration, and that it is admitted by the critics themselves that the evidence for psychological hedonism is at best vague.

Method B has it that the absurdity is not produced until the admission that being overcome by pleasure is ignorance is made explicit at 357d–e. The inconsistency lies in contradictory propositions about the weak-willed man's knowledge, and the popular thesis yields: 'a man does something, knowing it to contain more pain than pleasure, because he does not know it to contain more pain than pleasure'.⁶ The steps are: 1. the statement, with substitutions, of the popular thesis; 2. the analysis of right action in terms of choice of quantities; 3. the proof that knowledge gives right choice among quantities and wrong choice is always due to ignorance; 4. the conclusion that the popular thesis inconsistently ascribes both knowledge and ignorance to one man in respect of the same choice or action. This version is more attractive than the first in that the discrepancies between it and the apparent run of the text are not so pronounced. If Socrates says this, one can readily accept that an inconsistency has been demonstrated. However, although no unexpressed premises have to be summoned up and variously applied here, still, the version makes a point that the text does not make in that Socrates does not draw the same conclusion and does not explicitly state the contradiction. A complaint on this score might appear an excessive insistence on formality, but there is more to it than this. Socrates does state a conclusion, and with great emphasis, but it is not one which refers to the popular thesis but to the wider argument to which the demonstration of absurdity in that thesis is subordinate. He originally maintained that knowledge is invincible, suggested the popular thesis as a refutation, and undertook to show that this is a mistake and to explain what doing wrong through yielding to pleasure really is, 352c–353a. Again at 354e, immediately before the passage we are discussing, he says he is trying to show what yielding to pleasure is. Then comes the claim that the popular thesis is absurd, 355a–d, and the next passage that looks like the conclusion to an argument is 357c–e, which summarises the *original* position as at 352c–353e before declaring that yielding to pleasure is ignorance. It looks very much as though Socrates is not concerned with the absurdity as such here, but has done with that already and has moved on to give his own explanation of the phenomenon inadequately interpreted by the people. Thus, though undoubtedly Socrates could have turned aside to observe that the popular thesis is inconsistent, type B absurdity seems out of date in that the argument is already well past this point. The laughter referred to in 357d is not connected with that of 355c–d.

The above formal considerations suggest that the attempt to find a logical inconsistency exposed in the popular thesis can only be carried through virtually in defiance of the way Plato articulates the argument. The somewhat thicker atmosphere in which this flourishes may be gauged by looking at interpretation C. Here and here alone the considerable dramatic touches of the presentation really make sense. No lurking premises need to be discovered and no merely implicit conclusions need to be voiced.

⁶ This account is based on D. Gallop, *op. cit.* Arguments against Gallop are advanced by Santas (*op. cit.* p. 12, n. 14) and Vlastos (*op. cit.* p. 83, n.38). The former says that Gallop's version does not hold without psychological hedonism, but that if this is added to the premises the proof is already complete by 356c. Still, I believe it would give the required explicitness, and that would be a very good reason for going beyond 356c. Vlastos says that the people have already abandoned their thesis before they are

brought to accept Socrates' interpretation of being overcome by pleasure. With this I agree, except about the point at which and the reason why it is abandoned or, rather, reinterpreted so as to be defensible. However, unless the absurdity of whatever sort is *clearly* stated earlier, as I do not think it is in Vlastos' account, Socrates would be justified in showing that his doctrine of ignorance is implied in the popular hedonism, and in using it to make explicit the contradiction in the popular thesis.

The skeleton of the demonstration is this: 1. Socrates insists that the people hold to the identity of good and pleasure, 355a. 2. This being so, the popular view of giving in to pleasure will clearly be seen to be absurd, 355a–b. 3. Instead of mixing the opposites, the pair ‘good-bad’ alone will be used first and the pair ‘pleasant-painful’ alone later, 355b. 4. The popular thesis is restated with ‘overcome by pleasures’ replaced by ‘overcome by good’, 355c.

So much for the skeleton, but these are bare bones indeed and miss all the dramatic life of the final step. The substitution ‘by good’ is held back so that the sequence ‘overcome—by what?’ is twice stated before the answer is completed, and the answer, when it comes, has an oath to reinforce it. At once the questioner laughs and restates the amended thesis, calling the whole contention ‘a ludicrous business’, 355d. The entire sequence is inexplicable unless the answer is immediately felt to be ridiculous. After such a build-up it is hard to believe we have to wait for further steps before we are permitted to share the comedy, especially if we have to ferret out some steps for ourselves or if the final step is two Stephanus pages away. Once the effect has been engineered here, the absurdity in the second substitution can be felt without any need of a fresh build-up. The absurdity must be immediate and located at 355c7–d3.

What is it that is absurd? Merely that, on a very simple level, the popular thesis is silly. One cannot explain why a man who can do something good does something which he knows is bad, by saying that he overcome by good. The essential element of conflict has been obliterated. There is another linguistic aspect too: the verb ‘overcome’, *ἡττώμενος*, appropriate to reprehensible conditions in moral contexts, is ludicrous when combined with ‘by good’, *ὑπὸ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ*. There is nothing so rarified here as a logical inconsistency, not one that is spelled out anyway. If Plato had consistently written *ἡττώμενος ὑπὸ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ* it would be a sign that he was pointing to a logical absurdity, but he also uses the plural, *ἡττώμενος ὑπὸ τῶν ἀγαθῶν*, 355d, which removes the inconsistency. There are differences of meaning between *τὸ ἀγαθόν* and *τὰ ἀγαθὰ*, but they are not relevant to any point Plato is making here, and the variation should warn us that the search for further subtleties is futile. Whatever a reader might be expected to ponder, in the context of the dialogue the popular thesis has been stamped as ludicrous without this variation being taken into account.⁷ There are more reasons than one why a statement may be ‘absurd’, *γελοῖον*, and logical inconsistency is by no means the commonest in Plato, who is quite likely to reject, without the further analysis required to uncover any inconsistency that may underlie it, a proposition that looks senseless.⁸ A useful parallel is *Republic* iv 430e–431b, where, with reference to temperance, the expression *κρείττω αὐτοῦ εἶναι* is called absurd because whoever is superior to himself is also inferior to himself. But then Socrates goes on to explain that what is meant by the expression is that one part of a man is superior to another. The reinterpretation of an absurdity so as to reveal an element of sense in it is directly parallel to the *Protagoras*, for in the next section, 355d3–e3, Socrates is able to turn the absurdity into a defensible paradox. The questioner, after his initial laughter, wants to know what can possibly be meant by the extraordinary phrase ‘overcome by good’. There follows a brief analysis in terms of ‘worthiness’. ‘I see’, says the questioner, ‘what you mean when you say “overcome” is taking a greater amount of bad because of a smaller amount of good.’ The inferential *ἄρα* recognises that this (so Socrates ironically supposes) is what is behind the apparently absurd explanation. There is a sense in which one can do bad through giving in to good. The concession made in order to mitigate the absurdity will provide material for Socrates’

⁷ The variation is pointed out by Vlastos, *op. cit.* p. 81–2. The popular thesis as criticised always has the plural elsewhere, since Socrates is concerned with relative quantities, 353a, 355a etc. But the popular description ‘being overcome by pleasure’ may have either singular, 352d, 353a, 357e, or plural, 353c, 354e. They are regarded as equivalent for the purpose in hand; at 358c ‘giving in to oneself’, *ἡττω αὐτοῦ*, is admitted for the same idea. Cf. expressions

used in *Charmides* without any point being made of their differences: *ἐπιστήμη ἐπιστήμης* and *ἐπιστήμη ἐπιστημῶν*, 170a6, c6.

⁸ Cf. *Republic* iii 403e—it is *γελοῖον* that a guardian should need a guardian (of forbidding guardians to get drunk); the aviary in *Theaetetus* 199d: it is *πολλὴ ἀλογία* to suppose that ignorance can be caused by the presence of knowledge.

demonstration of his own view. Likewise with 356a–c, one looks in vain for a punch line and feels confident that this is preparatory material with more to come.⁹

Type C absurdity looks pretty dreary stuff when compared with the analysis which critics have found in the alternatives, type A especially, but it is far from despicable and the formal considerations are conclusive. The text is designed to produce this absurdity or something like it and has to be forced before it yields a more sophisticated version. I suppose that, apart from the immediate purposes of the dialogue, Plato is inviting his readers to reflect on two points of substance. First, hedonistic ethics are incompatible with the ordinary description of such dilemmas, for the terms are framed to express non-hedonistic values, i.e. you cannot say 'I knew that y was (morally) right but did x because overcome by pleasure', for by claiming that pleasure is the criterion of good you have abandoned the ordinary notion of rightness. Second, the challenge to give an alternative explanation is one which the hedonist cannot avoid if he is to give a coherent account of moral behaviour.

II

Socrates has shown that, if good and pleasure are identical, there is something very odd about the way people would ordinarily describe cases of moral weakness, which are better to be described as mistaken assessments as to the amount of pain or pleasure produced by a given option. In 358 he proceeds to draw conclusions from the previous argument, the most important of which is that people always do what they know *or think* to be best. Using this distinction between knowing a course to be good and thinking (wrongly) that a course is good, he goes on to analyse courage as knowledge, 359–360. There is thus a great difference between the arguments: moral weakness is argued to be ignorance without the aid of the alternative 'know or think', whereas this alternative is basic to the demonstration that cowardice is ignorance. Yet this demonstration purports to be using the conclusions of the discussion of moral weakness. Where then does the alternative 'know or think' come from?

It is in effect legislated into existence.¹⁰ Self control is knowledge, moral weakness is ignorance, and ignorance is defined as 'having a false opinion (*τὸ ψευδῆ εἶχεν δόξαν*) about matters of great importance' 358c. The idea appears to be that right action and wrong action are exhaustive alternatives in moral choice, and the first is due to knowledge that a course is good and the second due to wrongly thinking *that a course is good*. There is thus no room left for thinking that a course is bad and still doing it. If wrong-doing is ignorance, and ignorance is having a false opinion—and what else could a false opinion be in this context except a mistaken belief that an option is good?—then, whenever a man chooses, he has an opinion that what he is doing is good. This opinion might amount to knowledge,

⁹ If 355d–e and 356a–c do not help to show the absurdity, but follow it, why are they separated from each other by the intrusion of the absurdity with the second substitution? The reason is that Socrates analyses only the latter part of the popular thesis, the expression 'overcome by pleasure'. Thus he first substitutes 'overcome by the goods', gaining a fresher impact by freeing the expression from the confusing associations in the original expression. Here we have 'does bad because overcome by the goods' and naturally this leads to an analysis of *wrong* action, taking the lesser good. But in the second substitution he wants to analyse the positive side, *right* action, and now talks only of pleasure and pains, freeing the expression 'overcome by . . .' from confusing associations in 'overcome by the goods'; right action is to take the greater pleasure. The two passages, though of different length, are virtually balanced point by point (1. substitution, 2. goods/pleasures not worthy to overcome, 3. 'obviously since' . . . (the reason is only implied in the second

substitution), 4. unworthiness is relative quantity, 5. wrong/right action). The exposition is affected by dialogue form, giving a sufficient coverage with its own orderliness, different though this is from that appropriate to other modes of exposition.

¹⁰ My views of the origin of the alternative is in substantial agreement with that of N. Gulley, *Phoenix* xxv (1971) 118–21, (on p. 120). The distinction between knowledge and belief at 358b–c is the same as the distinction between knowledge and ignorance in the preceding argument, with 'ignorance' now defined as having a false belief that something is right when in fact it is not. Likewise I agree with his interpretation of the function of 'belief' in the proof that courage is knowledge. I think, however, that it is crucial to stress, as Gulley does not, that Socrates has no justification in the preceding argument for the way he defines 'ignorance' at 358b–c, so that the transition is illogical, whatever way one looks at it. My contention is that the illogicality is deliberate Platonic manipulation.

or it might be mistaken—Plato is not concerned here with the relative utility of knowledge and right opinion, as developed in the *Meno*—but in either case, a man always has a sort of mental approval of the value of his action. So that if a man is faced with a choice between evils, he can only act rightly or wrongly. Right action is taking the lesser evil, and is based on knowledge. Wrong action is taking the greater evil, and is always the result of error. There is, by definition, no possibility of a man taking what he thinks is the greater evil.

Provided that ‘possibility’ here is understood as logical possibility, the conclusion holds, but while it is so restricted, it tells us nothing about the way people behave. For one might say ‘I did x, knowing that y was right’, and Socrates would show me that I did not know that y was right, or otherwise I would have done y. I might accept this and admit that I somehow made a mistake in doing x, x being bad. But has Socrates shown that I thought x was good? No, unless we accept the definition of mistake as ‘wrongly thinking something to be good’. In which case whenever I do wrong, though it be in the blindest fit of rage or lust, he can always describe my motive, if he wishes, as wrongly thinking that what I was doing was good, even if no such thought was in my head. In short, he is entitled to say that it is not logically possible for a man to do what he thinks is bad, but, even on his own grounds, he is not entitled to say that ‘it is not in human nature’ for a man to do so. He has got a scheme of classification which he can apply whatever the psychological facts, and he has got his interlocutors to agree that the psychological facts must fit the scheme.

Plato’s argument here cannot win much applause, but he has now supplied himself with a premise basic to his ensuing proof that courage is knowledge. This proof has something in common with what appears from Xenophon and Aristotle to be a Socratic pattern. Having said that Socrates thought that knowledge is never overcome and that moral weakness is merely ignorance, Aristotle says that some people make a further distinction: knowledge indeed is never overcome, but they do not agree that no one acts contrary to what he thinks best, *παρὰ τὸ δόξαν βέλτιον*, *EN* 1145b21–35. It is a plausible if not necessary conclusion that Aristotle thought that the Socratic position did include such a premise. The form of argument using the premise may be reconstructed from Xenophon, where several passages show signs of a pattern for proving that virtue is knowledge, i.e. (i) a preliminary definition of the virtue without reference to knowledge; (ii) the thesis that all men do as they *think* best; (iii) subdivision of ‘thinking’ into (a) knowledge and (b) error; (iv) connection of knowledge with ability and performance; (v) connection of error with inability and failure; (vi) a revised definition of the virtue, incorporating knowledge. This pattern is most fully represented in the definition of courage (*Mem.* iv 6.10–11), and is more or less detectable with reference to piety (2–4), justice, (5–6), temperance (iii 9.4). And this pattern is the frame of Plato’s discussion of courage in our passage, *Protagoras* 359–360: no man is willing to go to what he thinks is bad, but some men are in error here, and these are cowards; since cowardice is ignorance, its opposite, courage, is knowledge. There is much more to the argument than this, of course, but the point I wish to stress is the function of the universal proposition which is subdivided into error and knowledge, for this is the keystone of the entire proof.

If we now look back at the proof that moral weakness is ignorance we will see that this premise is dispensed with. Right and wrong action are characterised as a question of assessment and choice among options containing various amounts of pleasure and pain. With reference to other packages containing measurable quantities it is knowledge, *ἐπιστήμη*, that guarantees results and sense perception that leads one astray. Analogously it will be some unspecified form of knowledge that guarantees results when choice is to be made between packages containing pain and pleasure. And if knowledge ensures right action, wrong action is due to ignorance.

This argument has been criticised on the ground that, even if knowledge gives right choice, this does not entail that failure to make the right choice is due to ignorance, unless knowledge also guarantees that a man who possesses it will act upon it. There is a gap between possession of and use of knowledge, and unless this gap is closed, Socrates has not proved that wrongdoing is ignorance. What is required is a premise of the sort that figures

¹¹ Developed by D. Gallop, *op. cit.*

in the proof that courage is knowledge, namely that men always do what they think best. But the only evidence hereabouts for such a premise is in the gerundival expressions of 356b–c, which mean 'ought to' and not 'cannot help but'. Thus the gap remains open and the demonstration fails.

This is an important criticism,¹¹ and has indeed been the worry which has prompted reexamination of the entire section in order to find material for the required premise. It is not a criticism of the Socratic paradox that virtue is knowledge, for other versions do use the required premise, which may perhaps be reached justifiably from other sources than the mere legislation of 358. What is suspicious about the criticism is that, whereas elsewhere Socrates seems fully aware of what he requires for his proof, here the objectionable gap is blandly papered over. No attempt is made to show that, if one has the relevant knowledge, one must choose rightly; it is simply granted that one does, 356d4–c3. Correct choice and right action are built into the model which Plato uses, so that, though the criticism may be in principle correct, it may in fact be off the point if the argument is not used for a purpose to which the strict entailment between possession of knowledge and right action is relevant. The argument may in fact be logically a much poorer thing, and deliberately so, which is flattered by its criticism. The real purpose for which it is used I will try to show in Section III, but already a preliminary reason can be given why Plato did not employ the premise whose absence has been criticised. It is because, having reduced the context in which moral weakness is shown to options capable of quantitative assessment, he has no further interest at this stage than to contrast the unreliability of sense perception with the reliability of a measuring technique. He is not even concerned to describe what would be involved in such a technique, 357b, but is content to press home the analogy, which is indeed highly plausible. And while in principle it is open to his interlocutors to say 'Yes, but supposing I had such a technique, why would I be compelled to act on it?', in fact it would be perverse to expect such a rejoinder, when everyone who has ever succumbed through moral weakness would admit that he did not have such a technique and would certainly be inclined to doubt that he would have succumbed if he had possessed it. Within its limits this argument is entirely adequate, and this consideration should make us not so much criticise its inadequacies as a proof of the Socratic paradox, valid though the criticism is, but rather look to see if there is not some further insight which Plato by his emphasis is inviting us to make.

III

If 356–357 is meant as a serious proof of the paradox that moral weakness is ignorance, then it really is not good enough for Socrates simply to incorporate right action along with right choice. He is not saying much more than that, if moral dilemmas of this type are analysable into choices among quantities, as appears to be implied by popular hedonism, then it is reasonable to conclude that some form of practical knowledge, some technique for taking decisions, will give the required result. The transition from knowledge that something is the case, *γινώσκων τὰ κακά ὅτι κακά ἐστίν* 355a, to technique, *τέχνη καὶ ἐπιστήμη* 357b, is neither confused nor sly, for as always the former is envisaged as a necessary feature of the latter and Socrates emphasises that weakness of will is not just ignorance, but is lack of a particular measuring technique, *ἐπιστήμης ἐνδεία ἐξαμαρτάνειν . . . καὶ οὐ μόνον ἐπιστήμης ἀλλὰ καὶ . . . μετρητικῆς* 357d. There is a lot more to be said about the connection between moral knowledge and *τέχνη*, as other dialogues, some of them almost certainly earlier than the *Protagoras*, show, but Plato never feels bound to say everything about a topic in every dialogue.

There is, however, another inadequacy in the argument, and this I take to be more important because it appears to be a flaw in the reasoning even when taken on Plato's own terms. But this inadequacy is the truly informative one, as it is the key to understanding the purpose of the entire analysis of hedonism. Starting from the identification of good and pleasure, agreement has been secured that right action is a question of choosing among quantities. On this model it is supposed that there will be a technique for choosing among

quantities whether near or far removed from the user of the technique. Among the subdivisions of this technique is one applicable to pains and pleasures, such that what is true of the whole class is true of the subdivision. Now the model requires that all the data, the magnitudes, are simultaneously available for inspection, i.e. nearness and remoteness are envisaged in terms of space. This is not true of the alleged subdivision dealing with pains and pleasures, for only time is relevant here, and a pleasure remote in time is one which has not yet happened. Such a technique could only be used to evaluate a completed action, one the outcome of which is known. As a practical technique to be applied in the moment of decision it is useless, for some at least of the quantities to be assessed must be cancelled by the act of choice even before they come into existence. The model then is inadequate, for it demands conditions which cannot be satisfied in order to operate. It is not open to us to assimilate this problem to the practical difficulties facing the constructor of a felicific calculus, for Plato is not referring to a *probable* outcome or *expected* amounts of pleasure. The data are fixed and determinable in the same way as are the objects to which the techniques of arithmetic and measuring are applied, and unless this is so one must renounce the possibility of knowledge. Thus, if what we have here is a serious analysis of correct procedure in a dilemma, from the viewpoint of an agent making his choice, then the analysis is spoiled by a deficiency in the model.¹²

But is Plato taking an agent's viewpoint? Throughout the entire discussion no account is taken of relative strengths of *desires*, surely a central question. The sources of deviation from right action given at 352b are a mixed bunch, and pain and pleasure have less to do with the emotions than have the others, anger, love and fear. Plato might well talk of being overcome by desire for pleasure, and that he does not do so, but talks only of being overcome by pleasure, suggests not so much confusion as a difference in viewpoint.¹³ He is not concerned with how things seem to an agent facing his decision, but how they are to an observer evaluating an action. We are being given a factual description with all the heat and steam taken out of it. This is so from the start, and becomes clearer as the argument proceeds. The absence of a reference to desire is very striking at 353c and again at 354a–b, where military service and surgery are called good but painful not because the *expected* outcome is beneficial, but because the actual outcome is so. Even these generalities are removed from

¹² Illusory pain-pleasure values are compared with the deceptive effects of distance on visual objects at *Philebus* 41e–42c. Here Plato seems to waver between saying that when someone feels pain and pleasure simultaneously, the magnitude of the one may make the other appear less than it is (i.e. than it would be if experienced in a context not dominated by its opposite?), and e.g. that an immediate pain may make the pleasure of anticipation less than the pleasure is when realised (in which case there are two separate pleasure feelings). Only the latter suits the analogy of visual distance at all closely, but only the former suits the context of the argument, so that Plato perhaps ought to say that the effect of a strong immediate pain or pleasure on its simultaneously felt opposite is deceptive in much the same way as an object which dominates one's vision may make an object half the size but further away appear less than it is and as it would appear if not seen at such a disadvantage. The immediate pain is exaggerated correspondingly by its association with a pleasure of anticipation which is less because the anticipated pleasure is distant in time. Thus there are two separate effects, which Plato presents as one: (a) mutual distorting effects of different degrees of pain and pleasure experienced simultaneously; (b) the importance of proximity of a pleasurable or painful experience in producing the particular combination felt. The degree of falsity in a pleasure is the extent

to which it is exaggerated as in (a), to which a contributory causal factor is proximity as in (b). Although Plato suggests that theoretically such an analysis reveals measurable quantities of true and false pleasure or pain, he does not imply that there is a technique available for making the measurement, or recommend such a technique to the hedonist. But this is what (ironically) he does propose in the *Protagoras*, and further, not only in connection with estimating an immediate experience, but a whole undertaking, project, outcome and all. Measurement remained for Plato the basis of accurate knowledge (as far as it is possible) of the sensible world, cf. *Republic* x 602d ff., and R. G. Bury, Appendix E to his edition of the *Philebus* (CUP 1897). Pleasure is measurable in a special sense at *Republic* ix 582 ff., by means of 'experience, practical wisdom and reason', *ἐμπειρία, φρόνησις, λόγος*; but there the question is about the type of pleasure to be found in each of the main ways of life, i.e. an assessment of available data, not, as the hedonist's position in the *Protagoras* requires, a way of calculating present facts and future eventualities.

¹³ It is not sufficient to refer Socrates' phrase *ὑπὸ ἡδονῆς ἠττούμενος* to a familiar Greek compendious expression meaning 'overcome by desire for pleasure', because of the complete agreement at all stages of the entire argument that we are concerned not with strength of desire, but with evaluation of actions.

the sphere of the probable and regarded with a successful result in mind. Still more decisive are the remarks about the actual experience of feeling pleasure, *αὐτὸ τὸ χαίρειν* 354c, which are applicable only to a factual description requiring knowledge of the outcome before it can be given.¹⁴ Likewise with the turn which Socrates gives to the popular thesis when he elucidates error as taking a smaller amount of good at the cost of a larger amount of bad, 355e: the two amounts are available for assessment and it is the *whole* action, result and all, which is considered. Most astonishingly of all, the same flat view of things is maintained in 356a–c, which we surely expect to be a matter of right choice in a practical dilemma, what with its expressions of obligation and its directives for weighing alternatives. But if a practical dilemma were in mind, the comment put into the mouth of a supposed objector would be utterly trifling. The practical objection surely would be that *desire* for something relatively unimportant may swell to obsessive proportions, but Plato's man enters into the spirit of objective evaluation by observing no more than that pleasures may be near or distant, allowing the rejoinder that, near or far, they are still categorically the same.¹⁵ Only a criterion for objective assessment is in mind here, with no more than the slightest of bows in the direction of strength of desire suggested by *μᾶλλον καὶ ἥττον* 356a. With the ensuing model for measuring magnitudes near or far, and its application to choice among pleasures and pains, we have the heady conclusion that Socrates requires the concept of practical knowledge in order to show that moral weakness can be analysed as lack of a knowledge which surveys present and future spread out as on a map.

On top of all this there is the deepest problem of the dialogue as far as its relation to other Socratic and Platonic material is concerned, namely that the bald equation of good and pleasure which is the basis of the argument appears quite alien, and is indeed the very antithesis of the usual position. For if Socrates sponsors this equation, he is not saying that the good life is also the pleasantest, but that pleasure is the only good, and on this unlikely basis, abandoning the negative zeal with which the paradox is handled in the *Laches* and *Charmides*, he proceeds to offer a serious demonstration that virtue is knowledge in an argument that has a defective model and blandly concedes the final step that has to be proved, and all this in a dialogue in which the sophists who accept the conclusion are treated with patent irony and in which Socrates has already suggested that the only way in which a moralising poem of Simonides can be understood is by reading into it Socratic convictions which it manifestly does not contain. The whole procedure looks like an invitation to contemplate not a poor proof of invincible knowledge on problematic grounds but an oblique criticism of the identification of good and pleasure. And while one need not feel that the pursuit of pleasure is necessarily a shallow undertaking, still one hardly feels that a profound moral insight has been vindicated when the sophists agree with enthusiasm that all that has been said is true, 358a, if one remembers the atmosphere of moral earnestness established towards the start of the dialogue when Hippocrates is warned not to entrust his soul, which is worth more than his body, lightly to a sophist, 313a ff.

Since my contention is that the implicit point of the discussion is at variance with its apparent conclusions, it will be as well to consider what attitude is taken towards hedonistic propositions by Socrates and the sophists. When the question is first raised, Socrates

¹⁴ . . . ἐπεὶ καὶ αὐτὸ τὸ χαίρειν τότε λέγετε κακὸν εἶναι, ὅταν μείζονων ἡδονῶν ἀποστερήῃ ἢ ὅσας αὐτὸ ἔχει, ἢ λύπας μείζονος παρασκευάζῃ τῶν ἐν αὐτῷ ἡδονῶν: ἐπεὶ εἰ κατ' ἄλλο τι αὐτὸ τὸ χαίρειν κακὸν καλεῖτε καὶ εἰς ἄλλο τι τέλος ἀποβλέψαντες, ἔχοιτε ἂν καὶ ἡμῖν εἰπεῖν. 354c–d.

¹⁵ The detail proves the important point that Plato is not concerned at all with strength of desire: the objector at 356a would in this case be suggesting that an immediate pleasure creates a stronger desire than a delayed one does, which would make Socrates' reply nonsensical. This reply, i.e. that an immediate pleasure differs from a delayed one only in being more or less pleasant, shows that the objection is to be referred to the *evaluation* of an action, not to its

psychological motivation. So also with 355e: surely what one means by 'being overcome', *ἡττᾶσθαι*, in these contexts is *not* opting for an alternative which is in fact worse, as Socrates interprets it. This is *part* of what one means, of course, but the other part is a question of strengths of desire and willpower. Socrates' interpretation only makes sense if this latter aspect is omitted; if, that is, the issue is only how to *evaluate* a stock situation in hedonistic terms. This being so, any attempt to make the Socratic paradox watertight by introducing a premise about the relationship of strength of desire to estimates of the amount of good contained in a projected action, is bound to be talking about something else than the argument in the *Protagoras*.

implies that it is his belief that pleasures are good, insofar as they are pleasant, that is, that pleasure is in itself absolutely good, *τὴν ἡδονὴν αὐτὴν ἐρωτῶν εἰ οὐκ ἀγαθὸν ἐστὶν* 351e. The sentence form is interrogative, but the proposition is asserted. Socrates does not claim that every action which is pleasant is good simply because it is pleasant, irrespective of whatever other judgment one might make about it, but that every action which is pleasant is good *insofar as* it is pleasant, whatever other judgment one might make about it. Nowhere is it implied that Socrates accepts that good and pleasure are identical. The distinction is important, for whereas the hedonist might pursue pleasure as the end of action and build his scale of values round this end, Socrates might feel that such a direct approach is putting the cart before the horse and would pursue other ends, which are not valued simply because they produce pleasure, but which may in fact be the only secure guarantors of a pleasant life. Thus the direct pursuit of pleasure—whether understood as crassest sensual satisfaction or subtlest aesthetic enjoyment or complete mental and bodily well-being—may on the one hand be incapable of reaching its goal for many reasons, including the fact that many pleasures are not directly accessible but are by-products of activities which must be entered into with another end in view than obtaining pleasure, if the pleasure they produce is to be obtained. To put explicitly what I believe is implied in 356–357, the goals of hedonism may be too imprecise for a reliable method of achieving them to be worked out and followed. On the other hand, many philosophers have regarded the philosophic life as having the edge in pleasure over other pursuits, without regarding philosophy as in any immediate sense a pursuit of pleasure, and Plato's attitude is in general of this kind. Both the closeness of Socrates' contention to hedonism and the real distinction between them are highly relevant to the notion of a measuring technique developed in 356–357, for the knowledge which fails direct hedonism through lack of anything definite to apprehend may secure pleasure indirectly to Socrates if it operates on entities accessible to knowledge. Accordingly Plato, subtly but perhaps unfairly to Protagoras, has the sophist misunderstand Socrates' point by suggesting that a pleasurable life is a good life only if the pleasures enjoyed are noble or morally acceptable, *καλά* 351c, as if Socrates were implying that pleasure is the sole criterion of goodness. It is indeed not certain that Protagoras is allowed to take Socrates' point at all in 351b–e; whether he is or not depends on the interpretation of the ambiguous clause *ἐὰν . . . τὸ αὐτὸ φαίνεται ἡδύ τε καὶ ἀγαθόν*, 351e. This might mean, in the light of the exchange which leads up to it, 'if it appears to be the case that if anything is pleasant it is also good', which is certainly all that Socrates is committed to, and it would be charitable of Plato to allow his Protagoras at least to realise what he is discussing. However, it could also mean 'if it appears that pleasure and good are the same', which is not Socrates' contention, and I suspect that this is how it should be understood, in view of a similar ambiguity in 358a–b discussed below.¹⁶

The text therefore gives good ground for believing that, when the question of pleasure is first raised, Socrates does not espouse the cause of hedonism but holds a view which is distinct but easily taken to be hedonism.¹⁷ A different slant is given to the view of pleasure

¹⁶ Some of the difficulty in finding a precise interpretation is due to the tendency of the Greek language to drop the definite article in a predicate, even when, as here, the article is crucial to the sense. It is curious that Plato is not always on the alert for this even in passages where the presence or absence of the article is the central point, e.g. *αὐτὸ δὲ τοῦτο τὸ πρέπον . . . σκοπεῖ εἰ τοῦτο τυγχάνει ὃν τὸ καλόν. . . σοὶ δ' ὄν δοκεῖ τὸ πρέπον καλόν εἶναι*; *Hipp. Maj.* 293e, cf. 294e; and compare *Φίληβος μὲν τοίνυν ἀγαθὸν εἶναι φησι. . . τὴν ἡδονήν*, *Phil.* 111b, with *Φίληβός φησι τὴν ἡδονήν σκοπὸν ὀρθὸν πᾶσι ζήοις γεγενῆσθαι. . . καὶ δὴ καὶ τὰ ἀγαθὸν τοῦτ' αὐτὸ εἶναι σύμπτει*, 60a; cf. also *Euthyphro* 8d–e. But there is no real possibility of misunderstanding in any of these passages, since the contexts make them clear. What makes one suspect that Plato is providing a loop-hole

for Socrates here is that the context of the ensuing argument establishes acceptance of the hedonistic identification only for the sophists and not for Socrates.

¹⁷ Socrates could hold, as he does, that pleasure is good, and that good is pleasant (in the sense that the best life produces the most pleasure in the long run) and therefore that, in the long run, good is materially equivalent to pleasant, while at the same time denying that pleasure and the good are identical (he might assert $p \equiv g$ and deny $p = g$ without contradiction). Plato could express this distinction by use of the terms essence, *οὐσία*, and accident, *πάθος*, as he does in connection with the proposed definition of piety as what is loved by the gods, *Euthyphro* 10e–11a. It is hard to see why Plato should hold back from committing Socrates to the outright hedonistic identification unless he means to suggest some signifi-

next ascribed to 'the people', for they are made to hold that no other criterion apart from pleasure and pain is applicable in evaluating actions in terms of good and bad, and it is not considered that they would modify this view, ἀλλ' ἔτι καὶ νῦν ἀναθέσθαι ἕξεσθαι, εἴ πῃ ἔχεται ἄλλο τι φάναι εἶναι τὸ ἀγαθὸν ἢ τὴν ἡδονήν 354e–355a. Neither Socrates nor Protagoras is committed to this view that pleasure is *the* good, but it is on this identification that the demonstration of absurdity in the popular account of giving in to pleasure depends, as also does the elucidation of right action as knowledgeable choice among quantities. Socrates is not committed because he only holds that pleasure is good, and Protagoras because he thinks that some pleasures are bad, 351d. But by Platonic sleight of hand Protagoras is made to accept the popular view, as are the other parties to the discussion. For they all agree that what has been said is true and that pleasure is good and pain bad, ὁμολογεῖτε ἄρα . . . τὸ μὲν ἡδὺ ἀγαθὸν εἶναι, τὸ δὲ ἀνιαρὸν κακόν 358a. Now this need be no more extreme a position than that adopted by Socrates, but Plato has them take it in the stronger sense, for they agree that it follows that moral weakness is ignorance and self control is wisdom, a conclusion which is derived only from the equivalence of good and pleasure, εἰ ἄρα . . . τὸ ἡδὺ ἀγαθὸν ἔστιν . . . οὐδὲ τὸ ἡττω εἶναι αὐτοῦ ἄλλο τι τοῦτ' ἔστιν ἢ ἀμαθία, οὐδὲ κρείττω ἑαυτοῦ ἄλλο τι ἢ σοφία 358b–c. There is some humour in this, and not a little malice, if Plato is deliberately making his sophists accept a fundamental Socratic conviction which does not quite follow from allegedly popular hedonistic grounds which are not quite what Socrates believes in. Even Protagoras' conviction that a pleasurable life is only good if the pleasures are not morally obnoxious is now abandoned, for all actions which lead to a pleasant and painless life are accepted as morally good, αἱ ἐπὶ τούτου πράξεις ἅπασαι, ἐπὶ τοῦ ἀλύπως ζῆν καὶ ἡδέως, ἀρ' οὐ καλαί, 358b. This is really quite monstrous, being in essentials the thesis held by Callicles in the *Gorgias* at his most ferocious, although the pleasure here envisaged need not be of the most lurid stamp. It is intelligible in the *Protagoras* only as irony at the expense of sophists whose teachings, however well meaning the men themselves might be, are morally suspect.¹⁸ From here to the end of the dialogue pleasure is mentioned in only one further section, for the argument to show that courage is knowledge can operate without it on the basis of the conclusions agreed in 358. Yet Plato cannot resist reminding us of it, and as if also to remind us not to take it at face value, he chooses the least likely of contexts: according to the argument, going into battle is not only fine and good, but pleasant 360a.

Plato is witty at the sophists' expense, making them simultaneously accept the Socratic paradox and the hedonistic values of the people whose views Protagoras does not think worth discussing, 352e, 353a. Is he also making a worthwhile critique of these values? The point, I take it, is to be found in the apparent defect of the measuring model in 356–357. The analysis of hedonism suggests that right action is a matter of knowledge, and with this proposition Plato is in wholehearted agreement. For knowledge to be possible, however, there must be something to know, facts or entities which can be known and used in action, and this conviction is a major driving force behind the Socratic search for definitions as well as the Platonic construction of a world of real forms. But in the case of hedonism there is nothing which can count except the amounts of pain and pleasure attendant upon the *outcome* of an action, and these are not, from the viewpoint of an agent, capable of being apprehended by knowledge since they do not yet exist. Hedonism then is analysed to reveal a contradiction in what it implies, for it both requires right action to be founded on knowledge and at the same time shows its nature to be inaccessible to knowledge. Knowledge can of course evaluate a completed action, but that is no help in moral choice; and by knowledge is surely meant something more than a realistic assessment of what is to be

cance in the distinction between Socrates' view and that ascribed to the people and accepted by the sophists. If Plato is going on to criticise hedonism obliquely, then the distinction is very much to the point.

¹⁸ That the *Protagoras* is in part an ironical attack on the hedonism implicit in the teaching of the sophists is, of course, one of the main contenders for the title of the standard view of the dialogue, cf P.

Shorey, *The Unity of Plato's Thought*, ch. 1 (reprinted in *Plato* ed. G. Vlastos, [Macmillan 1972] ii 26), and in more detail, G. M. A. Grube, *CQ* xxvii (1933) 203 ff. My interpretation adds what I believe is a vital reinforcement of this position, namely that the dialogue offers an oblique criticism of the hedonism attributed to the sophists. Without this we have to rely on *other* dialogues to know that Socrates is in fact criticising, not just explaining, the sophistic ethics.

expected. Like Socrates, the people believe that a man can know what is right; but unlike Socrates they also hold a hedonism which does not allow one to know what is right. Plato thus uses the idea of invincible knowledge to expose a final indeterminacy which the identification of good and pleasure brings into 'moral' choice. And because this is his purpose he does not attempt to bridge the logical gaps between possession of knowledge and action upon the basis of that knowledge, so necessary if he is seriously aiming to establish the Socratic paradox. But if he wants only to show up the short-comings of hedonism as he sees it, then the gap is irrelevant, and all he has to do is what in fact he does, namely stress that knowledge is a necessary condition of right choice while so characterising the entities on which this knowledge has to operate that they can be seen to be, from an agent's viewpoint, non-entities.¹⁹

This conclusion is admittedly no more explicit than the two types of absurdity, A and B, earlier rejected primarily because they are not explicit. Unlike them, however, it does allow the argument in the text to make its points on its own terms and follows some rather distinct leads in not taking the argument merely at face value. The conjunction of the Socratic paradox and hedonism is in any case curious; this conclusion shows a historically more plausible relationship between the two. The Socratic and Platonic affirmation of invincible knowledge is not affected merely because it is not proved on hedonistic grounds, any more than doubt arises about the Socratic principles that virtue is knowledge and all wrong-doing is involuntary, merely because they cannot be substantiated from the poem of Simonides in which Socrates pretends to find them exemplified, *cf.* 345b, d-e. What Plato obliquely suggests is that hedonism cannot yield the conditions for moral knowledge which ordinary language and his own conviction alike require. That is to say, the function of the Socratic paradox is much the same here as elsewhere, namely to act as a necessary aspiration and an instrument of criticism.

Scholars have attributed to Plato in connection with this dialogue an entire spectrum of attitudes towards hedonism. I cannot agree with any view that sees Plato sponsoring hedonism here, either because he was reconstructing the opinions of the historical Socrates or because he thought it worth a trial run as a system which offers some content to the notion of the good, hitherto unspecified, which is the object of moral expertise. My view in part coincides with that of those who see the *Protagoras* as an ironical exposure of an uncritical hedonism as the foundation of the teaching of the sophists,²⁰ but I would go further than this

¹⁹ The difference between the overt run of the argument and the substantial point of it may be put more formally. The argument, on the surface, goes:

1. Pleasure is identical to good.
2. Right action is action which contains most pleasure.
3. Knowledge determines which actions contain most pleasure.

Therefore 4. Knowledge determines right action. From which it follows, if we ignore the logical gap obscured by the ambiguous word 'determines' in 4, that wrong action is due to ignorance. But Socrates leaves us, though not without clues, to detect the falsity of 3 and to reconstruct the argument:

1. Knowledge determines right action.
2. Pleasure is identical to good.
3. Right action is action which contains most pleasure.

Therefore 4. Knowledge determines which actions contain most pleasure.

But 5. Knowledge does not determine which actions contain most pleasure.

Therefore, either 6. Knowledge does not determine right action.

Or 7. Pleasure is not identical to good.

Now, since Socrates has enthusiastically committed

himself to 1, and has carefully avoided endorsing 2, the sting of the criticism is turned against 2. Socrates has not proved 1, but Plato uses his conviction of the truth of 1 to draw out the falsity of 2.

²⁰ For the criticism of the sophists, see esp. Shorey and Grube quoted in note 18 above. For the view that Plato is serious about hedonism, see R. Hackforth, *CQ* xxii (1928) 39 ff., I. M. Crombie, *An Examination of Plato's Doctrines* (Routledge and Kegan Paul 1962) i 240 ff., G. Vlastos, intro. to *Protagoras* (Bobbs-Merrill 1956) p. xl ff., esp. n. 50. Vlastos' main argument for the view that Socrates sponsors the identification of pleasure and good is that it would be misleading to base the important Socratic thesis that wrongdoing is ignorance upon a falsehood, unless sufficient signs that this is being done are given, which is not the case. There is some force in this, though it is not clear how far Plato felt himself entitled to go within the limits of Socratic elenchus. For instance, the argument from opposites to prove the identity of temperance and wisdom, 322a ff., is accepted by Protagoras and allowed to stand, though it is hard to think that Plato felt it to be much more than suggestive. Likewise at *Euthydemus* 279e ff., Socrates uses ambiguities in the word *ἐστὴν* to encourage young Kleinias to study philosophy; the ambiguity is never acknowledged, although the

and say that, in addition, there is a critique of this foundation from the Socratic standpoint. There is no outright attack upon hedonism, for pleasure is indeed held to be good. Rather we have a combination of the Socratic thesis that virtue is knowledge and a basic hedonistic position, and the two together produce an exploration of fundamental moral notions in the course of which the Socratic view of the role of knowledge in moral choice is canvassed without any serious attempt to prove it, while it is obliquely suggested that hedonism cannot satisfy the requirements of a viable moral system. The criticism must be indirect if it is to harmonise with the other main aim of the discussion, namely to make the sophists acknowledge hedonism. The transition in 358 from hedonism to the analysis of courage is spurious and deliberately so, in order to win this acknowledgement from the eminent sophists. The proof that courage is knowledge is a more serious affair and deserves separate discussion, for the premises on which it is based might be reached from less dubiously Socratic positions than is actually the case in the dialogue, so that, despite a humorous reference to the hedonistic background, this argument probably contains all there is in the dialogue of a positive attempt to prove a Socratic paradox. This interpretation is not, I believe, weakened by the importance which Aristotle apparently attached to the *Protagoras*, for the dialogue does contain several clear statements of basic Socratic tenets, and Aristotle does not suggest that Socrates required a hedonistic foundation in order to work these out. Nor is it weakened because so much of it relies on reading between the lines, since in this dialogue more than in any other, that is where we are invited to read.

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reader is prepared to be on the look out by explicit comments in the preceding discussion, 277e–278b. Similarly, though more subtly, the ironical description of the sophists and their entourage 315a ff., the treatment of Simonides' poem 340a ff., the attempted proof that courage is wisdom via the importance of knowledge in confidence (about which Socrates can hardly be entirely sincere, cf. *Laches* 193c) 349e–350c, and the airing of the notion of illicit conversion 350c–351b, all put the reader on his guard. Admit-

tedly there is no explicit declaration that Socrates has reservations about hedonism, yet it is surely odd that Socrates does not declare for it either, but for something similar but different, while hedonism is several times expressly said to be implicit in popular values. Assuming Plato to be in control, this too would be misleading unless it is a sign that Socrates is not committed to hedonism and is not going to commit himself to it.