Introduction:

One of the most firmly held beliefs among Socratic and Platonic scholars is that there is a difference between Socrates and Plato, reflected in Plato’s dialogues. Many scholars\(^1\) believe that the early dialogues can be taken to be indicative of Socrates’ views, while the middle and later dialogues can be taken to be indicative of Plato’s views. Which dialogues precisely belong to the early dialogues is not agreed upon, but one such list (e.g., Penner’s list from the *Cambridge Companion to Plato* (1992), p. 124) goes as follows: *Apology*, *Charmides*, *Crito*, *Euthyphro*, *Hippias Minor*, *Ion*, *Laches*, *Protagoras*, *Lysis*, *Euthydemus*, *Menexenus*, *Hippias Major*, and *Republic* Book I, with *Gorgias* and *Meno* being dubbed “transitional” dialogues, since they contain (what these scholars who maintain a difference between Socratic and Platonic dialogues refer to as) both “Socratic” as well as “Platonic” elements. What believers in this Socratic/Platonic distinction believe is that Socrates had one view about erring willingly and that Plato came to think that erring willingly was possible. On the one hand, they believe that Socrates holds that no one errs willingly: It is *impossible* for someone to do a bad action based on a desire for that bad thing (believing that the bad thing is bad). On the other hand, they believe that Plato comes to have the view that it is *possible* for someone to do a bad action based on a desire for that bad thing (believing that the bad thing is bad). So most Socratic scholars today believe that there is a difference between Socrates and Plato on the question of belief.

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\(^1\) I have in mind especially scholars such as Penner (“Socrates and the Early Dialogues”, Richard Kraut (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Plato* (Cambridge University Press, 1992), 121-169.), and Vlastos (*Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Cornell University Press, 1991), 45-80).
akrasia$^2$; viz., the view that one can believe that an action is bad for oneself (where “bad for oneself” is construed as an action that will lead to one’s unhappiness), desire to do that action, and do that action. Knowledge akrasia is the view that one can know that an action is bad for oneself (again, where “bad for oneself” is construed as an action that will lead to one’s unhappiness), desire to do that action, and do that action. Penner, for instance, believes that Plato and Socrates agree on the impossibility of knowledge akrasia, and so differ only on belief akrasia (where, according to him, Socrates denies the possibility of belief akrasia and Plato believes that belief akrasia is possible$^3$).

As a Plato scholar, I am intellectually uncomfortable with the idea that Plato changed his mind on something as important as the question of whether or not it is possible to desire bad things, or to err willingly. If I can show that there is evidence in what are traditionally taken to be Socratic dialogues that the view of erring willingly in the “Socratic” dialogues is not necessarily inconsistent with the views found in “Platonic” dialogues, then I will be able to give a consistent reading of Plato on erring willingly. I am not claiming in this paper that there is no difference between the historical Socrates and the historical Plato, nor am I claiming that there are no differences between Socrates and Plato’s views in general, nor am I claiming that there are no inconsistencies of any kind in the writings of Plato, nor will I be arguing that Plato is correct in his views (though I do think his view is essentially correct). What I am claiming is

$^2$ Akrasia is also referred to as “weakness of will,” but since Plato never refers to a “will” *per se*, but instead simply uses words like “soul,” “wish,” or “desire,” there is no need for us to refer to “weakness of will” either.

$^3$ Technically, we can make the distinction between “synchronic belief akrasia” (SBA) and “diachronic belief akrasia” (DBA), where SBA would occur when a person P believes that action A is not best for him or her and simultaneously has another belief that action A is best for him or her, and P does A. DBA would occur when a person P believes that action A is not best for him or her at $t_1$ and is not doing action A, but then at $t_2$, P changes his or her mind that A is best for him or her and performs action A (the optional consequence is that P could subsequently revert to holding his or her original belief that A is not best, and express regret or remorse). Penner believes that Socrates denies SBA but accepts DBA, while Plato accepts that both SBA and DBA occur; in other words, SBA is the only real case of disagreement between Socrates and Plato’s views on this issue, for Penner. For more on Penner’s view, see Penner, “Socrates on the Strength of Knowledge: Protagoras 351B-357E”, *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 79, heft 2 (1997), 117-149, and “Knowledge vs True Belief in the Socratic Psychology of Action”, *Apeiron* 29 (1996), 199-230.
that there is a plausible reading of the dialogues (early, middle, and late) that gives Plato a consistent view of the impossibility of akrasia: That one always rationally desires what is best for oneself (no matter what one is doing), but while one is acting and desiring what is best for oneself, there can be other desires present in the person that are contradictory or inconsistent with one’s rational desire for what is best. I will try to show that this reading of the dialogues is the best overall reading, as against the traditional Socratic/Platonic interpretation. First, I will review what my opponents believe is Socrates’ view of akrasia in the “Socratic” dialogues; second, I will review what my opponents believe is Plato’s view of akrasia in the “Platonic” dialogues; and third, I will give my interpretation of the passages.

My Opponents, on the “Socratic” View of the Impossibility of Erring Willingly:

Though the *Meno* is usually taken by Socratic/Platonic interpreters to be a transitional dialogue⁴, in the *Meno*, Socrates and Meno discuss the possibility of knowing that something is bad and desiring to secure that bad thing for oneself. Meno starts off the argument by stating several times that it is possible that someone can know bad things to be bad and still desire them. But when Socrates connects up the ideas of knowing something is a bad thing (where a “bad thing” is equivalent to something that harms oneself or leads to one’s unhappiness) with the idea that no one wants to be miserable, Meno changes his mind, so Socrates and Meno end up agreeing that no one can know that a bad thing is bad and simultaneously desire that thing. Here is the way in which Meno’s conversion takes place: After stating that no one wants what is bad, Socrates asks Meno two questions and then makes a statement. The exchange goes like this (with Meno’s responses in parentheses):

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⁴ A “transitional” dialogue is ex hypothesi a dialogue which contain both Socratic and Platonic elements. For instance, the *Meno* contains discussion of virtue without a satisfactory answer (supposedly a Socratic element) and discussion of an immortal soul and recollection of the Forms (supposedly Platonic elements).
Were you not saying just now that virtue is to desire good things and have the power to secure them? (Yes, I was.) The desiring part of this statement is common to everybody, and one man is no better than another in this? (So it appears.) Clearly then, if one man is better than another, he must be better at securing them. (Quite so.) (Meno 78b)

In this passage, Socrates is saying that since everyone desires good things, but all people do not in fact secure good things (assumed here, and implied earlier at 77d-e, see below), it is not in people’s desires that we find differences between people, but in their beliefs. How can there be a difference between people’s desires if everyone desires good things, or what is best for him or herself? The reason we make mistakes and are unhappy, according to Socrates in the Meno, is that we choose to do an action based on a false belief that that action (i.e., an action that is in fact a bad thing, unbeknownst to us - a thing that will in fact lead to our unhappiness) is a good thing (i.e., an action that will lead to our happiness). In the text, Socrates makes his point as follows:

After Meno says that he cannot altogether believe that: “those who believe that bad things benefit them know that they are bad,” (my emphasis), Socrates concludes:

It is clear then that those who do not know things to be bad do not desire what is bad, but they desire those things that they believe to be good but that are in fact bad. It follows that those who have no knowledge of these things and believe them to be good clearly desire good things. (Meno 77d-e)

So Socrates argues that, since we cannot knowingly desire and do bad things, we must not know that the bad things are bad, but we can mistakenly or falsely believe that something is good when it in fact is bad – but we do not in fact desire the bad thing. Why not? To do so would be to desire unhappiness or misery, and no one desires to be unhappy or miserable.

In the Protagoras, Socrates makes the following statement, which is usually taken to be a refutation of the existence of akrasia. I will call the following passage the “Anti-Akrasia” passage:

Then if the pleasant is the good, 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. To give into oneself is nothing other than ignorance, and to control oneself is nothing other than wisdom. (They all agreed.) Well, then, do you say that ignorance is to have a false belief and to be deceived about matters of importance? (They all agreed to this.) Now, no one goes willingly toward the bad or what he believes to be bad, neither is it in human nature, so it seems, to want to go toward what one believes to be bad instead of to the good. And when he is forced to choose between one of two bad things, no one will choose the greater if he is able to choose the lesser. (They all agreed with all of that too.) (Protagoras 358c-d)

Here Socrates says that we cannot know that another course of action is better than the one we are doing and continue doing the present action: If we know (or were able to know, for the skeptical reader) for certain that our current action will bring us misery, and there is another better option open to us, how could we continue doing that miserable action? If the reader of the Protagoras should wonder why Socrates thinks that no one can knowingly continue doing some action where a better alternative is available, there is evidence from the Meno passages already cited: Since Socrates believes that no one wants to be miserable (at Meno 78a), no one can knowingly continue on a path toward misery (adapting this view to the way it is put here in the Protagoras). However, according to the Anti-Akrasia passage, we also cannot believe that there is a better course of action than the one we are doing and continue doing that action if there is another better action available to us. So the Anti-Akrasia passage adds to the Meno passage in that whereas the Meno passage says that no one desires bad things, the Anti-Akrasia passage is denying the possibility of my opting for what I believe to be the second best option of two available options, even if both of these actions are good actions!

My Opponents, on the “Platonic” View on the Possibility of Erring Willingly:

In Republic IV, Plato divides the soul into three parts: Reason, Spirit, and Appetite. (I will use the capitalized versions of “Reason,” “Spirit,” and “Appetite,” when I intend to refer to Plato’s parts of the soul.) He assigns not only desires but also beliefs to Appetite, and claims that
because these desires are contrary to the desire of Reason for what is best, there must be at least two parts of the soul. (I omit here the third division of Spirit, since the main issue centers around Appetite versus Reason.)

The key passage, according to my opponents, is this:

Let no one then, said I, disconcert us when off our guard with the objection that everybody desires not drink but good drink and not food but good food, because, the argument will run, all men desire good, and so, if thirst is desire, it would be of good drink or of good whatsoever it is, and so similarly of other desires. (Republic IV 438a)

My opponents hold that this passage is the place where we see Plato reject the view of his teacher regarding erring willingly. The “no one” who might catch Socrates off guard here “with the objection that everybody desires not drink but good drink and not food but good food, because … all men desire good …” is none other than Socrates (of the early dialogues – the Protagoras and Meno). My reading of the passage is that Plato is trying to argue here that thirst is not necessarily a desire for good drink. Appetitive desires can make person who is ignorant of her own good believe that they are best to act on, even though she also has another opinion that some other desire would be better to act on; the idea is this: If someone is ignorant, they may have one desire for what is best (and a corresponding opinion that an action that fulfills that desire is best), and also have another desire, such as an appetitive one for a drink, and not know that the desire for drink is not for what is best. For instance, we sometimes hear people say, “Part of me wants to go to the party, and part of me does not.” If someone is ignorant of their own good, putting it in Plato’s language in the Republic, that person’s Reason may be desiring not to go (which is, let us suppose, for what is best) and that person’s Appetite might be desiring to go (which is not, let us suppose, for what is best); but given the person’s ignorance, how can we argue that the person is aware of what is best in this situation – that he has identified the best action and (assuming the person attends the party) act against what is best for himself?
My View, on the Overlooked (?) Evidence in the *Protagoras* and *Laches* on Desires for Something Other Than for What is Best:

In this section, I will show that in the *Protagoras* and *Laches*, two “Socratic” dialogues, Socrates holds that there are desires for something other than for what is best, and in one case, that these desires are present in a person who has knowledge. If the latter claim is true, according to “Socrates,” then this reading can be made consistent (or at least not necessarily inconsistent) with the *Republic* passages and others. In the *Protagoras*, Socrates commits himself to the view that there can be desires in someone for something other than what is best for oneself in two passages. At *Protagoras* 357c, Socrates reviews with Protagoras what he and Protagoras agreed to earlier, saying, “. . . we were agreeing that nothing was stronger or better than knowledge, which always prevails, whenever it is present, over pleasure and everything else.” (*Protagoras* 357c; emphasis added) The key is that Socrates is saying that when knowledge is present in someone, it prevails over pleasure and everything else. But what is the “everything else?” Let us examine an earlier passage that Socrates is referring back to, where Socrates and Protagoras are getting straight what their opponents are claiming, and what they themselves are claiming. Socrates starts with what his opponents are saying:

. . . while knowledge is often present in a man, what rules him is not knowledge, but rather anything else – sometimes desire, sometimes pleasure, sometimes pain, at other times love, often fear; they think of his knowledge as being utterly dragged around by all these other things as if it were a slave. . . . or does it seem to you that knowledge is a fine thing capable of ruling a person, and if someone were to know what is good and bad, then he would not be forced by anything to act otherwise than knowledge dictates, and intelligence would be sufficient to save a person? (*Protagoras* 352b-c)

According to my reading of this passage, Socrates is characterizing the views of his and Protagoras’ opponents in this dispute as holding the following: Even if knowledge is present in a person, knowledge can be ruled by or dragged around by desire, pleasure, fear, pain, and/or love.
Socrates and Protagoras say that they believe that this is wrong; knowledge cannot be dragged around by desire, pleasure, fear, pain, and/or love. These qualities of the soul are some of the very things that Plato says in the *Republic* that we can act on contrary to our desire for what is best for ourselves. But how is what Socrates says in the *Protagoras* consistent with the view in the *Republic*? I take Socrates and Protagoras to be holding, against their opponents, the following: If knowledge is present, knowledge “rules over” and is not “dragged around” or “forced” by desire, pleasure, fear, pain, and/or love to do something other than what is best. However, I ask my opponents, why would a person with knowledge need to rule over desire, pleasure, pain, fear, or love? The answer is apparent: Only if these phenomena were possibly not best for oneself, or were irrational. If a person with knowledge had no desires, pleasures, pains, fears or loves that were contrary to what is best for oneself, why would knowledge need to rule over them? Why would Socrates not just have said, “When knowledge is present, there is no and can be no desire, pleasure, etc. for anything other than what is best for oneself, so one who knows can only act for what is best for oneself”?

Now the Plato of the *Republic* would call these desires, pleasures, fears, love, and pains irrational, since, given that they are contrary to what is best for the person, they cannot come from Reason. But this fact makes the view of erring willingly in the *Protagoras* compatible, or at least compatible in principle, with the *Republic*. For, if as Socrates says in the Protagoras, knowledge, when present, controls or rules over pleasure, pain, fear, love and desire, then these pleasures, desires, fears or love must be contrary to what is best for the person to pursue.

Otherwise, there would be no need for control over them; there would be nothing to be

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5 The desires, pleasures, fears, love, and pains mentioned in the *Protagoras* must be contrary to what is best for the person.

6 Obviously, much more needs to be fleshed out here to explain how the *Protagoras* can be read as compatible with the relevant *Republic* IV passages, but I have begun to address this question in the last section, where I give my reading of the “desire for drink” passage above.
controlled. So the *Protagoras* has a passage that, when properly understood in its context, can be read as being compatible with the ideas expressed about acting on irrational desires and beliefs in the *Republic*.

In the *Laches*, Socrates says other very interesting things in a passage\(^7\), for which I claim that a believer in the Socratic/Platonic distinction must provide a careful explanation. That is, Socrates states that it is possible to “fight” with one’s desires. The problem for my opponents is this: Why, in a Socratic dialogue, where presumably all desire is for the good, would Socrates himself (the believer in “All desire is for the good”) bring up the notion of fighting desire? How could we want to fight a desire for what is best? Socrates is unhappy with Laches’ proposal about what courage is, and he says there:

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\ldots \text{I wanted to learn from you not only what constitutes courage for a hoplite but for a horseman as well and for every sort of warrior. And I wanted to include not only those who are courageous in warfare but also those who are brave in dangers at sea, and the ones who show courage in illness and poverty and affairs of state; and then again I wanted to include not only those who are brave in the face of pain and fear but also those who are clever at fighting desire and pleasure, whether by standing their ground or running away – because there are some men, aren’t there, Laches, who are brave in matters like these? (Very much, Socrates.) So all these men are brave, but some possess courage in pleasures, some in pains, some in desires, and some in fears. And others, I think, show cowardice in the same respects. (Yes, they do.) (Laches 191d-e\(^8\), my emphasis)}
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Socrates commits himself here to the view that it is possible to fight desire, pleasure, pain, and fear, but such a view does not seem necessary if we all desire the good and cannot have any other desires to the contrary. Socrates seems to imply here that one can be standing one’s ground, all the while realizing that within one, one is realizing, for instance, “I have a desire to run away

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\(^7\) I must acknowledge that Thomas Brickhouse made me aware of this passage at the Spring 2001 Pacific APA meeting, while making his comments to Terry Penner’s invited paper.

\(^8\) Βουλήμας γάρ σου πυθέσθαι μὴ μόνον τοὺς ἐν τῷ ὀπλιτικῷ ἀνδρείῳ, ἀλλὰ καὶ τοὺς ἐν τῷ ἱππικῷ καὶ ἐν σύμπαντι τῷ πολέμῳ εἶδει, καὶ μὴ μόνον τοὺς ἐν τῷ πολέμῳ, ἀλλὰ καὶ τοὺς ἐν τῷ πρὸς τὴν θάλασσαν κυνήγοις ἀνδρείοις ἔστασι, καὶ ὅσοι γὰρ πρὸς νόσους καὶ ὅσοι πρὸς πενίας ἡ καὶ πρὸς τὰ πολιτικά ἀνδρεία εἰσίν, καὶ ἐτί αὐτῇ μὴ μόνον ὅσοι πρὸς λύπας ἀνδρείου εἰσίν ἡ φόβους, ἀλλὰ καὶ πρὸς ἐπιθυμίας ἢ ἑδονὰς δεινοὶ μάξεσθαι, καὶ μένοις καὶ ἀναστρέφοντες - εἰσὶ γάρ πού τινες, ὃς Λάχης, καὶ ἐν τοῖς τοιούτοις ἀνδρεῖοι - (truncated; FIX – Continue at 191e3)
now!” If this passage must be read as admitting that it is possible for a person simultaneously to have a desire to run away (not a desire for what is best) and a desire to stand one’s ground (a desire for what is best), this passage is compatible with the “Platonic” view of the soul, where one can have a desire contrary to what is best.

Compare this Laches passage with a passage from Plato’s Laws: “But what is to be our definition of courage? Are we to define it simply in terms of a fight against fears and pains only, or do we include desires and pleasures, which cajole and seduce us so effectively?” (Laws 633d) If Plato includes pleasures and desires as part of what courage is in the Laws, which is a late (so-called Platonic) dialogue, and he includes pleasures and desires as part of courage in the Laches, then must (and indeed should) we interpret the middle dialogues such as the Republic as being contradictory with what we find in the early dialogues?

We have seen that the passages in the Protagoras and Laches9 do not provide conclusive evidence that all desire is for the good, and also that they can be read consistently with the Republic, where believers in a Socratic/Platonic distinction (on the question of whether all desire is for the good) believe Plato rejects the Socratic view of desire in the early dialogues. We have also seen that the Laches passage is consistent with a passage from the Laws, which makes it more unlikely that Plato changes his mind in the Republic.

Conclusion:

I have tried to argue that it is plausible to read Socrates and Plato as having the same view regarding erring willingly by looking at the Protagoras, Laches, Meno, Republic and Laws.

9 There is one more passage to mention, from another, early, “Socratic” dialogue, the Apology. Socrates says to the jury members: “It may be that one of you, reflecting on these facts, will be prejudiced against me, and being irritated by his reflections, will give his vote in anger” (Apology 34c). This passage might be construed as implying that it is possible that the jurors who would vote to convict Socrates because of their anger, and not because they thought it was best.
At the very least, I have implicitly raised a question for Socratic/Platonic interpreters: Why does Socrates himself discuss the courage involved in restraining one’s desires in the Laches, given that (1) the Laches is an early dialogue on their view, and (2) Socrates believes that there is only one desire for good in everyone? At most, I have given some justification for the belief that Plato never changed his mind about erring willingly. What remains to be done is to look at all the other passages related to erring willingly, in the Phaedrus, Republic, Timaeus, and Laws, and attempt to confirm my reading of the Protagoras, Laches, and Republic, but this would have to be done as part of a larger project.

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