

# Interpretation

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Lewis Fallis's *Socrates and Divine Revelation* reminds one of the suppers one gets at many upscale coastal urban restaurants these days. On one hand, the food that is served is very, very tasty; on the other hand, the portion sizes are rather small and one sometimes leaves the table a little hungry for more.

Let us begin with the tasty part of the meal. At the heart of Fallis's book are careful, subtle, and insightful commentaries on two Platonic dialogues, the *Euthyphro* and the *Ion*. The *Euthyphro* commentary is divided into two chapters, the first addressing Euthyphro's "character" and the second his confusion about "piety." Fallis is particularly adept at using the hints provided by the dialogue to tease out what Socrates suggests about Euthyphro's morality, his passions and desires, his motivations and intentions. Euthyphro comes to sight in Fallis's analysis as a man who understands himself to be not only just but noble. His commitment to the laws as requiring the prosecution of his own father for murder is unparalleled, but Euthyphro is proud that he is unique in pursuing legal justice when most men would fail in their duty. He also understands himself as noble for offering to defend Socrates against the injustice the city intends for him. In short, what marks Euthyphro's character is its commitment to morality, come what may. "He has strong opinions about justice," Fallis emphasizes, and he "desires to do what is noble" (48); it is not at all clear, however, that these opinions and desires are completely coherent with each other. Like many of the interlocutors in Platonic dialogues, Euthyphro seems to have intentions that are laudable enough, but he does not understand himself very well.

Socrates, in Fallis's analysis, is able to expose Euthyphro's lack of self-understanding to the reader of the dialogue, although it is doubtful whether Euthyphro ever accepts his own humbling at the hands of Socrates, or whether he even realizes what Socrates is doing for him. Euthyphro's inadequacies are the subject of the second chapter of Fallis's commentary on the dialogue. Euthyphro's immediate problem is that he cannot give a coherent account of piety. Fallis is hardly the first to point this out, but his treatment of "the *Euthyphro* problem," as it has come to be called, is far more subtle and careful than that of most commentators. For one thing, Fallis is far more attentive to those places in the text where Socrates seems to treat Euthyphro unfairly; for another, he is careful about analyzing the abrupt conclusion of the dialogue. Most importantly, he poignantly raises the question of what Socrates learns or fails to learn from his conversation with Euthyphro.

Whereas Fallis sees in the figure of Euthyphro a man who is like a prophet, claiming direct experience of the divine, in *Ion* he sees a man who is a follower of a prophet, whose experience of the divine is mediated by a text. Fallis's *Ion* commentary also has two chapters. Their topics loosely imitate the two topics of his *Euthyphro* commentary, the first being devoted to *Ion*'s "artfulness and mindlessness" (i.e., his character), the second to *Ion*'s lack of "knowledge" (i.e., his inability to give a coherent account of his claims). Whereas Euthyphro comes to sight as a very strange person, Fallis notes, Plato emphasizes that the rhapsode *Ion* is quite normal (83). Both of Fallis's commentaries pay careful attention to structure, but the *Ion* commentary does so to a greater extent than the *Euthyphro* commentary. While there is certainly a great deal to learn from Fallis's *Ion* commentary, one has the sense that he is less confident in this than in his *Euthyphro* commentary. He frequently refers to the *Ion* as presenting "puzzles" (e.g., 85, 91, 94, 98, 118). Of course, the dialogue *does* present puzzles; the question is how to resolve or interpret them. It is again significant that Fallis raises the question of what Socrates learns or fails to learn from *Ion*.

The four chapters of Fallis's two commentaries comprise about four-fifths of the book. The other fifth is devoted to an introductory chapter and a short conclusion. It is these parts of the book that leave one hungry for more.

The stated purpose of the introduction of *Socrates and Divine Revelation* is to explain why contemporary readers need to study the *Euthyphro* and the *Ion*. The reason given is that contemporary analyses of "religious experience" or "divine experience" are inadequate because they begin with assumptions that prohibit the very possibility of treating religious experience

fairly or with “openness.” Plato’s Socrates, Fallis claims, is nondogmatic and this nondogmatism (which is not relativism) opens up the possibility of religious experience getting a fair or open hearing. People like Dawkins and Rorty, he says, especially fail to give those who claim experience with the divine an honest chance, but rather *assume* such people to be misguided or self-deluded or worse. Whether it is fair or accurate to use the pugnacious Richard Dawkins as particularly representative of the position of “scientism” is one question we might raise about Fallis’s approach.

A more significant question is whether those advocating “divine revelation” today would want to hitch their wagon to the concept of “religious experience” to begin with. The many more or less distantly related followers of Karl Barth, for example, would protest loudly against such a travel plan. For them, the very notion of “religious experience,” as it is commonly understood, is already an idolatrous enterprise, for it describes attempts by man to reach out to God, whereas “divine revelation” (the phrase used in Fallis’s title) implies God reaching out and achieving something within man. Indeed, the very word “religion,” which attempts to place things as disparate as Buddhism and Christianity in the same genus, already bears within it the Enlightenment attack on Christian faith, or so would some following in Barth’s footsteps aver. Fallis is not unaware of this problem (6), although one wonders if his treatment of the matter is adequate.

Fallis could perhaps have attempted to improve his argument for the rationale of his study simply with a more developed portrait of the contemporary alternatives. In addition to such a task, however, he will also need to make an extensive argument for why, even though paganism has been supplanted for many centuries, it is still desirable to turn to Plato’s treatment of pagan religion in dialogues such as the *Euthyphro* and the *Ion*. After all, the religious experiences of the audience Fallis is attempting to reach are Christian or Jewish or perhaps Islamic. It is less than obvious that such experiences as these map directly onto the pagan religious experiences of Euthyphro or Ion. Perhaps there are passages in Jeremiah where the prophet comes across as a moralist as severe as Euthyphro, but does Euthyphro ever say, with Isaiah, “Speak tenderly to Jerusalem”? Surely it never occurs to the overly self-confident Euthyphro to say to God, as Moses did, “Oh, my Lord, send, I pray, some other person.” One is inclined to think that the argument Fallis needs to establish the importance for studying Plato’s two dialogues in our theistic or post-theistic times is available, but he needs to show us the argument nonetheless. In the conclusion to *Socrates and Divine Revelation*, Fallis

admits that the argument is necessary for his project but missing from his book (138). Such an admission, though, goes some way toward undermining the argument he wants to make in the introduction for the importance of studying the *Euthyphro* and the *Ion*.

The conclusion to *Socrates and Divine Revelation*, like its introduction, outlines a valuable argument yet leaves it incomplete. We are told that, to get the whole Platonic teaching on religious experience—or divine revelation—we will need to consider (in addition to the *Euthyphro* and the *Ion*) at least portions of *Alcibiades*, *Republic*, and *Meno*. And while we learn that the interpretations offered of the *Euthyphro* and the *Ion* might go some way toward “a new account of Plato’s understanding of education” (141), it turns out that this new account will require a new study of the *Laws*. But Fallis proceeds to give only a brief sketch of such a study.

Readers of *Interpretation* presumably do not need much prompting in order to be convinced that we all need to study the *Euthyphro* and the *Ion* and we will certainly be assisted in our efforts by attending to Fallis’s fine commentaries. And while we would like to have the complete argument about the *Alcibiades*, the *Republic*, the *Meno*, and the *Laws* on education, we are perhaps—to return to our opening metaphor—not so gluttonous that we cannot wait for the next book from this talented young interpreter. The commentaries on the *Euthyphro* and the *Ion* are thus sufficiently substantial for today’s supper; our lips remain whetted, though, for the argument explaining the importance of these commentaries as well as the argument explaining where the commentaries lead. Having offered us one supper, we trust that Fallis will not make us fast for an inordinately long time before offering another.