This is the published version


Available from Deakin Research Online

http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30067989

Every reasonable effort has been made to ensure that permission has been obtained for items included in Deakin Research Online. If you believe that your rights have been infringed by this repository, please contact drosupport@deakin.edu.au

Copyright: 2010, Texas Tech University Press
Uncovering Euthyphro’s Treasure
Reading Plato’s Euthyphro with Lacan

MATTHEW SHARPE

ei σῶν σοι φίλον, μή με ἀποκρύψῃ ἄλλα πάλιν εἰπὲ ἐξ ἀρχῆς . . .
PLATO, Euthyphro 11B

"The beginning is the negation of that which it begins," the modern philosopher Friedrich Schelling once argued. Nowhere is this principle truer than with philosophy itself. As the classical philosopher Leo Strauss (1978, 7) once argued, "the proper form of presenting political philosophy is the treatise." Philosophy is fundamentally axiomatic, as Alain Badiou—another, very different recent Platonist—has recently agreed. Yet for all this, it remains true that Plato himself, the acknowledged founder of Western philosophy, wrote dialogues. Moreover, all but one of these dialogues figure the Athenian subject, Socrates—someone who both never wrote and by all accounts did not systematically codify any fundamental axiom(s) using 'reason alone.' Socrates' peculiar stance, given its fullest Platonic rendition in the Apology, is well known. The Delphic oracle pronounced him the wisest person in Athens. The only sense Socrates claimed to be able to give this is that he at least knew how little he knew: "I am only too conscious that I have no claim to wisdom, great or small" (Plato, Ap. 20B). In line with this, the dialogues widely known for the last century as the 'early' dialogues are usually called aporetic, from the Greek aporia, usually translated as 'dead end,' but deriving more strictly from poros, meaning something closer to 'resource' (thus, aporia would mean 'without resources,' being related to penia or 'poverty': Plato, Symp. 203B–D). Far from yielding us didactic instruction about those 'human things' that the characters discuss—the virtues, wisdom, the good life—those dialogues usually seen as 'early' or 'Socratic' each conclude with different versions of the same acknowledgment of ignorance or amatheia, coupled with an injunction to all to continue in the process of self-examination. As Socrates responds to Lysimachus's request that he teach youths about courage at the end of the Laches:
And if I had shown in this conversation that I had a knowledge of what Nicias and Laches have not, then I admit that you would be right in inviting me to [give assistance in the improvement of the youths], but as we are all in the same perplexity, why should one of us be preferred to another? . . . Let us then, regardless of what may be said of us, make the education of the youths our own education. (Lach. 200E–1A; my emphasis)

The positive descriptions of what Socrates takes himself to be doing with his famous dialogic ‘technique’ (the *elenchus*: roughly, ‘refutation’) are as famously provocative as they are revealing. Meno asserts, in the dialogue that bears his name, that Socrates’ questioning is like the sting of a “stingray” that paralyzes its subjects—a description to which Socrates assents, albeit with a qualification that we will make in a moment. In the *Apology* (31A), Socrates says that he is like a “gadfly” who rouses and reproves the Athenians lest they end their days in ethical and political complacency. One further Socratic self-description, from the *Theaetetus*, is of the philosopher as a kind of metaphysical “midwife”: he only allows others to give birth to ideas that they knew without knowing, or with which they were already “pregnant,” before Socrates came along.

The possibility of a striking homology between Socrates, the enigmatic founding figure of Western philosophy, and psychoanalysis as a ‘talking cure’ has often been remarked (Lear 1998 and 2001). On the one hand, it does seem that psychoanalysis might have something particular to say to, and about, Socrates’ *elenchus*, as a discourse that claims only to aid others to learn what they already knew (hence the Platonic *anamnesis*), if indeed it does anything more than ‘paralyze’ them in their previous certainties. Is not Socrates’ *elenchus*, like psychoanalysis, situated obliquely vis-à-vis inherited notions of public and private, the intimate and what is exposed—at once something that ‘one cannot do by oneself,’ and yet decidedly not ‘political’ either, as Socrates makes clear concerning philosophy in the *Gorgias*: “I know how to secure one man’s vote, but with the many I will not even enter into discussion” (Plato, *Grg*. 474B)? Are there not significant parallels between Socrates’ subject position in the early dialogues and that of the analyst in psychoanalysis, so that Socrates can significantly qualify Meno’s quip that he is like a “stingray” by saying that if this is so, he is a stingray that can only paralyze when it itself has first been rendered dumb (Plato, *Men*. 80C–D)? Furthermore, does not Socrates in the *Gorgias* insist that his practice, far from being merely negative or destructive, is no less than the truest po-
litical art (aethus politikê technê), in the sense that it betters the souls (psuchê) of the Athenians (Grk. 515–21D6–8)? Finally, and most tantalizingly of all, why is it that Socrates repeats at various places that if he has any “human” (versus “divine”) wisdom about anything (Plato, Ap. 15C) it is, like a good analyst, knowledge about eros (roughly ‘sexual love’ or ‘desire’) (Plato, Symp. 198B)?

There has been something of a resurgence of interest in Platonic thought in recent decades, outside of the modern specializations that are ‘classical studies’ or ‘classics.’ Alain Badiou’s thought in particular has drawn readers’ attention to the transcendent dimension of Platonic philosophy: a transcendent dimension that Badiou reminds us is minimally necessary for philosophy to overcome sophistical relativism, or its modern refigurings in versions of historicism. Yet Badiou’s reading of Plato, like many modern readings, pointedly abstracts from the dialogic framing of Plato’s philosophy. Indeed, as Badiou very traditionally understands the birth of philosophy per se, Plato’s dialogic or poetic framing of his thought can only be a relic from the mythopoetic cultural milieu that the advent of (his) philosophy serves to break open (Badiou and Toscano 2006, 39–40). In this way, Badiou also abstracts from the enigmatic dimension of eros that Plato severally indicates is so central to his conception of the philosophic practice and way of life. By contrast, Badiou’s teacher Jacques Lacan devoted a lengthy part of his eighth seminar on psychoanalytic transference to a discussion of Plato’s Symposium, arguably the most important of Plato’s dialogues concerning eros. The Symposium remains a recurrent reference point throughout Lacan’s later seminars.

In this paper, I will examine the suggestive parallels or points of potential intersection between psychoanalysis and the ‘first philosopher’: two theories of eros kai psuchê, one modern and one ancient. Can there be a productive encounter between Socrates with his elenchus and psychoanalysis, or are the apparent similarities only that—apparent? The stake of the reading, as we will see, is what has been called, since Alcibiades himself, Socrates’ atopia (literally, ‘without-place-edness’): that is, his genuine strangeness, and the difficulty continually confronting commentators in understanding what he represents. Central to this atopia is the enigma of ‘Socratic irony,’ from the Greek word eirônea invoked by both Thrasymachus in Republic and Alcibiades in Symposium. The question posed by Socrates’ paradigmatic irony, put most simply, is this: Can we believe Socrates when he pleads his ignorance to his interlocutors, and his inability to teach them anything, up to and including Plato’s Apology?
Socrates very obviously knows enough about something to challenge and reduce to absurdity their pre-given certainties about concepts like courage (Laches), temperance (Protagoras), friendship (Lysis), or poetry (Ion). Is not, then, Socrates’ profession of ignorance just a ruse, however nobly minded? Must Socrates not have been in possession of a body of certainties, so that he only chases to withhold these from his interlocutors, perhaps for political reasons, or perhaps—thinking of what psychoanalysis has formulated concerning the sadistic subject position—in order to ‘get off’ on dividing and confusing others?

In what follows, I will approach these questions by focusing on a single dialogue that, as far as I am aware, no Lacanian author has analyzed in detail: Plato’s Euthyphro. This dialogue is an aporetic one. It ends, seemingly without concluding. Having enthusiastically offered to discuss with Socrates to hasion (‘piety’ or ‘what is sacred’), Euthyphro stops by scuttling off and telling Socrates he has more important things to do. So, the question is: What is it that Plato could want to have shown by such an inconclusive exchange, something that might not otherwise have been able to have been said in a treatise, or some more direct statement? I take my title and my orientation from a classically ‘Socratic’ moment within the text, when Euthyphro has confessed to be ‘at a loss,’ as we say. Socrates goads him without mercy. He urges Euthyphro to mé apokrypse, or—as it is translated by both Jowett and Harward, who add what is only implied—“not to hide his treasure.” It is this, “Euthyphro’s treasure,” which would be Socrates’ stake within the text, if there is something more elevated going on than a demonstration of the former’s hubristic stupidity. It is this treasure, then, that we will be hunting after in what follows.

I. Euthyphro: From Definition, via Aporia, to Irony

Diogenes Laertius was correct when he remarked of the Euthyphro and Socrates:

And he [Socrates] was competent both in persuading and in dissuading. Thus, having conversed with Theaetetus concerning knowledge, he sent him away with a god inside him, as Plato would say. And when Euthyphro had indicted his father on a charge of manslaughter, he [Socrates] led him away after discussing some questions concerning piety. (Cited in Howland 1998, 95)
The *Euthyphro* deals with *to hōsion*, or what is usually translated either as ‘the holy’ or ‘the pious’ (in what follows I prefer ‘the holy’). It has the form, and all of the defining marks, of what is usually called a ‘definitional’ or ‘Socratic’ dialogue:

1. Socrates asks a question of the form, “What is (the) x?,” of his interlocutor and seeks after a definition of the “x” in question. Euthyphro, who is about to press charges of impiety against his own father, first answers Socrates’ “What is holy and what is unholy?” question by saying that what he is doing, *in his particular case*, is “holy” or “pious.” Having distinguished between examples and the idea (*eidōs*) of “the holy” in general, Euthyphro is drawn to attempt four suggested definitions of this *eidōs tou hōsion*:

   i. *to hōsion* is what is loved by the gods;

   ii. the holy is what is loved by *all* the gods;

   iii. the holy is that part of what is just that concerns the care (*therapeia*) of the gods; and,

   iv. holiness is a science of prayer and sacrifice, of giving to and receiving from, the gods.

2. When Euthyphro first poses definition ii above—“the holy is what is loved by *all* the gods” (Plato, *Euthyrh*. 9D–E)—we are given a precise indication of the eccentricity of Socrates’ philosophy and *elenchus* vis-à-vis the accepted conventions (*nomoi*) and opinions (*doxai*) of his day. Socrates says that he is interested in “correctness” (*orthotēs*). But insofar as this is the case, he has no regard just now for all that happens to be opined to be right or true by the Athenian political community:

   Then shall we examine this (definition of yours) again, Euthyphro, to see if it is correct [*orthos*], or shall we let it go and accept our own statement and those of others, agreeing that it is so, if anyone merely says that it is? Or ought we to enquire into the correctness of this statement? (*Euthyrh*. 9E)

The *Euthyphro* stages directly that aspect of Socrates’ pursuit that, for the first time in Western history, saw a calling into question of the unimpeachable authority of the ‘natural morality’ of the Athenian polis. Socrates’ *elenchus* opens up (or is open to) the possibility that a political community’s *nomoi* and *doxai*—what Lacanians call the big Other, the fabric of a society’s symbolic norms, prohibitions, and institutions—
might be open to judgment before some extrinsic tribunal, or 'Other of the Other.' As Lacan puts it in Seminar VIII, what this other tribunal might be, and what Socrates put his faith in, is what can be called 'the consistency of the signifier' (Lacan VIII, 7). This is the level, as Socrates specifies in the Symposium, at which we can know a priori that a father as a father will have either a son or a daughter, and a son and a daughter will have a father (Symp. 209D–E). At this level of the logos, and of what can be consistently enunciated within a discourse, Socrates enquires of whomever he meets, or certainly Euthyphro, whether their body of beliefs is internally coherent, or semantically inconsistent.

3. As in Laches, Lysis, and Protagoras, to name three early or 'definitional dialogues,' Socrates' elenchus nevertheless fails to provide the explicit definition of to hoiōn it promises. To Socrates' suggestion that they enleph by continuing their philosophical search for the definition of to hoiōn, Euthyphro replies: "Some other time, Socrates, I am in a hurry and it is time for me to go" (Euthyphr. 15E). The dialogue closes with the comical scene of Socrates chasing Euthyphro, begging Euthyphro not to disappoint the "high hope that I had that I should learn from you what is holy, and what is not" (Euthyphr. 15E–6A).

At this point of aporia, many readings of Plato, like the texts themselves, are brought to a halt. The question that arises is this: If we do accept that what Socrates introduced for the first time was a kind of semantic analysis of what can be consistently enunciated by a subject in language, what are we to make of the fact that his recorded attempts to achieve such systematic consistency all seemingly failed? Are these early dialogues not simply a kind of philosophical (or protophilosophical) comedy, and one we should now read with benevolent or patronizing amusement? Does not Socrates himself say, after all, that he is "barren" of wisdom in the Theaetetus, a claim that echoes with the Apology's avowal of ignorance of all higher things (Plato, Tht. 150C)?

There is a second path available, however: to invoke and to explore 'Socratic irony' (eirônia). However it might appear, we can argue that Socrates did really know what he was doing or aiming at, even if the earlier dialogues end inconclusively. It is just that, having this epistémê, Socrates did not or could not enunciate everything to the others that they might have wished him to. There is a gap between what is explicit in Plato’s Socratic texts and something that is, if not 'esoteric,' then not stated in Euthyphro and the other 'early' dialogues. And this is what Socrates' famed irony—his not meaning exactly what he said, and never saying exactly what he meant—signifies to the attentive reader.
Now, if we take this path in what follows, as I propose to do, variants of two further moves become available, versions of which various commentators have duly proposed. The first option is to say that what Socrates withheld is a more or less fully self-consistent doctrine or understanding of the 'political things' that he took with him to each encounter, but chose politically (or perhaps pedagogically) never to fully disclose. This is the position of Leo Strauss (e.g., 1964) and his students. The question then becomes why Socrates would have withheld this doctrine, whether this political practice of philosophy has any abiding relevance beyond the closed society where Plato's dialogues are set, and what we are to make of the many passages in the Platonic œuvre concerning transpolitical topics (especially metaphysics and mathematics).

The second option is that in some sense we take Socrates' famous avowals of amathia seriously. I suggest that what is in play in the elenchus is, in Gregory Vlastos's terms, a "complex" form of irony. Talking of "complex irony" is tantamount to arguing that Socrates was not simply dissembling, when he claimed not to know the truth of what he asked about: in some sense at least, he was telling the truth. Socrates really did not fully know everything others supposed that he did (Vlastos 1991). Either Socrates the individual had not yet attained to what he aimed for (e.g., knowledge and/or practice of virtue), or the type of knowledge at which Socrates aimed could not be achieved by him or anyone else, because it aims at erotic 'things' that are in themselves not knowable in the way we had expected. Such a view would speak to the ancient ideas that philosophy is above all a way of life (bios) directed at the care of the soul, and that such a care can only be carried out, in speech, in the living presence of an Other. This is certainly the view Plato conveys to us in the Seventh Letter (341B–E). It is a variant of this view that I will now defend.

II. Straight Thinking: Euthus Phrên and the Redoubled Law

There is one very apparent flaw in the picture that would present Platonic philosophy as a first, failed progenitor of the use of 'reason alone.' Such a view represents a precise exemplification of the Lacanian thesis that "Only the non-duped err." What scholars overlook, in their haste to get to 'the logic itself,' is simply the form of Plato's texts: the fact that they are dialogues. As the Straussian school has roundly highlighted, problematic consequences ensue. First amongst these is what Lacan concurs is the "unimaginable, extraordinary pretension that we have of being
more intelligent than the personage who developed the Platonic *œuvre*” (Lacan V, 10). Such readings miss the historical specificity of the dialogues and their personages. Plato’s dialogues are, instead, most often presented in analytic texts as accounts of ahistorical philosophical operations: somewhere between a mathematics classroom and the type of idyllic atmosphere in which the gospels are typically presented to young Christians. Also omitted by solely ‘philosophical’ readings of Plato is the possibility that the *form* of the dialogue that Plato chose to write might actually be essential to the *content* Plato wanted to convey to careful readers. As I wish now to argue, if we factor in these two considerations, a different and more productive light may be cast upon both the *Euthyphro* and the *apatia* of Socrates’ position within it.

Consider first the setting of the encounter between Euthyphro and Socrates in the *Euthyphro*. The dialogue takes place in front of the Portico of the King Archon, or *Stoa Basileós*, in the agora. The *Stoa Basileós* was where judicial proceedings concerning religious matters in Athens were initiated. Hence the *Euthyphro* is appropriately placed in most collections of Plato’s writings immediately before the *Apology*. As Euthyphro is surprised to hear, so the *Euthyphro* itself starts with Socrates reporting that a fellow citizen, Meletus, has brought a *graphê* (indictment) against him on behalf of the Athenian community. The charge, of course, is centrally that Socrates has been *impious* towards the gods of the city. The solely logical or ‘definitional’ interchange between the two men concerning ‘the holy’ has a very immediate dramatic relevance. Socrates—and Plato his acolyte—has a very ‘involved’ interest in it. As Socrates exclaims when he discovers that Euthyphro has such faith in his own piety that he can bring his own father before the court on grounds of impiety,

Rare friend! I think I cannot do better than be your disciple, then before the trial with Meletus comes on I shall challenge him and say that I have always had a great interest in religious questions, and now, as he charges me with rash imaginations and innovations in religion, I have become your disciple. You, Meletus, I shall say to him, acknowledge Euthyphro as a great theologian, and sound in his opinions; and if you approve of him you ought to approve of me, and not have me in court; but if you disapprove, you should begin by indicting him who is my teacher, and will be the ruin, not of the young, but of the old; that is to say, of myself whom he instructs… (Euthphr. 5A–B)

This confrontation with ‘Euthyphro’ at this moment is indeed “rare,”
when we recollect that, alongside of Meletus, Socrates names the comic dramatist Aristophanes as Socrates’ chief, most influential, older accuser (Plato, Ap. 18B–E). In Aristophanes’ Clouds, the comedian had presented Socrates as a conveyer of “hair-splitting solemnities” (Vlastos 1991, 30) so amoral as to be capable of justifying a young man’s beating of his father using reason alone (Howland 1998, 100). In Euthyphro, by nearly exact contrast, Plato presents us with a young man already convinced of the propriety of punishing his father, without his needing any teaching by Socrates. In an act whose piety is in fact far from clear-cut, Euthyphro is about to bring his father before the law courts. The action of the dialogue, in further opposition to Clouds, sees Socrates not directly defending the fathers, gods, and laws of Athens, but certainly troubling the Oedipal zealotry of his young companion, showing him to be much less sage concerning to hoi ton than he had first taken himself to be (Howland 1998, 100–1).

Far from being a disinterested discussion of to hoi ton, this cursory analysis of the setting and action of the Euthyphro shows how the dialogue also pointedly raises the question of the standing of Socrates towards the big Other of the Athenian polis and/or the Law of its fathers. Alongside to hoi ton, we might say that Socrates’ wider atopia with regard to the ‘force of Law’ is onstage in Plato’s Euthyphro. Historians are now persuaded that the Stoa Basileos, where Euthyphro and Socrates have their philosophical talk, was also the place where the ancestral laws of Draco and of Solon were inscribed on large stone tablets (stelai). We have then to imagine as we read the Euthyphro that the city’s laws are also present on the stage in all of their forbidding immobility, alongside or behind the backs of the interlocutors.

Again, at the level of the signifier the very name of Socrates’ interlocutor, ‘Euthyphro’ in the text—a character whose historical reality is highly questionable—can be read as a further telling clue about the meaning of this Platonic dialogue. As Howland (1998, 97) notes, ‘Euthyphro’ represents a suggestive condensation of two ancient Greek words: euthus: ‘straight’ or ‘instant’, and phren ‘thinking’ or ‘mind.’ Socrates is talking to a ‘straight thinker,’ or more literally, to ‘straight thinking’ itself. Although on one level Euthyphro’s action against his father is certainly atypical, Plato’s choice of this name indicates that he wants us to consider Euthyphro as in some way (however ironic) the representative of the conventional or ‘straight down the line’ at the line of Athenian polytheism. “Euthyphro is the incarnation of Plato’s view of Athenian orthodoxy carried consistently into practice” (J. Adam, cited in
Beversius 2000, 161). We have to recall that, however democratic Athens remained in 399 B.C.E. when Socrates was tried, it was far from being a secular polity. Alongside or beneath the civil laws of the city, there persisted a second order of laws—another ‘Other of the Other,’ quite different from that invoked by Socrates’ philosophy (Euthyphr. 7C-E). This ‘Other of the Other’ was the divine laws, rooted in inherited stories about Athens’ archaioi theoi or ancestral divinities. As we know from Sophocles’ Antigone, it was entirely possible for these two bodies of Law to conflict. Yet, as in Euthyphro’s case, this divine Law more often stood as the ground of the polis’s civil laws. In a way that invokes the terms of Lacan’s logic of the signifier, the laws of the Gods, conveyed in the city’s *muthoi*, represented the exceptional, legitimating ground of the positive body of the civil laws. On one level, as Socrates is quick to point out to Euthyphro, the actions of the ancestral gods were excessive, when measured against merely human laws: the Olympians conflict over even the highest things, and transgress wildly. However, in this very excess, these gods stood above or beneath the civil ordering of the polis, as its legitimating ground. As Howland (1998, 98) puts it,

Orthodoxy is “straight” or “correct” opinion, opinion that flows freely from the beginnings of the community in ancient *nomos*. These archaic beginnings—including especially the *archeioi theoi*, the ancient gods—are deemed authoritative just because they are Athenian and because they are old.

Significantly, this is why Euthyphro’s first definition of *to hosion* in the Euthyphro is exactly that ‘holiness’ is what is pleasing to the *archeioi theoi*. Straight thinking demands such a response.

So Euthyphro, as Plato presents him to us, has certainly gone beyond what is considered typical (in Lacanian terms, S2) in bringing a legal action against his father. Yet for him, this is because his action invokes a higher or more ancient authority (S1). And it is the justice or providence of this higher court that he initially claims to be able to teach Socrates. Mutatis mutandis, if Socrates challenges his companion in the Euthyphro about *to hosion*, the stake in the dialogue is finally the larger consideration of whether or not the big Other from which Euthyphro’s * euthus phrēn* hails, with its grounding in Athens’ ancestral stories and *archeioi theoi*, can be rendered fully consistent before the tribunal invoked by the Socratic *elenchos*.

The question of the *Euthyphro* is, then, who or what is being put on
trial before whom, and which higher tribunal or ‘Other of the Other’ should have the final word.

III. Circle Thinking: From Socratic Eirôneia to the Socratic Eros

With these framing markers in place, let us return to the text of the Euthyphro and consider what is enunciated there. The justly most renowned exchange follows after Socrates has secured Euthyphro’s second proposed definition of to hòsion, namely that “the holy is what all the gods love.” Socrates’ legendary enquirery of Euthyphro at 10A is the following: ἂν τὸ ὁσιόν ὅτι ὁσίων ἔστιν φιλεῖται ὑπὸ τῶν θεῶν, ἢ ὅτι φιλεῖται ὁσίων ἔστιν (Is that which is holy loved by the gods because it is holy, or is it holy because it is loved by the gods?). What Socrates wants to know is why something might be loved by the gods, if we agree with Euthyphro that to hòsion is loved by them. Confronted with this question, however, Euthyphro responds immediately that he has no idea what Socrates is talking about: οὐκ οἶδ’ ὅτι λέγεις, ὁ Σωκρατῆς (roughly, “I don’t know what you are saying, Socrates”). I would in fact suggest, alongside Beversus and others, that in all of what follows in the Euthyphro, it is ‘up in the air’ as to whether Euthyphro understands what his questioner, Socrates, wants from him. More and more confused, Euthyphro comes to protest that Socrates’ questioning is a kind of ‘circular thinking’—which is surely a significant enough designation, given his own geometrical proper name. Euthyphro compares Socrates’ words to the works of Socrates’ ancestor, the sculptor Daedalus, which were so lifelike they could walk around all by themselves.

The issue I want to address is this: Euthyphro’s repeated confessions of confusion at 10A and elsewhere can easily be read as testimony to Euthyphro’s dull wittedness alone. However, drawing on what has been established in the previous part, we can show this scholarly consensus to be a little too cavalier. Why?

Consider again that our ‘Euthyphro’ has effectively produced a very orthodox statement of what to hòsion is. This statement grounds ‘the holy’ in what we could call in Lacanian terms the demand—which is exactly not the desire—of the Athenian big Other. To hòsion is whatever it is that the citizens of Athens have been told in their shared, inherited culture that the founding gods of the polis want (φιλεῖται ὑπὸ τῶν θεῶν). Euthyphro’s position here thus anticipates the type of theological voluntarism that will emerge in the later medieval period with thinkers like
Duns Scotus in the Christian tradition: whatever the gods (or God) decide(s) has worth, because this will of God is the unsurpassable ground of all value. For such a position, then, and for such an orthodoxy as Euthyphro’s in the dialogue that bears his name, it is simply impossible to ask any further questions of this will, as Socrates qua philosopher wants to do. In effect, “Yours is not to reason why.” The demand of the Other—what the gods love—is, for all *euthus phrēn,* that one can ask questions concerning the meaning of other things, and yet for that very reason, it cannot *itself* be subjected to questioning. So it is little wonder that Euthyphro is dumbfounded by Socrates at 10A of the dialogue, and at several points after. One can doubt everything within a worldview, we can say in Lacanian terms, so long as certain grounding signifiers—namely, the master signifiers of the Other—remain ‘off limits’ to this *skepsis.* It follows that the Socratic question of whether any body of knowledge (S2) could ever be adequate to the demand of the sovereign Other (S1), or name the sublime object (a) that might *underlie* this founding demand, is precisely something that *does not make sense.*

How then does Socrates proceed with Euthyphro? If at *Euthyphro* 6B–C, Socrates invokes the great robe “which is carried up to the Acropolis at the great Panathenaea” each year into whose fabrics the stories of the ancestral gods were woven, we can say that Socrates is going to see whether he cannot un-quilt its hold upon Euthyphro a little. Schematically, Socrates’ goal is to show the possibility of the following:

**Figure 1: The Central Stake, X?, in *Euthyphro* 10A**

![Diagram](image)

Euthyphro identifies *to hosiôn* with the set “What the gods love.” Socrates, however, thinks that at least possibly there might be some surplus here (in the diagram, marked ‘X?’): some part of the set of “*to hosiôn* / the holy” that would exceed the set “What the gods love [*theophiles*].”
Moreover, the existence of this excess, Socrates reasons, would show that the feature that Euthyphro has given—that the holy is “what is loved by the gods”—may or may not be a predicate of this or that holy thing, because this feature could not then be “that characteristic in virtue of which” everything that is holy is holy.

Socrates proceeds by a reductio ad absurdum: he tries to show that Euthyphro’s definition—“the holy is what all the gods love”—when it is pursued, leads him into aporia. The reductio has three stages.

1. First, at 10 A–C, Socrates asks Euthyphro to consider a series of cases involving what we can consistently say of any objects—like “what is loved by the gods” in this case—that are the objects of some human activity or concern (so here, love or philia). For example, something is said to be in a state of ‘being carried,’ because (hōti) someone or something is carrying it. It would not make any semantic sense for us to say of something that is ‘being carried’ that it nevertheless is not being carried by anyone or anything. However, Socrates stresses, the peculiar thing is that we cannot reasonably reverse the terms of sentences like “Something is carried because someone carries it,” so as to proclaim, “Someone is carrying a thing, because [hōti] it is in a state of being carried.” As S. Marc Cohen (2005) has shown, at stake in Socrates’s position here is the double register in both the Greek term hōti and our term ‘because,’ into which it is usually translated. When we say, as in the first type of case, that the fact that something is in a state of being carried is because someone is in the process of carrying it, we are making a strictly semantic or conceptual claim about the meaning of the terms. At the Socratic level of the consistency of the signifier, it is part of the meaning of something’s ‘being carried’ that someone or something must be carrying it. When we reverse the terms to inquire as to whether “Someone is in the process of carrying a thing because [hōti] it is in a state of being carried,” however, the way we hear ‘because’ changes. In these cases, what we listen for is not just a logical part of the meaning of the phrase “Someone is carrying X.” What we want to know about is the reason or maxim in virtue of which someone is undertaking the carrying activity. For a person to respond to the question “Why are you carrying something?” by saying “I am carrying this object because it is being carried,” Socrates notes, looks on a first blush like a complete absurdity or rebuff (Cohen 2005, 43–5).

2. In the second step of the argument, in Euthyphro 10C–D, Socrates gets Euthyphro to consider the question, to which we shall return, of why the gods love the holy: “Because it is holy, or for some other reason?” This is precisely the question that we commented above is simply ‘off
limits’ for Euthyphro’s ‘straight thinking,’ and everything now confirms that he really does not get it. Nevertheless, in the heat of the encounter, Euthyphro is drawn by Socrates to somewhat hastily agree that, Yes, the gods must love the holy “because it is holy”—or, as he responds, rather less eloquently, to Socrates’ suggestion: coiken (I think so, 10D).

3. At this point, the game is up. Socrates hastens to remind Euthyphro that he had already said earlier (at 9E) that the holy is “what all the gods love,” and also now, at 10D, that “the holy is loved by the gods because it is holy.” If we then substitute Euthyphro’s definition at 9D—“what is loved by the gods”—into this second of his affirmations at 10D, we end up with the following tautology: “The holy is what is loved by the gods because . . . it is loved by the gods.”

Now Socrates takes the absurdity of this Euthyphrontic “The gods love the holy because the gods love it” as unequivocal, although we will finally have to return to this. It follows, Socrates reasons, that we must affirm that “the holy” (to hosion) is not reducible to the set of things loved by the gods (as shown in Figure 1). This love is only a contingent predicate of the things that comprise the set of ta hosia (11B). Hence, at this point in the dialogue, there is nothing for it. They will have to redouble their efforts and begin again from the start (palin ex archês) if they are to define to hosion, despite Euthyphro’s rising impatience.

The question I want to pose here, then, is one that students do not fail to raise when they first encounter this text: What exactly is it that Socrates desires from this bizarre exchange with Euthyphro, and from the elenctic game of ‘giving and asking’ more generally? It is this question that a Lacanian reading directs us towards—the question, as we might say, of the ‘desire of the Socratic analyst.’ Yet I want to suggest that this question of Socrates’ desire is not simply external to the Euthyphro, so we would have to forcibly import it in order to see it there. It is also a question that Euthyphro comes increasingly to ask, as his own shortcomings become increasingly evident. In psychoanalytic terms, indeed, everything looks as though Euthyphro is progressively ‘hystericized’ by Socrates’ elenchiis. He expresses first anxiety (“I really do not know how to say what I mean, Socrates,” 11B), then fatigue (“I have told you already, Socrates, that to learn all of these things accurately will be very tiresome,” 14A–B), before eventually just getting up and pre-emptively leaving the analysis (15E). But consider also Socrates’ own avowal about his practice at 14D. At this point of the text, Euthyphro proposes one, final definition of to hosion, the ‘official topic’ of the Euthyphro—that to hosion is “a science [epistêmê] of giving and asking” of the
gods. He expresses some satisfaction at the readiness of Socrates’ (provisional) acceptance of it. Socrates then replies by expressing his own desire for exactly such an epistēmē of pious exchange with the gods: ἐπιθυμήσει γάρ εἰμι, ὦ φίλε, τῆς σοφίας καὶ προσέχω τὸν νοῦν αὐτή (For I am eager, my friend, for your wisdom and give my mind to it, 14D). There is, it seems, a Socratic piety at stake in the elenchus.

In what might this piety consist? As the title of this paper highlights, the phrase that Socrates uses at 11B to enjoin his companion Euthyphro to begin again, and which would apparently offer us something like an answer to the enigma of Socrates’ desire, is enigmatic. In the Greek, his appeal to Euthyphro reads: μὲ (the negation, do not) apokruptē. LSJ indicates that the word apokruptē is a derivative of apokruptō or ‘to hide from,’ ‘to keep hidden from.’ The prefix apo is ‘from’ or ‘away from,’ and kruptō is the verb ‘to hide,’ ‘to cover,’ or ‘to cloak.’ The religious connotation here, binding the sacred to the hidden, is hence invoked. To take one significant example: when Creon in Sophocles’ Oedipus Colonus says at line 754 that his reproach against the Labdacean family cannot be “hidden” or “covered over” while Oedipus remains in the polis, apokruptō is the verb used. Literally, then, all that is being asked by Socrates at Euthyphro 11B is simply that Euthyphro not “hide away from him” whatever hidden thing is that he, Socrates, desires. However, no specific object of this desire is named.

It is notable, then, that English translators divide on how to render Socrates’ phrase μὲ apokruptē to Euthyphro, although their renderings all go beyond the letter of the Greek in venturing to name the desire of Socrates. In this way, it is clear that a certain politics of translation, with very high interpretive stakes, is in evidence. Typical of one school of interpretative translation is Hugh Treddenick, who has Socrates say to Euthyphro “not to conceal the truth from me.” Yet cognates of neither of the two key Greek, philosophical words for ‘truth’—αλήθεια and orthotēs—are present in the text. Why then this invocation of ‘truth’? Whatever else we might say, we can see that this translation is cognate with the type of classical reading of Socrates, mentioned above in part 1, that holds that Socrates did possess some wisdom or sophia, despite his ironic protestations. In the clause following 11B in the Euthyphro, after all, does not Socrates specify again that he is after the defining feature of “what holiness is, no matter whether it is loved by the gods or anything else happens to it” (11B)? In a word, this first translation points us towards the supposition of a body of Socratic knowledge (in Lacanese, S2) which would exist wholly prior to, and outside of, the exchange be-
tween the two men Euthyphro and Socrates. The latter might happen to bring this forth through elechnus, but it is something that would have preceded and exceeded the terms of the interchange.

The second, arguably stronger, translation of the Greek is given by scholars like Benjamin Jowett. Its terms point in another interpretive direction, concerning the analytic desire of Socrates. This second translation of Socrates' mê apokrups to Euthyphro draws our attention, amongst other things, to the derivation of our word 'crypt' (a burial place) from the Greek kruptis—being a 'hiding' or 'concealment' and a close cognate with the aortive kruspe in apokrups. Reminded perhaps that one thing that we tend to 'hide away' or even 'encrypt' is what is most valuable and intimate to who we are, Jowett renders the text as Socrates enjoining of Euthyphro "not to hide your treasure from me." This translation finds support from the sense in which kruptis and krups are used in other classical sources, in a way that the first translation does not. We also see straight away the different semantics involved in this second translation. If "the truth" in Tredennick's translation is as it were "something that could happen to anyone," the "treasure" of Jowett and others is something that—if it is accessible to a body of knowledge (S2) at all—is also something intimate to Euthyphro's identity as a subject. As this translation brings out, it is indeed something that can only be raised to him by Socrates in the second person: "your treasure." These observations, which point towards the psyché or soul of Socrates' particular interlocutor, would also point towards one explanation of the puzzling fact with which the essay began, namely that Plato recorded Socrates' exchanges in the Euthyphro and elsewhere as dialogues, not as so many treatises.

Following the lead of Jowett's translation, I now want to propose in the final part of the paper that we should read what transpires in Plato's Euthyphro in the light of Socrates' remark from Symposium 199C (which finds confirmations in both the Lysis and the Theages (Lacan II, 9)). This is the remark that the only things that Socrates knows about are the things of eros (love or sexual desire).

To place the position more formally: we know that in terms of the diagram above, what Socrates desires of Euthyphro—in Jowett's extrapolation, "Euthyphro's treasure"—would be that feature in virtue of which all holy things are holy, and given which it is at least possible that there is some part of the set of to hosion (X?) that exceeds the set "what is loved by the Other" (theophiles). The question now is whether this "treasure" might not in fact implicate Euthyphro's eros or desire—in Lacanian terms as the desire of the Other with which he has identified himself.
IV. Che Voui, Sokrates?

If what I am contending is correct, Euthyphro’s “treasure” invoked in the *Euthyphro* needs to be placed in that series of invocations and images of *eros* that dot the Platonic dialogues, often ignored or raised only as so many Platonic curios. In the *Charmides*, for example, there is the striking description of Socrates catching a glimpse of the inside of the beautiful Charmides’ cloak, and “taking the flame,” as Jowett translates it. Socrates is lost for words for a few moments afterwards. In the *Symposium*, as Lacan emphasizes, Plato records for us the even more striking image invoked by Alcibiades in his drunken encomium about Socrates. Socrates, whom Alcibiades still passionately loves, is described as like

a tiny object which it seems really existed at that time . . . images whose outside represented a satyr or a Silenus, and, within which were we do not really know what but undoubtedly some precious things.

(Lacan III, 2)

Alcibiades’ word uses for these “precious things” is *agalmata*. Socrates contains *agalmata theon* (statuettes of the gods, *Symp.* 215B); *agalmata theia* (divine images); and *agalmata aretes* (images of virtue) (Lacan XI, 3). According to Lacan, Alcibiades’ metaphor is far from being irrelevant to the nature of *eros* raised by Plato in the *Symposium* through the voices of his interlocutors. What it is there to show us, says Lacan (IX, 10), is that

at the heart of the action of love there is introduced the object, as one might say, of a unique covetousness, which is constituted as such: an object precisely from which one wishes to ward off competition, an object that one does not wish even to show.

Two questions are posed by an attempt to invoke *eros* in a reading of the *Euthyphro*. The first concerns the seeming distance between the substance of Socrates’ *agálmá*—which so captivates Alcibiades in the *Symposium* and is the cause of a quite serious ‘crush’—and the “treasure” intimated by Socrates’ interrogation of Euthyphro, which apparently bears upon the latter’s relation to the gods and *nomoi* of the polis. This is hardly the fare of erotic literature. The second question concerns a further, similarly obvious observation: namely that in the *Symposium*, the treasure in play is something hidden in *Socrates*, and whether in *Euthyphro*, it is
Socrates’ respondent who is the “envelope” (Lacan XI, 3) wherein the encrypted object of Socrates’ desire is hidden.

We may approach an answer to these two questions by making an observation that a reading of virtually any of the aporetic Platonic dialogues can quickly verify. To wit, at every turn Socrates’ questioning of his interlocutors resembles nothing more than the inquisitive insistence of a child questioning his or her parents without cease and without limit: “Why is the sky blue, Daddy?” “Why is the sun a circle?” and so on and on. At a very significant moment in the first of his papers on the psychology of love, Sigmund Freud (1997a) invoked the image of such a child in his discussion of the effect upon the Subject of his first, incestuous object choice. The fixation on this parental Thing, according to Freud, sets in place what Lacan later called the metonymy of desire, wherein each subsequent object choice will impress the Subject as “mother-surrogates”: more or less adequate substitutes for this first, lost love-object. The questioning child, Freud suggests, is, as it were, sliding down the metonymical chain of desire, as he challenges his first Others: “[T]his is the explanation of the insatiable desire to ask questions shown by children of a certain age; they have one single question to ask, but it never crosses their lips” (Freud 1997a, 236).

How does this observation bear upon the Euthyphro? Have we not seen that if Socrates, in this text, has one question to ask, it concerns to hésion, and that he does not cease repeating it? What might then “not have crossed his lips” in the text?

Recall what we saw in part 2 above, where I noted that the question of to hésion is actually no less than the question of the grounds of authority, or of the ‘force of Law,’ in the Athenian polis. As a naïve child would question his father or teacher, so Socrates enjoins Euthyphro in the dialogue to teach him about what specifically the city’s founding divinities want. Both of the subsequent lines of questioning in the Euthyphro, after the exchange we examined in detail in part 3, hence devolve ultimately around one consideration: the question of do the gods lack? If, as Euthyphro admits, holiness is attending (therepeía) justly to the gods, Socrates points out that this implies that the gods need our attendance. But Euthyphro’s piety cannot accept this. If, then, as Euthyphro next proposes, holiness is a science of giving sacrifice and asking in prayer of the gods, Socrates wants to know why the gods, who supposedly give everything good to mortals, would bother entering into an exchange with humans, who can offer them nothing? And so, one step further down the interrogative chain, this question again looms: “Must we not then say
that the gods do lack, since we do take it that they do make exchanges with mortals?"

Now, if psychoanalysis contributes anything to the sciences of culture, it turns around the founding interrelation between authority (*nomos*), language (*logos*), and *erōs*: desire and love. As Freud wrote in his "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality,"

The resultants of infantile object choice carry over into . . . the time of puberty. But as a consequence of the repression which has developed between the two phases they prove unutilizable. Their sexual aims have become mitigated and they now represent what may be described as the "affectionate current" of sexual life. Only psychoanalytic investigation can show that behind this affection, admiration and respect (for the parents and their substitutes, i.e., figures of authority) there lie concealed the old sexual longings. . . . (1977b, 119)§

If Lacan in *Seminar VIII* (1960–1961) accordingly chose to turn to Alcibiades’ directly erotic supposition in the *Symposium*—that Socrates contained a hidden, priceless treasure—in order to broach the question of transference love, his topic is not as far removed, as might first appear, from the *Euthyphro’s* concerns with the foundations of the *nomoi*.

Alcibiades drunkenly recalls in the *Symposium* the love proposal he made when younger to Socrates. This proposal was traditional within Attic culture of the day and was in fact defended in the *Symposium* by the second speaker, Pausanius. The physically beautiful, impetuous Alcibiades offered to Socrates what Gregory Vlastos translates as his "bloom"—in Greek, his *hēra* or 'sex appeal.' In exchange for the sex, Alcibiades, as Lacan puts it,

wanted to make of Socrates, and in a fashion openly avowed, . . . someone instrumental, subordinated to what? To the object of his desire, to that of Alcibiades, which is *agalma*, the good object. And I would say further, how can we analysts fail to recognise what is in question because it is said clearly: it is the good object that [Socrates] has in his belly. (Lacan XII, 9)

Yet crucially, it is not just a question in the text of an object, a for *agalma*, within Socrates which here animates Alcibiades’ desire. Just as in the clinical transference, so Alcibiades directly supposes that there is a positive body of knowledge (S2) at Socrates’ disposal. And this is decisive in shaping his desire:
It seems to Alcibiades that it would be enough that Socrates should declare himself in order to obtain from him precisely everything that is in question, namely what Alcibiades defines himself as: “everything he knows” pant akousai hosaper houtos edei. (Lacan XI, 4)

So, what follows Alcibiades’ ‘proposition’ to Socrates, as the Symposium records? Everything, in a way, turns around this point. Having declared his intention to Socrates, Alcibiades tells us:

He [Socrates] heard me out. Then, most eirônikes, in his extremely characteristic and habitual manner, he said: “Dear Alcibiades, it looks as though you are not stupid [phaulos], if what you say about me is true and there really is in me some power which could make you a better man, you must be seeing something inconceivably beautiful in me, enormously superior to your good looks. If that is what you see and you want to exchange beauty for beauty, you mean to take a huge advantage of me: you are trying to get true beauty in exchange for seeming beauty—“gold for brass.” (Symp. 218D)

In other words, Socrates flatly knocked Alcibiades back. Alcibiades, however—and arguably precisely because he was scorned—has long remained under the sway of the spell that Socrates has put upon him. Indeed, he compares Socrates’ compelling erotic charm in the Symposium to the charms of the music of the sartyr Marsyus whom Apollo had flayed for competing with the music of the gods (Lacan XI, 3). Alcibiades prefaces his encomium to Socrates with a series of warnings to others about his “power,” as he calls it, which he implies is tied to a component of deceit:

To begin with, see you how fond he is of beautiful boys? He is always with them and is always being smitten by them, and then again he knows nothing and is ignorant of all things. Isn’t this just like Silenus [the satyr]? (Symp. 216D)

Alcibiades is not alone in being seduced, and frustrated, by Socrates’ eleventhic comportment in the Platonic dialogues. As Lacan remarks near the beginning of Seminar VIII, “Socrates put at the origin, let us say right away, the longest transference (something which would give to this formula all its weight) that the history of thought has known” (1, 4). In part 1, I indicated that I do not think we need follow Alcibiades in transferentially supposing that Socrates held, and concealed, some fully con-
stituted, positive body of constative knowledge (S2). We are now in a position to say more clearly why this is so. It is not just that if Socrates did possess, but withheld, such a wisdom, the elenchus would effectively amount to no more than a trumped-up version of what transpires when a school teacher pretends he does not know the answer to a math problem so as to energize his charges. In structural, psychoanalytic terms, if Socrates did indeed take himself to be operating with such a concealed knowledge, we would be forced to conclude that his subject-position was strictly sadistic—one wherein he set himself up as the object-instrument of the Truth posed by this knowledge, in order to ‘get off’ by coldly dividing or hysterizizing his ignorant interlocutors.9

The logoi that Socrates gave of himself, however, are different. In the Symposium, for instance, his rebuff to Alcibiades’ erotic proposition continues as follows:

But examine yourself more closely [ameinon skapei], blessed boy [Alcibiades], lest you have missed that I am nothing [kenosis]. The mind’s vision grows sharp only when the [body’s] eye sight has passed its peak, and you are still far from that. (Symp. 219A; Lacan XI, 5, 6; my emphasis)

The force of this reply can be made evident by locating it in terms of the famous formulation of the ‘metaphor’ involved in love by Lacan in Seminar VIII (Lacan III, 4). There are two stages in this ‘metaphorization,’ though only at the second do we have the ‘miracle’ of love:

First, the lover (erastês) offers to the beloved or erômenos what he or she does not have: his or her being as a being of lack, of desire. As Diotima tells us in the Symposium, eros is the daughter of Poros (wealth, resources), and Penia: “[P]overty, even destitution, and in an articulated fashion in the text, (she) who is characterised by what she knows well about herself: aporia, namely that she is without resources!” (Lacan VIII, 11)

Second, love is precipitated when the erômenos returns his or her lover’s desire, as if he or she did have the object that had captivated his/her erastês (Lacan III, 5). It is as if, Lacan says, you stretched your hand out to clasp a piece of fruit, and, because you did, it burst into flame. Then, miracle of miracles, at this moment, a hand reached out from the flames to clasp your hand in return. At this, exclaims Lacan, “What is produced . . . is love!” (Lacan IV, 3)10
In these terms, we can say that Socrates refuses to actualize this second moment in the metaphor of love. “It is precisely because Socrates knows” about love, Lacan says, “that he sets his face against having been in any justified or justifiable way whatsoever the erōmenos, the desirable, what is worthy of being loved” (XI, 6). He remains “impassive,” both in his “contemptuous scorn” for Alcibiades’ hóra, and insofar as he refused to become for him the passive erōmenos, as if he might indeed have what his lover lacked and desired. And what is the force or point of this refusal? Lacan is clear:

I mean that by his attitude of refusal, by his severity, by his austerity, by his noli me tangere, [Socrates] implicates Alcibiades on the path to his good. The commandment of Socrates is: “Look after your soul, seek your perfection….” (Lacan XI, 8)

In other words, as Socrates’ ironic reply to Alcibiades’ entreaties already indicate, what his refusal asks of Alcibiades is that he effectively turn his concern away from what he had phantasmatically supposed to be something in Socrates. Instead, he should direct his attention inwards, so as to see the implication of his own desire in his ability to see these fantastical agalmata in Socrates’ belly. “If there is anything within me,” Socrates effectively says to his young erastês, “it can only be because you put it there. Certainly, my older eyes can see that I do not have what you suppose me to have.” What is decisive for Alcibiades, Socrates’ bearing towards him shows, is nothing about Socrates’ being; rather, what is decisive is his own erós, which his transferential suppositions concerning Socrates at once reflect but also apokrupsont.

In closing, let us return to the Euthyphro. What if, beyond the appearance of a fairly elevated form of sadism, the Euthyphro shows us another instance of Socrates’ elenctic care for the psuchê of his interlocutor, as in his treatment of Alcibiades recounted in the Symposium? What if, just as Socrates directs Alcibiades to turn his attention away from the sublime object(s) Alcibiades ‘sees’ in him to how Alcibiades himself has sustained this lure, so Socrates in the Euthyphro was directing Euthyphro to reconsider the exceptional status he accedes to the gods in his boastful piety? What if the work of Socrates’ elenchus, together with its apparent aperorai, is only there to open Euthyphro to the possibility that if these gods bear such a treasure for him, it is because of his, and others’, erotic investment in them?

Such a reading would advocate care, when we read the tautologous
formula Euthyphro is reduced to repeating by Socrates throughout the Euthyphro. This formula, as we recall, is: “the holy is what the gods love because it is what the gods love.” If this looks a simple absurdity, from a Lacanian perspective, it is significant that we need only to insert (an) Other(s) into the formula to arrive at an exact formulation of the intersubjective logic of hysterical desire: “Something is loved because it is loved by the Other(s).” More than this, what we can hear in the very disappointment of our expectation of sense in such tautologies is typically the commitment of the Subject’s desire in the signifiers that she is repeating; that is, their repetition here bears witness to the force of the speaker’s immovable identification with the signifiers in question. In order to explain the Euthyphrontic aporia, S. Marc Cohen (2005), for instance, uses the example of someone responding to our asking, “Why do you love him?,” by saying simply, “Because I love him.” Clearly, nothing new is added at the level of the enunciated by this response; nevertheless, something very forceful indeed is being conveyed by this response at the level of the enunciation. The questioner is being rebuffed, and the speaker for her part is saying something along the order of Martin Luther’s “Here I stand; I can do no other.” “I love him because I love him” means there can be no negotiation on the matter. The lover needs no external rationale, beyond his own love, to justify his eros.

Significantly, there is one point of exception within the Euthyphro to Socrates’ disavowal of knowledge about to hosion and about what he wants. Under the pressure of Socrates’ repeated questions, Euthyphro qualifies his third definition of to hosion:

The holy is that part of the set of what is just that concerns our therapeia of the gods.

For Euthyphro, the kind of ‘attendance’ (therapeia) of the gods he means is like the attendance a servant gives his master. It does not ‘tend to’ any lack in the master’s being, as a doctor gives therapy to his patients. It is there to help the master accomplish some further good. Socrates responds by asking, “But what about the many fine results the gods accomplish? What is the chief result of their work,” for which they would need mortals’ assistance (Euthphr. 14A)? At this moment, Euthyphro loses patience for the last time. Before continuing on his own, however, Socrates says enticingly:

You might, if you wished, Euthyphro, have answered much more
briefly the chief part of my question. But it is plain that you do not care to instruct me. For now, when you were close upon it you turned aside: and if you had answered [my question], I should already have attained from you all the instruction I need about holiness. But, as it stands, the questioner must follow the questioned wherever he leads. (14C)

Commentators as different as Gregory Vlastos and Jacob Howland assert that what does not cross Socrates’ lips in this strange moment in Euthyphro concerns the Socratic injunction of gnōthi seauton (Know thyself). For them, Socratic piety is exactly what Socrates calls in the Gorgias the “highest political art”—that of caring for the souls of the Athenians. “Piety is doing god’s work to benefit human beings,” Vlastos (1991, 176) says of Socrates’ conception. And this is what Euthyphro’s straight thinking can in no way register. Nevertheless, Socrates cannot in his turn simply spell it out for Euthyphro didactically. In terms of our argument, we can see why. To tell Euthyphro that to care for his soul and the souls of others is piety and philosophy would be like Socrates returning Alcibiades’ love in the Symposium—submitting to being the ‘object-with-knowledge’ his erastēs had elevated him to, unconcerned at the state of his interlocutors’ psyche. Euthyphro must actively work out this truth for himself, in this way instantiating the type of soul-care that Socrates aims to inspire in his companions. Socrates by contrast ‘must’ follow Euthyphro, even when the latter finally turns away from the decisive consideration—“not because [Socrates] does not think his [Euthyphro’s] soul [is] worth saving, but because he believes that there is only one way to save it and that Euthyphro must do the job by finding this one right way, so that he too becomes a searcher” (Vlastos 1996, 14). The alternative is that the very form in which Socrates carries out his teaching would performatively undermine the philosophic piety toward which it would aim to lead Euthyphro. Euthyphro’s treasure for Socrates, so we might say, is his desiring, lacking subjectivity itself: a subjectivity opened in this way to the possibility of philosophical skēpsis and inquiry, and so to the desire to ascend from straight thinking doxa towards an examined truth. That Euthyphro could not take this higher path—any more than history tells us that Alcibiades could transcend his own baser, tyrannical eros—shows the irremovable risk of Socrates’ erotic conception of philosophy. It does not, for that reason, negate its uniqueness as a conception of the philosophic way of life, largely forgotten in the modern period. Nor does it
negate Socrates’ continuing, singular fascination as “the most questionable phenomenon in antiquity” (Nietzsche), whose most eloquent description still hails from the intoxicated Alcibiades of the Symposium:

Many are the marvels which I might narrate in praise of Socrates; most of his ways might perhaps be paralleled in another man, but his absolute unlikeness to any human being that is or ever has been is perfectly astonishing. (Symp. 221C)

Works Cited


Notes

1. All translations of the various Platonic dialogues are drawn from Cooper 1997.

3. I refer here to the eighth session of Lacan (Lacan 1998). In what follows I will follow the referencing convention adopted there, listing the session number in Roman capitalized numerals, followed by the page number in the session.

4. For a psychoanalytic reading, there is of course a profound suggestiveness about the animating cause of the Euthyphro, which is Euthyphro’s legal action against his own father. The text raises directly the Freudian question of the connection between such Oedipal discontents and the very foundations of piety and impiety, and justice and injustice. Euthyphro tellingly compares his action against his father in the dialogue to those of Zeus, who bound Cronos “because he swallowed his sons unjustly,” and of Cronos himself, who “castrated his own father because of other such things” (Howland 1998, 115–6). In the heart of Socrates’ description of the charges against him laid by Meletes, moreover, we find a further analogy between the polis and its laws and the laws of the family, which Socrates is accused of contesting: “He may be wise,” Socrates says, “and, looking down upon my ignorance, is coming to accuse me before the city as before his mother on the ground that I am corrupting those of his own age” (Howland 1998, 102; my emphasis).


7. In Aristotle’s Rhetoric, for example, as LSJ points out, the word is used to denote the concealment particularly of ‘stolen goods’ (Rhet. 1372a32). We have already mentioned that what cannot be karupse in Creon’s address in Oedipus at Colonus is nothing less intimate than the blood guilt of the Labdaean family, stemming from Oedipus’s unwitting, unholy transgressions. In the much later writing of the Neoplatonist Damascus, even more evocatively, karupsen is used to denote the divine ‘secret or mystery’ worthy of praise in song.

8. This connection can be verified as many times as you like in everything Freud wrote. In his “Five Lectures” at Clark University in 1909, to take a second example, Freud compares the position of the analyst as object of transferential love to “the role of mediator and peacemaker”—and so a representative of the Law—as might be assumed by the happily named Dr. Stanley Hall, should some noisy evictee from the auditorium sue to be readmitted.

9. It is striking that something like this charge seems clearly to resonate in the charges that Socrates’ prosecutors put before the Athenian courts. In Socrates’ own précis, these men say that he is not only a “curious person who searches into things under the earth and in heaven, and who makes the worse appear the better cause.” He is also an “evildoer.”

10. As a contemporary Australian, I can think of no better example of this than the surprising thing that happened when journalists crowded around pop starlet Delta Goodrem’s house when she announced that she had cancer in 2004, and—in a scene of unlikely beauty—Delta descended into the crowd and started hugging them!