

Interpretation

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Interpretation

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- Inquiries* ***Interpretation, A Journal of Political Philosophy***
Department of Political Science
Baylor University
1 Bear Place, 97276
Waco, TX 76798
- email* interpretation@baylor.edu

Characters: Socrates, Alcibiades

[138a]

SOC. Alcibiades,² you're on your way³ to pray to the god?

ALC. Most certainly, Socrates.

SOC. You appear⁴ down in the dumps⁵ with your gaze on the ground, like you have something on your mind.⁶

ALC. And what might someone have on his mind, Socrates?

SOC. The greatest thing to have on one's mind, Alcibiades, it seems to me. But come, tell me, by Zeus, [138b] do you not think when we

² The first words of both *Alcibiades* and *Second Alcibiades* are direct addresses to Alcibiades by Socrates. In *Alcibiades*, the first words are "Child of Kleinias. . ." In *Second Alcibiades*, Alcibiades is addressed by his own name.

³ *poreuē*: Plato will have Socrates use this word twice again in the dialogue (141a7 and 148a2—the second instance repeats the first almost word for word, and both refer directly back to the question here). The negative will be used five times (once by Alcibiades at 139e9 and four times by Socrates at 142d4, 147e5, 148d8, and 150b8), and is implied twice (once by Alcibiades at 148b1, and once by Socrates at 149c6—see notes 49 and 58, below). The word's massive significance for Socrates's reflections on thinking and argument throughout the Platonic dialogues makes the use—in the first line of the dialogue—pregnant. It evokes the first lines of *Lysis* (203a–b), where the word is used three times in rapid succession. The first time in *Lysis* (also the dialogue's first word), Socrates speaks of his own "way," the second, he speaks of someone else (Hippothales) asking about Socrates's "way." The connections between *Second Alcibiades* and *Lysis* are significant. By contrast with the opening of *Alcibiades* (see note 2, above), and Hippothales's question to Socrates in *Lysis* ("On your way to where, Socrates, and from whence?"—cf. the opening words of *Phaedrus*, which are identical to Hippothales's question except for omitting the word *poreuein*, which is very likely not an accidental omission), there is a subtle emphasis on only where Alcibiades is *going*, to the deliberate neglect of where he is coming *from*.

⁴ *phainēi*: It is *apparent* that Alcibiades is "down in the dumps"—in Socrates's phrase, this comes from Alcibiades himself, it shines forth from him. This word will appear again throughout the dialogue, and we should track it carefully. The opening line of *Protagoras* is evoked, in which the "companion" asks Socrates, "*Pothen, o Sōkrates, phainēi?*" ("From where are you appearing, Socrates?"—cf. note 3, above: where Socrates is coming *from* always matters). *Phainein* is not identical with *dokein*, as we will see immediately—*dokein* will be used several times in succession by Socrates in the next few lines, though he will not use *phainein* again until 146e. In the meantime, Alcibiades interjects in the conversation with "*Phainetai*" ("so it appears") three times (139c, 140e, 144c).

⁵ *eskuthrōpakenai*: This is the only instance in which Plato uses this word in any of his works. It has a comic heritage (Aristophanes, *Lysistrata* 7 and *Ploutos* 756), and perhaps origin; it may be one of Aristophanes's neologisms. "Of sad countenance" (one of LSJ's translations) might be good, given its evocation of Don Quixote. "Dejected" may be very accurate, but not particularly comic. Cf. Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 2.7.2 and *Cyropaedia* 6.2.21.

⁶ *sunnooumenos*: The verb and its cognate noun *sunnoia* are used three times in rapid succession here, and then not again in the dialogue. The root word is *nous*—mind—and the prefix *sun* should not be neglected. What this word gestures to is of the greatest philosophical importance.

happen⁷ to pray for things both private and public, that the gods sometimes give them and sometimes don't, and to some people, and to others, not?

ALC. Most certainly.

SOC. Doesn't this seem to you to entail many foresights,⁸ that one not forgetfully⁹ pray for great evils while believing they are good things, and the gods happen to be disposed to give what the person praying happened upon? Like Oedipus¹⁰ who, it is said, prayed instantly that his sons would divide their patrimony in battle¹¹: [138c] when he had it, for himself, to pray that his own present evils might somehow be averted, he called down others on top of those already there; whereby they found their completion, and from them came very many and terrible things, that require their own discussion.¹²

⁷ *tunchanomen*: To happen, to chance upon. The word and its cognates are critical to the dialogue, and will mostly be translated as “happen” or “fortune” and their cognates. Where it is necessary to translate with another word, this is noted in parentheses, as are instances where “happen” is used to translate another word.

⁸ *pollēs promētheias*: “Many foresights” is awkward, but the Greek is awkward. In the singular, *pollē promētheia* means “much foresight,” and this is how Plato uses the expression at *Minos* 318e10. The plural here requires consideration(s), and suggests the variety of “foresights” that would be needed to be drawn together to predict the beneficial way in which to pray.

⁹ “Forgetfully” translates *lēsetai hauton*. *Lēsetai* is in the middle voice of *lanthanein*, and the expression used here has a subtly different meaning in the middle than the active: where the middle means “forgetfully,” the active means “unawares.” Alcibiades will later repeat the phrase in which Socrates uses this expression, almost word for word, but among the subtle differences is that he will there use the active voice (148b1–2).

¹⁰ The story of Oedipus begins and ends the dialogue, and casts its shadow on the whole of it (cf. for example 144b11–12). The emphasis here, and at the end, is on the human disposition involved in praying for or interpreting divine things. It should be noted that other stories are available to Plato to illustrate the point Socrates is making here—Oedipus is a deliberate choice (cf. *Laws* 687d10–e4).

¹¹ Socrates paraphrases the story recounted in Euripides, *Phoenician Women* 66–68; and Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* 1375–96.

¹² “that require their own discussion”: This is a literal translation of the phrase *ha ti dei kath' hekasta legein*, which more colloquially means, “which we can't get into here.” Socrates seems to use the colloquial meaning at this point, but soon demonstrates that he means it literally (see 143a3).

- ALC. But Socrates, you're talking about a human being when he's mad with rage [*mainomenon*]¹³ Does it seem to you that someone composed [*hugiainōn*]¹⁴ would have dared to pray for such a thing?
- SOC. Does it seem to you that madness [*to mainesthai*] is the opposite of sound-mindedness [*to phronein*]?¹⁵
- ALC. Most certainly. [138d]
- SOC. And some human beings seem to you to be unsound, and others sound-minded?
- ALC. Indeed so.
- SOC. Come then, let us consider who these are. It is agreed that some are unsound, others sound-minded, and others mad?
- ALC. It is agreed.
- SOC. And still others are healthy?
- ALC. They are.
- SOC. So then some others are unhealthy? [139a]
- ALC. Quite so.
- SOC. So then they are not the same?

¹³ *mainomenon*: "Mad with rage"—Alcibiades is focused on the "rage" of Oedipus here, and the word he uses is an important one. It is the verbal form of the noun *mēnis*—"rage"—which is the first word in Homer's *Iliad*, and therefore the first word in the Western "canon." That first word speaks of the devastating "rage of Achilles," a rage celebrated as heroic by the Greeks—Alcibiades is not necessarily criticizing Oedipus for the rage he mentions in this context. But the Greek word can also mean "madness" in the sense of insanity, which Socrates will immediately pick up on and turn to.

¹⁴ *hugiainōn*: "Composed" is contextually accurate, compared as the word is here with the temporary condition of being enraged, but the Greek word has the broader meanings of "healthy" in general, and "sound" in general. Socrates plays on this ambiguity immediately. For the rest of the dialogue, this word and its cognates will always be translated by the word "healthy" and its cognates. No other words will be so translated.

¹⁵ *Phronein* and its cognates will always be translated as "sound-mindedness" or a version of "sound"; no other words will be so translated. The privative *aphrōn* and cognates will likewise be translated with versions of "unsound"; no other words will be so translated. *Phronein* permits of meanings other than soundness, and can sometimes be equivalent to "wisdom," but Socrates uses the word here, the first time in the dialogue, as the contrary of "madness" (*mainesthai*). The less equivocal Greek word for "wisdom," *sophia* (and all of its cognates), is entirely absent from the *Second Alcibiades*. It seems therefore best to allow our comprehension of what "soundness" is to expand, if necessary, rather than substitute a different English word should *phronein* seem to meet the bar of wisdom at any point in the dialogue.

- ALC. Well no.
- SOC. And are there some others who happen not to be either?
- ALC. Of course not.
- SOC. For it's necessary that a human being be either sick or not sick?
- ALC. So it seems to me.
- SOC. Well then, do you hold the same thought about sound-mindedness and unsoundness?
- ALC. How do you mean?
- SOC. Does it seem to you¹⁶ only possible to be either sound-minded or unsound, or is there a third condition in between that makes a human being neither [139b] sound-minded nor unsound?
- ALC. Of course not.
- SOC. It's necessary then that the condition be one or the other of these two?
- ALC. So it seems to me.
- SOC. You remember, no, that you agreed madness is the opposite of sound-mindedness?
- ALC. I do.
- SOC. And that there is no third condition in between that makes a human being neither sound-minded nor unsound?
- ALC. I did agree.
- SOC. And can there somehow be two opposites of one thing?
- ALC. Not at all. [139c]
- SOC. Then unsoundness and madness are probably the same thing.
- ALC. So it appears.
- SOC. Then, Alcibiades, if we said that all unsound people are mad, we would speak correctly; for example, if some of those your own age happen to be unsound (and such there are) and even some of your

¹⁶ Omitting *ei*, with MS T.

elders. For tell me, by Zeus, do you not think that of those in the city the sound-minded are few, and the unsound—whom you call mad—many?

ALC. I do.

SOC. Do you then think we would be pleased [139d] to so long pay the penalty [*dikēn*]¹⁷ of being citizens together with such madmen—that we wouldn't be lashed out at and tossed around, and all the things madmen are used to doing? Observe, you blessed man, whether things might be otherwise.

ALC. How might things be then, Socrates? For [it looks like] they probably aren't as I thought they were.

SOC. So it seems to me as well. But it must be considered in this way—

ALC. What way do you mean?

SOC. I'll tell you. We suppose that some are sick, no? [139e]

ALC. Most certainly.

SOC. And does it seem to you that the sick person necessarily has gout, or fever, or ophthalmia, or doesn't it seem to you that even with out any of these conditions he is still sick, from another sickness? For they are of course many, these are not the only ones.

ALC. They seem so to me.

SOC. Is every ophthalmia thus a disease?

ALC. Yes.

SOC. And every disease thus an ophthalmia?

ALC. Of course not, as far as I'm concerned. But I'm at a loss [*aporō*] as to how I mean that. [140a]

SOC. Well if you turn your mind [*prosechēis ton noun*] to me, “two together will be examining,”¹⁸ and we may happen [*tuchon*] to find [a way].

¹⁷ In other contexts, *dikē* means “justice” more broadly conceived. The word and its cognates are almost entirely absent from the dialogue: this is the first appearance of the word, and it will only appear again toward the end (in a *reprise* at 147a8 and a *presto* at 149e8, 150a7, and 150b2).

¹⁸ Socrates “quotes” Homer (*Iliad* 10.224)—Diomedes's speech to Nestor when he wants to sneak into

- ALC. I'm turning,¹⁹ Socrates, to the extent of my power.
- SOC. Well then, it was agreed by us that all ophthalmia is a disease, but all disease is not, however, ophthalmia.
- ALC. It was agreed.
- SOC. And it seems to me correctly agreed. For even though everyone who has a fever is sick, not everyone who is sick therefore has a fever or gout or ophthalmia, [140b] I think—every such thing is indeed a sickness, but differs in what those whom we call doctors say is its “elaboration.” For they are not all²⁰ the same, nor do they bear out the same way, but each instead bears out according to its own power. Nevertheless, all of them are sicknesses. Likewise, we suppose that some people are craftsmen, no?
- ALC. Most certainly.
- SOC. And thus cobblers and carpenters and sculptors—and very many others who require their own discussion—have their separate shares [*melē*] of craftsmanship, [140c] and all of these are craftsmen, but those who, taken all together, are craftsmen are not therefore cobblers or carpenters or sculptors.
- ALC. Of course not.
- SOC. In just this way are people also separate with respect to unsoundness, and we call those who have the largest share of it “madmen,” but those who have a bit less, “fools” and “thunderstruck”—while those who wish to speak in more auspicious terms [*euphēmōtatois*]²¹

the Trojan camp. Socrates alters Diomedes's speech: Diomedes speaks of “going together” (*erchomenō*), not “examining together” (*skeptomenō*). The man who accompanies Diomedes is Odysseus.

Diomedes (whose name means “contrivance of Zeus”) is not an incidental choice of Homeric characters, and Socrates will use his example again at the end of the dialogue (150d6–9). He is one of the very few great Homeric heroes for whom, from a standard Greek perspective, everything works out well. He is of course wounded in battle at Troy, like all the heroes, but he faced none of the tribulations that Odysseus did returning home, for example, nor did he meet a fate such as that of Agamemnon, Achilles, or Ajax. He was instead held to have lived a long and full life, and to have founded many cities. He was worshiped as a god after his death.

¹⁹ The translation is awkward, but particularly given the Homeric passage alluded to, with its literal sense of “going,” and given that he drops the “*ton noun*” (mind) in his reply to Socrates, Alcibiades seems almost to speak in terms of physical motion, both in lacking a “way” and in “turning” (i.e., paying attention) to Socrates to find one.

²⁰ Reading *pasai* with MS T, rather than *pasin* with MS B.

²¹ The verbal form of the adjective *euphēmos* is itself a euphemism, literally meaning “to speak well.”

name some “great-souled,” some “good-hearted” [*euētheis*],²² and still others [140d] “innocent” and “inexperienced” and “dumb-founded.” And you will find many other names if you search them out. Yet all of these are unsoundness, though they differ, just as it was apparent to us that art differs from art, and sickness from sickness. Or how does it seem to you?

ALC. To me, like that.

SOC. Then let’s go back over again from what came before. For evidently at the beginning of the argument it was necessary to investigate who the unsound and who the sound-minded could possibly be. For it was agreed that there are such people—or was it not?

ALC. Yes, it was agreed. [140e]

SOC. Then you suppose that those people are sound-minded who would know whatever is necessary to do and say?

ALC. I do.

SOC. And which ones are unsound—aren’t they the ones who know neither of these things?

ALC. They are.

SOC. Then those who know neither of these things will not be aware when they’re saying and when they’re doing those things that one must not?

ALC. So it appears.

SOC. And that’s just the sort of human being I was saying this Oedipus is, Alcibiades. [141a] And you will find many even now who are not possessed by anger like him, praying for things while not supposing they are evil for themselves, but rather that they are good things. He did not pray like that, nor suppose that he did, but there are others who experience the opposite in these things.²³ For

but most associated with religious observances, referring to the reverent silence preserved before the sacred—*Euphēmeis* means, in that case, “Hush!” Socrates and Alcibiades will have a brief but important discussion about this term and its implications shortly (143d2–9), and a more lengthy one toward the end of the dialogue (148d–150d).

²² The term has a range of meanings, from “good-hearted” and “innocent” to “simple-minded” and “naive.” Socrates will use the word in a clearly disparaging sense at 149e5.

²³ Socrates’s words here are ambiguous. They might be heard to suggest that Oedipus, according to

I suppose if the god to whom you happen to be on your way should appear to you first, before you prayed at all, and asked if it was sufficient for you to become tyrant of the Athenians' city; and if you deemed that worthless and not grand enough he would even deliver [141b] all the Greeks; and if he saw you seemed to hold even this to be a trivial thing if it wasn't all of Europe, and consented to this; and consented not only to this, since you would immediately want everyone to perceive that Alcibiades, son of Kleinias, was tyrant—I suppose you would go away extremely pleased, as having obtained the greatest things.

- ALC. I suppose that someone else would too, Socrates, if indeed such things came to pass like that! [141c]
- SOC. But you would not want the territory of all the Greeks and barbarians, and tyranny over them, at the cost of your soul.
- ALC. I suppose not! How could I, if I was destined [*mellōn*]²⁴ to have no possibility of using them?
- SOC. And if destined to make evil and harmful use of them? Not then either?
- ALC. Of course not.
- SOC. You see then that these are not reliable [*asphales*]: neither to receive lightly what one is given, nor to pray that such a thing come about, if it destines one to be [141d] harmed through these things, or to have one's life taken away altogether. But we could tell of many who desired tyranny before now, and who made serious efforts to attain it for themselves—holding it to be a good thing to obtain—and who have been robbed of their life by plots against their tyranny. But I suppose you have not missed hearing of some things that happened “yesterday or the day before,”²⁵ when the

him, supposed that he was praying for something evil *for himself* when he prayed for his sons to fight over their patrimony. But this is not likely to be what he means. His words also contain the possibility that he supposes Oedipus was not even thinking of his own good when he made his prayer—that he was exclusively focused on wishing evil on his sons. That is, that Oedipus prayed, and supposed he prayed, in anger.

²⁴ *mellōn*: this is the verbal form of the word *melos*, translated as “share” above—i.e., one's lot, or portion of fate. It is an important word and theme in the dialogue, and since its full range of meanings is variously evoked, cannot be translated by the same word every time. Wherever it is not translated by “destined,” the transliterated word will be included in square brackets.

²⁵ *Iliad* 2.303—the context is significant.

darling of Archelaos of Macedon, who was no less in love with the tyranny than the other one was with his darling, killed his lover so as to become tyrant and a happy man [141e]—but after holding the tyranny for three or four days, he too was plotted against by others, and came to his end. And you see even among our own citizens, and these things we haven't just heard of but have seen for ourselves, [142a] there are those who have desired generalships before now and happened upon it, who are now either exiles from the city or have ended their life. And of them, even those seeming to fare best have gone through many dangers and terrors not only in their generalship, but are also, upon their return home, besieged by a siege of informers no less than they constantly were by their enemies in war, to the extent that some pray that they had never been a general at all rather than been a general. [142b] Obviously if these dangers and labors brought some benefit, there would be an argument for them, but as it is now [*nun*]²⁶ it's even entirely the opposite. And you will find the same thing concerning children: some have prayed before now to engender them, and having engendered them have been beset by the greatest ill circumstances and pains. Some have gone through their entire life in pain, having children who are bad through and through; others, having decent [*chrēstōn*]²⁷ children who [142c] were sent ill circumstances and taken from them, were beset no less than the former by bad fortune, and wanted to never have engendered children rather than have engendered them. Nonetheless, with these things and still more like them exceedingly obvious for them to see, it is rare to find someone who, having been given something, held himself back from it; or who, expecting [*mellōn*] to have his prayer answered, refrained from praying. The many would not hold themselves back from being given tyranny or generalships nor many other things [142d] that harm rather than benefit when they're actually there, but would even pray for them if they did not happen to be actually there, and then not long afterward sometimes hold up and recant, unpraying what they first prayed for. For my part, I am at a loss [*aporō*] as to whether such human beings are not truly at fault to

²⁶ The *nun* is crucial: Socrates is not saying that this has always been the case, or always will be. He is clearly not diminishing courage and braving dangers as such—he is suggesting that they are pointless if put in the service of a futile goal.

²⁷ This is the same verb as Alcibiades's "useful" at 141c5.

declare that the gods are “responsible for their evils”—“they by themselves by their own recklessness,” or unsoundness, one must say, “have more than their share of pain.”²⁸ [142e] It is probable, Alcibiades, that that poet was sound-minded, who seems to me to have had some mindless friends, and seeing that they were both doing and praying for things that were not better, though they seemed so to them, made a common prayer for all of them as such: [143a] “King Zeus, the good things [*esthla*],” he said, “whether prayed for or not prayed for, for my part I ask you to give; and what is terrible,²⁹ even if prayed for, ward off.”³⁰ Certainly to me, the poet seems to speak nobly [*kalōs*]³¹ and without risk of fall [*asphalōs*], but if you have something in mind [*nous*] about this, do not be silent.

ALC. It is difficult to contradict what has been nobly said, Socrates, but I do have this in mind [*ennoō*], that ignorance is responsible for so many evils for human beings when, as it seems, because of it we both do without noticing [143b]—and what is worst of all, even pray for ourselves to have—what is most evil for us. And that is exactly what no one would suppose, but everyone would suppose himself to be adequate to praying for the greatest things for himself,

²⁸ *Odyssey* 1.32—the context is significant.

²⁹ Reading *deina*, with all the MSS, rather than *deila* (“the wretched things”) with Buttman’s emendation accepted by Burnet (here and at 148b6). *Deina* here picks up Socrates’s previous mention of the “very many and terrible things [*deina*], that require their own discussion” at 138c4–5.

The statement here compares the “good things” in the noble sense with the “terrible things” in the noble sense, rhetorically eclipsing the possibility of “wonderful” in *ta deina*, and of a possibly broader understanding of *ta agatha*. It is not clear that Socrates understands *esthla* to be equivalent to *agatha*, or *deina* to *kaka*, Alcibiades’s conclusions notwithstanding (cf. 148b1–7): the poet’s prayer may have a too narrow or mistaken interpretation of what is good and evil, for human beings, from a philosophical point of view—he may be throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Cf. *asphalōs* in Socrates’s next line with *episphalē* at *Republic* 497d9–10, and context; and Alcibiades’s “*chalepon*” in response (143a6) with Socrates’s “*chalepa*” at *Rep.* 497d10. These passages resonate with each other.

In the same way, “arts” and “sickness,” for example, are used by Socrates in ways that anticipate an immediate assumption on the part of his listener(s) that the former are good, the latter bad. But these evaluations are not unproblematic or unqualified, for Socrates.

³⁰ The meter of the poem appears to be “Doric,” or “mixed.” It begins with two dactylic meters, suggesting Homeric epic poetry, then moves into the Doric mode. This form of poetry allowed the poet broad latitude with respect to (i) the type of meter used, which could be changed within a line, and (ii) the number of meters in each line. There are three long “runs” of long syllables throughout the passage—such runs evoke Athenian comedy. The “poem” should be compared most especially with *Laws* 686c7–689e5.

³¹ This is the first use in the dialogue of the term *kalos*—beautiful, noble, fine, fair. It is not clear in which way the word is meant, or taken, here. “Nobly” might be better rendered by “Beautifully” here.

not the most evil things. For this would truly be some kind of curse, and not the same thing as a prayer!

SOC. But perhaps, best of men, some man might appear who happens to be wiser than me and you both, who would say that we are incorrect [143c] to condemn ignorance indiscriminately [*eikēi*], if we were not to specify *of what* the ignorance is, and specify that it is in a certain way a good thing for those who have it, just as it is an evil thing for others.

ALC. How do you mean? Is there anything whatsoever for which it is better for the one who has it in any way to be ignorant than to know?³²

SOC. It seems so to me at any rate—but not to you?

ALC. No indeed, by Zeus!

SOC. But I certainly won't charge you with wanting for your own mother what it is said that Orestes and that Alcmaeon brought about, though some others have, by what they have themselves brought about, gained [*tunchanousi*] what those two did.³³ [143d]

ALC. Hush [*euphēmei*] by Zeus, Socrates!

SOC. Oh, Alcibiades. It's not the person saying that he would not want³⁴ you to have committed such things whom you must order to hush [*euphēmein*], but much rather someone who might say the opposite,

³² This is awkward, but it is important to capture the shift in what one “has,” from Socrates's question to Alcibiades's reply. Socrates speaks of “having” ignorance; Alcibiades speaks of “having” *a thing*—i.e., a possession—of which one is either ignorant or knows. The referent for Alcibiades's “in any way” (*hopōsoun*) in his reply is also ambiguous, a crucial ambiguity that I have tried to preserve in translation: Alcibiades assumes somewhat easily that one can possess something “in any way” of which one is ignorant “in any way,” wondering whether this can be better “in any way”; for Socrates, if one is ignorant “in any way” about what one purportedly possesses, one does not possess it “in any way”—one then possesses only one's ignorance.

³³ Again, awkward, but (i) the sense of gaining and possession needs to be preserved (in fact, “what those two did” translates *ekeinois tauta*—literally, “their things”), as the theme is continually advanced in the dialogue (cf. 144d4–e1), and (ii) the sense of the terrible crime just “happening” (*tunchanein*) through what one has “brought about,” without necessarily intending that consequence, is crucial to what follows immediately: Alcibiades's dream of tyranny would, if achieved instantly, entail deposing and probably killing his guardian Pericles—a consequence Alcibiades seems not to have even considered (though cf. 144a8). And this to say nothing of the long shadow that the story of Oedipus casts across the whole dialogue, a story specifically evoked again here with the mention of Alcmaeon (whose mention Socrates demonstrates was superfluous to the “principle” of the argument immediately, and twice: 143d7, 144b11).

³⁴ Reading *etheloi* with MS B, rather than *ethelois* with MS T.

since it seems to you that the deed is simply exceedingly terrible, to such an extent as to be unequivocally [*eikēi*] unspeakable. But do you believe [*dokeis*] that if this Orestes, had he happened to be sound-minded and known what was best to do for himself, would have attempted to bring such things about?

ALC. Of course not. [143e]

SOC. I don't suppose anyone else would either.

ALC. Indeed not.

SOC. Then it looks like ignorance of what is best and being ignorant of what is best is a bad thing.

ALC. So it seems to me.

SOC. So then both for that person and for everyone else?

ALC. I say so.

SOC. Then let us therefore examine this: if you should suddenly be disposed, supposing it to be better—and going to his door, dagger in hand—to ask whether Pericles, your own guardian and friend, was inside, and planning to kill him and no one else; and they say that he's inside—and I'm not saying that you want to do such a thing, but if, I suppose, this seems so to you then, which doubtless nothing prevents someone ignorant of the best from being disposed to somehow believing, inasmuch as he supposes the most evil thing to be somehow the best thing—or doesn't it seem so to you?

ALC. Most certainly.

SOC. Then if on going inside and seeing that very person, [144b] you were ignorant of who he was and supposed him to be someone else, would you still attempt to kill him?

ALC. No by Zeus—it doesn't seem so to me!

SOC. For no doubt it was not the one you just happened upon, but the other himself whom you wanted. Or what?

ALC. Yes.

- SOC. Then even if you went to attack many times, if you were always ignorant of who Pericles was when you were destined to do it, you would never run yourself at him.
- ALC. Of course not.
- SOC. What then? Do you believe [*dokeis*] that this Orestes would ever have set himself upon his mother if he had been ignorant of who she was? [144c]
- ALC. I don't suppose so!
- SOC. For no doubt it was not just any other woman he happened upon first, or someone else's mother, whom he thought to kill, but his own.
- ALC. That's so.
- SOC. Then to be ignorant of such things is a good thing for those so simply disposed and who have such fixed notions [*doxas*].
- ALC. So it appears.
- SOC. So you see that it is "of *what* the ignorance is, and that it is in a certain way a good thing for those who have it," and not an evil thing, as it seemed to you just now?
- ALC. It is likely so. [144d]
- SOC. Nonetheless, if you wish to examine what follows from this, it might perhaps seem strange to you.
- ALC. What exactly, Socrates?
- SOC. That, to say it briefly, it is probable indeed that the possession of the other³⁵ areas of knowledge [*epistēmōn*], if someone so possesses without reference to what is best, will seldom benefit and mostly harm the one who has it. Look at it like this: doesn't it seem to you to be necessary that whenever we're really about [*mellōmen*] to do or say something, it needs be that we first suppose that we know, or actually do know, [144e] the thing that we are so ready³⁶ to do or say?
- ALC. It certainly seems so to me.

³⁵ Knowing who one's parents and guardians are is thus presented by Socrates as on par with these "other areas of knowledge."

³⁶ *procheirrotērōs*: the word evokes *encheiridion* (dagger) at 143e10, above, and indeed means "ready" inasmuch as it means "with dagger in hand."

- SOC. So then the orators, for example, either by really knowing how to counsel or by supposing they know, counsel us on each occasion, some about both war and peace, some about the walls of a building or constructing harbors—in a word, whatsoever the [145a] city ever does to another city or itself for itself, it all comes from the orators' counsel.
- ALC. You speak truly.
- SOC. See then what follows from these things.
- ALC. I will if I can.
- SOC. For you name people sound-minded and unsound?
- ALC. I do.
- SOC. So then the many are unsound but the few are sound-minded?
- ALC. Just so.
- SOC. So then in both cases you're looking from one thing toward something else?
- ALC. Yes. [145b]
- SOC. And do you call such a person who knows counseling, but without connection to the "whether it is better" and "when it is better," sound-minded?
- ALC. Of course not.
- SOC. Nor, I suppose, that man who knows warring itself, without connection to the "when it is better" and "for how long a time it is better." Or what?
- ALC. Agreed.³⁷
- SOC. So then also not if someone knows [about] killing someone, or seizing his money, or making him an exile from his fatherland, without connection to the "when it is better" and "whom it is better"?
- ALC. Certainly not. [145c]

³⁷ Literally, "Yes" (*nai*), but this does not make sense in English here.

- SOC. So it's that man who knows something of these sorts of things, if attended by knowledge of what is best—and this is clearly the same thing as that of the beneficial—or what?—
- ALC. Yes.
- SOC. And we will declare this one to be sound-minded, and a useful counselor both for the city and himself for himself, but the one not such the opposites of these. Or how does it seem?
- ALC. Like that to me.
- SOC. And what of someone who knows horsemanship or bowmanship, or boxing or wrestling or some other contest, or any other thing [145d] among those things we know by an art—what do you call him who knows what becomes better through this art? The one who, according to the art of horsemanship, a horseman?
- ALC. I do.
- SOC. And I suppose the one who, according to the art of boxing, a boxer, and that of flute-playing, a flute-player, and all the others, obviously, analogously—or is it otherwise?
- ALC. No, like that.
- SOC. Then does it seem necessary to you that the one who has some knowledge of these things be as a result a sound-minded man, or [145e] will we say he falls short by far?
- ALC. By far indeed by Zeus!
- SOC. Then what kind of a regime do you suppose this to be: good bowmen and flute-players, and athletes and the other artists besides, and intermixing with these those whom we spoke of just now, the knowers of warring itself, and killing itself, and orator-men blustering political bluster, and all the others without knowledge of what is best and without knowing when or for whom it is better [146a] to make use of each one of them?
- ALC. A worthless one, for my part, Socrates.
- SOC. And I suppose you would say it, whenever you might see each one of them competing with the others, and “assigning the greatest share” of the regime “to that in which he himself

happens to be strongest³⁸—by which I mean, to what becomes best through *that* very art;³⁹ but most things about what is really best for the city and for himself are utterly off the mark, because, I suppose, he has put his trust in opinion without intelligence. [146b] Such things being so, would we not speak correctly in declaring that such a regime is full of much upheaval and lawlessness?⁴⁰

ALC. Correct indeed, by Zeus.

SOC. And it seemed necessary to us that it needs be that we first suppose that we know, or actually do know, that thing that we are very ready to do or say?

ALC. It did so seem.

SOC. And that if someone does things that he knows or seems to know, and is attended by the beneficial, we hold him [146c] to be profitable both to the city and to his own self?

ALC. How otherwise?

SOC. But I suppose if the opposite of these things, neither to the city nor to his own self?

ALC. Me too.

SOC. Well, does it still seem so to you now, or is it somehow otherwise?

ALC. No, like that.

SOC. And you said that you call the many unsound, and the few sound-minded?

ALC. I did.

³⁸ From Euripides's *Antiope*, of which only fragments are extant. The passage is quoted at more length, and differently, in *Gorgias* (484e4–7), including having *beltistos* (“best”) where our passage has *kratistos* (“strongest”); and *hēmeras* (“of the day”) where our passage has *tēs politeias* (“of the regime”). Whether the passage in *Gorgias* preserves Euripides's exact words is not known, but it remains entirely in tragic meter (iambic trimeter), whereas *tēs politeias* in our passage definitely interrupts the meter, and is therefore almost certainly an interpolation.

³⁹ This passage repeats, word for word, the passage at 145d1–2 translated as “what becomes better through this art,” with two exceptions: “better” at 145d2 is “best” here; and *tautēn tēn technēn* (“this art”) at 145d2 is *autēn tēn technēn* (“that very art”) here.

⁴⁰ Aside from this word (*anomia*), there is only one other use of any word whose root is connected to the word “law” (*nomos*) in the dialogue—*nomizomena* at 151b2. See note 47, below, for an alternative manuscript reading that yields a possible exception.

- SOC. So then we say once again that the many utterly miss the mark of the best since, I suppose, they in most cases put their trust in opinion without intelligence. [146d]
- ALC. We do say so.
- SOC. Then it is profitable to the many neither to know nor to suppose they know, if they'll be particularly eager to do those things that they know or suppose they know, which in doing they mostly harm rather than benefit themselves.⁴¹
- ALC. What you say is most true.
- SOC. Do you see then that when I said it was probable that the possession of the other [146e] areas of knowledge, if it is without possessing knowledge of what is best, will seldom benefit and mostly harm the one who has it, I really spoke correctly in saying so, no?
- ALC. Even if it didn't then, it seems so to me now, Socrates.
- SOC. Then it's necessary that the city and soul expecting [*mellousan*] to live correctly cleave simply⁴² to this knowledge, just as a sick man does to a doctor, or the man expecting [*mellonta*] to sail safely [*asphalōs*] to some pilot. [147a] For without this [knowledge], by as much more furiously what belongs to the soul wafts near possession of wealth,⁴³ or strength of body, or any other such thing, by this much more is it necessary that errors [*hamartēmata*]⁴⁴ arising from them, as is likely, come about. And he who, possessing what is called both polymathia and polytechnia, but bereft of this knowledge, is led along by each one of the others, will he not quite

⁴¹ It is also possible to translate the final clause of this sentence in the passive, thus: "which in doing they are mostly harmed rather than benefited."

⁴² Socrates makes a little pun: "cleave simply" is *antechesthai atechnōs* (omitting Burnet's comma), the latter word meaning literally "without art." The literal meaning is certainly important here.

⁴³ The first part of this sentence is highly problematic in the MSS, and yields no tolerable sense. Burnet reads *tuchēs* (chance), with Stallbaum, but the MSS have *psuchēs* (soul). I provisionally follow Sauppe's emendation of the passage instead, which seems to me to cleave closest to the MSS. Burnet's text, following a transposition suggested by Lennep, and Stallbaum's emendation, would read: "For without this [knowledge], by however much more keenly the [wind] of fortune [*tuchēs*] blew in possession of wealth, etc." This does not seem to me to be an unreasonable suggestion, given the prominence of *tuchē* in the dialogue.

⁴⁴ This word's verbal form is the root of *diamartanein*, which is translated as "utterly off the mark" at 146a, and "utterly miss the mark" at 146c.

justly suffer much stormy weather, since, I suppose, he is carrying along at sea without a pilot [147b] over the course of a life that is not long? Such that it seems to me to be in line with [*sumbainein*] the words of the poet who, accusing someone somewhere, says that “knowing many crafts, but badly,” he said, “was he knowing them all.”⁴⁵

ALC. What?! And just how is this in line with [*sumbainei*] the words of the poet, Socrates? For it doesn't seem to me to accord with the words spoken at all.

SOC. It's even exceedingly in accord with the words spoken. But he speaks in riddles, best of men, both this one and almost all other poets. For by nature the art of poetry as a whole is a riddling one, and [147c] not every man you happen to meet [*prostuchontos*] has knowledge [of it]. Moreover, in addition to this thing it is by nature, when it lays hold of a jealous man who does not want to display, but rather to conceal his own wisdom from us to the greatest degree, it appears an extraordinarily [*huperphuōs*]⁴⁶ difficult thing to understand whatever each of them has in mind to mean [*noousin*]⁴⁷ sometimes. For you obviously don't believe [*dokeis*] that Homer, the most divine and wisest poet, did not know that there is no such thing as knowing badly—for he it is who says that Margites knew many [147d] things, “but badly,” he said, “was he knowing them all”—but he speaks in riddles, I suppose, substituting “badly” for “a bad thing,” and “was knowing” for “to know.” It becomes, then—setting the meter aside, but it's what he means—that he was knowing many crafts, but it was a bad thing for himself to know all of them. Clearly, then, if indeed it was a bad thing for himself to know many things, “someone worthless he was happening to be,”⁴⁸ if indeed the previously discussed arguments must be trusted. [147e]

⁴⁵ From the *Margites*, a mock-epic attributed to Homer, of which very few lines are extant. The name *Margites* comes from *margos*—“mad.” Alcibiades will play on the title with this word shortly (148a9).

⁴⁶ The word's root word is the same as for “nature.”

⁴⁷ The alternative reading in MS B is *nomizetai*, which would yield, “whatever each of them believes sometimes.” See note 40, above.

⁴⁸ The passage translated in quotes is phrased as the second half of a line of dactylic hexameter, the meter of the *Margites* and epic poetry. Socrates makes his criticism sound like the end of a line in Homer. To borrow Alfarabi's comment, with a minor modification, we admire the ease with which Plato invented Homeric speeches (cf. 149d2 and d7–e1, which lines, attributed to Homer, are not in

- ALC. But it seems so to me, Socrates. It would be difficult indeed for me to trust any other arguments, if not these.
- SOC. And it seems so to you correctly.
- ALC. On the other hand, though, it seems to me otherwise.
- SOC. But come, by Zeus!—for you obviously see how great the perplexity [*aporian*] is, and the manner of it, in which you seem to me to share in common. Tossed up and back again, you don't stop at all, but that which seems to you to be so to the highest degree then again gets torn away [148a] and no longer seems as it was—if then even now the god to whom you happen to be on your way, came to appear before you and asked, before you prayed in any way, if it would be sufficient for you if something among those things discussed at the beginning were to come about, and if he ought rather to leave it to you to pray for yourself, what do you suppose would happen with the opportunity—taking the things offered by him, or praying that something come about on your own?
- ALC. But by the gods, I'd have nothing to say to you, Socrates, offhand; but this seems to me to be something mad [*margon*] [148b], since even [our perplexity]⁴⁹ is a truly great warning that someone not pray for evil things unawares,⁵⁰ believing they are good things, then not long afterward hold up, as you were saying,⁵¹ and recant, unpraying what he first prayed for.
- SOC. So then the poet whom I mentioned at the beginning of the argument knew something more than us, urging us to pray to ward off what is terrible?⁵²
- ALC. It seems so to me at any rate.

any extant manuscript of the *Iliad*).

⁴⁹ “Our perplexity” is not present in the text, but is required by the feminine case in the absolute (*kai hōs alēthōs pollēs phulakēs*), which refers back to the *aporia* noted by Socrates at 147e5.

⁵⁰ See note 9, above.

⁵¹ Except for being in the singular where Socrates had spoken in the plural, the last part of Alcibiades's sentence repeats what Socrates had said at 142d2–4 almost word for word. Significantly, he omits Socrates's “sometimes” (*eniotē*).

⁵² See note 29, above. Here, the manuscripts differ—I am reading *deina* with MS T. MS B has *dēla* (“what is obvious”).

soc. Well then, Alcibiades, [148c] the Lacedaemonians, whether emulating this poet or even through examining themselves, pray a similar prayer at each private and public event, bidding⁵³ the gods give them noble things joined to the good things for their very own—more than this, no one of them is heard to pray. For that reason they are, up to the present time, human beings who are inferior in fortune to no others, and if it has so happened [*sumbebēken*] that not everything is fortunate for them, it was at least then not the result [148d] of their prayer, it being for the gods, as I suppose, to give what someone praying might happen [to obtain] and their opposites. But I want to describe something else for you, which I once heard from some older men,⁵⁴ how a quarrel having arisen between the Athenians and the Lacedaemonians, it was always so happening [*sunebainen*] to our city that whenever a battle came about both by land and by sea, she was unfortunate [*dustuchein*] and never able to prevail; and the Athenians being therefore greatly vexed by these things, and at a loss [*aporoumenous*] [148e] to find something to ward off their present evils by some needed device, and after deliberating it seemed to them that the strongest thing would be sending to Ammon⁵⁵ to inquire of him, and what is more before the gods also the wherefore and when of their hostility for which they gave victory to the Lacedaemonians rather than to they themselves, declaring, “Among the Greeks it is we who bring the most and finest [*kallistas*] sacrifices, we have furnished their temples with votive offerings as have no others, we have presented the most lavish and reverent procession to the gods every year, [149a] and we spend more money than all of the other Greeks together; but for the Lacedaemonians’ part,” they said, “they have never yet given care to any of these things, but are so negligently disposed toward the gods that they sacrifice maimed animals on every occasion, and in all other matters are more deficient in honoring than we are, though they possess no less

⁵³ The word is *keleuontes*, which in this grammatical context strongly suggests that the Lacedaemonians order the gods to give them these things.

⁵⁴ Reading *presbuterōn tinōn*, with MS T. Burnet does not like *presbuterōn*, and secludes the word—I am unable to see any reason to do so, and include it.

⁵⁵ Ammon is the Greek name of an originally Libyan god, worshiped in Egypt as the supreme god Amun. Ammon's worship was prominent in Cyrene (cf. *Statesman* 257b5–6); elsewhere in the Greek world he was associated with Zeus.

money than our city.”⁵⁶ When they had spoken thus, and asked further what they needed to do to find something to ward off their present evils, the prophet responded nothing but this, [149b] for the god clearly did not permit this [inquiry], and having summoned them, declared, “Ammon says this to the Athenians. He declares that the reverent reserve [*euphēmian*] of the Lacedaemonians is preferred by him to all of the sacred rituals of the Greeks together.”⁵⁷ He said this, and nothing more. Now, in saying “reverent reserve,” the god seems to me to mean nothing other than this prayer of theirs, for it really is very [149c] different from the others’. The other Greeks, those bringing up bulls with gilded horns, and those giving votive offerings to the gods, were praying for things to happen, begging for good things and begging for bad things, and so hearing how irreverently speaking [*blasphēmoutōn*] they were, the gods were not favorably receiving these lavish processions and sacrifices. So it seems to me there is need of [its] great warning⁵⁸ about examining what is to be said and what not, and when. And you will find in Homer other things similar to what has been said. [149d] For he declares that the Trojans making their camp “offer completed hecatombs to the immortals,”⁵⁹ and that “the winds brought the smell of sacrifice from the plains into the heavens”⁶⁰ — “pleasant, but the blessed gods wanted no share of it, for grievously hated was hallowed Ilium, [149e] to them, and Priam and the people of Priam of the good ashen spear,”⁶¹ so it did not serve them to sacrifice and to complete gifts in vain for gods when they were hated by them. For I don’t suppose that such a thing is of the gods, to be so influenced by gifts, like an evil usurer; and indeed it’s a silly [*euēthē*]⁶² thing we say when we deem this to be “excelling” the

⁵⁶ The breathlessness of the length of this single sentence should be compared with the economy of speech or silence that is praised in response.

⁵⁷ Lamb’s translations of *euphēmia* and *hiera* are excellent in this sentence, and I have borrowed them.

⁵⁸ “Its”: picking up, again, the “perplexity” (*aporia*) of which Alcibiades spoke when he spoke of the “great warning” that perplexity was, in itself, at 148b (cf. note 49, above).

⁵⁹ In meter, but not in our texts of Homer. The context of indirect speech makes it clear that, if this happens to be in Homer, Socrates has altered Homer’s words, in a way that artfully remains in meter.

⁶⁰ Not in meter, but modified from a line in our texts of Homer (i.e., modified to fit Socrates’s account). See *Iliad* 8.548.

⁶¹ In meter, but not in our texts of Homer. As above, the context of indirect speech makes it clear that, if this happens to be in Homer, Socrates has altered Homer’s words, in a way that artfully remains in meter.

⁶² Cf. note 22, above.

Lacedaemonians in this respect. For it would be a terrible thing if the gods look to our gifts and sacrifices but not to our soul, should one happen to be pious and just. [150a] Much rather [to this], I suppose [they look], than to these lavish processions and sacrifices, which those who have offended [*hēmartēkotas*] greatly against gods and greatly against human beings, are in no way prevented from holding both privately and for the city, and accomplishing every year; but they, since they're not bribe takers, think all these things beneath them, as the god and the prophet of the gods declare. It is probable indeed that by the gods and by those human beings who have intelligence, justice and [150b] sound-mindedness are given particular honor; and that the ones who know what must be done and said to gods and to human beings are none other than the sound-minded and the just. But I would like to learn from you what you have in mind [*nōi*] about this.

- ALC. But it does not seem to me, Socrates, to be any way other than to you or to the god; for it would not be seemly for me to come to vote against the god.
- SOC. So then you remember affirming your great perplexity [*aporiai*], [150c] lest you pray for evil things unawares, believing them good?
- ALC. I do.
- SOC. You see then how unsafe [*ouk asphales*] it is for you to go to the god when you're praying, where it may happen that, hearing your irreverent speech [*blasphēmountos*], he will not accept your sacrifice at all, and you may happen to come away with something else besides. It seems to me that it is therefore best to keep silent, for I do not suppose you want to use the Lacedaemonian prayer, given your "great-souledness"—for this is really the fairest of names within unsoundness. [150d] It is therefore necessary to wait until one has learned how one must dispose oneself toward gods and toward human beings.
- ALC. Well, when will that time be here, Socrates, and who the teacher? For I believe [*dokō*] it would be most delightful for me to see who this human being is.
- SOC. It is he who cares for you. But it seems to me, just as Homer says that Athena took away the mist from Diomedes's eyes, "that he

might well perceive [*gignōskoi*] both god and man,⁶³ [150e] so too must the mist that now happens to be there first be taken away from your soul, and then lay your hands on the delights by which “you are likely [*melleis*] to perceive [*gnōsesthai*] both evil and good [*esthlon*].”⁶⁴ But for now you do not seem to me capable of it.

ALC. Let him take it away, whether he wants [to call it] the mist or something else; for I have readied myself to flee nothing enjoined by him, whoever that human being is, if I might expect [*melloimi*] to become better. [151a]

SOC. But how amazing is that person’s eagerness for you!

ALC. Then it seems to me to be the strongest thing to put off the sacrifice until that time.

SOC. And indeed it seems to you correctly, for it is safer [*asphalesteron*] than risking such a risk.

ALC. But how [do you respond to this], Socrates? I will bestow this wreath upon you, since you seem to me to have counseled [me] beautifully, [151b] but to the gods we will give both wreaths and all the other customary things when I see that day has come. And it will be not long coming, if they are willing.

SOC. Well I accept this, and may I see myself delightedly accepting anything else that you give.⁶⁵ And just as Euripides has made

⁶³ *Iliad* 5.128. The context is highly significant: Athena is there responding to Diomedes’s prayer by granting it—not, perhaps, without ulterior motive of her own (cf. *Iliad* 5.131–32).

Socrates makes a slight change to the Homeric text, making *gignōskein* optative instead of subjunctive, while retaining the meter. He thereby gives the word an aspirational sense, where in Homer it is jussive.

⁶⁴ The passage translated in quotation marks is in meter, and plays off the line just quoted from Homer.

⁶⁵ This sentence is awkward in translation, because awkward in the Greek. Lamb suggests that it “seems very unplatonic” (Plato, *Charmides, Alcibiades I and II, Hipparchus, The Lovers, Theages, Minos, Epinomis*, trans. W. R. M. Lamb [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1927], 273n1), but I am not inclined to agree. The connection between “delight” and “seeing” has just emerged in a very pointed way in the conversation (cf. 150d4 and e2), which Socrates is putting specific focus on here (cf. Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, Introduction, last sentence and context, with Genesis 3:6); and the dialogue as a whole concerns the problem of indiscriminately wishing for or accepting gifts (cf. 142c4–7). In his *Philosophy of Plato*, Alfarabi notes that in *Second Alcibiades*, “he investigated the things that are good in the eyes of the multitude and the things that are gainful in the eyes of the multitude, whether they are truly good and gainful. He also investigated whether the things that are useful in the eyes of the multitude are truly as they believe them to be or not. He explained that they are not, and here he went through all the things that are good gains in the eyes of the multitude.” Alfarabi, *Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*, rev. ed., trans. Muhsin Mahdi (Ithaca, NY: Cornell

Creon [say] upon seeing Teiresias wearing his wreaths, and having heard that he received, on account of his art, the first-fruits of plunder from their enemies, “As an omen do I take ⟨your⟩ victor’s wreaths,” he says, “for in a wave we’re caught, as you do know,”⁶⁶ so do I for my part take this opinion of yours as an omen. [151c] And I seem to myself to be no less in a wave than Creon, and I wish I might become victorious over your lovers.

University Press, 2001), 58. Cf. also Alfarabi’s reflection on the oneness of the subject, means, and object of intellection as a completion: *Risālah fi al-‘aql* [Treatise on intellection], ed. Maurice Bouyges (Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1938), 16.

⁶⁶ Euripides, *Phoenician Women* 858–59. Teiresias is blind (cf. note 65, above, on the prominent place of “sight” in the dialogue), and his “art” is prophecy. In the play, Creon will soon have cause to see that what he takes here as a good omen for victory will come at a terrible personal cost: his son, Menoeceus, must be sacrificed to save Thebes.

It is not clear whether Socrates slightly alters Euripides’s text here—the MSS do not have “your” (*sa*) before “victor’s wreaths,” as do the MSS of the *Phoeniciae*, but every other word is identical to the passage in Euripides. Given the exactitude with which Socrates recites the rest of the words of the passage, and the impact on the meter if the *sa* is not included, I am inclined to believe that it was dropped in the MSS owing to a scribal error. I have therefore included it, but in the chevrons Burnet uses in his Greek edition to indicate the interpolation, and its uncertainty.

