

5-1-2012

The Possibility of Akrasia in the Protagoras and the Republic

Benjamin Kryder

Pepperdine University, Benjamin.Kryder@pepperdine.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/globaltides>



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kryder, Benjamin (2012) "The Possibility of Akrasia in the Protagoras and the Republic," *Global Tides*: Vol. 6, Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/globaltides/vol6/iss1/5>

This Humanities is brought to you for free and open access by the Seaver College at Pepperdine Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Global Tides by an authorized editor of Pepperdine Digital Commons. For more information, please contact bailey.berry@pepperdine.edu.

The Possibility of *Akrasia* in the *Protagoras* and the *Republic*

In Plato's *Protagoras*, Socrates seems to deny the possibility of *akrasia*¹—the state of acting against what one's reason dictates. Traditionally, scholars have offered an interpretation of *The Republic* that claims Socrates affirms *akrasia*, yielding incongruent accounts. I maintain this standard view that in order to adequately demonstrate the city-soul analogy in *The Republic*, Socrates denies the principle of opposites and affirms the tripartition of the soul, and therefore commits to the claim that *akrasia* is possible in at least some instances; I endorse the standard account and, thus, the claim that the two accounts do not square up. First, I will examine the basic argument made in the *Protagoras*, which holds that it is impossible for anyone to be *akratic*. Then, I will present the argument for tripartition and the compresence of opposites; next, I will explicate and defend the standard interpretation through dialogue and evaluation of alternative interpretations, which maintain that Socrates does not argue for the possibility of *akrasia* in the *Republic*.

First, it is necessary to spell out the basic arguments for the conclusion in the *Protagoras* that *akrasia* is not possible. Here is a formulation of the argument—the first of two arguments for the conclusion that it is impossible to do what one knows to be wrong—borrowed from Michael Morris, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Sussex:

- A1) Necessarily, if anyone does what he knows to be wrong, then for some *a*, *b* and *t*, he chooses to do *a* rather than *b*, despite thinking at time *t* that *b* is better than *a*, because at *t* he desires *a* more than *b*;
- A2) To desire *a* more than *b* is to think that *a* is better than *b*; so
- A3) Necessarily, if anyone does what he knows to be wrong, then for some *a*, *b* and *t*, he chooses to do *a* rather than *b*, despite thinking at time *t* that *b* is better than *a*, because he thinks at *t* that *a* is better than *b*; but

¹ an action is *akratic* when one's rational faculties say to do *X* and yet, at the same time, one does $\sim X$

- A4) It is impossible, for any a , b and t , for anyone to think at t that a is better than b and think at t that b is better than a ; so
 A5) (C1) It is impossible to do what one knows to be wrong.²

According to Morris, the argument rests on two assumed principles, namely: “[P1] an evaluative conception of desire, and [P2] the idea that it is impossible for anyone to have contradictory preferences.”³ Principle 1, which we shall call *an evaluative conception of desire*, and principle 2, which we shall call *the impossibility of contradictory preferences*, are essential to A1-A5 and consequently, C1. An evaluative conception of desire means simply that when one desires X, one takes X to be good. This kind of thinking commits one to say that if *akrasia* is even possible, the *akratic* person has a weakness of will, an internal failure of rationality or a failure to act on one’s rational dictates.⁴ Even if one accepts this principle, there still exists the controversial claim that it is impossible to have contradictory preferences. Morris has elucidated Socrates’ argument against the possibility of contradictory preferences in the following way:

- B1) Someone only really has a preference if that preference makes sense of what he does.
 B2) One can only make sense of someone to the extent that he is rational.
 B3) Someone with contradictory preferences could not be rational.
 B4) So no one can really have contradictory preferences.⁵

If this argument is sound, then there is clearly a problem for the concept of *akratic* action. The problem is that, insofar as *akrasia* is an action, it seems there would have to be a rational explanation for the possibility of acting on what one knows to be wrong, but given Morris’ formulations of the arguments in the *Protagoras*, it seems that *akratic* action is impossible. Thus, it seems that given the *Protagoras* argument, *akrasia* must be denied.

² Michael Morris, “*Akrasia in the Protagoras and the Republic*,” *Phronesis* (2006): 197

³ Morris 198

⁴ Morris 198

⁵ Morris 200

In the *Protagoras*, there is a second argument with the conclusion (C2) that “it is impossible to do what one knows is wrong.”⁶ It seems that this second argument rests on the premise that psychological hedonism, which holds that *only* pleasure is valued and that all human action is motivated *only* by this desire for pleasure, is true. However, I maintain that the argument is unnecessary since C2 follows from psychological hedonism being true, independent of the argument for conclusion one. Thus, if it is the case that C1 and C2 are equivalent yet inferred from different premises, then Morris’ basic formulation of the *Protagoras* argument (A1-A5) is sufficient.⁷ It seems then that the view in the *Protagoras* rest only on the two crucial assumptions (P2 and P3) needed for C1. So the view in the *Protagoras* “holds that desires and evaluative judgments, taken in themselves, are capable of contradicting each other (assuming an evaluative conception of desire...)” and that one cannot have contradictory preferences at the same time.⁸ On this view, the impossibility of *akratic* action follows from the impossibility of having contradictory preferences at the same time.

Having laid out the basic, functional argument of the *Protagoras*, I will now turn my attention towards the discussion of the city-soul analogy in *The Republic*. In seeking a vision of the just city, Socrates defines justice as “a matter of its three functionally defined classes standing in appropriate relations to each other.” So then justice must then require three *parts* of the soul.⁹ As analogues to the ruling class, the security forces, and the material providers, Socrates suggests reason, spirit, and appetite. For the analogy to hold, the analogues must be able to hold relationships in the same way as the city’s classes, so

⁶ Morris 201

⁷ Morris 204

⁸ Morris 205

⁹ Morris 205

Socrates needs reason, spirit, and the appetites to be distinct agents within the soul, representing distinct interests which compete for authority in the person, “where authority is to be understood ultimately as control over the use of force.”¹⁰

In order to justify this model, Socrates introduces the principle of opposites; “It is obvious that the same thing will not be willing to do or undergo opposites in the same part of itself, in relation to the same thing, at the same time” but it seems that in some cases the single soul undergoes opposites in the same thing at the same time, so there must be different *parts* of the soul.¹¹ If the doing or undergoing of opposites is a competition amongst the parts of the soul—perhaps for authority or using force against each other—then there is a causal relationship between the parts of the soul, and the language of parts is justifiable.¹² It must be the case that if Socrates is correct about the city-soul analogy, then he is also correct in inferring that the soul has distinct parts. In order for this to be a defensible argument, one must be able to provide an example of someone genuinely undergoing opposites in relation to the same thing at the same time; an example of this might be “a single person at the same time wants to have a drink and not have a drink.”¹³ It seems that this is only possible if that person has different parts of the soul, and that these parts are in competition for power or authority over the person, dragging the other parts around.¹⁴ In order for Socrates to demonstrate psychological tripartition, he must provide this counterexample to the principle of opposites. Thus, I interpret Socrates as both denying the principle of opposites and affirming tripartite psychology in the *Republic*.

¹⁰ Morris 206

¹¹ Morris 206

¹² Morris 206

¹³ Morris 207

¹⁴ Morris 208

I maintain that this interpretation is correct and if it is, then at the least, it seems that it is possible for a person to be *akratic*, or dragged around by the appetitive or spirited parts of her soul even when her reason dictates otherwise. It seems then that we are already committed to saying that the *Protagoras* and *The Republic* do not square up. In summation of what we have explored thus far, it seems that the *Protagoras* claims want to affirm the claim, “If A is the same person as B, then A and B cannot have contradictory preferences at the same time”; on the other hand, tripartite psychology commits us to denying this claim and to affirm instead the claim, “If A is the same person as B, then A and B cannot be controlled by different forces at the same time.”¹⁵ Put more simply, it seems that the *Protagoras* argument needs to affirm the principle of opposites (PO), whereas the *Republic* argument needs to deny the principle of opposites (PO). Before fleshing out in further detail how exactly these two sets of claims stack up, I will turn my attention towards laying out and responding to relevant, alternate interpretations of *The Republic*.

Gabriella Roxana Carone, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Colorado, offers a serious counter to the traditional interpretation of weakness of will in *The Republic*. She claims that the account in book VI of *The Republic* follows from the claims in the *Protagoras* with the development of synchronic-belief (at one time) versus diachronic-belief (across time) *akrasia*.¹⁶ Carone claims that the former is ruled out in book VI while the latter can be affirmed. Carone wants to say that Socrates denies the claim that the reasoning part of the soul can hold a belief *at the same time* that a non-rational part of the soul trumps reason and acts in pursuit of its non-rational ends (synchronic-belief *akrasia*).

¹⁵ Morris 209

¹⁶ Gabriela Roxana Carone, “*Akrasia in the Republic: Does Plato Change his Mind?*” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* (2001): 110

Carone then argues that Socrates does allow for the claim that the rational part of the soul may hold a belief, but then be weakened by one or both non-rational parts of the soul so much so that it comes to endorse the belief of the non-rational part that acts in pursuit of its non-rational ends (diachronic-belief *akrasia*).¹⁷

If this is the case, then *The Republic* does not commit us to denying the PO, allowing for congruence between the two sets of claims. However, I maintain that though plausible, the argument is unconvincing and the burden of proof remains on the person endorsing this position. Certainly, it seems reasonable to conclude that if reason is not necessarily in opposition to the non-rational parts of the soul; that is to say that it could be the case that reason comes to endorse non-rational ends in virtue of being weakened by the other non-rational parts. But even if we grant this, it is unclear why we would think this to be the case in all conflicts of this sort. It seems just as plausible if not more to say that in some instances, we simply ignore or postpone reason and act on the non-rational parts of the soul. The idea that reason must be recruited or weakened in a way that would endorse the non-rational parts is plausible, but Carone has failed to provide a positive reason as to why this is the correct interpretation. In fact, it seems that Socrates is committed to denying the principle of opposites, which within tripartite psychology allows for the compresence of opposites (the notion that opposites can be simultaneously present within the same object); at the least, a charitable reading of *The Republic* would certainly not readily conclude that Socrates affirms the principle of opposites. Carone wants to deny synchronic-belief *akrasia* since it requires the undergoing of opposites in the same thing in the same time, and instead appeals to diachronic belief, which does not require the

¹⁷ Carone 114

compresence of opposites *at the same time*. However, Carone's interpretation then seems unnecessary in attempting to appeal to a claim that Socrates appears to explicitly deny in the passage.

Though plausible, Carone's interpretation seems problematic. Consider a cocaine user (we will call him Jim)—reason dictates that it is good not to do cocaine, but Jim's appetitive urges lead him to conclude that it is good to do cocaine. It seems this is a case where we have a genuine compresence of opposites—doing or undergoing of opposites of the same thing at the same time—in virtue of the divisible nature of the soul. Moments before Jim does his first few lines of cocaine, Jim's rational part still holds that it is good to not do cocaine. It seems dubious to claim that during or after Jim's use of the cocaine, it must be the case that his reason now endorses the appetitive urge that it is good to do cocaine. Jim's appetitive desire may best his reasoning, but it certainly does not seem like his desire to do cocaine has temporarily committed him to believing that cocaine is good for him. This diachronic-belief *akrasia*, as Carone describes, attempts to get around the denial of the PO, but instead it commits us to a flawed model for explaining our actions. Instead it seems much more reasonable to say that Jim believes and continues to rationally believe that it is good not to do cocaine, but is bested by an opposite belief held by his non-rational parts that it is good to do cocaine. I argue that Carone's view commits one to say that the rational part of the soul is in constant flux, which seems entirely unwarranted. In a presentation of the "Desire thesis", Barney interprets Socrates as claiming that what one rationally desires is what one takes as objectively good.¹⁸ If this rational desire for the good is a pursuit for objectivity, then it seems incorrect to say our rational desires would

¹⁸ Rachel Barney, "Plato on the Desire for the Good," in *Desire, Practical Reason, and the Good*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010): 46

temporarily endorse the non-rational goods pursued by the baser parts of the soul. Given the divisible nature of the soul, the compresence of opposites is possible, and thus, synchronic-belief *akrasia* seems to be both reasonable and congruent with *The Republic*; it is certainly reasonable to conclude that diachronic-belief *akrasia* is also plausible, but there is no reason to think that this must be the case given the compresence of opposites.

Charles H. Kahn, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Pennsylvania, offers a similar position; Kahn holds that the rational part is the only part capable of forming a conception of the good, and that if reason is able to rule, then it will specify the life of virtue aimed at the good. Kahn says that when reason is overpowered by spirit or appetite, it misidentifies the good, meaning the non-rational parts cause the rational part to make a mistake in which ends are to be pursued.¹⁹ If Kahn (as well as Carone) is correct about this interpretation of Socrates, then we can reasonably eliminate the possibility of synchronic-belief *akrasia*. However, I respond to Kahn by reaffirming Socrates' denial of the principle of opposites (PO) and the divisibility of the soul. If the PO is false and the soul can be divided, then *akrasia* is at least possible. Kahn needs to provide a positive reason why one should interpret Socrates as affirming the PO in order to refute the standard interpretation. In addition, I critique the diachronic model in consideration of Jim—it seems unintuitive to say that Jim's rational dictates lead him to know that cocaine is not a good, and yet his appetitive desires cause his reason to mistake cocaine as a good. Even in the case of a sorely addicted drug user, it seems that at no point does this person believe that the drug is rational-end good because of the overpowering desire for pleasure; rather, it seems that

¹⁹ Charles H. Kahn, "Plato's Theory of Desire," *Review of Metaphysics* (1987): 88

they maintain that cocaine is not a rational-end good all along, but act on an opposite claim that cocaine is a pleasure-end good, which stems from a baser part of their soul.

Jessica Moss, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Oxford, offers another interpretation of how the constituent parts interact within the divided soul. Moss, appealing to Socrates' claim that powerful fears, pleasures, or pains "wash out" the dictates of reason, claims that the rational dictates do not come to endorse the pursuits of the non-rational parts (as Carone offers), but rather reason's dictates are seduced by these extreme appetitive urges.²⁰ So let us reexamine the case of Jim—reason dictates that cocaine is to be feared since it is not a good (but rather it is bad), but the extreme pleasure involved in snorting cocaine washes out these rational dictates so much so that they can simply be disregarded. The idea then, for Moss, is that the reasoning part of the soul is in some instances, poorly equipped to deal with the seductive qualities of the non-rational parts that follow from extreme urges.

Prima facie, there does not seem to be anything incorrect with a theory of *akrasia*. However, let us consider Jim's case. It seems that in this instance, Jim believes doing cocaine is not good, but comes to believe it to be good inasmuch as it is extremely pleasurable as the appetitive urges seduce the rational belief into submission. Now it appears that Jim is simply ruled by appetite. While on Moss' view there may have been genuine opposites (but not at the same time), Jim has stifled his reasoning part in service to his extreme desire for pleasure. So it appears that Moss is actually endorsing something very close to Carone's diachronic-belief *akrasia*—over a period of time, person A believed X to be not good and person A believed X to be good; then the extreme pleasures entailed by

²⁰ Jessica Moss, "Shame, Pleasure, and the Divided Soul," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* (2005): 19

X washed out the belief that X is not good. Then person A acts only on the belief that X is good. Again this is something entirely different from the claim that person A acted on the belief that X is good while still holding the belief that X is not good, which we can call synchronic-belief *akrasia*. Moss seems to have offered a plausible theory, but is no more convincing than Carone. In fact, it seems reasonable to conclude that Jim does not do cocaine while maintaining the whole time that cocaine is bad, but rather that his reasoning part is ignored by the intense desire to do cocaine.

It seems that Moss must answer why one's rational dictates would be seduced by the potential for intense pleasure. Moss may be correct in saying that in the case where a person who claims bodily pain is not bad and is not to be feared, his reason will be seduced by the fear of being threatened with a dagger to his throat.²¹ But it seems only a pain, pleasure, or fear of this intensity, immediacy, and certainty could warrant this type of seductive capacity. Consider the case of a person who believes it is good to eat vegetables but also holds at the same time that eating vegetables is not good. The person might choose not to eat vegetables, but not by virtue of being seduced by some strong pain or pleasure implicit in eating vegetables. Rather, it seems the person simply acted out of a non-rational desire while concomitantly aware of the dictates of reason, but at no point did these dictates become obscured or washed out by some intense desire to avoid eating vegetables. Moss has provided a serious consideration that seems to be correct in at least some circumstances, but I maintain that there still exist examples of what appears to be synchronic-belief *akrasia*, which fall outside of the range of the diachronic-belief *akrasia* that Moss has offered.

²¹ Moss 19-20

As a final consideration, I turn to an interpretation from Christopher Shields, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Oxford. Shields makes the claim that the tripartite soul is neither necessary nor sufficient for the possibility of *akrasia*, which flies in the face of the standard interpretation.²² Shields wants to say that someone who endorses psychological hedonism would not be committed to *akrasia*, because that person simply acts on what maximizes her own pleasure.²³ Shields holds that in this case, the divisions within the soul would be irrelevant in respect to the possibility of *akrasia*. Then Shields maintains that one could hold to a simple, unified soul while still affirming *akrasia* by saying that X is better than Y and yet that person still does Y.²⁴ If the standard interpretation is to hold up, then Shields' objections must be addressed.

First, let us consider the claim that the divided soul is not sufficient for the possibility of *akrasia*. In the case of a psychological hedonist (PH) with a tripartite soul, Shields wants to say that given the nature of PH, one would always know and act on the rational option, that which maximizes pleasure for that person. But we could conceive of a case in which a person of this type is faced with a quandary about let us say some sexual action. The rational part of the soul might dictate that pleasure would be maximized by abstaining (avoiding the pains of disease, unwanted pregnancy, death), but the appetitive part of the soul might dictate it would be very pleasurable to do the act. It seems even for the psychological hedonist, there could be a case where there is a compresence of opposites; it is then unclear that Shields is correct that psychological hedonism, within tripartition, escapes the possibility of *akrasia*. Shields may respond to the thought

²² Christopher Shields, "Simple Souls," in *Essays on Plato's Psychology*, (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2001): 139

²³ Shields 139-140

²⁴ Shields 139-140

experiment by arguing that these two options have quantitatively different values, and thus are not genuine opposites. Even if we grant that line of thinking, we could imagine a case in which a psychological hedonist with a tripartite soul undergoes two genuine opposites at the same time of the same thing with the same quantitative value. So it seems that it is at least possible for *akrasia* to arise in any case that affirms the divisibility of the soul and the possibility for the compresence of opposites. Shields then goes on to claim that the divisibility of the soul is in fact unnecessary, that instead a simple, unified soul is sufficient for *akrasia*. Let us consider the person with the unified soul—they consider all their options and decide it is better to do X than Y, but nevertheless do Y. Shields claims this to be a description of *akratic* action, but I maintain that he is incorrect. If this person chooses Y over X, then the person desires Y over X. To desire Y over X is to take Y to be better than X (given an evaluative conception of desire).²⁵ As soon as this person acts on Y, than they are committed to saying that Y is better than X. The idea that this person acts on Y and yet knows X to be true all along is utterly incoherent—only because we are dealing with a simple, unified soul. We can give examples and push intuitions that affirm exactly what Shields is saying but only in respect to the divisible soul. The distinction is that the divided soul allows for the compresence of genuine opposites whereas the single, unified soul, by definition cannot. So what Shields is describing is one of two things—either the person chooses Y and thus believes Y to be better (unified soul), or the person chooses Y while at the same time knowing X to be true (synchronic-belief *akrasia* within the divided soul). The former directly contradicts Shield’s original claim and the latter explicitly supports the standard view.

²⁵ Morris 198

Having presented and responded to several interpretations that clash with the standard view, I now turn my attention to how the claims in the *Protagoras* and *The Republic* square up. It appears that the strongest of the alternative interpretations affirm diachronic-belief *akrasia*, but deny synchronic-belief *akrasia*. That is to say, the interpretations take Socrates to affirm the PO, the impossibility of having genuine compresence of opposite things at the same time in the same way. This is clearly not an interpretive issue since Socrates explicitly endorses the possibility of the compresence of opposites within the tripartite soul in *The Republic*, but it seems some scholars do not wish to commit Socrates to this theory. If the alternative interpretations I have addressed are correct, then the action of the soul does not require or even allow for the possibility of genuine compresence of opposites. On this view, the appearance of genuine opposites is illusory and can only be the case diachronically. If this is the case, then Socrates' claims in *The Republic* are congruent with the *Protagoras*, so that synchronic-belief *akrasia* is impossible. However, at the least, these interpretations seem dubious; they appear highly unintuitive and are unwarranted in attempting to interpret Socrates as affirming the PO, which is clearly denied. It seems much more reasonable to follow Socrates' denial of the PO, which in conjunction with the tripartite nature of the soul, allows for the genuine compresence of opposites, and thus *akratic* action. On this view, the possibility of both synchronic-belief *akrasia* and diachronic-belief *akrasia* are warranted. The standard interpretation then seems to be the most charitable reading of the text, following from the denial of the PO and the description of the tripartite soul. It is unclear why one would deny the possibility of synchronic-belief *akrasia*, particularly without providing positive reasons

to think that the alternative interpretations are veridical. The most sensible explanation is that the alternate interpretations seek to square up the claims made across the dialogues.

Prima facie, the *Protagoras* argument seems to commit Socrates to a litany of claims. However, given the condensed argument from Morris, it appears there are only two claims that Plato is committed to in order to reach C1—"It is impossible to do what one knows to be wrong"—1) an evaluative conception of desire and 2) the impossibility of contradictory preferences. In *The Republic*, it seems that given 1) the tripartite soul and 2) the possibility of the compresence of opposites, one can reasonably conclude that *akrasia* is at the least possible. It seems that though the evaluative conception of desire is necessary for the *Protagoras* argument, this commitment does not clash with any claims made in *The Republic*. Also, Socrates' description of tripartite psychology in *The Republic* is sufficiently congruent with the *Protagoras* and does not appear to run into problems. Thus, the most charitable formulation of the arguments in the *Protagoras* and *The Republic* boil down to a conflict over the principle of opposites. In the *Protagoras*, the impossibility of contradictory preferences is a necessary premise; in *The Republic*, Socrates affirms that it is possible for—a single person at the same time to take X to be good and to take X to not be good—given the soul is tripartite. In order for the account to square up, one could deny tripartition, making the compresence of opposites an impossibility within the soul. Other interpretations have attempted to reconcile the accounts by simply affirming the PO, and thus denying the possibility of synchronic-belief *akrasia*, but given the passages in *The Republic*, this simply seems like an unwarranted move. It seems much more reasonable to think that Plato's view developed over time, since it appears that the possibility of

(synchronic-belief) *akrasia* is utterly contingent upon whether or not Plato affirmed or denied the principle of opposites.

Work Cited

Rachel Barney, "Plato on the Desire for the Good," in *Desire, Practical Reason, and the Good*, ed. Sergio Tenenbaum (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010): 34-64

Gabriela Roxana Carone, "Akrasia in *The Republic*: Does Plato Change his Mind?" *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 20 (2001): 107-48

Charles H. Kahn, "Plato's Theory of Desire," *Review of Metaphysics* 41,1 (1987): 77-103

Michael Morris, "Akrasia in the *Protagoras* and *The Republic*," *Phronesis* 51,3 (2006): 195-229

Jessica Moss, "Shame, Pleasure, and the Divided Soul," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 29 (2005): 137-70

Christopher Shields, "Simple Souls," in *Essays on Plato's Psychology*, ed. Ellen Wagner (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2001): 137-56