

Ignorance in Plato's *Protagoras*:  
An Inquiry into Humanity's Dark Side\*

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## Abstract

Ignorance is commonly assumed to be a lack of knowledge in Plato's Socratic dialogues. I challenge that assumption. In the *Protagoras*, ignorance is conceived to be a substantive, structural psychic flaw—the soul's domination by inferior elements that are by nature fit to be ruled. Ignorant people are characterized by both false beliefs about evaluative matters in specific situations and an enduring deception about their own psychic conditions. On my interpretation, *akrasia*, moral vices, and epistemic vices, are products or forms of ignorance, and a person who lacks knowledge is not necessarily ignorant.

**Key words:** Ignorance, knowledge, *akrasia*, vice, Socrates, *Protagoras*

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# 1 Introduction

Socrates famously professes to lack the knowledge that he is dedicated to pursuing. In the literature, it is common to infer that Socrates is professing to be ignorant.<sup>1</sup> The inference in question is made under the assumption that ignorance *just is* a lack of knowledge. With that assumption, insofar as we understand what knowledge is, we will automatically understand what ignorance is; ignorance does not have to be studied in its own right.<sup>2</sup>

In this paper, I will challenge the assumption that ignorance just is a lack of knowledge. As I will show, Socrates has a rich account of ignorance, which cannot be fully captured in terms of a mere lack of knowledge. By examining the Socratic dialogues,<sup>3</sup> and, in particular, the

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<sup>1</sup> See Mackenzie 1988, 333–4; Brickhouse and Smith 2000, 58–68; Matthews 2006, 103; Bett 2011, 215.

<sup>2</sup> The previous line of reasoning captures the status of contemporary philosophical scholarship, and, in particular, the scholarship on Plato. While many discussions have been devoted to illuminating knowledge (Vlastos 1972, 424–5; Penner 1973; Kraut 1984, 261–2; Nussbaum 1986; Roochnik 1986; Brickhouse and Smith 1997, 2010; Cooper 1999, 89; Clark 2015; Glasscock 2020), considerably less attention has been given to its intellectually impoverished cousin, ignorance.

<sup>3</sup> By Socratic dialogues, I mean to include *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, *Crito*, *Alcibiades*, *Second Alcibiades*, *Hipparchus*, *Rival Lovers*, *Theages*, *Charmides*, *Laches*, *Lysis*, *Euthydemus*, *Protagoras*, *Gorgias*, *Hippias Minor*, *Hippias Major*, *Ion*, *Menexenus*, *Clitophon*, and *Minos*. Commentators propose two approaches to understanding the unity of the Socratic dialogues. The first approach argues that those works, in terms of their *chronological order*, fall into the early stage of Plato’s philosophical career. So the Socratic dialogues are also called the early dialogues (Vlastos 1991, 46–7). The second approach contends that the Socratic dialogues are unified by their *thematic and non-assertoric continuity*. In all those dialogues, Socrates, as the main speaker, examines primarily ethical matters and refrains from stating his positive theses (Cooper 1997, xii–xviii). Notably, the two approaches are not mutually exclusive. Scholars who adopt the former, chronological approach might agree that the Socratic dialogues also exhibit a thematic and non-assertoric continuity. Scholars who subscribe to the latter, thematic approach might

*Protagoras*,<sup>4</sup> I will argue that he conceives of ignorance as a substantive, structural psychic flaw: the soul's domination by inferior elements that are by nature fit to be ruled instead of ruling. The inferior elements at issue are appearances—representations of how things strike one to be from certain perspectives. Understood in this way, ignorant people are characterized by false beliefs about evaluative matters in specific situations and an enduring deception about their own psychic conditions, such as mistaking themselves for knowing what they do not know. On my interpretation, there is—contrary to the common assumption—a *middle ground* between knowledge and ignorance: while Socrates lacks the knowledge that he claims to lack, he is not ignorant, because he is alert to the deceptive nature of appearances. This interpretation of ignorance has broader impact on how to understand defects that are prominent on the dark side of humanity, such as *akrasia*, moral vices, and epistemic vices. As I will show, they are products or forms of ignorance.<sup>5</sup>

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concede that some Socratic dialogues, such as the *Euthyphro* and the *Crito*, are likely to have been composed at a relatively early stage of Plato's philosophical career.

<sup>4</sup> Harte proposes an interesting account of ignorance in one of the most famous middle-period dialogues, the *Republic* (Harte 2013). But she does not study the Socratic dialogues, which this paper examines. Vogt tries to construct an account of ignorance by looking at both *Philebus*, which is generally accepted as a late dialogue, and Socratic dialogues like *Apology* and *Ion* (Vogt 2012). It is well known that there are significant differences in the theses that Plato explores or adopts in the Socratic dialogues and the late dialogues. In light of those differences, it is dubious whether there is a single account of ignorance across those dialogues. I will examine elsewhere Plato's accounts of ignorance in the middle-period dialogues and late dialogues.

<sup>5</sup> A small group of commentators (Ferrari 1990; Segvic 2000; Callard 2014) take the ignorance that akratic agents suffer from to be a deficiency in self-knowledge, and, more specifically, a complete or a partial ignorance of their own ignorance. While that interpretation to some extent captures a partial characterization of ignorance, 'having been deceived about matters of great importance (ἐψεῦσθαι περὶ τῶν πραγμάτων τῶν πολλοῦ ἀξίων, 358c5), it fails

My plan for the paper is as follows. In Section 2, I contextualize the discussion of ignorance in the *Protagoras* and extract four major claims that structure my ensuing inquiry. In Section 3, I sketch out the impoverished intellectual and practical nature of ignorance by contrasting it with knowledge. Section 4, I argue that Socrates conceives of ignorance as the soul's domination by psychic states that are by nature fit to be ruled, i.e., appearances. In Section 5, I offer a more concrete picture of ignorance by contending that ignorant people are characterized by both false beliefs about evaluative matters in specific situations and an enduring deception about their own psychic conditions. In Section 6, I suggest that defects that are nowadays called akrasia, moral vices, and epistemic vices are products or forms of ignorance. In Section 7, I close the paper by arguing that, in light of the conception of ignorance in the *Protagoras*, there is a middle ground between knowledge and ignorance, occupied by individuals who are alert to the deceptive nature of appearances.

## 2 Ignorance in Context

Among the Socratic dialogues, the *Protagoras* contains the most elaborate comments on ignorance (ἀμαθία).<sup>6</sup> In the *Protagoras*, Socrates' comments on ignorance are embedded in his

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to accommodate Socrates' other comments, for example, 'that being weaker than oneself is nothing other than ignorance (οὐδὲ τὸ ἥττω εἶναι αὐτοῦ ἄλλο τι τοῦτ' ἐστὶν ἢ ἀμαθία, 358c1–2)' and that ignorance is the cause of not only akratic actions but also vicious actions (352d4–e2, 357c4–d2, and 360b3–d7).

<sup>6</sup> Socrates does not take ignorance (ἀμαθία) and incomprehension (ἄγνοια) to be synonymous. Admittedly, he thinks that they are closely related. For example, at 360b4–7, he asserts that the confidence and fear of the cowardly, the foolhardy, and madmen are disgraceful and bad because of incomprehension and ignorance (δι' ἄγνοιαν καὶ ἀμαθίαν). Nevertheless, in some other passages, he strongly suggests that ignorance is a special case of incomprehension. At *Lysis* 218a2–b1, he notes that people can have incomprehension and be affected by it in two

two-stage challenge to Protagoras,<sup>7</sup> a famous sophist who claims to be knowledgeable about virtue. According to Protagoras, while virtue is teachable, a part of it—courage—is separable from the rest: many people are exceptionally courageous but unjust, impious, intemperate, and ignorant (320c2–328d2 and 349d2–8). In the first stage of his challenge, Socrates sketches out a notion of knowledge that Protagoras accepts by refuting a popular account of *akrasia* (351b3–357e8). In the second stage, he argues that based on that conception of knowledge, courage, like the other cardinal virtues, is a form of knowledge and wisdom. Thus, virtue as a whole seems to be teachable. It is therefore not open for Protagoras to assert both that virtue is teachable and that a part of it, say, courage, is separable from the rest (358a1–361d6).

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ways. On the one hand, they can merely have incomprehension without becoming deficient in comprehension (*ἀγνώμονες*), ignorant (*ἄμαθεῖς*), and accordingly vicious. Because they are keenly aware of their lack of knowledge about things that they do not know, they in fact love wisdom. On the other hand, people can have incomprehension in such a way that they become ignorant (*ἄμαθεῖς*) and vicious. Because they mistakenly take themselves to know things that they do not know (*Alcibiades I* 118a4–5), they lack desire for wisdom. Ignorance (*ἄμαθία*) is a noun that is cognate with the adjective ‘ignorant (*ἄμαθεῖς*)’. So it is not far-fetched to infer that ignorance stands for a state of being affected by incomprehension in such a way that the subjects, mistaking themselves for knowing what they do not know, are vicious. Therefore, ignorance is a special case of incomprehension. I thank an anonymous referee for encouraging me to clarify the distinction between ignorance and incomprehension.

<sup>7</sup> In this paper, I often attribute views to Socrates and Protagoras, who are main characters in Plato’s *Protagoras*. Nevertheless, it is worth emphasizing that in doing so, I do not assume that the views of those characters represent the views of the corresponding historical figures. My aim is to reconstruct the philosophical positions that the characters in Plato’s *Protagoras* espouse rather than figure out the philosophical views that the actual historical figures defended.

Socrates makes references to ignorance (ἀμαθία)<sup>8</sup> in both stages of his challenge to Protagoras. In the first stage, he does so by refuting a popular account of the phenomena that are nowadays called *akrasia*,<sup>9</sup> according to which akratic agents act contrary to their knowledge (when it is possible for them to act otherwise) because they are overcome by pleasure, pain, anger, or some other passions (ὕπὸ τῶν ἡδονῶν ἠττᾶσθαι, 352b3–353a6). In Socrates' view, akratic agents, insofar as they act badly, cannot act contrary to their knowledge. Rather, they lack knowledge and are ignorant. But, as we will see, this should be understood as leaving open the possibility that some cases of lacking knowledge will not be ignorance. In any case, akratic agents act akratically because of their ignorance (357c6–e8). Ignorance accordingly is the cause of akratic actions. In the second stage, Socrates infers further claims about ignorance from his arguments in the previous stage. Being weaker than oneself is nothing other than ignorance (οὐδὲ τὸ ἥττω εἶναι αὐτοῦ ἄλλο τι τοῦτ' ἐστὶν ἢ ἀμαθία, 358c1–2). Ignorance is like this (ἀμαθίαν ἄρα τὸ τοιόνδε):<sup>10</sup> having false beliefs and having been deceived about matters of great importance

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<sup>8</sup> ἀμαθία is used interchangeably with ἀφροσύνη, meaning ignorance or folly. Both of them are identified as the opposites of σοφία or φρόνησις (wisdom). At 332a2–333b6, ἀφροσύνη is identified as the opposite of wisdom. At 358d6–360e5, ἀμαθία is taken to be the opposite of wisdom. Between ἀμαθία and ἀφροσύνη, the former seems to be the primary one, since it figures in Socrates' diagnosis of his contemporaries, such as Alcibiades (*Alcibiades I* 116e2–118c2), the reputedly wise (*Apology* 21b1–22e5), and the majority (*Apology* 29a7–b6).

<sup>9</sup> The phenomena that Socrates focuses on are paradigmatic cases of what are nowadays called akratic actions: one voluntarily pursues what one deems to be bad. These phenomena are often called 'akrasia' or 'weakness of will' by contemporary scholars (Tenenbaum 1999).

<sup>10</sup> 358c4–5: ἀμαθίαν ἄρα τὸ τοιόνδε λέγετε, τὸ ψευδῆ ἔχειν δόξαν καὶ ἐψεῦσθαι περὶ τῶν πραγμάτων τῶν πολλοῦ ἀξίων. Notably, the phrase 'ignorance is like this (ἀμαθίαν ἄρα τὸ τοιόνδε)' is in indirect discourse, with the copulative verb εἶναι omitted. The definite article τό before the demonstrative pronoun τοιόνδε strongly suggests

(τὸ ψευδῆ ἔχειν δόξαν καὶ ἐψεῦσθαι περὶ τῶν πραγμάτων τῶν πολλοῦ ἀξίων, 358c4–5). In addition, he connects ignorance with vice. Cowardice is ignorance about what inspires confidence or fear, and this ignorance is the cause of cowardly actions (360b4–d7).

In sum, the *Protagoras* contains the following claims about ignorance.

- (i) Some people who lack knowledge are ignorant (357c6–e8).
- (ii) Being weaker than oneself is nothing other than ignorance (358c1–2).
- (iii) Ignorance is like this: having false beliefs and having been deceived about matters of great importance (358c4–5).
- (iv) Ignorance is the cause of akratic actions (357c6–e8) and cowardly actions (360b4–d7).

In the following sections, I offer a comprehensive analysis of Socrates' account of ignorance in the *Protagoras* by examining claims (i)–(iv) in order. To begin with, I show that (i) and its immediate context cast light on the impoverished intellectual and practical nature of ignorance by contrasting it with the achievement that features more prominently in philosophical discussions, i.e., knowledge. Then, I argue that (ii), connecting ignorance with being weaker than oneself, illuminates the nature of ignorance. From there, I contend, by outlining what ignorant people are like, that (iii) offers a more concrete picture of ignorance. In the end, I suggest that (iv) provides insight into the causal power of ignorance and paves the way for a distinctive picture about defects that are prominent on the dark side of humanity.

### 3 The Impoverished Intellectual and Practical Nature of Ignorance

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that they, as a whole, function as the subject of the infinitive, whereas ἀμαθίαν is in the predicate position. So the phrase 'ignorance is like this' (ἀμαθίαν ἄρα τὸ τοιόνδε) literally means that the thing like this is ignorance.

The claim that (i) some people who lack knowledge are ignorant (357c6–e8) occurs as Socrates concludes his refutation of a defense for a popular account of akrasia. This popular account is put into the mouths of the ‘many’, imaginary interlocutors who stand for the average Athenians.<sup>11</sup> After its initial formulation—akratic agents act contrary to their knowledge because they are overcome by pleasure, pain, anger, or some other passions—is shown to be ridiculous at 355a3–356a5,<sup>12</sup> a possible defense on the many’s behalf is proposed at 356a5–7. This defense can be unpacked as follows. Among passions, what is immediately pleasant has a uniquely potent effect on motivation and action. While other passions cannot mislead people who both know what is good for them to do and are able to act accordingly into acting contrary to their knowledge, what is immediately pleasant can get them to do so. In the latter kind of cases, akratic agents act contrary to their knowledge, because they are overcome by what is immediately pleasant.

To eliminate that defense of the many’s account of akrasia, Socrates resorts to the antithesis between appearance and knowledge, or more precisely, between the power of appearance (ἡ τοῦ φαινομένου δύναμις) and the knowledge of measurement<sup>13</sup> at 356c3–357b5. At this point, we

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<sup>11</sup> Callard highlights the kinship between the views of many and the views of sophists like Protagoras. Protagoras ‘comes to endorse hedonism when and as a result of the fact that’ the many do (Callard 2014, n. 9).

<sup>12</sup> I will not delve into how the many’s initial formulation of akrasia is shown to be ridiculous at 355a3–356a5. For recent discussions, see Wolfsdorf 2006; Clark 2012; Callard 2014.

<sup>13</sup> In the context, Socrates does not distinguish the art of measurement (ἡ μετρητικὴ τέχνη, 356d4 and e3–4) from the knowledge of measurement (ἡ μετρητικὴ ἐπιστήμη, 357a1). In fact, he even calls it ‘an art and a (branch of) knowledge (τέχνη καὶ ἐπιστήμη)’ at 357b4–5. The looseness with his language is consistent with the preliminary nature of his account: it is a sketch of the power that an expertise with regard to measurement has over motivation and actions. For the sake of clarity and brevity, I will call the expertise in question ‘the knowledge of measurement’, or, more briefly, ‘knowledge’.



might naturally raise the following questions. What is an appearance? What power does it have? What is the knowledge of measurement?

Let us start with appearances. An appearance is a representation of how, from a certain perspective, something strikes one to be. In the current context, Socrates notes that an appearance can represent sensory objects and properties. For instance, a visible object can appear to be (φαίνεται)<sup>14</sup> larger or smaller; a sound may appear to be louder or softer (356c5–8). An appearance can also represent evaluative properties: things can appear to be more or less pleasant and good (356a5–7, 357a5–b3).<sup>15</sup> Notably, Socrates ties appearances<sup>16</sup> to perspectives, by which I mean the points of view that people adopt as a result of their standing in certain relationships with the objects that appear to them. As one’s perspective changes, appearances change accordingly. For example, an object appears to be larger when seen near at hand and smaller when seen from a distance; a sound appears to be louder when one is closer by and softer when

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<sup>14</sup> As Moss points out, in addition to φαίνεσθαι and its cognates, δοκεῖν, εἰκός, and their nominal cognates can mean ‘to appear’ or ‘appearances’ (Moss 2021, 147).

<sup>15</sup> In the context, Socrates operates with the hypothesis that long-term pleasantness is the good, a version of hedonism that the many are revealed to endorse (353c1–354e2; see Moss 2014, 296). In addition, he does not dispute with the many that things can appear to be more or less pleasant. Hence, under the hypothesis that long-term pleasantness is the good, things can appear to be more or less pleasant and accordingly good.

<sup>16</sup> Elsewhere in the Platonic corpus, an appearance can represent non-sensory, non-evaluative entities, such as ideas, hypotheses, and claims. At *Protagoras* 351b8–c3, Protagoras insists that it seems (δοκεῖ) to him that there is a distinction between that justice is pious and that piety is just, even though he fails to challenge Socrates’ arguments, according to which there is no such distinction. See also *Euthyphro* 12b4–7, *Charmides* 167d7–e2, and *Protagoras* 360e4–5.

one is further away.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, an appearance represents how, from a certain perspective, something strikes one to be.

Appearances are associated with, but distinct from, belief and knowledge. People often believe what appears to them, unless they think that their appearances are misleading. One's knowledge can agree with appearances, when the latter happen to be veridical. In spite of those connections, an appearance is distinct from belief and knowledge. As Socrates puts it, one cannot voluntarily act contrary to one's occurrent belief and knowledge about goods and bads: 'no one who knows or believes there is something else better than what he is doing, something possible, will go on doing what he had been doing when he could be doing what is better' (358b7–c1). By contrast, one could voluntarily act contrary to one's occurrent appearances. To give an example, feasting on pastries may appear to be particularly good for me, even though I, alert to its health risks, refrain from following my appearance.

In the following passage, Socrates casts the power of appearance and the knowledge of measurement side by side.

If then our well-being depended upon this, doing and choosing large things, avoiding and not doing small ones, what would we see as our salvation in life? Would it be the art of measurement or the power of appearances? While the power of appearance makes us wander all over the place in confusion, often changing our minds about the same things and regretting our actions and choices with respect to things large and small, the art of measurement, in contrast, would make the appearances lose their power by showing us the truth, would give us peace of mind firmly rooted in truth and would save our life.

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<sup>17</sup> These examples are adapted from Socrates' claim at 356c4–8.

Therefore, would these men agree, with this in mind, that the art of measurement would save us, or some other art? (356c8–e4)<sup>18</sup>

At 356d8, Socrates claims that the knowledge of measurement renders appearances powerless, or not in charge (ἄκυρον). His claim indicates that succumbing to the power of appearance amounts to the domination of appearances. But what does the domination at issue consist in? To answer that question, it is worth noting that according to Socrates, the power of appearance makes people ‘wander all over the place in confusion’ (356d4–5). In the Platonic corpus, the word ‘to wander (πλανᾶν)’ often characterizes the cognitive instability of individuals who, lacking knowledge, attempt to judge in accordance with appearances. For instance, at *Hippias Minor* 372d3–e3, Socrates confesses that he, in the absence of knowledge, wanders with regard to whether people who go wrong voluntarily are better than those who do so involuntarily, as the issue appears differently to him from time to time.<sup>19</sup> Thus, that the power of appearance makes people wander hints that under the domination of appearances, people try to judge in accordance with their ever changing appearances.<sup>20</sup> On top of that, Socrates asserts that the power of

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<sup>18</sup> Εἰ οὖν ἐν τούτῳ ἡμῖν ἦν τὸ εὖ πράττειν, ἐν τῷ τὰ μὲν μέγιστα μήκη καὶ πράττειν καὶ λαμβάνειν, τὰ δὲ μικρὰ καὶ φεύγειν καὶ μὴ πράττειν, τίς ἂν ἡμῖν σωτηρία ἐφάνη τοῦ βίου; ἄρα ἡ μετρητικὴ τέχνη ἢ ἡ τοῦ φαινομένου δύναμις; ἢ αὕτη μὲν ἡμᾶς ἐπλάνα καὶ ἐποίησεν ἄνω τε καὶ κάτω πολλάκις μεταλαμβάνειν ταῦτα καὶ μεταμέλειν καὶ ἐν ταῖς πράξεσιν καὶ ἐν ταῖς αἰρέσεσιν τῶν μεγάλων τε καὶ μικρῶν, ἢ δὲ μετρητικὴ ἄκυρον μὲν ἂν ἐποίησε τοῦτο τὸ φάντασμα, δηλώσασα δὲ τὸ ἀληθὲς ἡσυχίαν ἂν ἐποίησεν ἔχειν τὴν ψυχὴν μένουσαν ἐπὶ τῷ ἀληθεῖ καὶ ἔσωσεν ἂν τὸν βίον; ἄρ' ἂν ὁμολογοῖεν οἱ ἄνθρωποι πρὸς ταῦτα ἡμᾶς τὴν μετρητικὴν σφῆξιν ἂν τέχνην ἢ ἄλλην;

Translations of the *Protagoras* are by Stanley Lombardo and Karen Bell, from Cooper 1997.

<sup>19</sup> See also *Alcibiades I* 117b2–8. For an illuminating discussion of the relationship between wandering, appearance, and belief, see Moss 2021, 213.

<sup>20</sup> This, as a matter of course, does not mean that the judgments of people who are dominated by appearances cannot latch onto truth: when appearances are veridical, those people can form correct judgments on the basis of

appearance oftentimes makes people ‘change their minds about the same things and regret their actions and choices’ (356d6–7). That is to say, under the domination of appearances, people not only judge in accordance with appearances but also often revise their appearance-based judgments, presumably because, in line with their shifting perspectives, appearances are subject to changes. And the fact that changes in appearance-based judgments lead to regret about earlier actions and choices strongly suggests that those judgments urge individuals who are under the domination of appearance to act accordingly.<sup>21</sup> In sum, the power of appearance consists in appearances’ domination over judgments and actions.

The knowledge of measurement makes appearances powerless by enabling its possessors to judge and act in accordance with truth, thereby doing well. To see this point, let us focus on the visual domain. Just like those who lack the knowledge of measurement in the visual domain, namely, optics, people who are equipped with that knowledge have visual appearances, which can be veridical or misleading, depending on individuals’ perspectives. For example, for both those who lack the knowledge of optics and those who have that knowledge, two objects of equal size at the same distance appear to be equal in size, whereas two objects of equal size at different distances can appear to be unequal in size. So the possession of knowledge does not make appearances disappear altogether. What knowledge does, according to Socrates, involves

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appearances. But in such cases, their access to truth is mediated by appearances—they form correct judgments because of how things appear to them.

<sup>21</sup> More specifically, it hints that earlier, appearance-based judgments have led to corresponding actions, which one, having revised one’s judgments, regrets. Thus, appearance-based judgments induce individuals who are under the domination of appearances to act accordingly. This inference agrees with the theory of human motivation that Socrates puts forward later at 358b6–d4. Human beings voluntarily pursue what they believe or know to be good for them in relevant situations.

‘showing truth’ and ‘giving one peace of mind firmly rested in truth’. That is to say, it allows one to reliably grasp truth as truth. To put it differently, knowledge enables one to not only judge in accordance with truth<sup>22</sup> but also hold on to correct judgments in spite of the presence of conflicting appearances. In addition, knowledge is acclaimed to be the salvation of human life (356d8–e4). In the context, Socrates identifies the salvation of human life with that which doing well depends on. Under the hypothesis that long-term pleasantness is the good, a version of hedonism that the many are revealed to accept (353c1–354e2; see Moss 2014, 296), doing well amounts to pursuing what is pleasant in the long term and thus good instead of what merely appears to be so. Hence, by calling knowledge the salvation of life, Socrates holds that it enables its possessors to act in accordance with truth, thereby doing well.

The antithesis between appearance and knowledge allows Socrates to refute the possible defense for the many’s account of akrasia at 356a5–7, according to which akratic agents act contrary to their knowledge because they are overcome by what is immediately pleasant. The antithesis indicates that as long as one has knowledge, one judges and acts in accordance with truth and, as a result, does well. Akratic agents, pursuing what is actually bad rather than good, act badly. Thus, they cannot be equipped with knowledge. Contrary to the many’s claim, akratic agents do not know what is good or bad for them to do.

Socrates’ refutation of the possible defense for the many’s account of akrasia, paving the way for claim (i) that some people who lack knowledge are ignorant (357d3–e2), illuminates the impoverished intellectual and practical nature of ignorance. According to him, akratic agents,

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<sup>22</sup> By characterizing a knowledgeable person as judging in accordance with truth, I do not mean to make any further claim about the metaphysics of truth, a subject of which the Socratic dialogues do not seem to contain a concrete account.

lacking knowledge about what is good or bad for them to do, are ignorant (357d1–e2). The knowledge at issue, as I have shown in this section, enables its possessors to judge and act in accordance with truth. Thus, the ignorant, lacking that knowledge, cannot judge and act in accordance with truth. They have to rely on appearances, i.e., representations about how things strike them to be from certain perspectives. Appearances can misrepresent reality, when one happens to stand in suboptimal perspectives. For instance, two apples of equal size can appear to be unequal in size, if one happens to be at different distances from them. Accordingly, the ignorant are liable to be misled by appearances and, as a consequence, judge and act badly.

#### 4 The Nature of Ignorance

Claim (ii) is that being weaker than oneself is nothing other than ignorance (οὐδὲ τὸ ἥττω εἶναι αὐτοῦ ἄλλο τι τοῦτ' ἐστὶν ἢ ἀμαθία, 358c1–2).<sup>23</sup> What does this claim say about ignorance?

The first step to unpack claim (ii) is noting that it establishes common ground between the popular account of akrasia and the Socratic alternative. The claim occurs at the beginning of the second stage of Socrates' two-stage challenge to Protagoras. In the first stage, Socrates paves the way for his eventual rebuttal of Protagoras by presenting and refuting the popular account of akrasia. According to that account, akratic agents act contrary to their knowledge (when it is possible for them to act otherwise) because they are overcome by pleasure, pain, anger, or some other passions (ὕπὸ τῶν ἡδονῶν ἠττᾶσθαι, 352b3–353a6), which can be cashed out as being weaker than oneself (τὸ ἥττω εἶναι αὐτοῦ).<sup>24</sup> Against the popular account, Socrates argues that

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<sup>23</sup> A similar formulation occurs at 359d6: τὸ ἥττω εἶναι ἑαυτοῦ ἡνέθη ἀμαθία οὔσα.

<sup>24</sup> At 352d7–e1, Socrates declares that according to the popular account, the cause of akratic actions is being overcome by pleasure, pain, or some of the things that he said (ὕπὸ ἡδονῆς φασιν ἠττωμένους ἢ λύπης ἢ ὧν νυνδὴ

knowledge enables one to judge and act in accordance with truth, thereby doing well. Akrotic agents, pursuing what is actually bad rather than good, act badly. Thus, they cannot be equipped with knowledge. Instead, they lack knowledge and are ignorant. They act akrotically because of their ignorance. Recall that claim (ii), occurring at the beginning of the second stage of Socrates' challenge to Protagoras, states that being weaker than oneself is nothing other than ignorance. So in claim (ii), Socrates can be seen as establishing common ground between the popular account of akrotasia and his own alternative, after he has refuted the former. In spite of their disagreement on whether akrotic agents can have knowledge, the popular account and the Socratic proposal converge on what they conceive to be the cause of akrotic actions. What the former takes to be the cause of akrotic actions, i.e., being weaker than oneself, turns out to be what the latter regards as the cause of those actions, viz., ignorance.

The fact that claim (ii)—being weaker than oneself is nothing other than ignorance—establishes common ground between the popular account of akrotasia and the Socratic alternative strongly suggests that it can be understood in the following ways. First, the claim could mean

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ἐγὼ ἔλεγον ὑπό τινας τούτων). The things that he said are passions including anger, pleasure, pain, pain, love, and fear, which are representative of passions that can lead one to knowingly and voluntarily pursue what is bad, according to the popular account. That which is identified as the cause of akrotic actions is abbreviated as being overcome by pleasure (τὸ πάθημα ἡδονῆς ἡττᾶσθαι) at 353a5 and 357c7. At 357e2, Socrates picks up the same condition as being weaker than pleasure (τὸ ἡδονῆς ἡττω εἶναι). This interchange between being overcome by and being weaker than strongly suggests that the phrase 'being weaker than oneself' at 358c1–2 is meant to cash out what the popular account takes to be the cause of akrotic actions, i.e., being overcome by pleasure, pain, anger, or some other passions. In *Laws*, Plato also uses 'being weaker than oneself' and 'being overcome by passions' interchangeably. For the relevant discussion, see Wilburn 2012, n. 3

that being weaker than oneself is defined as ignorance.<sup>25</sup> Second, it could mean that being weaker than oneself is identical to ignorance.<sup>26</sup> Admittedly, the immediate context of Socrates' comments on ignorance in the *Protagoras* does not give us a decisive reason to favor either of those interpretations.<sup>27</sup> A moment of reflection tells us that no matter whether being weaker than oneself is defined as or identical to ignorance, being weaker than oneself can be seen as

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<sup>25</sup> The claim that being weaker than oneself is nothing other than ignorance is a case of the proposition that A is nothing other than B. In the Platonic corpus, that proposition often means that A is defined as B. For example, at *Theaetetus* 160d5–6, Socrates paraphrases Theaetetus' first attempted definition of knowledge at 151d7–e3—knowledge is perception—as that knowledge is nothing other than perception (ἐπιστήμη οὐκ ἄλλο τί ἐστὶν ἢ αἴσθησις). See also *Phaedo* 64d4–5, *Cratylus* 413e3–4, and *Republic* 338c2–3.

<sup>26</sup> The proposition that A is nothing other than B can also mean that A is identical to B. At *Phaedrus* 245e7–246a1, Socrates asserts that only the soul can move itself by saying that whatever moves itself (that is, the self-mover) is nothing other than the soul (μὴ ἄλλο τι εἶναι τὸ αὐτὸ ἑαυτὸ κινῶν ἢ ψυχὴν). Both Hackforth and Rowe hold that Socrates identifies the self-mover with the soul at *Phaedrus* 245e–246a1 (Hackforth 1952, 64; Rowe 1986, 177). So the self-mover is just the soul. For a similar use of the proposition that A is nothing other than B, see *Charmides* 164e5–6.

<sup>27</sup> A third possible way of construing claim (ii)—being weaker than oneself *exemplifies* ignorance—should be ruled out in the current context for the following reasons. First, in the Socratic dialogues such wording has this meaning only at *Hippias Major* 296e8, a work that is of dubious authenticity (for debates about the authenticity of *Hippias Major*, see Woodruff 1982 and Kahn 1985). Second, throughout the Socratic dialogues, all cases of ignorance can be cashed out as being weaker than oneself, which, as I will argue in the rest of this section, amounts to the soul's domination by appearances, which makes one judge and act in accordance with appearances. For example, persistently taking oneself to know what one does not know (*Apology* 21b1–e2) can be understood as holding fast to distorted appearances about oneself, as a result of being stuck in suboptimal perspectives. False beliefs about evaluative matters (*Protagoras* 358d5–360d5) can be seen as judging in accordance with misleading appearances. By contrast, if claim (ii)—being weaker than oneself is nothing other than ignorance—meant that being weaker than oneself exemplifies ignorance, some cases of ignorance might not be cashed out as being weaker than oneself.



ignorance, and vice versa. An inquiry into being weaker than oneself provides insight into the nature of ignorance. What, then, is being weaker than oneself?

Being weaker than oneself, I propose, indicates the lack of a natural, normative psychic order. Admittedly, as many scholars have argued, the moral psychology operative in Plato's works has witnessed significant changes. While the Socratic dialogues assume that the human soul is a simple entity which desires what it believes or knows to be the best,<sup>28</sup> the middle and late dialogues conceive of the human soul as a composite of distinct parts, each of which is the subject or the host of a certain kind of desire.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, the following theme runs through the entire Platonic corpus: some psychic states, activities, or parts are by nature fit to be ruled. Whenever they are properly ruled, one is stronger than oneself; whenever they are left without proper regulation, one is weaker than oneself. For example, in the *Gorgias*, where the theory of soul in the middle and late dialogues is not operative in full force,<sup>30</sup> control and being stronger than oneself amount to ruling pleasures and desires, which are naturally fit to be ruled.<sup>31</sup> Instead

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<sup>28</sup> Both commentators who deny the existence of non-rational motivation and those who argue for its existence in the Socratic dialogues agree that the human soul is a simple entity which desires what it judges to be the best. They disagree on whether non-rational states can influence the soul's judgments of what is best and thus have independent motivational force. For the denial of non-rational motivation, see Frede 1992, xxix–xxx; Irwin 1995, 209; Penner 1997, 129; for the other side, see Devereux 1995; Brickhouse and Smith 2000, 179–81; 2010, ch. 2; Singpurwalla 2006.

<sup>29</sup> Bobonich 2003; Lorenz 2006; Moss 2009; Kamtekar 2017.

<sup>30</sup> While Socrates' examination of Callicles involves consideration of motivational states that arise independently from reason, it falls short of arguing that the human soul is a composite of distinct parts, as Plato does in the middle and late dialogues. For a comprehensive discussion of the topic, see Cooper 1999, ch.2.

<sup>31</sup> According to Socrates, a ruler of the city must be ruling herself—she is moderate and self-controlled, ruling the pleasures and desires within her (σώφρονα ὄντα καὶ ἐγκρατῆ αὐτὸν ἑαυτοῦ, τῶν ἡδονῶν καὶ ἐπιθυμιῶν ἄρχοντα τῶν

of acting in accordance with one's pleasures and desires indiscriminately, one should only satisfy those that will make one better, thereby being stronger than oneself (503c4–d3). In the *Republic*, the *locus classicus* of the theory of the human soul in the middle and late dialogues, being weaker than oneself is being overpowered by non-rational parts, which are naturally fit to be ruled. One who is weaker than oneself acts in accordance with non-rational desires (431a3–d3). Hence, the phrase being weaker than oneself, in all likelihood, refers to the lack of a natural, normative psychic order: psychic states, activities, or parts that are naturally fit to be ruled, left without proper regulation, dominate the human soul by making one act in accordance with them.<sup>32</sup>

In the *Protagoras* and other Socratic dialogues, the human soul is conceived to be the subject or the host of various psychic states and activities. According to Socrates, character virtues or vices, such as wisdom, justice, and ignorance, are excellent or poor states of the human soul.<sup>33</sup> The human soul is the host of intellectual efforts and accomplishments: one learns and obtains truth in virtue of one's soul.<sup>34</sup> It is also the subject or the host of the following cognitive, conative, and affective activities or states. It judges; on account of it, one desires and experiences

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ἐν ἑαυτῷ, 491d10–e2). The word 'control (ἐγκρατῆ)' in the phrase 'self-controlled' is cognate with 'stronger (κρείσσων)'. In fact, the phrases 'self-controlled' (or more literally, 'control oneself') and 'being stronger than oneself' are used interchangeably (see Wilburn 2012, and compare n.24 above). Thus, Socrates holds that control and being stronger than oneself amount to ruling one's pleasures and desires. Pleasures and desires, left without proper regulation, become inflamed and insatiable (493a1–494a5), so they are by nature fit to be ruled.

<sup>32</sup> The same theme features prominently in *the Laws*, which is commonly held to be the last work of Plato. For a comprehensive discussion of its role in the *Laws*, see Wilburn 2012.

<sup>33</sup> *Gorgias* 477b3–8 and 507a5–c7.

<sup>34</sup> *Protagoras* 314b1–4 and *Apology* 29e1–3.

pleasure, pain, or other passions.<sup>35</sup> We might naturally wonder: among those psychic states or activities, which are naturally fit to be ruled?

The antithesis between appearance and knowledge paves the way for the following answer: appearances are by nature fit to be ruled. As we have seen, knowledge renders appearances not in charge (ἄκυρον, 356d8) by enabling its possessors to judge and act in accordance with truth rather than appearances. So appearances are characteristically dominant among those who are bereft of knowledge. The domination of appearances and the possession of knowledge have opposite impact on human life. While the former makes one susceptible to wrongdoings, regret, and other miseries (356d4–7), the latter is essential to doing well (356d1–e4) and happiness,<sup>36</sup> arguably the most important goals of the human life.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, appearances should not be dominant. Instead, they are naturally fit to be ruled.

But one might want to know whether there are some other things that are fit to be ruled in addition to appearances. As we have seen, the human soul is the subject or the host of many psychic states and activities, such as desires, erotic love, and pleasure. Among them, are appearances the only kind that are naturally fit to be ruled?

A closer look at the *Protagoras*, in light of other Socratic dialogues, brings forward the following answer—while appearances might not be the only psychic states or activities that are naturally fit to be ruled, they are the *ultimate* ones on account of which other states or activities call for regulation. The many's initial formulation of akrasia at 352b3–353a6 vividly captures how passions, such as pleasure, anger, fear, and erotic love, can lead one who lacks knowledge

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<sup>35</sup> *Gorgias* 486e5–6, 493a1–c2, and 496e4–9.

<sup>36</sup> At *Gorgias* 507c, Socrates claims that a person who does well (εὖ πράττοντα) is blessed (μακάριον) and happy (εὐδαίμονα).

<sup>37</sup> See Bobonich 2011.

astray. At *Gorgias* 491d4–508a8, Socrates contends that indiscriminate gratification of desires morally corrupts someone who is yet to acquire knowledge and virtue. Most human beings, if not all, lack knowledge and virtue.<sup>38</sup> The fact that they are liable to be misled and corrupted by passions strongly suggests that passions are naturally fit to be ruled. For most people, passions consist of or are based on appearances. As the many exemplify, people, lacking knowledge, tend to be pleased by what appears to be good, pained by what appears to be bad. And when they are motivated by passions, their passions are or involve evaluative judgments,<sup>39</sup> which are based on appearances.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, it is not far-fetched to infer that other passions should be regulated because they consist of or are based on appearances.

In this way, Socrates conceives of ignorance as the soul's domination by appearances, which makes one judge and act accordingly. As I have argued, being weaker than oneself is the lack of a natural, normative order of the soul: psychic states, activities, or parts that are naturally

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<sup>38</sup> At *Apology* 21b1–22e5, Socrates tells us that his examination of people who are reputedly wise, such as politicians, poets, and craftspeople, reveals that they regard themselves as knowing things which they do not know and are thus ignorant. That condition plagues not only the reputedly wise but also ordinary people. At *Protagoras* 357c1–e8, Socrates argues that the many, being ignorant, lack the knowledge that they regard themselves as possessing.

<sup>39</sup> At 358b3–d4, Socrates declares that one voluntarily acts in accordance with one's judgments of good and bad. Fear is a kind of expectation of something bad (*προσδοκία τῆς κακοῦ*, 358d6). 'Expectation' literally means 'anticipatory belief' or 'judgment'. Other passions can presumably be characterized as specific ways of judging things to be good or bad. See Segvic 2000; Moss 2014.

<sup>40</sup> This point can be inferred from the antithesis between appearance and knowledge. As I have argued, knowledge makes appearance not in charge by enabling its possessors to judge and act on the basis of truth instead of appearances. So the evaluative judgments of people who lack knowledge are characteristically based on appearances.

fit to be ruled, left without proper regulation, dominate the human soul by making one act in accordance with them. Appearances are the ultimate psychic states that are fit to be ruled—other psychic states or activities should be ruled because they consist of or are based on appearances. Being weaker than oneself accordingly comes down to appearances’ domination of the human soul, which makes one act accordingly. In the immediate context, Socrates asserts that whenever human beings act voluntarily, they do so in line with their judgments.<sup>41</sup> Thus, the fact that one who is dominated by appearances acts according to appearances strongly suggests that one judges in line with those appearances as well. Recall that being weaker than oneself can be seen as ignorance, and ignorance can be seen as being weaker than oneself. Therefore, Socrates conceives of ignorance as appearances’ domination over the soul, which makes one judge and act in accordance with appearances.

## 5 Ignorance, False beliefs, and Deception

To have a more concrete picture of ignorance, let us now consider claim (iii), ‘ignorance is like this: having false beliefs and having been deceived about matters of great importance’ (358c4–5).

We first need to get clear about the phrase ‘like this (τὸ τοιόνδε)’. In the Platonic corpus, ‘like this (τὸ τοιόνδε)’ plays two primary roles. First, it can introduce something that is co-extensive with the subject matter. For example, at *Phaedo* 78b4–7, Socrates declares that we

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<sup>41</sup> More precisely, whenever one pursues something voluntarily, one knows or believes that it is good (358b3–d4).

The knowledge and the belief in question are token cases of knowledge and belief, as opposed to branches of knowledge or sets of beliefs. At 354c5 and 358e5, Plato refers to them as suppositions or judgments (ἡγγεῖσθαι). For an illuminating discussion on this topic, see Moss 2014, 200–1.

should ask ourselves something like this and then offers a list of questions. The phrase ‘like this’ introduces the list of questions that are co-extensive with the subject matter—the questions that we should ask ourselves.<sup>42</sup> Second, ‘like this’ can introduce preliminary and somewhat tentative characterizations of the relevant subject matter. For instance, at *Phaedo* 94b8–c1, the phrase ‘like this’ introduces sketches of what the subject matter—the soul’s opposition to bodily affections—is like. When the body is hot and thirsty, the soul draws one to not drinking; when the body is hungry, the soul draws one to not eating.<sup>43</sup>

A moment of reflection allows us to see that at 358c4–5, the phrase ‘like this’ should introduce preliminary characterizations of the relevant subject matter, i.e., ignorance. According to Socrates, ignorant people characteristically take themselves to be knowledgeable about things that they do not really know.<sup>44</sup> They, as I have argued, judge and act in accordance with appearances, which are representations of how, from certain perspectives, things strike one to be. Thus, they suffer from suboptimal perspectives about themselves, which subject them to misleading appearances about their psychic conditions.<sup>45</sup> The fact that ignorant people stand in suboptimal perspectives about themselves strongly suggests that there is more to ignorance than having false beliefs and having been deceived about matters of great importance. It follows that

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<sup>42</sup> I thank an anonymous referee for drawing my attention to this way of understanding the phrase ‘like this’. For passages in which the phrase is used in the same way, see *Euthyphro* 10a1–3, *Cratylus* 399a6–7, 429a3–5, and *Theaetetus* 181c2–5.

<sup>43</sup> For passages in which the phrase ‘like this’ is used in the same way, see *Theaetetus* 163d1–4 and *Alcibiades I* 107e9–108a4. I thank an anonymous referee for encouraging me to clarify my interpretation.

<sup>44</sup> See n. 38.

<sup>45</sup> In the text to notes 53–58, I argue that ignorant people not just stand in suboptimal perspectives about themselves. They are *embedded in* those perspectives, as a result of their being parts of a corrupt society.

the phrase ‘like this’ at 358c4–5 is unlikely to introduce something co-extensive with the subject matter, viz., ignorance. Rather, it should introduce preliminary and somewhat tentative characterizations of ignorance. In other words, having false beliefs and having been deceived about matters of great importance give readers some basic sense of what ignorance, conceived to be the soul’s domination by appearances, is like. An ignorant person is characterized by having false beliefs and having been deceived about matters of great importance.

But what, exactly, are having false beliefs and having been deceived about matters of great importance? It is tempting to suppose that ‘having false beliefs’ and ‘having been deceived about matters of great importance’ are synonymous or interchangeable.<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, a closer look at the Greek text tells us that this is unlikely to be what Socrates has in mind. In characterizing ignorance as having false beliefs and having been deceived about matters of great importance, he shifts from the present infinitive ‘having’ to the perfect infinitive ‘having been deceived’.<sup>47</sup> The present infinitive in the first half, ‘having (ἔχειν)’, indicates that having false beliefs is an ongoing condition.<sup>48</sup> The perfect infinitive in the second half, ‘having been deceived (ἔψευσθαι)’, signals that the action at stake, being deceived, has been completed with a lasting result that persists into the present.<sup>49</sup> When one has a false belief, one might realize one’s

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<sup>46</sup> Kamtekar, for example, glosses over the two conjuncts as ‘ignorance is having a false belief about the most important things’ (Kamtekar 2017, 52–3).

<sup>47</sup> A similar juxtaposition of the present and the perfect infinitives occurs at *Republic* 382b1–4. ἐγὼ δὲ λέγω ὅτι τῆ ψυχῆ περὶ τὰ ὄντα ψεύδεσθαι τε καὶ ἐψεῦσθαι καὶ ἀμαθῆ εἶναι καὶ κεκτηῖσθαι τὸ ψεῦδος πάντες ἠκιστ’ ἀν δέξαντο, καὶ μισοῦσι μάλιστα αὐτὸ ἐν τῷ τοιοῦτῳ. Several commentators note that the infinitives at issue characterize different aspects of true falsehood, i.e., ignorance (Adam 1902; Harte 2013).

<sup>48</sup> Smyth 1956, 1865a.

<sup>49</sup> Smyth 1956, 1865c.

mistake soon after. In that case, one is not enduringly deceived. Therefore, having false beliefs and having been deceived about matters of great importance are neither synonymous nor interchangeable. Instead, they stand for two distinct characterizations of ignorance.

At this point, it is not hard to see how ignorant people are characterized by having false beliefs. Throughout the Socratic dialogues, ignorant people are often represented as falling prey to false beliefs about evaluative matters in specific situations. For example, Alcibiades, being ignorant, is liable to have false beliefs about what is just, admirable, good, and advantageous for him in specific situations and, as a result, act badly.<sup>50</sup> Akrotic agents voluntarily pursue what is actually bad for them, as they, being ignorant, suffer from false beliefs that confuse what is bad with what is good.<sup>51</sup> So the false beliefs that characterize ignorant people deal primarily with evaluative matters in specific circumstances. Recall that ignorance is conceived to be appearances' domination of the human soul, which makes one judge and act in accordance with them. Appearances, as representations of how things strike one to be from certain perspectives, misrepresent the reality when one happens to be in suboptimal perspectives. The ignorant are not immune from standing in suboptimal perspectives, especially when it comes to evaluative matters, such as good and bad, fine and shameful, and just and unjust. This is why they are subject to false beliefs about evaluative matters in specific situations and, as a result, act badly.

But in what sense are ignorant people characterized by having been deceived about matters of great importance, which, as I have argued, amounts to an enduring deception about those

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<sup>50</sup> *Alcibiades I* 117a3–118c2.

<sup>51</sup> At *Protagoras* 358b6–d4, Socrates declares that human beings voluntarily pursue what they, at the moment of action, know or believe to be good for them. Akrotic agents pursue what is actually bad for them. So they suffer from false beliefs about what is good for them. For comprehensive discussions about akrotic actions in the *Protagoras*, see Penner 1990 and Callard 2014.



matters? To answer this question, I propose that by matters of great importance (τῶν πραγμάτων τῶν πολλοῦ ἀξίων), Socrates refers to, most prominently, one's own psychic conditions.<sup>52</sup> At *Protagoras* 313a1–314a2, he asserts emphatically that the soul is the dearest thing to a person. At *Apology* 29d7–30a5, he encourages his audience to care for wisdom or truth, or the best possible state of their souls, which is of great importance (τὰ πλείστου ἄξια). The same exhortation is rephrased later as ‘caring that one should be as good and wise as possible’ (36c5–d1). Accordingly, by matters of great importance, Socrates seems to have in mind, first and

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<sup>52</sup> An anonymous referee suggests that Socrates could be more *dialectical* than *doctrinal* about what matters of great importance amount to in the context. More specifically, Socrates could get his interlocutors to agree that ignorant people are characterized by being lastingly deceived about matters of great importance without meaning to settle what, exactly, matters of great importance amount to. So his interlocutors can continue mistaking wealth, honor, or some other things for being supremely important while conceding that ignorant people are characterized by an enduring deception about matters of great importance. Although that interpretative possibility is extremely thought-provoking, it does not seem to square well with the context. Immediately after asserting that ignorant people are characterized by false beliefs and an enduring deception about matters of great importance, Socrates contends that cowardice is a form of ignorance about what inspires confidence or fear (358d5–360d6). It follows that cowards, on his view, are characterized by having false beliefs about what inspires confidence or fear and being lastingly deceived about matters of great importance. If Socrates does not mean to settle what matters of great importance amount to, his interlocutors will be liable to arrive at counter-intuitive accounts of cowardice. Suppose they take wealth to be supremely important. Then cowards will be characterized by having false beliefs about what inspires confidence or fear and being lastingly deceived about what they take to be supremely important, viz., wealth. But what does cowardice have to do with wealth, as well as other things that Socrates' interlocutors may mistakenly take to be of the highest importance, such as honor, success, and power? Therefore, Socrates, in all likelihood, has a settled view about what matters of great importance amount to in the context.

foremost, one's soul, and, more specifically, whether it is as good and wise as possible.<sup>53</sup> A closer look at individuals who are diagnosed as being ignorant by Socrates confirms this interpretation: they suffer from deception about their own psychic conditions. Alcibiades takes himself to know evaluative matters, including what is just and unjust, admirable and shameful, good and bad, which he lacks knowledge about (*Alcibiades I* 117a3–118c2). People who fear death, being ignorant, mistake themselves for knowing that death is exceedingly bad, even though no living human being can have that knowledge (*Apology* 28d5–29c1). The majority assume that their education and upbringing equip them with civic virtue, even though they are revealed to lack it under closer scrutiny (*Protagoras* 319a4–320c1). Therefore, the enduring deception about matters of great importance, which ignorant people are characterized with, deals prominently with their psychic conditions, such as the possession or the lack of knowledge and virtue.<sup>54</sup>

Why are ignorant people characterized by an enduring deception about their own psychic conditions? Socrates' comments on the nature of appearance paves the way for the following answer: ignorant people suffer from an enduring deception about their own psychic conditions

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<sup>53</sup> By arguing that an enduring deception about matters of great importance deals prominently with one's own psychic conditions, I do not mean to rule out the possibility that matters of great importance can include other issues, such as evaluative matters.

<sup>54</sup> My interpretation of the phrase 'having false beliefs and having been deceived about matters of great importance' at 358c4–5 is compatible with two possible ways of taking what 'matters of great importance' qualifies. On the one hand, 'matters of great importance' could qualify only 'having been deceived'. On this interpretation, 'matters of great importance' prominently refers to one's own psychic conditions. On the other hand, 'matters of great importance' could qualify both 'having been deceived' and 'having false beliefs'. On this interpretation, 'matters of great importance', albeit prominently referring to one's own psychic conditions, must include evaluative matters in specific situations as well.

because they are disposed to remain in suboptimal perspectives about those conditions. Recall that the ignorant, being dominated by appearances, i.e., representations about how things strike them to be from certain perspectives, judge and act accordingly. Their appearances and corresponding judgments thus misrepresent the reality whenever they are in suboptimal perspectives. The fact that ignorant people's deception about their psychic conditions is enduring strongly suggests that they cling to misguided judgments and appearances about those issues. Hence, they are disposed to remain in suboptimal perspectives about their own psychic conditions.

But we might wonder: why are ignorant people disposed to cleave to those suboptimal perspectives? Here, the textual evidence seems to run out: Socrates does not offer a conclusive diagnosis of the phenomena in question. But it is worth pointing out that he oftentimes associates the enduringness of ignorant people's deception about their own psychic conditions with their corrosive social context. For example, in the *Gorgias*, he asserts that Callicles is unable to properly appreciate his flaws due to a love for the common people (513a1–c7),<sup>55</sup> who, being ignorant, regard those who are adroit at gratifying their appetites as good.<sup>56</sup> He also observes that the common people can hardly recognize their lack of civic virtue since they, as a powerful, collective agent that dominates their cities, vehemently resist and even punish individuals who

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<sup>55</sup> Callicles is ignorant. In taking indiscriminate gratification of appetites to be preeminently good and undertaking to live accordingly (489b7–492c8), he makes his soul deprived of organization, correctness, and order, which are characteristic of a wise and virtuous soul. Instead, he is ignorant and vicious (506c5–507c7).

<sup>56</sup> According to Socrates, the common people (δημος) are ignorant. They mistake pleasures, which appear to be good, for being truly good (521d6–522b1). For an illuminating discussion of the relationship between pleasure and good in the *Gorgias*, see Moss 2006.

dare to reveal their deficiency.<sup>57</sup> In both cases, Socrates implies that a corrosive social context obstructs human beings from properly discerning their defects and, as a result, perpetuates their deception about their own psychic conditions.

In this way, we arrive at a more concrete picture of ignorance. Ignorant people, dominated by appearances, are characterized by the following features. First, they are subject to false beliefs about evaluative matters in specific situations.<sup>58</sup> Second, they suffer from an enduring deception about their own psychic conditions: for example, they could take themselves to know things that they do not know or regard themselves as instantiating virtues that they lack.

## 6 Ignorance and the Dark Side of Humanity

Let us take stock. I have argued that in the Socratic dialogues, especially the *Protagoras*, Socrates conceives of ignorance as a substantive, structural psychic flaw: the soul's domination by inferior elements that are by nature fit to be ruled. The inferior elements at issue are appearances—representations of how things strike one to be from certain perspectives.

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<sup>57</sup> The common people's vehement resistance to individuals who dare to reveal their deficiency is often noted by Socrates. For example, in the *Apology*, he tells his audience that if he had attempted to take part in politics in the past, which presumably requires him to challenge the common people's claim to civic virtue, he would have died long ago (31d2–32a3). In the *Republic*, he also notes that the common people refuse to accept individuals who reveal their mistakes (492d5–493e1): they might even want to kill those people (517a1–6).

<sup>58</sup> Some readers might wonder whether only the ignorant are subject to false beliefs about evaluative matters in specific circumstances. In my view, Plato does not mean to deny the possibility that the knowledgeable and those who are neither knowledgeable nor ignorant suffer from those beliefs. But for those people, such mistakes are *atypical*. Under normal circumstances, the knowledgeable make correct judgments, and those who are neither knowledgeable nor ignorant refrain from making judgments about subject matters on which they have an inadequate grip (*Alcibiades I* 117a3–118c2).

The ignorant judge and act in accordance with appearances. They are characterized by both false beliefs about evaluative matters in specific situations and an enduring deception about their own psychic conditions, such as taking themselves to know things that they do not know and regarding themselves as virtuous when they are not.

At the end of Section 2, I noted that Socrates also makes the following causal claim about ignorance: (iv) ignorance is the cause of what are nowadays called akratic actions (357c6–e8) and cowardly actions (360b4–d7). By calling ignorance the cause of akratic actions and cowardly actions, he indicates that ignorance is the underlying psychic condition that is responsible for those bad actions. If one wants to be immune from them, one will have to tackle one's ignorance.<sup>59</sup>

It is not far-fetched to infer that ignorance is the cause of not only cowardly actions but also other types of vicious actions. According to Socrates, cowardly actions and their opposite, courageous actions, demarcate a specific domain of responses: avoiding what is fearful and pursuing what inspires confidence (*Protagoras* 359d1–360d5). In addition to cowardly actions, other types of vicious actions<sup>60</sup> and their opposite, virtuous actions mark off distinct domains of

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<sup>59</sup> At *Protagoras* 357e2–8, Socrates points out that the cause of akratic actions, i.e., ignorance, is the defect that sophists, such as Protagoras and Prodicus, claim to cure. In saying so, he hints that ignorance is the underlying psychic condition that is responsible for akratic actions. One will have to tackle one's ignorance if one wants to be immune from akratic actions. In his view, the same relationship holds true between ignorance and cowardly actions as well, since he asserts that ignorance is the cause of cowardly actions at 360b4–d7.

<sup>60</sup> For Socrates, paradigmatically vicious actions include the cowardly, the unjust, the intemperate, and the impious (*Protagoras* 349d5–8 and *Gorgias* 507a5–c7). This does not imply that in his view, those types, demarcating their corresponding domains of responses, exhaust the entirety of vicious actions. For example, at *Protagoras* 360b, he recognizes the existence of foolhardy actions. Hence, while contemporary readers might disagree with Socrates on

responses. For instance, just and unjust actions are about what is proper or improper with respect to human beings; pious and impious actions deal with what is appropriate and inappropriate for the divine (*Gorgias* 507a5–c7). Recall that while knowledge enables its possessors to judge and act in accordance with truth, ignorance subjects people to wrong judgments and actions. One acts in a cowardly manner because of ignorance, and, in particular, ignorance about what inspires confidence or fear, which subjects one to wrong judgments and actions about those issues (*Protagoras* 358d6–360d7). Likewise, one engages in other types of vicious actions, such as unjust and impious ones, because of ignorance about the respective domains of responses, which subjects one to wrong judgments and actions. Ignorance is therefore the underlying condition that is responsible for not only cowardly actions but also other types of vicious actions. It is the condition that one must tackle if one wants to be immune from those bad actions.<sup>61</sup>

Accordingly, Socrates regards what are currently called *akrasia* and moral vices as being fundamentally the same problem—ignorance. Recall that in his view, ignorance is the underlying condition that is responsible for akratic and vicious actions. In the recent literature, *akrasia* is conceived to be either a shorthand for akratic episodes or the underlying character defect that is responsible for those episodes.<sup>62</sup> So what are nowadays called *akrasia*, according to Socrates, is a

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whether certain types of actions, say the impious ones, are vicious, they can still agree that vicious actions, as well as their opposite, virtuous actions, demarcate distinctive domains of responses.

<sup>61</sup> It is worth noting that ignorance is the cause of not only what are nowadays called akratic actions and vicious actions but also correct actions which people who are afflicted with ignorance engage in. While the ignorant are susceptible to bad actions, they can act correctly if the appearances in accordance with which they judge and act happen to be veridical.

<sup>62</sup> Many contemporary philosophers, such as Sergio Tenenbaum and Sarah Stroud, regard *akrasia* as a shorthand for akratic episodes (Tenenbaum 1999, 876; Stroud 2003, 124). Nevertheless, Aristotle and his contemporary followers,

product or a form of ignorance. Moral vices are character defects because of which one acts badly in specific domains of responses. Cowardice, for example, is a character defect because of which one acts badly with regard to avoiding of what is fearful and pursuing what inspires confidence.<sup>63</sup> So moral vices are forms of ignorance. In this way, Socrates conceives akrasia and moral vices to be at their roots the same problem, i.e., ignorance.

Furthermore, in Socrates' view, epistemic defects that are called epistemic vices these days are forms or products of ignorance. To see this point, let us zero in on Socrates' characterizations of the majority and the reputedly wise, both of whom are diagnosed as being ignorant. The majority are gullible, especially with regard to good and bad. Because of that character trait, they are liable to mistake what appears to be good for what is truly good: for example, they oftentimes take individuals who are merely adroit at offering what appears to be good to be genuine experts who are proficient in providing what is truly good.<sup>64</sup> Mistaking what appears to be good for what is truly good is a matter of confusing appearances with truth. Ignorance, as we have seen, is the human soul's domination by appearances, which makes one judge and act in accordance with appearances. Appearances, as representations of how things strike one to be from certain perspectives, are subject to distortion. So because of ignorance, one is susceptible to confuse appearances with truth. It follows that the majority's mistaking what appears to be good for what is truly good results from ignorance. Therefore, the character trait that is responsible for their mistakes, i.e., gullibility, is a form of ignorance. In addition to gullibility, ignorant people could

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such as, Thomas Hill, hold that akrasia is the underlying character defect that is responsible for akratic episodes (Aristotle *NE* 7.1–10; Hill 1986).

<sup>63</sup> *Protagoras* 360c1–e2. A similar view is suggested by contemporary virtue ethicists such as Heather Battaly (Battaly 2010, 4).

<sup>64</sup> *Gorgias* 517b2–519b2 and 521c5–522c3.

fall prey to wishful thinking. According to Socrates, the reputedly wise—politicians, poets, and craftspeople—lack the knowledge that they purport to have. Nevertheless, even after their lack of knowledge is revealed, they hold fast to the misleading but presumably gratifying appearances that they are particularly wise.<sup>65</sup> Hence, they are guilty of wishful thinking. Their wishful thinking occurs because of ignorance, which makes them judge in accordance with appearances, even when those appearances are distorted. So wishful thinking is a product of ignorance. In a word, Socrates conceives of epistemic defects that are currently called epistemic vices, such as gullibility and wishful thinking,<sup>66</sup> as forms or products of ignorance.

To close this section, I want to sketch out two broader implications of my interpretation of ignorance in Plato's *Protagoras*. First, if my interpretation is correct, Socrates draws a distinctive picture about the dark side of humanity. Contemporary philosophers operate with a sharp distinction between *akrasia*, moral vices, and epistemic vices, defects that are prominent on that side of us. An *akratic* agent correctly discerns what is truly good for her to do, but that discernment is overcome by a passion or a conflicting judgment. A morally vicious person, lacking correct discernment, simply mistakes what is bad for being good.<sup>67</sup> Epistemic vices, as

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<sup>65</sup> *Apology* 21b1–22e6, particularly 21c6–7.

<sup>66</sup> As Quassim Cassam has convincingly argued, intellectual or epistemic vices are character traits, ways of thinking, or attitudes that obstruct the pursuit of knowledge (Cassam 2019, 1–27). Admittedly, Socrates does not explicitly develop a theory of epistemic vices. He does characterize the ignorant as oftentimes falling prey to a variety of epistemic defects. And those defects belong to what are called epistemic vices by contemporary scholars.

<sup>67</sup> For contemporary discussions which contend that *akrasia* is distinct from and less blameworthy than full-fledged vice, such as cruelty and injustice, see Hill 1986 and Radoilska 2012. Their take on the distinction between *akrasia* and vice is largely Aristotelian. As Rachel Barney has helpfully put it, for Aristotle, while an *akratic* agent's reason does not endorse his wrong actions, the reason of a vicious person does. That is to say, a vicious person 'acts in



character traits, attitudes, and ways of thinking that impede the pursuit of knowledge, might be entirely distinct from akrasia and moral vices.<sup>68</sup> By contrast, the conception of ignorance in the Socratic dialogues points to the interconnectedness, or even convergence, of those defects. As we have seen, akrasia, moral vices, and epistemic vices are products or forms of ignorance. This, of course, does not mean that we should deny or downplay the distinctive perceptual, affective, or behavioral patterns of those defects. For instance, akratic agents are often torn about what they regard as good and what they regard as bad; cowards are prone to tremble at the face of insignificant dangers; wishful thinkers have difficulty in dismissing misleading but presumably gratifying appearances about themselves, such as the appearances that they are particularly wise. The point is rather that defects that are prominent on the dark side of humanity stem from the same problem: ignorance.

Second, examining the nature of ignorance is integral to moral and intellectual progress. As we have seen, Socrates thinks that most human beings are, in one way or another, ignorant.<sup>69</sup> Examining the nature of ignorance provides insight into our day-to-day moral and intellectual predicaments. It also allows us to discern epistemic vices which impede the pursuit of knowledge.<sup>70</sup> As a result, we are more likely not only to arrive at an undistorted view of the

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accordance with choice, which flows from his rational wish and deliberation. Thus, he is persuaded or convinced of what he does, whereas an akratic acts against choice, and is not persuaded' (Barney 2019, 289).

<sup>68</sup> A wishful thinker, for instance, might exhibit wishful thinking in a very limited group of cases: she takes herself to be a great pianist, in spite of contrary evidence. But she is not particularly susceptible to akratic and vicious actions.

<sup>69</sup> See notes 38, 55, 56.

<sup>70</sup> Socrates suggests that epistemic vices impede philosophical inquiries, which, by discussing virtue and other evaluative matters and examining oneself and others, lead one closer to knowledge (*Apology* 38a1–5). For example,

human ideal, i.e., knowledge and virtue, but also to come up with constructive proposals for bridging the gap between the ideal and the realities.

## 7 Conclusion

In closing, let us return to the case of Socrates, which we have encountered at the very beginning. Socrates famously professes to lack the knowledge that he is dedicated to pursuing. Is he thereby ignorant?

If my interpretation is correct, Socrates is far from ignorant despite his lack of knowledge. Socrates' disavowal of knowledge, as many commentators have convincingly argued, is sincere. He conceives of knowledge as a comprehensive understanding of evaluative matters, which gives its possessors a systematic, reliable guidance to life.<sup>71</sup> Even though he has a grip on some pieces of truth, he lacks the comprehensive understanding of evaluative matters that constitutes knowledge.<sup>72</sup> But Socrates' lack of knowledge in no way implies that he is ignorant. Ignorant people are characterized by both false beliefs about evaluative matters in specific situations and an enduring deception about their own psychic conditions. In the *Apology*, Socrates suggests that through the practice of philosophy, which involves discussing virtue and other evaluative matters and examining oneself and others,<sup>73</sup> he has an accurate grasp of his own psychic conditions. For

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the wishful thinking of the reputedly wise prevents them from acknowledging their lack of knowledge and embarking on inquiries into the nature of virtue and evaluative matters.

<sup>71</sup> Nussbaum 1986; Woodruff 1990; Vlastos 1994; Bett 2011.

<sup>72</sup> Brickhouse and Smith 1994; Vlastos 1994; Bett 2011.

<sup>73</sup> At 28d5–30b4, Socrates suggests that he cares for the souls of his own and his fellow citizens through the practice of philosophy. At 38a1–7, he notes that the care at issue is achieved through discussing virtue and its kindred matters and examining oneself and others.

example, he can correctly tell what he knows and what he does not know. Thus, while Socrates might experience false beliefs about evaluative matters, he is free from an enduring deception about his own psychic conditions. In other words, he is not afflicted with one of the two prominent features of ignorant people. Therefore, even though he lacks knowledge, he is not ignorant. This inference coheres with Socrates' self-characterizations. While he labels himself as not knowing (οὐκ εἰδώς) the nature of virtues and related qualities,<sup>74</sup> he never concludes that he is ignorant (ἀμαθής or ἄφρων).

There is accordingly a middle ground between knowledge and ignorance, occupied by people who are undazzled by appearances. As Socrates exemplifies, individuals, who lack the knowledge that enables its possessors to judge and act in accordance with truth, are not necessarily dominated by appearances and thus ignorant. Instead, they can be alert to the deceptive nature of appearances. Because of this alertness, they are not embedded in suboptimal perspectives about themselves. Accordingly, they are free from an enduring deception about their own psychic conditions. Keenly aware of their lack of knowledge, they refrain from rushing into judgments about subject matters that they lack knowledge of. On top of that, they aspire to obtain and actively search for knowledge and wisdom.<sup>75</sup> When they encounter and start practicing philosophy correctly, which allows people not only to discuss virtue and other evaluative matters

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<sup>74</sup> For example, at *Meno* 71b1–8, Socrates asserts that since he does not know (οὐκ εἰδώς) virtue, he does not know what qualities it possesses. At *Apology* 21d4–6, he declares that he does not know what is fine and good (οὐδὲν καλὸν καγαθὸν εἰδέναι).

<sup>75</sup> At *Alcibiades* I 117b2–e6, Socrates notes that people who lack knowledge but are not ignorant are aware of their lack of knowledge. As a result, they refrain from rushing into judgments about what they do not know. At *Lysis* 217e6–218b1, Socrates asserts that people who are neither knowledgeable nor ignorant love wisdom, and by implication, knowledge. And this love urges them to seek knowledge and wisdom, which they lack.

but also to examine themselves and others, they gradually discover some pieces of truth, such as that it is wicked and shameful to do wrong, to disobey one's superior, be he god or man (*Apology* 29b6–7). These pieces of truth, guiding their judgments and actions, lead them closer to knowledge and virtue.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> It seems to me that not only philosophers, who correctly practice philosophy, but also some aspiring young people, who love knowledge and wisdom even though they have not embarked on the journey of philosophy, fall into the middle ground between knowledge and ignorance. But the latter's condition is far from stable. As Socrates notes deplorably, aspiring young people are liable to be corrupted and, as a result, become ignorant (*Theaetetus* 150b6–151a5).

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