Prudence, Rationality and Happiness in Aristippus

It is noticeably clear from several ancient sources that the hedonist Aristippus of Cyrene (a friend and student of Socrates) asks us to concentrate on enjoying the pleasures of the present or near-future. What is not so obvious is his reason for such a recommendation. Although any explanation for this is bound to be somewhat speculative due to the inadequacy of the sources, I would like to offer a possible rationale for, and subsequent reconstruction of, his view, one which might be seen to take its departure primarily from the hedonistic theory set forth in Plato’s Protagoras. In effect, I want to argue that Aristippus’ present-moment focus can be explained as part of a rational overall strategy to guarantee maximum pleasure over one’s life as a whole. I begin this paper however, by briefly running through one of the more popular explanations advanced in recent years for Aristippus’ present-moment focus and neglect of the future. This account, I try to argue, is not only unconvincing but largely incompatible with the bulk of the evidence.

I

Personal Identity Explanation

Some scholars have attempted to account for Aristippus’ (and the Cyrenaics’) strong emphasis on the present by appealing to the view that he holds a conception of personal identity which denies that the same agent sees himself as persisting throughout a lifetime, in other words, that he sees himself as a single, temporally extended person.¹ T.H. Irwin, for instance, claims that Aristippus and the Cyrenaics reject long-term planning (happiness, or eudaimonia), because they have doubts about personal identity or a continuing self. Such reservations are in turn related, it is argued, to certain ontological

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and epistemological doubts they have about aggregates or collections of affections or impressions (*pathe*).

Very briefly, the brunt of Irwin’s argument runs as follows. The Cyrenaics ground their main ethical position, that individual present pleasure is the moral end, on the distinction between particular affections and collections of affections. While they see individual present pleasure as belonging to particular or simple affection and so as identifiable and irrefutable, they see happiness, or *eudaimonia* and temporally extended selves in compositional terms or as collections of affections and so as unidentifiable and fallible – hence they adopt a sceptical stance towards them.²

The view espoused here would amount to roughly the following. Aristippus holds an account of personal identity which conflicts with the ‘common-sense’ view of the same agent persisting throughout the whole of life. ‘Future selves’ stand to ‘present selves’ from a diachronic perspective in the same way as other persons on a synchronic perspective do. Hence, the reasoning goes, we will not be concerned with the future since whatever it brings will not really belong to us – those plans will really be for our ‘future selves’ for whom we have no rational concern. We would have no good reason therefore to sacrifice our pleasures now for the sake of our ‘other’ selves down the road. We would thus be rejecting the assumption that temporal stages in our life must all be taken into account with every rational choice, or, to put it another way, we would be concluding that to discount ‘our’ own future pleasures is rational because the pleasures experienced by later selves is not fully one’s ‘own’.³

**Objections to Personal Identity Explanation**

³ Something like this is given humorous expression by Jerry Seinfeld. “I never get enough sleep. I stay up late at night, because I’m Night Guy. Night Guy wants to stay up late. What about getting up after five hours’ sleep? Oh, that’s Morning Guy’s problem. ‘That’s not my problem, I’m Night Guy. I stay up as late as I want.’ So you get up in the morning, the alarm, you’re exhausted, you’re groggy, oh you hate that Night Guy! You see, Night Guy always screws Morning Guy. There’s nothing Morning Guy can do. The only thing Morning Guy can do is try and oversleep often enough so that Day Guy loses his job, and Night Guy has no money to go out any more.” From *Seinfeld*, ‘The Glasses,’ Thursday 30 September 1993, NBC.
Though neatly cogent, there is absolutely no justification for such a view to be found in the testimony on Aristippus, let alone the Cyrenaics. Nothing explicit in the sources concerning Aristippus himself even remotely suggests concerns about temporal identity. In fact, the sources on Aristippus unequivocally land on the side of the ‘common-sense’ view. In Xenophon’s *Memorabilia* (historically proximate testimony), for instance, Aristippus (twice) states explicitly that he is concerned with his life as a whole, or *eudaimonia* (2. 1. 9, 2. 1. 11), and it seems clear that this sort of perspective, or eudaimonism, presupposes or rests on the assumption of a conception of the ethical agent as a self whose identity endures over time; in other words, of someone conceiving of oneself as having a life—a chain of actions and experiences that belong to one subject lasting through (at least a significant period of) time. Moreover, similar eudaimonistic considerations pervade their entire discussion. Hence, with respect to the testimony of Xenophon, not only is it clear from certain claims he makes that Aristippus is conceiving of the good life or life as a whole—and thus by extension of himself as a temporally extended and persisting agent—but the language and the overriding concern of the discussion itself, actually presupposes it.

Finally, I take it as apparent that much of the later testimony also implies or entails belief in a continuing self on the part of Aristippus. Consider a passage from Diogenes Laertius: “Again, when Aristippus was asked what are the subjects which handsome boys ought to learn, his reply was, ‘Those which will be useful to them when they are grown up.’” (II 80) Aristippus here is clearly conceiving of the boys and the grown men that they will one day become as the *same agents* in different times.

Before leaving doubts about personal identity as a possible explanation for Aristippus’ near-future focus, perhaps something should be briefly said about Plato’s *Theaetetus*, since some scholars have taken some of what is expressed there as *implicit* evidence for Aristippus’ relevant scepticism. Relatively early in his discussion with Theaetetus, Socrates makes reference to a subtle group of thinkers (156a), whose ontological and
epistemological views suggests scepticism concerning personal identity. For example, at 157b Socrates says that, according to these wise men, the verb ‘to be’ ought to be abolished from use, along with words like ‘something’, ‘mine’, etc. or any other name that makes things stand still. Instead, one should speak in accordance with nature and refer to things as ‘becoming’, ‘changing’, etc. Also, at 158e5-160c5, Socrates argues from the Protagorean perspective that the different Socrateses perceived at different times are not stages of one and the same continuing Socrates. As stated, some scholars take this group to be Aristippus and the Cyrenaics. If this was true, it would seem to provide Aristippus with not only a sceptical view of personal identity but with a firm ontological and epistemological basis for such scepticism.

However, the general chronological consensus concerning Plato’s dialogues informs us that the *Theaetetus* was written sometime –give or take 5-10 years– around 360 BC, while the death of Aristippus is usually dated around the same time, or a bit later, perhaps around 356 BC (Aristippus was probably a few years older than Plato). In any case, this dating clearly rules out the later Cyrenaics and Aristippus’ grandson of the same name as candidates for these subtle thinkers mentioned in the *Theaetetus* since they were all philosophically active quite a few generations later. Thus the chronology tells us that only the views of Aristippus himself (the Elder) could have been known by Plato.

But if we take Plato to be referring to the doctrines of Aristippus then several difficulties present themselves. First, Plato refers to a subtle group, not a singular person, on more than one occasion (156a, 157b), and there is no evidence that Aristippus belonged to any sort of group. Second, if it is meant to refer to the doctrines of Aristippus then we would obviously need to assume that Aristippus had fully, or near fully, developed what we encounter in the later sources concerning Cyrenaic epistemology, but this is problematic for several reasons: i) there is no evidence on Aristippus, at least from those sources

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4 For example, see Zeller, 1963, 112.
5 Aristippus the Younger would have been barely twenty years of age by the time of publication of the *Theaetetus*. It seems unrealistic that he would have already developed a fully fledged epistemological theory like the one Plato represents in the *Theaetetus*. 
which are not susceptible to conflation between the two Aristippuses, elsewhere which corroborates or even slightly suggests such radical epistemology, ii) perhaps related to this, we would need to account for the testimony on Aristippus which attributes no concern to speculative theorizing but only with ethics or practical conduct\(^6\), and iii) we would need to make sense of the testimony which attributes the central doctrines of Cyrenaic epistemology to the younger Aristippus.\(^7\)

All things considered, it is probably most reasonable to conclude therefore that the position Plato discusses in the *Theaetetus* is not meant to refer to Aristippus (perhaps instead to some other historical group, or maybe it is simply a creation on the part of the author) and so not evidence for a sceptical view of personal identity on his part.

**II**

**Aristippus and Attributions of a Lack of a Rational Strategy**

Julia Annas, in her *The Morality of Happiness*, claims that Aristippus of Cyrene 1) rejects the traditional eudaimonistic concern for one’s life as a whole and that 2) his position falls short of any kind of rational theory of conduct. She thinks that seen against the long-term hedonism of Plato’s *Protagoras*, Aristippus holds an irrational and absurd view. She maintains that Aristippus’ own form of pleasure pursuit, with its emphasis on the present moment and perceived lack of concern for the future, is far removed from Socrates’ stress in the *Protagoras* on hedonism as a rational overall strategy to guarantee maximum pleasure over one’s life as a whole. Annas says:

> “On the other hand, Aristippus’ own form of pleasure pursuit, focused clearly on pursuing the present pleasure rather than caring for the past and future, has little to do with Socrates’ stress in the *Protagoras* on hedonism as a rational overall strategy to ensure maximum pleasure over one’s life. The *Protagoras* theory in fact points in quite the other direction, since it stresses the irrationality of going for the present pleasure just because it is present, a viewpoint that leads to misjudging the pleasantness of what is far away in time just because it is far away from the present.

\(^6\) For example, see Aristotle, *Met*. 996a21-34.  
\(^7\) For example, see Aristocles, quoted by Eusebius, *Prep. for the Gospel*. XIV. 18. 31-32.
Aristippus breaks with all theories that stress one’s life as a whole, rather than isolated episodes – and this would include the Protagoras theory.” (228)

I have already mentioned that Aristippus is concerned with some kind of perspective for one’s life as whole (see Mem. 2. 1. 9, 2. 1. 11). Thus I leave that issue as it stands and move forward to Annas’ second claim. With respect to this it is undeniable that in some of the central sources on Aristippus there is heavy stress on the more present-moment pleasures and some kind of corresponding lack of concern for the future. However, do they go so far as to justify Annas’ attribution of a lack of rational or prudential thought on the part of Aristippus? I want to argue that a thorough analysis of them does not commit Aristippus to this. In fact, I would like to go further and make the more positive suggestion that, viewed in light of the Protagoras theory, a much more interesting and substantive interpretation of Aristippus’ position may be reconstructed. That is, I want to argue that, contra the long-term hedonism presented in the Protagoras, Aristippus may be looked on as offering up an alternate hedonist strategy of his own –one which however does not run foul of any of the ordinary Greek commitments to prudence, rationality and life as a whole.

**Aristippus and the Protagoras**

Now prior to embarking upon the central initiative of this paper it would seem that an important question which needs to be asked is whether or not there are good grounds for thinking that Aristippus’ position can be seen and reconstructed –albeit somewhat speculatively– in the light of the Protagoras theory. Certainly many scholars have seen, and continue to see, a connection between Aristippus and the Socrates of the Protagoras.\(^8\) Aristippus was a friend, follower and student of Socrates, and he may have thought the theory Socrates builds up in the Protagoras, that is, taking (the rational pursuit of) pleasure as one’s final end, to be a legitimate interpretation of his teacher’s ethics.\(^9\) It


\(^9\) I am not concerned here with whether or not Plato’s Socrates in the Protagoras is putting forward the hedonistic theory as his own, or merely arguing ad hom; neither am I concerned with whether or not the
would not be at all surprising therefore that Aristippus would be developing variations on the sorts of arguments that Socrates appears to present there. Although there is no mention of Aristippus in the *Protagoras*, Socrates, for instance, does allude briefly to pleasures of the moment (353d), providing perhaps some indication that certain modifications on hedonism, e.g. short-term or sybaritic, were already in the air at this time. There is also the discussion found in Book II of Xenophon’s *Memorabilia* between Socrates and Aristippus where the former seems to be extolling a position somewhat reminiscent of the hedonistic or prudential passages in the *Protagoras* (Socrates refers to pleasures of the moment there as well -2. 1. 20). And even if he is not doing exactly this, from the things Socrates says there Aristippus may certainly be –and I believe he is– interpreting him as putting forward a kind of long-term view of prudence or hedonism. It is interesting therefore to see what Aristippus has to say there in terms of a reply to Socrates’ perceived position.

**The *Protagoras* and the Art of Measurement**

As a point of departure, I begin my look at the *Protagoras* with Socrates’ introduction of the art of measurement. After claiming, against those who speak of being overcome by pleasure, that he can conceive of no other way for pleasure not to be worth pain except that one should be more and the other less, Socrates seems to test his own claim by imagining someone interjecting:

“For if someone were to say: ‘But, Socrates, the immediate pleasure is very much different from the pleasant and the painful at a later time,’ I would reply, ‘They are not different in any other way than by pleasure and pain, for there is no other way that they could differ.’” (356a-b)

*historical* Socrates himself was a hedonist. All that matters for the purposes of this paper is that the position described in the *Protagoras* is available to Aristippus, which it is, and that some hedonistic position might be gleaned from it.

10 This also appears to be the view of Gosling and Taylor who take Prodicus’ fable to stand for a kind of proto-hedonism, as a kind of unarticulated version of the view presented in Plato’s *Protagoras* (1982, 15). Irwin shares a similar belief, 1991, n.5; 1995, Chap. 6, n.35.

11 For example, the question that Socrates employs to frame their central discussion is: “Shall we then consider whether the rulers or the ruled live the pleasanter life?” (2. 1. 10).
Here Taylor, in his translation of Plato Protagoras (1976, see commentary to 356a5), thinks the imaginary objector, in accordance with the views of Bentham, is advising Socrates to add distance in time to his list of conditions determining the value of pleasures and pains. Surely this, the objector thinks (or so Taylor surmises), gives a significant reason for short-term pleasures to be more valuable than Socrates has so far acknowledged. Bentham (Principles of Morals and Legislation, Ch. 4.) holds that the temporal distance and the certainty of the occurrence affects the value of a particular pleasure (or pain) directly. On this account, a more distant pleasure is less valuable than a less distant pleasure and a more certain pleasure is more valuable than a less certain pleasure. Thus some might interpret Socrates’ response as inadequate since he does not appear to concede the possibility that a nearer pleasure might be, as the objector seems to imply, ipso facto more valuable than one which is more remote.

But why should he make such a concession? We might see Socrates’ description at this particular stage of the text as concerned only with the intrinsic value of pleasures and pains. The intrinsic value of a thing is a component of its value that depends solely on the intrinsic features of the thing rather than on its relations. So the intrinsic value of an episode of pleasure must depend upon facts about that episode of pleasure itself (in Socrates’ case, presumably such things as intensity of feeling, its duration, etc., given the apparent aspirations for quantitative measurement, e.g. 356e, 357a) and not upon extrinsic features (such as, for instance, its cause, effect and distance in time). It is the objector who conflates extrinsic features with intrinsic ones by assuming that temporal distance is directly relevant to the value of a particular pleasure. And it seems to be part of Socrates’ point here that a mere difference in when a pleasure happens (a relational property) is not a difference in its value or quality –the fact that a pleasure is further off in the future will not make it, when it comes, any less pleasurable.

So Socrates’ reply is, it seems, right on target so long as we view him, at least at this specific stage, as confined solely to a view of axiology concerning the intrinsic value of pleasures and pains. Indeed, the preceding text seems to confirm just this view. At 353e,
Socrates states that when people condemn pleasure, they do so not because they take
pleasure to be bad as such, but because of the bad effects they find pleasure often to have.
For example, at one point Socrates says that the only reason why the pleasures of food
and drink and sex seem to be evil is that they result in pain and deprive us of future
pleasures. He concludes that pleasure is in fact good as such and pain bad, regardless of
what their consequences may on occasion be. Thus it seems to be clear here that Socrates’
concern is with the intrinsic value of pleasures and pains.

However, immediately following this Socrates appears to be turning from a view
concerned with the intrinsic value of pleasures and pains to a view about what sorts of
actions one should perform —specifically, about what to do to bring the pleasant about. He
says,

“Weighing is a good analogy; you put the pleasures together and the pains together, both the near
and the remote, on the balance scale, and then say which of the two is more. For if you weigh
pleasant things against pleasant, the greater and the more must always be taken; if painful things
against painful, the fewer and the smaller. And if you weigh pleasant things against painful, and
the painful is exceeded by the pleasant —whether the near by the remote or the remote by the near—
you have to perform that action in which the pleasant prevails; on the other hand, if the pleasant is
exceeded by the painful, you have to refrain from doing that.” (356b-c, italics added)

This no longer appears to be a view in axiology but one concerned with normative
behavior, or, perhaps more appropriate to the apparent hedonism expressed by Socrates in
this dialogue, a view about prudence. Socrates, in other words, is now saying something
about hedonistic prudential or calculative choice-making. To take the first case, one is to
place the pleasant and the painful on separate ends of the balance scale and weigh them —
if the pleasant weighs in heavier than the painful, one ought to go ahead with the
particular course of action assessed. Indeed, Socrates had offered up just such examples a
little earlier in the discussion. At 354a-b, he implies that the immediate pain of warfare
must be chosen because later it will produce wealth, rule over others and the safety of the
city; the weighing-in complete, the pleasure prevails over the pain and so one ought to go
to war.
Socrates and Knowledge of the Future

What is interesting here is that it appears that Socrates presupposes that one can have present knowledge of future pleasures and pains. That one, in other words, can be in a certain infallible epistemic state now with regards to what the future holds, specifically, with regards to the consequences of choices of action, especially the long-term effects of choices which at first glimpse appear either to be inconsistent with hedonism but indirectly produce the maximization of pleasure –like perhaps the warfare case, or else to be consistent with hedonism but are indirectly opposed to the maximization of pleasure.

Perhaps a further indication that Socrates presupposes something like this can be derived from the comparison he subsequently goes on to draw between the viewing of an object that appears smaller from a distance and the viewing of a pleasure that appears smaller because it is in the remote future, which, in addition, he compares to sounds which seem louder when near at hand, softer when farther away (356c-d). When Socrates speaks about distant objects and sounds and likens them with future pleasures he seems to be implying that future pleasures, like distant objects and sounds, are ontologically ‘out there’, so to speak, that they are anchored in reality in the same way that distant objects and sounds are.

Now surely Socrates does not really think exactly that. Nevertheless, the very fact that he invites this apparent ontological comparison suggests an enormous epistemological confidence concerning the occurrence of certain future states of affairs. The fact that he draws upon actual distant objects in his analogy strongly implies that Socrates is taking for granted the virtual epistemological certainty of the occurrence or availability of future pleasures (and pains). He does, after all, later go on to conclude that the art (techne) he is speaking of, that which concerns the correct choice of pleasures and pains be they larger or smaller or nearer or further (357b), embodies an exact knowledge (episteme) (357b4).
Perhaps equally revealing, Socrates never returns to his imagined objection concerning distance in time. Of course, it may have been a misplaced objection at that particular instance when the description seemed to be one about the intrinsic value of pleasures and pains. But later, in terms of an account of prudential reasoning or choice-making, surely that objection would have been a relevant one or at least one commonsensical enough to raise. Distance in time, after all, does not seem to be irrelevant to prudential decision-making for the reason that it affects the certainty of the attainment of, in this case, pleasures and pains. The degree to which some pleasure will or will not occur because of its distance in time would seem to affect its choiceworthiness. The fact that Socrates chooses not to raise or dwell on such a seemingly important factor in the comparison of goods in the near and more distant future gives further reason to suggest that he thinks both goods near and far are capable of being known as equally reliable and so are certainly attainable.

Now, whether Socrates has perhaps overlooked distance in time as a relevant factor or whether he does not raise it simply because his techne assumes a certain epistemological infallibility with regards to what the future holds, we might imagine some of this looking a bit suspect to a reader or student of the Protagoras. After all, can there really be such an art that delivers such epistemic certainty concerning future states of affairs? In general, could not Socrates be seen as culpable of being somewhat overly-convincing and optimistic of our chances of predicting and taking into account the important facts about the future? What about the vagaries of chance –surely no art concerned with long-term future assessment can account for all contingencies? And if not, should not the recognition of this fact affect one’s decision-making? That is, is there not a very reasonable sense in which it is rational to prefer a more reliable over a less reliable pleasure?

We have seen earlier how it is an appeal to personal identity proved inadequate as a possible source of explanation for Aristippus’ concentration on the present. As suggested already, I want to try to motivate an entirely new direction of interpretation. I propose we
read Aristippus and attempt an explanation of his view in light of the sorts of questions just posed.

Aristippus’ Outlook

Now, how does Aristippus’ perspective compare to the one which Socrates presents in the *Protagoras?* First, and most obviously, his is one which clearly advocates greater concentration on the present.¹² A few passages should suffice to show this.

“For he (Aristippus) revelled in the pleasure of the present, and did not toil in seeking out the enjoyment of what was not present.” (DL II 66)

“…he thought that the memory of past pleasures and the hope of those to come are of no concern to him, but he judged the good solely in the present.” (Athen. *Deip.* XII 544a-b)

“He told them to pay attention to each day as it comes, and similarly to that part of the day in which the individual’s action or thought takes place. For he said that only the present is ours…” (Aelian, *VH* 14. 6)

But what is it that motivates this sort of present-moment or near-future focus? The answer to this clearly involves a kind of pessimism or scepticism with regards to the future. The following are the completions of the two latter passages above and offer just this sort of explanation.

“He (Aristippus) thought that having enjoyed or enjoying in the future were nothing to him since the first is no longer the second not yet and unclear.” (Athen. *Deip.* XII 544b, italics added)

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¹² I take it as evident that, in an assessment of his actions, it simply cannot be true that Aristippus takes no concern whatsoever of the future. To begin with, nobody who is concerned with any kind of deliberative activity at all can ever be said to be totally unconcerned with anything that extends beyond the present temporal point that one occupies; after all, even a simple action like reaching for a glass of wine at the dinner table involves a concern for a future state of affairs. Moreover, to attribute to Aristippus any such radical discounting simply runs antithetical to his commitments, implied throughout the testimony, to some amount of prudential discrimination and self-control. This is clearly expressed in both of his discussions with Socrates in the *Memorabilia.* At 1. 2. 4-6, he agrees with Socrates’ counsel in approaching certain situation with the requisite foresight. So Aristippus does not deny reflection with respect to the more short-term consequences of one’s actions. It is more the consequences of the distant future that Aristippus wishes to put little stock into, since it is especially there that issues of uncertainty might reasonably be said to arise. This will become clearer as the exposition develops.
“For he (Aristippus) said that only the present is ours, not the past nor the future. For the former has perished and it is unclear if the latter will be.” (Aelian, VH 14. 6, italics added)

There seems to be at least two important points being made here with regards to the characteristics of the future, namely, that it is ‘not yet’ and that it is ‘unclear’. The former appears to be some sort of metaphysical claim, one which looks to cast doubt on the reality, at least from the present perspective, of future goods or states of affairs. This is interesting, especially, as we recall, in light of Socrates’ analogy of future pleasures with actual distant objects and sounds. That is, unlike Socrates, Aristippus seems to consider future states of affairs to be of an inferior ontological status (if at all) simply by virtue of being in the future or ‘not yet’.

The latter characteristic is, for the purposes of this paper, perhaps even more intriguing. As these particular lines are both embodied in larger passages offering descriptions of his hedonistic conduct or action, Aristippus’ emphasis on the ‘unclearness’ of the future should be interpreted primarily in the relevant epistemological sense, that is, one can now be less certain of the pleasures to occur in the distant future than in the nearer future most probably because there is a greater intervening period between that time and now in which various unanticipated things can happen to interfere with their occurrence.

That Aristippus is suggesting something along these lines is, it would seem, implicit in the Memorabilia text. It would appear, in part, to explain his hesitation in accepting Socrates’ insistence on the life of the ruler (2. 1. 7-9). That is, from what Socrates has been saying to him about self-restraint and ruling (2. 1. 1-8), Aristippus doubtless sees rulers as holding to a form of planning that advocates the actualization of merely, or mostly, distant future goods or pleasures. He probably judges that this requires a continual postponement of enjoyment for the sake of those future events, which perhaps, due to the (future) involved –and thus dependent on more intervening events– position of ruling, may never come. In other words, Aristippus might be wondering why he would waste time setting up for himself the future pleasures of the ruler when given all the unreliability wrought up over time by such a commitment or given all the more general
unforeseen things which may happen in that long intervening period between that time and the present, these pleasures may never come to be actualized. His ensuing reference to wishing for nothing but the easiest (and pleasantest) life (2. 1. 9) would seem to corroborate something like this. By easy life he appears to have in mind the cultivation and pursuit of desires rather more limited in scope than those of Socrates’ ruler. The sorts of desires, it might be surmised, which are not so ambitious in nature and not so extended into the future thereby possibly increasing their chances of something’s intervening to prevent their fulfillment.

In any case, what we might safely infer so far is that a likely source of disagreement or divergence between Aristippus and both Socrates’ calculative deliberator in the Protagoras and Socrates’ ruler in the Memorabilia involves their respective levels of confidence in the degree to which an agent can count on future objects of desire or pleasure.

**Aristippus and the Longer-Term Future**

Now, we might notice from the assessment of these particular passages presented so far that though Aristippus is clearly a sort of pessimist about the future, he does not appear to be a pessimist about the future in toto. That is, his pessimism seems to be directed specifically at potential or future sources or objects of pleasure, not the future as a whole. From the fact that he cannot count on the availability of distant or future goods, it is left entirely open that he takes seriously a perspective for one’s life as a whole. Indeed, we have already seen that much of the testimony on Aristippus strongly suggests just this perspective. However, since many have taken the passages by Athenaeus and Aelian in particular to signal a clear lack of concern for the future it is important to spend some time looking closely at what exactly they have to say in this regard.

Here they are:
“(Aristippus) taught that this life of easy-going pleasure we have discussed is the goal and that happiness is based upon it; further, that it is for the single moment; like men of profligate life, he regarded the memory of past enjoyments as having no importance for himself, any more than the expectation of pleasures to come; rather, he judged the good by the sole criterion of the present, and thought that past and future enjoyment had no relevancy to himself, because the first no longer had being, the second had no being as yet, and was uncertain.” (Deipn. XII 544a, italics added)

“He (Aristippus) told them to pay attention to each day as it comes, and similarly to that part of the day in which the individual’s action or thought takes place. For he said that only the present is ours…” (Aelian, VH 14. 6, italics added)

Although it is indisputably true that both passages call attention to the importance of the present, I do not believe they do so in a way which casts any aspersions on the significance of the future as a whole. In regards to this, let us examine the Athenaeus passage first since there are several critical points to take note of here. To begin with, as just alluded to, what appears to be the target of Aristippus’ concerns is the availability, or more accurately, the non-availability, of future objects or sources of pleasure, not the future itself or any long-term goal associated with it. This is why he says specifically that the ‘expectation of pleasures’ and ‘future enjoyment’ have no importance to him. It is not doubts qua future but rather doubts qua future enjoyment or pleasure that worries him here.

Such an interpretation, moreover, has the advantage of better explaining how it is Athenaeus goes on to say, subsequent to mentioning the goal of getting pleasures, that Aristippus thinks happiness can be based on it. Surely, if it was part of the view of the present-moment that it overthrew or excluded a concern for the future, then the appeal to happiness here would be unnecessary. Instead, given that both the concepts of present pleasure and happiness are kept prominent, it is best to understand the pursuit of present pleasure or near-future focus as somehow couched within a long-term commitment to, or integral to the aim of securing, happiness.

As for the Aelian passage, we might, right off the bat, notice something interesting about it which should once again make us think twice about the popular reading of Aristippus as someone who is wholly unconcerned with the future or life as a whole. That is, as what
appears to be some sort of general overarching principle he enjoins us to take notice of each day, an outlook which surely betrays—and involves—a recognition of the future. It would seem that if he had no concern for, or overall reflection of, the future there would have been no need to preface his counsel regarding the importance of the present with the recognition that this is something which ought to be considered in the light of each day forward. Indeed, this passage does not appear to be at all unlike the Athenaeus one in the sense that it too seems to set the pursuit of present pleasure within the context of a concern for the future.

**Does Aristippus Have a Hedonistic Strategy?**

Thus from our examination so far we have seen that 1) Aristippus holds to some kind of near-term focus or pursuit of near-future pleasure, that 2) he holds somewhat of a pessimistic view with regards to the availability of future goods or pleasures, but also that 3) he does not discount a concern for the future as such. Still, as they stand right now, such generalities do not seem to add up to much, especially seen in light of, or in opposition to, the more formal and fleshed out prudential reasoning of the hedonism in the *Protagoras*. And, to be sure, many commentators, Annas included, have seen Aristippus’ near-term focus and pessimism regarding the remote future (in the sense of accurately predicting it) as translating into a lack of commitment, on his part, of any sort of prudential or rational plan of action. Is this true? Has Aristippus really nothing more in mind than a kind of *carpe diem* outlook or attitude?

Certainly, that future goods are ‘not yet’ and that the future is largely unclear does not, at least on the face of it, look like much of a starting-point for some system of prudential planning. That said however, I believe we may actually have good reason to construe the above listed features as partially constituting some kind of formal prudential schema. There may be good grounds, that is, to see Aristippus’ view here not as some sort of isolated or free-floating bit of advice for us to focus on the moment and to try to make the best of it we can, but as a kind of *strategy* or rational plan of action, one which does
ultimately take into account the entire purview of a life. In support of such claims, I now turn to the *Memorabilia*.

In his discussion with Aristippus in the *Memorabilia* (Book 2. 1), Socrates is clearly exhorting his interlocutor about the benefits of holding to a kind of long-term prudentialism. Whether or not he subscribes to it himself or is merely arguing *ad hom*, Socrates even goes on to couch this long-term view in terms of achieving the pleasant life. Specifically, he asks Aristippus to consider two options, “whether the rulers or the ruled live the pleasantest life?” (2. 1. 10) Now, Aristippus has plainly been attentive to Socrates throughout and he knows very well what Socrates intends by that question. That is, Aristippus knows that rulers will turn out to be the best candidates for the acquisition of the pleasantest life because they practice self-control and are very mindful of future or long-term consequences -as opposed to the ruled, who have no control and like partridges and other wild animals, rush into situations without foresight (2. 1. 4-5).

Aristippus’ response to this is emphatic and is clearly meant as a viable challenge to the outlook Socrates is exhorting him on. He replies that his option is a middle one which leads neither through rule nor slavery, but through freedom, which is the most certain path to happiness (*eudaimonia*) (2. 1. 11). Before proceeding any further, it must be mentioned, once again, that Aristippus here never disputes or doubts the eudaimonistic perspective with which Socrates’ question at 2. 1. 10 is framed –indeed, as we see, it is precisely the long-term goal of *eudaimonia* Aristippus thinks his middle option will ensure. Now what is this middle option exactly? Well undoubtedly it has something to do with the near-future pursuit of pleasures. After all, Aristippus himself describes his option as constitutive of a kind of *freedom*, and we can gather from what Socrates infers about his interlocutor throughout –that he is unrestrained in regards to eating, drinking and sex (2. 1. 1), that he has a weakness for high living (2. 1. 15), and that he is indolent in regards to restraining himself from present enjoyment (2. 1. 20)— that it concerns some sort of liberty with respect to the pursuit of the more momentary pleasures. Indeed, Aristippus pretty much reaffirms this when he presents the reasons for why he does *not* want to be a
ruler –that is, rulers sacrifice a large part of their desires and abstain from many good things (2. 1. 8-9).

What are we to draw from this then? Surely it is not a mere *carpe diem* outlook Aristippus is putting forth here. Both his appeal to happiness and his adamantly yet carefully chosen third option, one which avoids what perhaps Socrates had intended as an exhaustive and exclusive disjunction, i.e., that one is either ruler or ruled, strongly betrays the attempt at a feasible challenge to Socrates’ position. The broad interpretation here would appear to amount to something like the following. Aristippus seems to think that, contra Socrates’ long-term view, the best way to achieve happiness (and to avoid slavery) is through pursuing the pleasures of the moment or near-future. Indeed, such a view is strongly suggested by the language Aristippus uses when he puts forth his view. First, he says that he does not believe that the way of a ruler is most conducive to those, like himself, who wish for a life of the greatest ease and pleasure that can be had (2. 1. 9). Second, he claims that his way through freedom is the most certain road to happiness (2. 1. 11). We might reasonably take the superlatives in the former and the adverb in the latter to indicate that Aristippus is not concerned with the acquisition of pleasure in some haphazard way, but with the best way of acquiring the most of it during a lifetime. In other words, that implied in his third option is some kind of fixed strategy for the maximization of pleasure throughout a lifetime.

Whatever the exact details, this is surely not, as is popularly thought, some crude position which says that to achieve the best life one should go for present pleasure without any overall reflection. Rather, and more interestingly, it is perhaps best viewed as someone putting forward, against Socrates’ long-term view, a modified strategy for hedonism— one which focuses on the present or short-term future because doing so will ultimately be more conducive to the maximization of pleasure throughout a lifetime.

Let us concede then the possibility that Aristippus is recommending to us a strategy or prudential plan which takes the pursuit of near-term pleasure as integral to securing the
pleasantest life overall. And let us assume that an essential part of his explanation for this has to do with the uncertainty of the availability of future pleasures. Interesting though this view may be, as it stands, admittedly it is still quite thin. So is there anything more specific to be found which might help to flesh out some of the details underlying this quite general explanation? Is there any further insight to be had with respect to the characteristics of Aristippus’ near-future focus which would explain more convincingly why he thinks it may work as a good strategy, compared to say, the long-term focus stressed in the *Protagoras*, for the maximization of pleasure throughout a lifetime? I believe there is, and for this I would like to now turn back to the passage from Aelian.

Concerning an elucidation into the character or features of this near-future focus, two points in particular immediately jump out at us. That is, not only is Aristippus clearly concerned with action or conduct, but he is also concerned with a kind of thought, intent or deliberation, where the latter is doubtless meant to serve or underlie the former. *Prima facie*, this would seem to dispel those views on Aristippus which suggest he is some sort of non-reflective, passive recipient of present pleasure. Indeed, scope or range of deliberation aside, Aristippus need not be looked on here as being too far from the practical deliberator of the *Protagoras*, in the sense of promoting a concern for grounding action in some degree of reflective thought about consequences.

We might get further and more specified confirmation of this when we read on. As it says, this deliberation and action is confined to the time closely surrounding it –stretching out to a part, or perhaps almost the whole, of the day. And it seems that the reason for such temporal confinement has something to do with the fact that, as it says, ‘only the present is ours’. This stress on the possessive, i.e. that only the present is somehow within our ownership or control, suggests strongly that Aristippus is recommending to us to consider only those things which can be affected by, or can come about due to, our actions. This sort of view, it should be noticed, fits nicely with our earlier and more

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13 Watson (1895, 41-7), for instance, thinks Aristippus amounts to doing no more than “taking whatever goods the gods happen to provide” and that he is “excluding all reflection and making the best of the present moment.”
general explanation of Aristippus’ near-future focus as a kind of pessimism about the availability of future goods –explicit in the Athenaeus passage and implicit in the Memorabilia discussion– due to great distances in time in which various unanticipated things can happen. That is, it makes clearer why he seems to think that the effects of our actions tend to diminish with the passage of time and thus run the risk of being out of our control or no longer assuredly ‘ours’.

So given that something like this is on the right track, what might it all amount to? We might see Aristippus’ full recommendation as adding up to something like the following. The best way to ensure successful conduct is by adopting a shorter-term perspective with regards to the consequences of our actions. After all, if it is knowledge of the consequences of our actions that is of concern –clearly a prominent issue in Socrates’ art of calculation in the Protagoras–, what can be more certain, we might imagine Aristippus asking, than those (consequences) giving us sufficient control over their production by inhabiting the more secure or unaffected realm of the shorter-term future? However, the recommendation is not exhausted by this shorter-term perspective. As both passages indicate –and indeed so too the Memorabilia text–, of crucial importance is the additional point that Aristippus is ultimately interested in fulfilling the goal for one’s life as whole, namely, in achieving the most pleasant life possible. This concentration on the shorter-term future then should be seen in light of the ultimate end of the maximization of pleasure throughout a lifetime. And indeed if it is looked at in this way, prudential planning for Aristippus takes on an interesting shape. That is, it is not the case, as it is with the theory extolled in the Protagoras, that one should look to the distant future, to the long-term consequences of one’s actions, if one wants to ensure maximum pleasure over one’s life, but rather, it is that, in order to achieve that same ultimate end, one should focus on the more immediate future, on the more short-term consequences of one’s actions.

We might see Aristippus then, both in these passages and in the Memorabilia, as someone disagreeing with Socrates’ stress in the Protagoras of exclusively long-term hedonism as
a rational overall strategy for maximum pleasure throughout a lifetime. For Aristippus, as we have seen, does not seem to believe that it is necessarily irrational\textsuperscript{14} to go for more near-future pleasures for the reason that these are much more secure (less susceptible to intervening factors) and therefore more attainable. It is more prudent to pursue near-term pleasures since one cannot be sure, for the most part, about one’s chances of achieving the pleasures of the future. In other words, Aristippus may be thinking, a strategy much more conducive, \textit{in the end}, to accruing the most possible pleasure in life will involve displacing a heavy emphasis on the present, that is, it will involve a repositioning of focus largely towards the pursuit of the more near-future pleasures.

\textbf{Aristippus and Life-Stage Relativity}

Now there is nothing in the sources which accounts for Aristippus’ near-future focus in terms of an incentive to preserve a kind of life-stage relativity with regards to one’s desires. Put somewhat perfunctorily, we might say that what motivates a life-stage relativity view is the concrete possibility that one’s future desires may turn out to be completely incompatible with one’s present desires. The desires of a young adult, for instance, may turn out to be quite unlike those of the continuous individual as an older man. It seems possible, in other words, that a single individual may at different points or select stages in his life hold different and irreconcilable desires. Consequently, the life-stage relativity view enjoins us not to take into account any times or goods outside the present life stage one is in. An even more extreme relativity view might embrace the standpoint that it is rational to pursue only very immediate pleasure, since, this, of course, ensures that those pleasures one pursues will always be appropriate to one’s present desires and one’s present time.

\textsuperscript{14} I take it that the rationality of present choice understood here does not necessarily \textit{depend on the fact} about future happenings. As I am understanding it, a decision is rational or irrational independently of what will in fact occur later and of what would in fact happen as a result of making some alternative choice. Rather, whether a choice is rational depends on factors present at the time, namely, on whether the presumptions one holds about the intents of actions constitute warranted beliefs, or beliefs based on relevant information to those actions.
In any case, as mentioned, there is not anything explicit in the sources which says that something like this underlies Aristippus’ concentration on the more immediate future. That said however, lack of overt evidence surely does not rule out the possibility that he could have had something to this effect in mind. Certainly, in light of some of the things the position Socrates extols in the *Protagoras* might be seen to insinuate, it would not be altogether surprising if he indeed did. Socrates’ claim (356b-c), for instance, that upon a weighing where the painful is exceeded by the pleasant, one *has* to perform that action – where we might take as an example of this his talk about going through with the pain of warfare since ultimately in the long-term future it will lead to a greater amount of pleasures like the acquisition of power and wealth (354a-b)– seems to, at least *prima facie*, close off the possibility that, for instance, one might sometime later during one’s life lose the desire for the pleasures of power or wealth which going to war supposedly ensures. In any case, a view with a sensitivity to changing desires is certainly not incompatible with our explanation of Aristippus’ near-future focus as a kind of pessimism about the availability of future goods due to great distances in time in which various unforeseen things can happen –it could perhaps be part and parcel of that explanation or a welcome subsidiary of it. Given however that attributing anything like this to Aristippus would be speculation which simply outruns any of the texts, I leave this issue here as it stands.

**References**


