

Socratic Therapy for the Glutton

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I. The Gluttonous Wrongdoer

T1 Are you [i.e., Callicles] saying that a person [...] should not restrain his appetites but let them become as large as possible and then should procure their fulfillment (πλήρωσις) from some source or other, and that is his excellence? [...] I want to persuade you to change your mind if I can: to choose the orderly life, the life that is adequate to and satisfied with its circumstances at any given time instead of living an insatiable, undisciplined life. (*Gorg.* 492d-493c).

The glutton:

- is ignorant: he believes that maximizing bodily pleasure by shoveling down food is in his own best interest.
- lives a disorderly, stressful life that is slavishly focused on satisfying his appetites (*Gorg.* 491d-e, 493a-494a, 499d-e); he “is forced to keep on filling [his leaky jars], day and night, or else he suffers extreme pain” (*Gorg.* 493e-494a).
- has no friends (*Gorg.* 507e-508a).

Socrates' intellectualist explanation of wrongdoing:

- (i) All wrongdoing is due to ignorance, that is, a false belief about what is best for us to do (*Prot.* 358b-d).
- (ii) Gluttons are ignorant wrongdoers (*Gorg.* 505b).
- (iii) So, if we want to treat gluttons, we must make them less ignorant. They must understand what is in fact good for them.
- (iv) People become less ignorant through teaching, that is, philosophical conversations.
- (v) Thus, gluttons need teaching (philosophical conversations).

Would Socrates in certain cases also prescribe treatments other than philosophical conversations?

- Some interpreters: No! "nothing apart from talking and reasoning with us will be necessary" to prevent wrongdoing (Rowe)¹; "[i]f only we could *discuss* things for long enough, if only we could *understand* what is best,' Socrates seems to say, 'all would be well, and all conduct would be virtuous!'" (Penner)²

¹ Rowe (2006. *Socrates in Plato's Dialogues*. In: A Companion to Socrates. Ahbel-Rappe, S.; Kamtekar, R. (eds.). London: Blackwell. p. 166).

² Penner (2000. *Socrates*. In: Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Political thought. Rowe, C.; Schofield, M. (ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 165).

- Other interpreters: Yes! Socrates’ account of education and correction includes non-argumentative means such as practice and habituation and even shame and punishment (Brickhouse and Smith 2010; Jonas 2018).
- **FM:** Yes! While Socratic therapy certainly includes philosophical conversations, some gluttonous wrongdoers also require stricter non-conversational means of correction, namely abstinence training.

II. What kind of a state is hunger for Socrates?

Desire *epithumia* (ἐπιθυμία) in Plato’s early dialogues:

- (i) We *epithumein* something that we lack (ἐνδεές).³
- (ii) Lacks and *epithumiai* are painful (ἀνιαρόν).⁴ Hunger itself is painful.⁵
- (iii) Filling the lack is (an instance of) pleasure (ἡδονή).⁶
- (iv) *Epithumiai*, which are aimed at filling a lack, are aimed at pleasure.⁷

We desire what we lack, and we lack what is our own (oikeion).

T2 (i) A thing desires what it lacks, right? ... (ii) it becomes lacking where something is taken away from it?... [(iii) implied: ‘what is taken away is the *oikeion*’] (iv) τὸ οἰκεῖον is then (δη), what desire is directed towards. (*Lysis* 221e-222a)

What the hungry person lacks and wants is the *oikeion*. But what is that?

Etymological background: τὸ οἰκεῖον (‘our own,’ ‘what belongs to us’) ← οἰκεῖος (also: fitting, suitable) ← ὁ οἶκος (household).

What is *oikeion* to me falls within my natural realm of concern; it naturally matters to me.

The *oikeion* as the object of our desire is something that is ‘mine’ and ‘belongs to me’ “by nature” (φύσει, *Lys.*222a5; *Lys.*221e6) and that we are “necessarily friendly towards” (*Lys.* 222a). In other words, the *oikeion* is something which belongs to my natural state and is thus good and useful to my natural way of being.

What are natural belongings for Socrates?

What is *oikeion* to each thing is that thing’s own or proper order:

T3 We’re good if some excellence is present in us. ...Excellence comes to be present in things—whether it’s the excellence of an artifact or a body or a soul or

³ *Lys.*221e1.

⁴ *Gorg.*496c6-d5.

⁵ *Gorg.*496d1.

⁶ *Gorg.*496d.

⁷ *Charm.*167e1-9.

of any animal—through organization (τάξει)...So, it's when a certain order (κόσμος), the thing's **own order** (ὁ ἑκάστου οἰκεῖος), comes to be present in it that it makes each of the things there are good. (*Gorg.* 506d5-e5).

My proposal:

- (i) What naturally belongs to a thing—body, soul, artifact, animal—is that thing's order.
- (ii) Humans have both body and soul.
- (iii) Thus, what naturally belongs to humans is the orderly state of both body and soul.
- (iv) The orderly state of the body is 'health' (*Gorg.* 504c).
- (v) Thus, bodily health naturally belongs to (is *oikeion* to) us; it is "our own"; it naturally matters to us. We come equipped with a natural concern for our bodily well-being.

The hungry person lacks and wants to restore his *oikeion*, i.e., his natural bodily order.

Physicians / Dieticians aim to bring about the body's proper order

Philosophers aim to bring about the soul's proper order

The *oikeion* and virtues of the soul:

- (a) Wisdom: if Lysis were to be wise, others would be *oikeion* toward him because they would desire his wisdom as that which is good and useful (*Lysis* 210d).
- (b) Temperance as 'doing one's own things' (τὰ οἰκεῖα, *Charmides* 163d-e).
- (c) Justice: doing one's own work well (*ergon*) is realizing one's "own virtue" (οἰκειάν ἀρετήν, *Rep.* I, 353c1). The soul's own work is living (*Rep.* I 353d) and the soul can perform its own work excellently if it is organized well, i.e., justly. Justice is then defined as 'doing one's own' (ἡ τοῦ οἰκείου τε καὶ ἑαυτοῦ ἕξις τε καὶ πρᾶξις δικαιοσύνη, *Rep.* IV, 433e12-a1); neologism οἰκειοπραγία (*Rep.* IV, 434c8) to distinguish "doing-one's-own" from 'doing many things' (πολυπραγμοσύνη, *Rep.* IV, 434b7-9, 444b2) and 'doing another's work' (ἀλλοτριοπραγμοσύνην, *Rep.* IV, 444b2). 'Doing one's own' leads to order, harmony, virtue, and happiness, while 'doing another's work' leads to disorder (ταραχήν) and rebellion (ἐπανάστασιν), and thus vice and misery (*Rep.* IV 444b6-8).⁸

Socrates uses the concept of *oikeion* to refer to a clearly defined realm of things that are truly or by nature 'our own,' namely our soul's and body's orderly constitutions, which enable soul and body 'to do their own work' and realize their 'own virtue.'⁹

⁸ My argument here benefitted substantially from Murgier's 2017 article *Oikeion and justice in Plato's Republic*. In: Πηγὴ / Fons (Vol. 2). pp. 65-85.

⁹ Murgier (2017). *Oikeion and justice in Plato's Republic*. In: Πηγὴ / Fons (Vol. 2). pp. 65-85: "it is now clear that the οἰκεῖον in question is not just a contingent matter, but has to be found in the function for which one is devised by nature" (p.78).

FM: In the case of hunger the *oikeion* is **not** food¹⁰ because...

- the *oikeion* is ‘ours’ and ‘naturally belongs to us,’ it ‘most intimately belongs to myself because it is part of human nature’¹¹ VS. food
- The *oikeion* is good and useful VS. food is often bad and harmful (*Lys.*221b).
- The *oikeion* (what is mine, familiar) is the opposite of *allotrios* (what is alien, strange, another’s, ἀλλότριον, *Lys.* 222c4); in my interpretation, the orderly state of my body is ‘mine’ or ‘familiar’ to me, while its disorderly state is ‘alien’ to me. But what would be the *allotrios* to food?

We experience painful lacks and mentally reach out to pleasant fillings.

- (i) We *epithumein* something that we lack (ἐνδεές).
- (ii) Lacks and *epithumiai* are painful (ἀνιαρόν). Therefore, hunger itself is painful.
- (iii) Filling the lack is (an instance of) pleasure (ἡδονή).
- (iv) *Epithumiai*, which are aimed at filling a lack, are aimed at pleasure.

FM on (i): what we lack and desire is something that is naturally ‘our own’ (*oikeion*), which is in the case of hunger our natural bodily order.

FM on (ii) to (iv): lacking what is *oikeion* to me is painful, while filling this lack and reestablishing order is pleasant. Hunger is a compound phenomenon that consists in experiencing a present painful lack and mentally reaching out to a future pleasant filling.

The present lack of what is *oikeion* to me is experienced as painful when it is *perceived*:

T4 Do you distinguish the sort of pleasant you call fine [καλόν, i.e., pleasures from hearing, sight] from the pleasant, and do you say that what is pleasant **according to the other senses** [κατὰ αἰσθήσεις; the other senses being touch, taste, smell] is not fine – food and drink, what comes with making love, and all other such things? (*Hip. Maj.* 298d6-298e2)

Food is pleasant according to the sense. Likewise, I propose, the food-related lack of our bodily order is painful according to the senses. In other words, the lack is painful when it is perceived.

Hunger:

perceive present lack of *oikeion* + mentally reaching out to future pleasure of restoring
experience it as painful. *oikeion* (bodily order)



food (pleasant filler) is a means to restoring our *oikeion*

¹⁰ Against Wolfsdorf (2007. *Philia in Plato’s Lysis*. Harvard Studies in Classical Philology (103)).

¹¹ Rowe (2017. *Plato on Respect, and What “Belongs to” Oneself*. In: The roots of respect Giorgini, G.; Irrera, E. (eds.). pp.67-82).

III. The Glutton – Socratic Diagnosis and Treatment

Since hunger has two components—experiencing present pain and mentally reaching out to future pleasure—we get two possible sources of the glutton’s pathological hunger and thus two treatment plans:

Glutton #1: is pathologically hungry mainly because he constantly thinks about or envisions food and future fillings (i.e., mentally reaches out to future pleasures). The glutton has lost sight of his true end (restoring his *oikeion*); eating has become an end in itself.

Treatment: extended philosophical conversations will be necessary and possibly sufficient to reorient his desires towards his proper ends (bodily and psychological excellence). Those with pathological appetites need to “re-direct” and “not turn to” their appetites (μεταβιβάζειν τὰς ἐπιθυμίας καὶ μὴ ἐπιτρέπειν, *Gorg.* 517b5-6).

Glutton #2: is pathologically hungry mainly because he constantly experiences present painful bodily disturbances—he constantly feels that he lacks what is *oikeion* to him.

Treatment: philosophical conversations alone will be insufficient. If my body is disturbed and I perceive it, I feel discomfort or pain, and no argument can talk me out of that. We cannot change the fact that perceived lacks are disagreeable. Compare to perceptual illusions: the glutton feels hungry, even if he believes that he does not need to eat. Likewise, a tower in the distance appears to be small, although one believes that it is in fact huge (*Prot.* 356c). This patient needs to “discipline” and “restrain” (κολαστέον, *Gorg.* 492d6, 493d) his appetites **by not providing a filling** (πλήρωσις, *Gorg.* 492d7, 507e2) for the lack, i.e., by practicing abstinence. Abstaining from food will make his excessive appetites—or “leaky jars”—less excessive or leaky (*Gorg.* 493a).

Wrapping things up:

I argued that gluttons of type #2 who constantly feel hungry because they constantly experience painful bodily lacks require non-conversational corrective interventions, namely abstinence training. My reading thus supports the non-standard picture of Socratic education.

But beyond Socratic education, my reading led us also to a non-standard picture of Socratic desire and anthropology—that is, what it means to be human and to live a good human life. It appears that maintaining good eating practices is an important part of the Socratic way of life. Good eating habits promote our natural bodily order, i.e., health, and Socrates seems to acknowledge that we have a motivational tendency to maintain bodily health because it “naturally belongs to us” (*oikeion*). We are naturally inclined to preserve not only our psychological but also our bodily well-being.

Response to Thomas Blackson

We agree on the conclusion (Socratic education includes restraint and discipline).
But disagree on where exactly restraint and discipline come into play.

If I were to make the following clarifications, would we agree on even more, specifically on a certain understanding of Socrates’ motivational intellectualism?

Socrates’ motivational intellectualism: We always (want to) do what we believe is the best thing we can do (what’s in my own best interest), given all available options (*Prot.*358b7-d4). In other words, the motivation for any given action derives from beliefs. If something does not stem from a belief about what is best to do, it cannot motivate an action.

So, I agree (at least it’s ok with me to premise) that all “desires” understood as **full-fledged action-causing motivations** stem from beliefs (about what is best to do). But I wonder if that leaves room for other states, not full-fledged action-causing motivation, but **states with mere motivational flavor** that do not stem from beliefs.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • States with mere motivational flavor; they do not motivate actions; only influence our deliberation about what to do. • Appetites (hunger, thirst) • “itches and hankerings,” “raw desires,” “attractions and aversions” • Do not stem from beliefs. • Since “appetites” do not stem from beliefs (but from perceiving bodily lacks), arguments can be ineffective. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Full-fledged action-causing motivation • “Desires to do something” • Stem from beliefs (about what is best to do). • Since “desires” stem from beliefs, if Socrates can make the agent abandon his belief that a certain action is best to do, then the agent would also abandon the desire to perform that action.
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Motivational intellectualism: belief “eating is best” → desire to eat → action

FM: hunger | **Restraint** → belief “eating is best” → desire to eat → action

TB: belief “eating is best” → hunger/desire to eat | **Restraint** → action

I don’t have to believe anything (such as “eating and filling the lack would be good or best”) to feel hungry. Possible advantage (?): even Socratic sages can be hungry while believing it is not good to eat right now without holding two conflicting beliefs (“eating would be good” VS. “eating would not be good”).