

The Bogus Hedonism of Plato's Protagoras

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The hedonistic theory that is energetically presented by Socrates in the *Protagoras* raises both exegetical and philosophical questions. The central exegetical question are whether or not Socrates sincerely endorses hedonism, and what exactly he's trying to say if he doesn't. The central philosophical question is whether the hedonism he advocates (seriously or otherwise) makes sense. My main interest here will be the second question. I will try to show that the Socratic hedonism ultimately fails, but in a philosophically informative way. My suspicion is also that Plato knows that the argument fails, and so does his character Socrates, and I will revisit some aspects of the exegetical question in the course of examining the argument.

We will begin by making some general points about the relationship as it was conceived in Greek philosophy between hedonism and morality, then by looking again at whether or not we have reason to doubt Socrates' sincerity. The point of these preliminaries is to help us to see what we should be looking for as we track the argument from its premises to its surprising conclusion, that the ethical virtues can be derived from a hedonic calculus.

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The toughest question to ask of any hedonistic theory is how it accommodates the virtues. Hedonism commits us to the view that the *only* intrinsically good thing in life is our own pleasure, and that everything else that has value only in so far as it gives us pleasure in some form. This is to be distinguished from the much weaker claim — which almost no ethical theory rejects — that pleasure is one of the things we value, and that we want our lives to be enjoyable. That weaker claim is fully compatible with rejecting hedonism, and raises no problem at all for the ethical virtues.

Hedonists ought to reject the ethical virtues outright ('shake them off') if they think they will get more pleasure, overall, by doing so. That's the kind of hedonism that is advanced by Callicles in the *Gorgias* and by Thrasymachus in the *Republic* (and before that by Polyphemus in the *Odyssey*). It is also a fictional, polemical and darker version of hedonism than was actually advocated by real, living hedonists. Plato's character Callicles proposes that we will get most pleasure in life by treating other people with monstrous brutality, and that that is what we should all strive to do. He scornfully rejects the traditional virtues that Socrates admires (especially moderation and fairness) and declares that in his view it is honourable (*kalon*) for the strong to exploit the weak, and shameful (*aischron*) and pathetic if they refrain from doing so. Another of his fictional characters, Thrasymachus, seems to aspire to the life of a psychotic tyrant. He vilifies the central ethical virtue of fairness, which calls 'a kind of naïve stupidity.'

Real hedonists were far more respectable than that. They were not the nasty, aggressive amoralists that Plato's villains invite us to think they were. Yet it is clear that his portraits were at least based on genuine and important features of hedonists' ethical theory — their ethical naturalism, and their insistence on treating the virtues as instrumental rather than intrinsic or absolute goods. Plato's contemporary Aristippus, and later Epicurus (who between them became standard bearers of ancient hedonism) both made plain their willingness to reject some of the traditional virtues and traditional styles of moral reasoning, while at the same time presenting themselves as basically decent. Aristippus said that nothing was naturally honourable (*kalon*) or shameful (*aischron*), and was happy to derive pleasures from so-called 'shameful' sources; but he also thought that a man has every reason to act justly (i.e., to obey the law) so as to avoid punishment and to maintain a profitably good reputation. It is this instrumentalist theory of justice, i.e., the hedonistic defence of justice, that Plato explicitly sets out and attacks in the *Republic*, where it is

advocated, for sake of argument (which is to say, on behalf of Aristippus) by Glaucon and Adeimantus. Later, Epicurus similarly advocated adhering to justice at all times, to avoid punishment and anxiety about punishment, but insisted that there was no such good as justice 'in itself,' no absolute or divinely sanctioned right or wrong. Like *Callicles* in the *Gorgias*, and Glaucon in the *Republic*, he saw justice as arising merely from the agreement that people make not to harm one another. (Plato's many arguments against this theory had not impressed him.) He called on people to dispense with "vain, silly and troublesome virtues" and is reported to have said "I spit upon what is *kalon*, if it does get me pleasure." So the ancient hedonists about whom we have any solid information, both the fictional and the real, invariably revised the standard virtues (to varying degrees) and denied that conventional, traditional morality was necessary for an enjoyable life. Indeed, this revision and partial rejection of morality was the defining feature of ancient hedonism (just as it is a defining feature of modern utilitarianism) and shaped Plato's interest in it.

Were the ancient hedonists wrong about this? As hedonists can we justify a commitment to all the traditional moral virtues, without *any* revision? What if being good — in the standard, pre-hedonistic way — is *in itself* something pleasurable, and thus an essential ingredient of the enjoyable life? Can hedonism give us reason to carry on acting exactly like ethically minded non-hedonists, and for the same reasons, if it turns out that ethical actions are always the most enjoyable actions we can choose? Aristotle advocated something like this idea. He said that the ethical life was the most enjoyable overall, and that ethical actions were 'naturally' enjoyable, and therefore always enjoyable for good people. This, however, was not true hedonism, and it is very instructive that Aristotle never presented it as such. It is not true hedonism because if we do possess the virtues in their usual form, complete with the traditional reasons for acting ethically, then the propositional content of those reasons commit us to rejecting hedonism. Even if it is true that 'fair people enjoy

acting fairly,' and that friends enjoy helping one another, and that 'good people enjoy being good,' it doesn't follow that the ethical life is therefore the life we should choose as hedonists. Fair-minded people enjoy acting fairly because they value fairness and fair outcomes *per se*, and they enjoy being good because they set value on goodness *per se*, and they enjoy helping their friends because they set value on the lives and the well-being of their friends *for their sake*. It follows that they do *not* think that the only good thing in life is their own pleasure. It is only because they are not hedonists that they are able to 'find these kinds of action enjoyable' in the way that Aristotle means.

In particular, Aristotle often says that good people value and pursue *to kalon* ('the honourable'), which he treats as an intrinsic good connected with ethically motivated actions. But the value of *to kalon* is not reducible to pleasure. Good people enjoy doing what is *kalon*, but their enjoyment depends on their valuing *to kalon* for its own sake. For our purposes it will do to express his idea as follows: good people enjoy being good and they enjoying performing honourable actions because they consider such actions to be intrinsically worthwhile from the ethical point of view. But they do not consider them worthwhile merely because they bring about that very enjoyment — and could not. Obviously it makes no sense to think that an action is worthwhile only because it brings about pleasure, and that the pleasure of it derives only from the consciousness of the fact that it is worthwhile. Aristotle's position is a kind of *pseudo-hedonism*. It resembles hedonism in so far as it asserts that we should strive to lead enjoyable lives, and might be mistaken for hedonism because of the emphasis placed on pleasure (an emphasis that betrays Aristotle's interest in hedonism) but in fact it explicitly rejects the first hedonist principle, that the *only* good thing in life is pleasure.

Aristotle's view, or any that claims that the traditional ethical virtues are enjoyable, potentially give rise to a kind of paradox for hedonists. The paradox occurs if the following propositions are all true:

- (1) As hedonists we believe that the only our own pleasure has intrinsic value.
- (2) We aim to lead the most enjoyable life possible.
- (3) Good people necessarily believe that some things besides their own pleasure have intrinsic value (e.g., the moral state of their souls, the lives of their children, the good of their friends, the welfare of their fellow citizens, or *to kalon*).
- (4) Good people lead the most enjoyable lives possible.

Now the first two claims here are true of hedonism, as it was understood throughout the history of Greek philosophy. These are the minimal requirements of genuine hedonism. The third and fourth claims give us the outline of Aristotle's pseudo-hedonistic view, but for that matter are also fairly modest and plausible and follow from standard accounts of morality both ancient and modern. Let's assume for now that they are true, since we are considering whether or not hedonism can accommodate the ethical life in this conventional form. It will then follow from the four propositions that hedonists are in the odd position of being logically barred from *either rejecting or adopting* the ethical life. They cannot adopt it, because its evaluative beliefs compel them to renounce hedonism. Once they acquire even the most commonplace ethical beliefs, e.g., that their children's lives have value independently of their own pleasure, then according to premise (1) they are not hedonists any more. But they also cannot reject the ethical life, because they are committed to living the most enjoyable life possible and we are assuming that they accept claim (4). It follows that if these four claims are all true then hedonism is deeply unworkable. This suggests that 'enlightened hedonism' — if that is the name

for hedonism that aims to incorporate the ethical life in its familiar form — cannot make any sense; cannot exist. Would-be ‘enlightened’ hedonists might respond to the paradox by pointing out that they could *initially* adopt the ethical life for hedonistic reasons (because it is the most pleasant life available to them) even if they *then* had to give up hedonism. In that much weaker sense hedonism seems compatible with adopting the ethical life to begin with. But the problem is that they could not have the standard ethical virtues and *continue to be* hedonists. Hedonism would be self-effacing. Having adopted the virtues for hedonistic reasons you would then have to believe passionately that hedonism was false. And crucially, you could not *exercise* the virtues with only hedonistic reasons — i.e., by weighing up the amounts of pleasure and pain that follow from individual actions. It is part of the content of the third proposition, above that the virtues bring along distinctive commitments that would make that kind of direct hedonic calculus impossible. That means that if we treat hedonism as a kind of calculus, a method making individual decisions, day to day, about what to do, then ‘enlightened’ hedonism could not possibly work.

So it seems very plausible that hedonism must reject premise (3) or premise (4) or both. That is, hedonists must reject or at least substantially warp the virtues, or give up their central proposition and revert to some much weaker and less ambitious view, such as Aristotle’s pseudo-hedonism, or perhaps the two-stage kind of hedonism that obliterates itself. This conclusion, we have noted, was widely accepted in ancient times. Philosophers who believed in the intrinsic value of the ethical virtues or ethical goods (like *to kalon*) were never hedonists, and self-proclaimed hedonists never accepted the intrinsic value of ethically conceived goods like virtue, ‘justice in itself’ or *to kalon*. Hedonists treated the virtues as instrumental goods, valuable only as a means to one’s own greater pleasure, and for that reason could not accept them uncritically or in their traditional form.

The single striking exception to this pattern is the hedonism advocated by Socrates in the *Protagoras*. There, at least by the end of the argument, Socrates claims to be endorsing the standard ethical virtues *in their entirety*, and without revision, and he seems to think that they can be sustained by hedonism. That makes his version of hedonism unique, and in what follows we shall try to work out exactly how he manages to make moral goodness and hedonism fit together so snugly. But first let's briefly consider the question of whether we have any reason to doubt his sincerity.

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Plato argues strongly against hedonism in several dialogues written after the *Protagoras*. He makes no attack on hedonism in any dialogue prior to the *Protagoras*, assuming the standard chronology. Some commentators have argued that we therefore may as well assume that the character Socrates sincerely argues for hedonism in the *Protagoras*, and that Socrates is Plato's mouthpiece in the usual way, so that we should assume that Plato favoured hedonism at this stage in his development. It has also been proposed that hedonism is a plausible elaboration of the views of Socrates as he is presented in the earliest dialogues, and therefore perhaps of the historical Socrates. After all, hedonism in the *Protagoras* is a distinctly Socratic hedonism. It plays a key role in the argument against the popular understanding of *acrasia*, and seems to be used to vindicate the Socratic ideas that virtue is nothing but knowledge and that we only ever make mistakes through some form of ignorance.

Let's agree to leave aside Plato's later views. Though it seems rather unlikely, Plato may have changed his views on hedonism, or he may have been reporting a more Socratic view in this earlier work. Even so, it is simply not the case that the earlier dialogues contain nothing that stands in opposition to hedonism. In fact there are at least three prominent features in the earliest 'Socratic' dialogues that seem to place the character Socrates firmly in the anti-hedonist camp. First, there is his clear

commitment to theism: his belief in gods who care about human beings and take an interest in our virtues. Second, there is his apparent view that ethical goodness has supreme value, and his tendency to contrast the pursuit of goodness with the pursuit of material or worldly goods. Third, there is the fact that he explains or expresses the value of goodness by speaking of the effects of goodness on the soul.

(i) All self-proclaimed ancient hedonists (Democritus, Aristippus, Epicurus and all of their followers) were materialists, and as such agnostics or atheists, or at the very least rejected the idea of a particular providence. This was a universal feature of ancient hedonism for the simple reason that hedonism was the ethical system that arose *out of* the rejection of providential theism. If there are no gods watching over us and taking an interest in whether we act justly or unjustly, then standards of right and wrong and good and bad must come from *ourselves*. And if they come from ourselves, and we are purely material and physical beings, then surely they must simply depend on our own pleasures and pains? That was the rationale of hedonism, which was in effect simply the dominant ancient form of ethical naturalism. Conversely, philosophers who did believe in divine providence were never hedonists — and for very good reason. If the gods themselves applaud righteousness, then surely righteousness must be something *objectively* praiseworthy and valuable. It would be bizarrely incongruent to propose that the gods applaud morality and that its value derives only from our subjective pleasure and pains.

It is clear where Socrates stood on this issue. He says in the *Apology* that he is certain that, by divine law, nothing bad can ever happen to a good man, and that the gods take a close interest in our affairs. He has *no doubt whatsoever* that there are gods and that they approve of moral goodness, even though he is prepared to doubt just about everything else. He repeatedly states that his obligation to improve his fellow citizens through moral philosophy derives from a divine command that gives it overwhelming force. Similarly, in the *Euthyphro*, Socrates is keenly interested in the

connection between ethical duties and the will of the gods, and expresses various claims about the gods not merely as an elaboration of Euthyphro's claims but on his own initiative. He asserts, for instance, that it is unthinkable that the gods would allow injustice to go unpunished, and he proposes that piety is somehow connected with righteousness — exactly the theistic view he expressed in the *Apology*. Even though he rejects Euthyphro's attempts to define piety, he never raises any doubts that suggest any hint of the agnosticism or atheism that were the corollaries of hedonism, even though the issue raised in the dialogue cries out for robust naturalistic scepticism. The first questions any ancient hedonist would put to Euthyphro is something like this: "Why do think there even *are* any gods, and even if there are, why on earth would they care whether or not you prosecute your father?" This is exactly the question raised by Glaucon in the *Republic* when he is advocating a hedonistic approach to justice: 'Why should we even think there are any gods; and if there are, why should we think they care if we act unjustly?' Socrates in the *Euthyphro* does not and would not ask such a question. In this respect, then, Socrates even in the earliest dialogues seems to reject the naturalist and anti-theistic view.

(ii) In the *Apology* Socrates sharply rebukes ordinary people for caring about money, reputation, status, and their bodies, *instead of* striving to be good people and caring about the state of their souls. This looks very much like an anti-hedonist position. Socrates seems to be placing intrinsic value on moral goodness, which is exactly what ancient hedonists refused to do. It seems hugely unlikely that what he means is that we should value moral goodness only in so far as it leads to pleasure. If he thought (as Aristippus and Epicurus did) that people should act ethically only to avoid punishments and accrue material goods (in the pursuit of pleasure), then he should be *applauding* people for caring about money, status, and their bodies, not scolding them. Those are exactly the things any sensible hedonist cares about. Alternatively, if he merely means (as seems unlikely) that moral goodness is

intrinsically more enjoyable than wealth, then even so he is a pseudo-hedonist, and as such an opponent of genuine hedonism. But he does not present himself even as a pseudo-hedonist. He simply argues for ethical goodness *over* material goods, period, without mentioning pleasure.

(iii) In the *Crito*, just as in the *Apology*, Socrates claims that ethical actions have an effect on the soul, which seems, again, to be his way of expressing his belief in their intrinsic or absolute value. Crito is trying to tempt Socrates to break the law (which Socrates considers unethical) by way of a series of arguments that would appeal to any sensible hedonist. If Socrates runs away he can live out his life comfortably and pleasantly in another city in the company of friends. If he stays he will die, and experience no further pleasures of any kind. But Socrates dismisses Crito's appeal as the kind of thing that would appeal to 'most people.' He argues that his soul will be damaged by any unethical action — it will be corrupted by immorality itself. That's his reason for doing the right thing *no matter what the material consequences*. He appears to be attaching intrinsic importance to an ethical good, and rejecting the idea that ethical virtues should be dispensed with or relaxed a little when they threaten our comfort. This seems like an un-hedonistic attitude. At any rate Epicurus and many other hedonists would have thought that Socrates' decision was absurd, and that it was based on a superstitious delusion.

It has been suggested that Socrates' idea that we 'harm the soul' by doing wrong might itself imply a *hedonistic* view. If Socrates is referring to the guilt or distress his soul (i.e., mind) will *feel* at doing wrong, then he means, in effect, that he will be put into an unpleasant mental state by a wrong action. Perhaps this is just the kind of thing a hedonist needs to say about morality to avoid appealing to transcendental ethical principles. But this reading does not make any sense at all. A real hedonist can't talk about painful mental states if those mental states involve propositional content — thoughts, beliefs, commitments — that itself contradicts

hedonism. Socrates may well feel bad about doing wrong. But what would he be feeling bad *about*? His guilt would have a further content: it would depend on the thought that he shouldn't have run away. He would have to regret his decision *prior to* the unpleasant feeling. That makes the appeal to guilt or distress circular. He can't claim that he shouldn't run away only because he will 'feel bad' and that he will feel bad because he shouldn't have run away. So, on grounds of philosophical charity, as well as from the other indications of the context, it seems most unlikely that Socrates is talking about guilt, or that he has any form of hedonism in mind. It is much more likely that his talk of 'harming the soul' is meant to refer to the intrinsic and absolute importance of doing the right thing, come what may. That reading is strongly supported by Plato's discussion of the value of righteousness in the *Republic*. There Plato says that 'most people' think that morality has only instrumental value and don't consider its effects on the soul. They concern themselves only with its secondary effects: punishments and rewards, their reputation, and so on. Conversely, he says that to concern yourself with its effect on your soul is the same as asking whether righteousness is something good or bad *in itself*. In what follows Plato mounts a powerful attack on Aristippus' hedonistic approach to justice. This gives us a strong *prima facie* reason for thinking that that is what Plato meant by the exact same terminology in the *Crito*, and that his view there is just as anti-hedonist as in the *Republic*. Plato might perhaps have changed his mind about hedonism, but it is hugely implausible that he should use identical terminology and the very same arguments to express two diametrically opposed ideas.

For our purposes we hardly need claim that these indications are decisive. We are not trying to *prove* that the early Socrates was against hedonism. Perhaps we could argue, in each case, for some hedonist-friendly reading of these texts if we had good reason to do so. But we don't seem to have any good reason to do so, and these are at least good *prima facie* indications that from the earliest dialogues (*Apology*,

Crito, Euthyphro) Socrates rejects hedonism and ethical naturalism, and it is a fair and modest assumption that Socrates expresses approximately Plato's views when he wrote those dialogues. Nor is this a minor issue. These clues place Plato, at that time, on one side of a major ideological divide. Greek philosophers, like modern philosophers, did not easily switch from the a theistic or transcendental to a naturalistic and instrumentalist meta-ethics, and it is still less likely that Plato, who is such a tireless persecutor of hedonism and ethical naturalism in his later dialogues, switched sides *twice* (from his initial strident theism to naturalism and hedonism in the *Protagoras*, then back again). So we should be very open to the possibility that something odd is going on, dialectically, in the *Protagoras* — the solitary dialogue where Socrates seems very keen to bat for the other team.

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In the final argument of the dialogue, which we are examining, Socrates makes hedonism account for the value of the traditional virtues. His argument focuses briefly on the particular virtue of bravery, but he then applies it to all the other virtues (with the exception of piety). In that more general form there is very wide agreement among scholars that it basically work as follows:

(1) *Pleasure is the only intrinsically good thing.* So doing what is good for us, and avoiding all errors, is simply a matter of working out what will give us the most pleasure. [354c-358a.]

(2) *Every honourable action is pleasurable.* [359e5-360a3: see below for a discussion of the introduction of this claim.]

(3) *Therefore, being a good person is just a matter of having complete knowledge of what is pleasurable.* That knowledge will guarantee that you always act in accordance with the traditional ethical virtues, because (2) implies that those always lead to greater pleasure. [360c3-d5, and 361b1-3]

Socrates begins by equating what is good for us with what is pleasurable (351c2ff), and then claims (after dismissing the apparent objection raised by the phenomenon of

acrasia) that if we know what's pleasurable we will always do what we ought to do (356bff, 357d3ff). It is an assumption (a standard Platonic principle) that we should always and only do what is good for us. Similarly, all references to 'pleasure' refer strictly to our own pleasure, never to other people's pleasure. The idea is that people always choose what they think will maximise their own pleasure, and hence, as long as they *know* what will lead to the greatest pleasure, they will never make any mistakes. This is perfectly intelligible, and granted the hedonistic principles on which it rests it is fairly plausible, so far. But the argument becomes distinctly bolder and more surprising when Socrates claims that *ethical* ('honorable') actions are always more pleasurable for us than the alternative unethical actions, so that hedonic omniscience will not just prevent us from 'making mistakes' (somewhat vaguely conceived) but lead us to moral goodness in particular. In fact he ends by asserting that all the ethical virtues simply *are*, i.e., are identical with, hedonic knowledge. So Socrates has to claim, somewhere along the way, and he does claim (at 359e), that all ethical actions (that is, traditionally conceived brave, fair, and moderate actions) are always the most pleasurable actions we could choose, or that they somehow always make our lives more pleasurable overall.

This is extremely ambitious and far more surprising than the hedonism itself; first, because this is a view that hedonists emphatically rejected, as an almost automatic consequence of being hedonists, and second because it is hugely implausible considered in itself. Yet it is this claim that plays the pivotal role in achieving the argument's result of pulling the rabbit of complete, traditional moral goodness from the hat of hedonism. How exactly does Socrates argue for this apparently magical step in the argument?

First, is Socrates arguing for true hedonism, or pseudo-hedonism? If his hedonism is true hedonism (as it ought to be) then he is claiming (a) that the only good thing is pleasure and (b) that the ethical virtues always lead to pleasures *that do*

not themselves depend on any species of good other than pleasure. He would then be saying that the virtues infallibly increase our stock of *conventional* pleasures, the ones connected with material and worldly goods: the pleasures of eating, drinking, sex, health, power, status, and so on. On the other hand it may be that the unusual premise expresses the idea that ethical actions are *intrinsically* enjoyable, i.e., enjoyable *because they are ethical*, even though that amounts to abandoning hedonism. That is, he may mean that brave actions are pleasurable because we enjoy being brave, where that enjoyment depends on our consciousness of the fact that we are doing something honourable. That would make pretty good sense of the claim that actions that are *kalon* are always pleasurable. It would be essentially the same as Aristotle's view, that ethical actions are 'naturally' pleasurable, *qua* ethical, and that their pleasure lies in a certain kind of moral self-consciousness. The problem, of course, is that that would not be hedonism. It only make sense if Socrates meant (as Aristotle does) that what is *kalon* had intrinsic value, *independent of pleasure*.

Can we explain the suspicious premise — the 'magic premise' — by sticking to true hedonism? In the opening stages of the argument — that is, right up to 359e — Socrates certainly *sounds* just like a true hedonist. He only ever mentions conventional pleasures and pains, and he mentions a lot of them: food, drink, sex, health, wealth, power, poverty, physical pain and hardship. These are pleasures and pains through which one could only hope to treat the virtues, at best, as instrumental goods. The problem, then, is that it is extravagantly difficult to make a hedonistic defence of the virtues work as completely as he needs it to. Someone appealing only to these kinds of pleasures might show that acting ethically will be pleasurable *some* of the time, or even most of the time. But Socrates is saying that *all* ethical actions are pleasurable *all of the time*. Bravery, to take Socrates' own example, often leads to pleasurable results, such as the security of one's country or military victory and political power ('pleasures' mentioned by Socrates at 354b). But according to Socrates

bravery is pleasurable even if it achieves no such results. What about a case where a very young man fights bravely and dies an agonising death on the battlefield, whereas if he had run away he would have enjoyed a long life full of all the pleasures that Socrates has named: five decades of eating, drinking, constant sex with beautiful women, perfect health, vast power and boundless wealth? It seems impossible for him to claim that in that case agonising death was the more pleasurable outcome, and that ordinary people would agree that it was the more pleasurable outcome. But that *is* what Socrates claims! He specifically offers 'going to war' (359e3) as an instance of a brave action, and says (at 360a3) that the earlier discussion has established that, in the view of ordinary people, 'going to war' is *pleasurable*. Obviously 'going to war' can lead to a painful and premature death. So at 359e he is asserting that an action that leads to a painful and early death, if it is brave, is more pleasurable than one that leads to five decades of life full of all the pleasures that he himself carefully listed. It should be a source of amazement to us that Socrates makes this claim without *any* mention of the *prima facie* objections, and therefore, in effect, without any substantial argument at all.

So now that we have established that this is a surprising as well as crucial step in the argument, let's consider exactly when and how the magic premise appears. Is it true, as Socrates claims at 359e7, that somewhere earlier in the discussion he has 'already established' that brave actions (including suicidally brave ones) are pleasurable by the standards of true hedonism, and that ordinary people would agree that this was the case? Unsurprisingly, it is not. He has nowhere established any such thing. If we look at the earlier claim to which he is referring when he helps himself to the magic premise we will see that the earlier claim is entirely different, and that he is in effect simply cheating. This the earlier passage to which he refers:

Τί δὲ δὴ, ὦ ἄνδρες, ἔφην ἐγώ, τὸ τοιόνδε; αἱ ἐπὶ τούτου πράξεις ἅπασαι, ἐπὶ τοῦ ἀλύπῳς ζῆν καὶ ἡδέωσ, ἄρ' οὐ καλαί; καὶ τὸ καλὸν ἔργον ἀγαθόν τε καὶ ὠφέλιμον; [358b3-6]

‘And what about this?’ I said, [P1] ‘Aren’t all actions which lead to that — to a life that is pleasant and free of pain — honourable [*kalai*]?’ [P2] And is an ‘honourable action’ one that’s good <for us> and beneficial?

We noted that up to this point Socrates has done a very good impression of being a true hedonist. He has spoken a great deal about common pleasures, and has so far not discussed, or so much as mentioned, any virtues at all. He has thereby strongly implied (to the listener who knows anything at all about hedonism) that his attitude to the traditional virtues is not one of uncritical acceptance, but will turn out to be like that of all other hedonists, who value the virtues *only in so far as they lead to pleasure*. Recall that this is the defining feature of ancient hedonism, and that Plato is perfectly aware of that fact. The first claim he makes here (P1) looks exactly like just such a revision of our idea of what is *kalon*. This is not the magic premise we are looking for. It is not the claim that all ethical actions invariably lead to a more pleasurable life. That reading is of this claim is impossible. Notice that ‘all’ modifies ‘actions that lead to a pleasant life’ and that the phrase ἄρ' οὐ καλαί; shows us clearly that question ‘are they honourable?’ is being asked of ‘all pleasurable actions.’ Thus, P1 (converted into a proposition) is the claim that *all actions that lead to a pleasurable life are ‘honourable’*. It implies the inference ‘if pleasurable, then honourable.’ ‘Honourable’ naturally has the sense ‘ethically acceptable’ or ‘not shameful,’ so that P1 amounts to saying that *there can be no shame in doing whatever will lead to the most pleasure in life overall*. So if (e.g.) running away from a battle is going to be more pleasurable than staying, fighting, and dying, then Socrates is saying (here at least) that there is no shame in running away — precisely the sort of thing a true hedonist would say. Similarly, if becoming a rich and powerful tyrant is going to be

more pleasurable overall than remaining a poor and lowly law-abiding citizen, then there is no shame in treating people unjustly.¹ The traditionally ‘shameful’ actions, if they lead to the greatest pleasure, should on this view *no longer be regarded as shameful*. The same or very similar proposals can be found in the hedonism of Callicles, Thrasymachus, Aristippus, Epicurus and the others. So this is both what Socrates *seems* to be saying in P_I and what we very much *expect* him to be saying at this stage. P_I is brief, and a little vague, but the implication is nevertheless perfectly clear, and we can easily fill in the details for ourselves. It strongly suggests, for example, that there is no shame in steering well clear of hideously painful acts of suicidal bravery.

The second sentence (P₂: ‘Is an honourable action a good and beneficial one?’) is ambiguous. It most naturally means ‘is an honourable action good for us?’ This seems to reverse the direction of predication and inference implied by P_I. P_I unambiguously asks ‘are all pleasurable actions honourable?’ (implying the inference ‘if pleasurable, then honourable’) but P₂ appears to ask ‘are <all> honourable actions pleasurable?’ (implying the inference ‘if honourable, then pleasurable’). Yet P₂ might *also* be taken as meaning ‘are honourable actions *those actions that are* good for us?’ Notice that *to kalon ergon* placed right at the start of the phrase gives at least a hint that Socrates is offering a definition. The definite article may be functioning (as it often does) as quotation marks (as in my translation): ‘And is an “honourable” act *<to be defined as>* one that’s good for us?’ That would make its meaning exactly equivalent to P_I, which would seem to be the far more charitable reading. After all, Socrates certainly presents the two claims as equivalent, and the sense of P_I is perfectly clear. Still, the ambiguity in P₂ is curious, considering the enormous difference between the two meanings, and we shall consider this detail again, shortly.

¹Callicles produces a very similar redefinition of ‘right’ at 483 a7. It is as if Socrates has engineered an account of right actions tailored to a Calliclean outlook. And he has—it is an account to appeal to sophists.

Later, Socrates claims that he has already established that all honourable actions are pleasurable. He is referring back only to the section of the argument just examined, where he made no such claim (except in so far as it is a possible but improbable and uncharitable reading of P₂). Here is the section text where he inaccurately reports what he said earlier:

Ἄλλὰ μέντοι, ἔφη, ὦ Σώκρατες, πᾶν γε τούναντίον ἐστὶν ἐπὶ ᾧ οἱ τε δειλοὶ ἔρχονται καὶ οἱ ἀνδρεῖοι. αὐτίκα εἰς τὸν πόλεμον οἱ μὲν ἐθέλουσιν ἰέναι, οἱ δὲ οὐκ ἐθέλουσιν. Πότερον, ἔφην ἐγώ, καλὸν ὄν ἰέναι ἢ αἰσχρόν; Καλόν, ἔφη. Οὐκοῦν εἴπερ καλόν, καὶ ἀγαθὸν ὡμολογήσαμεν ἐν τοῖς ἔμπροσθεν· τὰς γὰρ καλὰς πράξεις ἀπάσας ἀγαθὰς ὡμολογήσαμεν. Ἀληθῆ λέγεις, καὶ αἰεὶ ἔμοιγε δοκεῖ οὕτως. Ὅρθῶς γε, ἔφην ἐγώ. ἀλλὰ ποτέρους φῆς εἰς τὸν πόλεμον οὐκ ἐθέλειν ἰέναι, καλὸν ὄν καὶ ἀγαθόν; Τοὺς δειλοὺς, ἦ δ' ὅς. Οὐκοῦν, ἦν δ' ἐγώ, εἴπερ καλὸν καὶ ἀγαθόν, καὶ ἡδύ; Ὁμολόγηται γοῦν, ἔφη.

‘But that’s not the case, Socrates!’ he said. ‘What cowards go towards is the very opposite of what brave people go towards! I mean, take war for example; brave people are willing to go into battle, cowards refuse.’ ‘And is going into battle’ I said, ‘honourable, or shameful?’ ‘Honourable’ he said. ‘And if it’s honourable, then by what we agreed earlier on it must be good for them. Remember, we agreed that [P₃(i)] *all honourable actions are good for us*.’ ‘That’s true; we did. And that’s what I still think now.’ ‘And you’re right’ I said. ‘So, which people is it you say refuse to go into battle, even though it’s the honourable thing to do, and therefore good for them?’ ‘Cowards’ he said. [P₃(ii)] And if it’s the honourable thing to do, and good for them, it’s also pleasurable; Yes?’ ‘Well, that’s certainly what was agreed’ he said.

Here Socrates claims that they earlier agreed that ‘all honourable actions are good <for us>’, and he quickly adds that this means they agreed that all honourable actions (here meaning all *traditionally* honourable actions) are pleasurable — and this is the magic premise that we have been looking for. But obviously P₃ (the combination of P₃i and P₃ii) is not the same claim as P₁ at all. Notice that this time ‘all’ modifies ‘honourable actions’ (whereas in P₁ ‘all’ modified ‘pleasurable actions’) and that ‘pleasurable’ here is the predicate, whereas as in P₁ ‘honourable’ was the predicate. Thus, it is linguistically impossible that these are the same claims, and this is no

minor or simple slip — on the contrary, it makes a vast and philosophically vital difference to what is being claimed. Let's put the two claims side by side, in each case filling them out slightly according to what each of them implies in its context:

(P₁) *All actions that lead to pleasure are honourable.* [That's the only standard that we hedonists accept. There can be no shame in seeking the greatest pleasure in life *by whatever means*. Has someone told you that dying or being maimed for your country is "honourable"? To hell with that! Do you think you're going to get any pleasure by dying or being maimed for someone? Don't be a fool! For goodness' sake, *run away!*]

(P₃) *All honourable actions lead to pleasure.* [That is, all *traditionally* honourable actions are maximally pleasurable, all things considered. Everyone agrees that going to war and dying or being permanently maimed for your country is very honourable. Therefore it is pleasurable.]

This helps us to see how completely at odds the two claims are. The first is one that real hedonists would happily accept and that expresses their revisionist view of the virtues nicely. The second is a claim that hedonists would regard as *utterly laughable*. That is because 'honourable' is clearly being used in the second claim in its traditional sense, whereas the whole point of the first claim is to overthrow that traditional view of what is honourable and shameful. Hedonists emphatically do *not* believe that traditionally conceived honourable actions (such marching bravely towards certain death) always lead to pleasure. Also, P₃ seems to imply that an honourable action is pleasurable *qua* honourable — which a real hedonist would regard as especially absurd. (Recall Epicurus: "I *spit upon* what is 'honourable,' if it does not bring me pleasure!") So when Socrates asks if 'going into battle' is honourable, and running away shameful, Protagoras should have answered 'Well, let's

see. I might have thought so in the past. But running away from death or injury in battle is much more likely to be *pleasurable* than staying and fighting. So, according to our present findings, there's no shame in running away.' But Protagoras has never shown any enthusiasm for the hedonistic view and here both he and Socrates fall back on the *non-hedonistic* view that risking life and limb for one's country is an honourable thing to do. Socrates is very happy for him to make that assumption and thus completes the sleight of hand. He pulls the magic premise, P₃, that honourable actions are always pleasurable, *from thin air*. He combines it with Protagoras' conventional view of bravery to produce the highly suspect conclusion that brave actions are always pleasurable, no matter what their consequences.

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There are several good reasons for thinking that this equivocation, and the sleight of hand, is deliberate, and that Plato has carefully constructed it.

(i) If Socrates claimed that P₃ followed from P₁, or had been established on the grounds of P₁, then it might be at least possible that he was making an actual mistake rather than deliberately changing the claim. You might think that "all pleasurable actions are honourable" allows us to *infer* "all honourable actions are pleasurable." But in fact there is no inference suggested: he very explicitly asserts that P₃ just *is* the claim that was made earlier: τὰς γὰρ καλὰς πράξεις ἀπάσας ἀγαθὰς ὡμολογήσαμεν. Technically this is not even a new claim: it just reports the earlier one. His use of καλὰς and πράξεις and ἀπάσας in P₃ are a deliberate and very precise reference to the wording of P₁, which uses all the three terms: αἱ ἐπὶ τούτου πράξεις ἅπασαι...ἄρ' οὐ καλαί; He is claiming that P₁ and P₃ are identical. But it is hugely unlikely that he does not know that they are different. We should assume that Plato is aware of the implications of the claims in their contexts. He knows, then, that P₁ implies that "there's no shame in pursuing the greatest

pleasure by whatever means.” He knows that P₃ implies that “even acts of suicidal bravery are pleasurable.” He *could not* think that these are the same claim.

(2) Indeed, the idea that Plato hasn’t noticed the difference between P₁ and P₃ and accidentally confuses them is quite absurd. In other dialogues Plato constructs devastating arguments to the effect that hedonism cannot support the virtues. In *Republic II*, for example, the Gyges’ ring story brilliantly shows that if we assign only instrumental value to justice (as Aristippus does) then our reasons for being just are hopelessly inadequate. The extraordinary circumstances generated by the magic ring (and the pressure that they place on a hedonistic account of fairness) are closely similar to the pressures that can be placed on a hedonistic defence of bravery. Here is the parallel:

- (a) If we only treat people fairly for material benefits, *viz.* to avoid punishment and maintain a good reputation, what happens when we can commit enormously profitable crimes and are *certain* that we will avoid punishment and keep our reputation? Wouldn’t fairness, in that case, be foolish?
- (b) If we are only brave for material reasons, *viz.* to gain greater pleasures, then what happens when we are certain that a brave action will lead to a painful death, while a cowardly action will lead to a lifetime of vast pleasures? Wouldn’t bravery, in that case, be foolish?

The second question here constitutes a powerful and obvious objection to Socrates’ claim that hedonism can give us reasons for *every* act of bravery. And it is this line of thought that Plato would have to have somehow neglected if the equivocation we have outlined between P₁ and P₃ was a mere accident, since its effect is to allow to him slide past the objection. Does it not seem astonishing that Plato would be acutely aware of the problem in one dialogue and oblivious to it in another? It seems far more likely that the sleight of hand is there precisely because Plato has his usual

view. He doesn't believe that any valid argument could make hedonism compatible with full ethical virtues, and sure enough Socrates *does not offer* any valid argument for that conclusion. Socrates resorts to cheating to make (true) hedonism and bravery go together precisely because he is convinced that he cannot do it any other way.

(3) The crucial premise (P₁/P₃) is introduced in two stages that are widely separated. Why? For the actual use of the premise (in its P₃ form) Socrates refers back to the earlier passage (i.e., to P₁). Why isn't the premise just introduced in full, *all at once*, when it is needed? When P₁ is introduced, it has no function. It is raised as a new point: τί δὲ δὴ, ὧ ἄνδρες, ἔφην ἐγώ, τὸ τοιόνδε; But no sooner has he made his claim about 'honourable actions' than it is instantly dropped again. Just before its introduction Socrates has concluded, after a very long and detailed argument, that good and pleasure are the same: Ὁμολογεῖτε ἄρα, ἦν δ' ἐγώ, τὸ μὲν ἡδὺ ἀγαθὸν εἶναι, τὸ δὲ ἀνιαρὸν κακόν. Then, right after the insertion of P₁, Socrates resumes from *that* point in the argument: Εἰ ἄρα, ἔφην ἐγώ, τὸ ἡδὺ ἀγαθὸν ἐστίν...etc. There is no further mention, or use, of *to kalon* in what immediately follows. Thus, P₁ does no work where it is actually introduced, and the section in which Socrates raises it is inexplicably brief — a mere three lines.

All of this is explained if Socrates is trying to hide an equivocation, or rather if he is trying to arrive at P₃ *by way of* an equivocation, rather than by arguing for it directly. He separates P₁ and P₃ to make it much harder to see that they are not the same; but the argument works by his being able to treat them as the same without the reader (or Protagoras) noticing that he is doing so. P₁ having no function where it is introduced is merely a side effect of this process, and is fully explained by it. The point is that to pass off P₃ as a mere repeat of P₁ he has to separate them; and that means that he has to place P₁ earlier than P₃, somewhere where it consequently has no active role. Imagine that he had set out P₁ and then *instantly* treated it as P₃: "All

actions that lead to pleasure are now to be deemed honourable. Therefore, dying in battle must be pleasurable.” It would have been far easier to see that something was badly wrong. But as it is, with the carefully constructed *separation* of the two halves of the equivocation, by the time we come to P₃ it’s perfectly easy for Protagoras to think that *something* of this kind was indeed agreed, and there is a similar effect on the reader. Did Socrates say that exactly, or something different? Nobody quite remembers.

For these reasons I think that we should accept that the magical conclusion that Socrates reaches in his hedonistic argument really *is* magic. Socrates introduces an apparently innocuous claim (P₁) fully in keeping with the general tone and implication of the *true* hedonism that he has advocated up to that point. ‘There’s no shame in pursuing pleasure, however you do it.’ He doesn’t use the new claim, so it raises no suspicions or objections, and then he swiftly removes it again from view, like a magician giving his audience a very quick look at his empty hat. A few moments later, after some suitable distractions, the hat has a rabbit in it — the astonishing claim that risking your life in battle will always lead to pleasure.