

EURIPIDES AND SOCRATES

T. H. IRWIN

IN PLATO's *Protagoras* Socrates argues that no one can choose what he believes to be worse. He thinks this is a controversial claim, because most people will reject it; they think someone can know that one course of action is better than another, but still be overcome by emotion, pleasure, pain, passion, or fear, so that he chooses to do what he knows to be worse (*Prt.* 353B1–C2).

The "Socratic Paradox" defended by Socrates here is a central claim in Socratic ethics. It denies the possibility of incontinence. An agent acts incontinently if and only if:

- (1) He has a choice between doing x and doing y;
- (2) He believes that x is, all things considered, better than y;
- (3) But still he believes that y is more attractive than x; (so that)
- (4) He wants to do y more than he wants to do x; (and hence)
- (5) He chooses to do y rather than x.

Socrates says most people think incontinence is possible; but he argues that they are wrong.¹

Socrates did not convince Plato (in the *Republic*) or Aristotle. He has not convinced most of us, who still agree with "most people." If "most people" is accurate, he did not convince his contemporaries either. We reasonably expect them to be outraged by his flagrant rejection of common sense. Not surprisingly, some readers have found a reply to Socrates in Euripides. Euripidean characters sometimes seem to say that they are being incontinent; they deny that knowledge is sufficient for right choice, emphatically rejecting the Socratic Paradox. Do they not express Euripides' reply to Socrates, and his defense of the commonsense view?

1. "Incontinence" translates Aristotle's term *akrasia* (*EN* 1145b25–26). The conditions (1)–(5) are meant to express the view that Socrates argues against in the *Protagoras*. "All things considered" makes it clear that the agent must believe x to be better *on the whole*. There would be nothing odd (and Socrates would see nothing odd) in my judging that there is *something* to be said for x rather than y and still choosing y; the apparent oddity arises when I think there is *more* to be said for x than for y and still choose y. (In what follows I understand "better" as "better all things considered.") "Attractive" indicates other properties besides goodness all things considered that may provoke desire. In the *Protagoras* Socrates reduces these all to pleasantness (see below, n. 17); but incontinence can be described without presupposing this hedonistic doctrine. The *Protagoras* argument is discussed further in T. H. Irwin, *Plato's Moral Theory* (Oxford, 1977), pp. 103–7. Incontinence is discussed by D. Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford, 1980), pp. 21–42.

My formulation speaks of belief, while Socrates sometimes speaks of knowledge. The substitution is justified by 358C5–D4.

This account of Euripides and Socrates has been challenged on several grounds:

(1) Euripides does not reject, and has no reason to reject, the Socratic Paradox, for the "Paradox" is simply a traditional Greek way of explaining action. Greeks, beginning with Homer, are cognitivists: they explain failure to act by failure of knowledge rather than by weakness of will.

(2) Euripides cannot be shown to be considering incontinence at all.

(3) Though he accepts the possibility of incontinence, he is not commenting on the Socratic Paradox; he simply expresses a commonsense view, with no special reference to Socrates.

The second of these claims depends on the misunderstanding of some controversial passages in Euripides' plays, and of some fragments lacking a context. The third rests on a claim about the intellectual outlook of Euripides' time. The first rests on a still broader historical claim.²

I want to show that none of these grounds justifies rejection of the view that Euripides replies to Socrates. Though this view is not provable beyond any reasonable doubt, it remains plausible.

I

If the Homeric outlook supports the Socratic Paradox, and if this outlook is correctly identified with traditional Greek thinking, it is understandable that Socrates' contemporaries took the Socratic Paradox for granted. But does the Homeric outlook really imply rejection of the possibility of incontinence?

Homer's outlook seems to be cognitivist. In explaining action and describing character he uses terms that in later Greek apply primarily to cognitive states, even when he is speaking of apparently affective states (emotions, feelings, desires). Knowing something and having a particular attitude are both included when Homer says what someone "knows" or what his "mind" is like.³

These facts can be explained in two different ways:

(a) Homer intends these terms in purely cognitive senses, and so believes

2. Different parts of these different claims are combined, not always consistently, in recent writers. See, e.g., E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley, 1951), p. 17, commenting on Homer: "This intellectualist approach to the explanation of behaviour set a lasting stamp on the Greek mind: the so-called Socratic Paradoxes, that 'virtue is knowledge,' and that 'no one does wrong on purpose,' were no novelties, but an explicit generalised formulation of what had long been an ingrained habit of thought." But later, in his discussion of the Socratic Paradoxes, Dodds says: "What seems to us odd is that both of them [sc. Socrates and Protagoras] dismiss so easily the part played by emotion in determining ordinary human behaviour. And we know from Plato that this seemed odd to their contemporaries also: on this matter there was a sharp cleavage between the intellectuals and the common man" (p. 185). If the ordinary man was so much influenced by intellectualist habits of thought as Dodds suggested earlier, he should not have found Socrates' views so paradoxical; and it was Dodds himself who suggested that they were not paradoxical. For the alleged cognitivism of Homeric and traditional Greek thought, see also W. Nestle, "Intellektualismus und Mystik in der Griechischen Philosophie," *Neue Jahrbücher für das Klassische Altertum* 49 (1922): 137–57; D. Claus, "Phaedra and the Socratic Paradox," *YCIS* 22 (1972): 223–38. My discussion of Homer is largely indebted to M. J. O'Brien's detailed argument against a cognitivist interpretation in *The Socratic Paradoxes and the Greek Mind* (Chapel Hill, 1967), pp. 22–25.

3. For *εἰδέναι*, cf. *Il.* 5. 326, 16. 73, 24. 41. For *νόος*, cf. *Il.* 16. 35, 23. 484; *Od.* 6. 121, 9. 176.

that some purely cognitive state is present where we would recognize an affective state.

(b) He uses them with "fused" (or "undifferentiated") senses, so that they refer indifferently to cognitive and to affective states, which Homer does not clearly distinguish.

The second explanation is far more plausible. To accept the first we would have to ascribe to Homer, unjustifiably, some fairly clear grasp of the distinction between cognitive and affective states. Someone who believes "apples are pears" is different from someone who has one concept applying to apples and pears without distinction.

If Homer's concepts are fused, he will not describe incontinence in Socrates' terms. Nor will he agree with Socrates in denying its possibility. Both the description and the denial require a distinction between cognitive and affective terms. However, Homer's implicit position might still be closer to the anti-Socratic than to the Socratic. Let the fused term "be aware of" apply indifferently to believing and wanting. Homer can then easily allow a person to be aware of *x* as better than *y*, but still to be aware of *y* as in some way more attractive than *x*, so that he is more favorably aware of *y* than of *x*, and chooses to do *y* rather than *x*. When a Socratic insists (in Homeric fused terms) that awareness of *x* as better than *y* ensures the choice of *x* rather than *y*, Homer may well disagree. He may be predisposed to reject, not to accept, the Socratic Paradox. In asking whether Homer recognizes the possibility of incontinence I will be using "incontinence" loosely to refer to the analogue of incontinence just described.

Some apparent evidence of incontinence must be rejected. We might think Hector's flight from Achilles is incontinent, provoked by fear. We might say the same when Demeter "gives way to her *thumos*" and lies with Jason (*Od.* 5. 126–27). Homeric people think they should control the *thumos* (*Il.* 9. 496, 18. 113, 19. 66; *Od.* 20. 266). But they need not refer to continence and incontinence here. Achilles says that Ajax knows how to say everything according to Achilles' *thumos*, but still his heart (*κραδίη*) swells with rage when he knows how Agamemnon has treated him (*Il.* 9. 645–47). Achilles does not mean that it would be better to listen to Ajax, and incontinent to be moved by the anger of his heart. He means that he prefers to act on his anger.⁴ The same may be true in the other cases, too.

However, the possibility of incontinence is probably recognized. Odysseus tells his spirit to endure when it wants to kill the maids at once, against his better judgment (*Od.* 20. 10–24). Plato is probably right to see here the sort of conflict that might produce incontinence (*Phd.* 93D–E, *Resp.* 441B–C). When Odysseus's first impulse is to attack Polyphemus, "another spirit" restrains him from acting on his impetuous anger (9. 296–305); this is the incident he recalls later (20. 18–21). Here Homer

4. Contrast J. Griffin, *Homer on Life and Death* (Oxford, 1980), p. 74 (note), who ascribes Achilles' action to his "passionate emotion" overriding his ethical code. Griffin criticizes J. M. Redfield, *Nature and Culture in the Iliad* (Chicago, 1975), p. 106, who seems to me more nearly correct.

implies that Odysseus might have chosen the other way, and hence that incontinence is possible.⁵

Though incontinence is possible in the Homeric psychological scheme, it is not important in Homer's account of human action. Why is this?

The simplest answer is that Homer is not very interested in incontinence, and a Homeric hero is not very likely to display it. When someone is incontinent, he believes that *x* would be better than *y*, all things considered, though he wants to do *y* more. This sort of belief is likely to result from fairly reflective consideration and deliberation; the less of this someone engages in, the less likely he is to have the beliefs and desires of an incontinent.

Now Homeric people certainly deliberate about tactical matters—whether to attack here or there, whether to hide or come forward (*Il.* 13. 455–59, 14. 16–24; *Od.* 6. 141–47, 10. 151–55, 17. 90–94, 235–38, 22. 333–39, 24. 235–40). The more important and far-reaching the choice, the less deliberation is likely to have preceded it. The crucial choices and decisions in the *Iliad*—Agamemnon's insistence on getting Briseis; Achilles' withdrawal; his refusal to accept the peace offerings; his return to the battle; Hector's refusal to return to Troy when Achilles approaches—none of these choices is the result of reflective deliberation. A hero acts on reasons that he can explain (*Il.* 9. 312–22, 643–48, 18. 79–93, 22. 99–130), but not on deliberation about his most important choices. He is guided by his sense of what a good man does; and a good man is expected to avenge an insult or protect a friend at once. Prolonged reflection is not needed; often it is a handicap. Odysseus cuts short his reflections by reminding himself that only a bad man would run away (*Il.* 11. 401–10); deliberation here might seem to be a cloak for cowardice (cf. Thuc. 3. 82. 4). Someone's basic goals and aims in life are not regarded as the product of deliberate choice; they just reflect the way he naturally acts and reacts, which is to say, as a hero should.

This sort of person is not likely to have the beliefs and desires of an incontinent. He will often have a strong desire and act on it, without asking himself if that is the best thing to do, all things considered; he will not pause to make an "all things considered" judgment. Hence incontinence is possible, but not likely on important matters, which are settled by impulse anyhow. Homer is not likely to find the possibility of incontinence very interesting. Achilles, for instance, is moved by his anger; but, as we saw, he is not incontinent. He recognizes no conflict between his rational decision and an overpowering desire. An Achilles who recognized this sort of conflict would not be a Homeric character; as we will see, he would be a Euripidean character.

5. The passage in *Odyssey* 20 is discussed by J. P. Russo, "Homer against his Tradition," *Arion* 7 (1968): 275–95. He argues that this is an untypical, consciously innovative scene. However, the reference to *Odyssey* 11 suggests (and Russo does not deny this) that recognition of the possibility of incontinence need not be one of its innovative features—though certainly reflection and struggle are described here in unusual detail.

Homer, then, is not a Socratic, and he does not suggest that traditional Greek thought is Socratic.

II

Homer, however, is only the beginning of traditional Greek thought, as Socrates and Euripides knew it. Is there anything more to suggest that Euripides could not intend to reject the Socratic Paradox? Aeschylus and Sophocles, far more than Homer, emphasize rational deliberation and choice and their consequences. To see this we need only compare Homer's presentation of Achilles with Aeschylus's presentation of Pelasgus, Agamemnon, and Orestes. Achilles faces a critical choice: whether or not to accept Agamemnon's terms, whether or not to return to the battle. But we have seen that Homer does not present these as questions for careful weighing and deliberate resolution. Both choices are made quickly, easily, and unreflectively. It is different in Aeschylus:⁶ the agent faces difficult choices between conflicting goods and evils. Sometimes, as with Eteocles in the *Septem*, Aeschylus presents the agent making and standing by his decision when its costs are made clear to him (*Sept.* 653–719). Sometimes he presents the agent's deliberations and conflicts before the decision, as with Agamemnon (*Ag.* 205–27) and Orestes (*Cho.* 896–930), and most elaborately with Pelasgus (*Supp.* 340–523).⁷ Similarly, Antigone, Oedipus, and Ajax, in their different ways, act on deliberate and reflective decisions.

It is important not to exaggerate or mislead here. It would be foolish to claim that everything significant in an Aeschylean or Sophoclean tragedy turns on the rational decisions of agents. It would be still more foolish to claim that the decisions are always reasonable or correct. Let us say that a decision is reasonable if it is based on the appropriate considerations correctly valued; that it is correct if it rests on a correct inference from the agent's values and beliefs; and that it is rational if it rests on inference from the agent's values and beliefs. Someone who decides to be a circus stunt-man when he could have been a great violinist may make an unreasonable decision, expressing mistaken values. But, given his values, a decision to learn stunts rather than violin-playing is the correct one. If he deliberates badly and decides to do something that will make it harder to be a stunt-man, he still makes a rational decision, though a foolish and mistaken one. The difference between Aeschylus and Sophocles and Homer is the relative importance and prominence of rational decision. The dramatist wants to show how decisions are formed, how they can be incorrect and unreasonable, and how they affect what happens.

6. See B. Snell, *Scenes from Greek Drama* (Berkeley, 1964), pp. 19–22; *The Discovery of the Mind*, trans. T. G. Rosenmeyer (Oxford, 1953), pp. 101–3 (Snell's contrast between Homer and Aeschylus is, however, seriously exaggerated). Some recent views on will, decision, and responsibility in tragedy are discussed by J. P. Vernant, "Ébauches de la volonté dans la tragédie grecque," in J. P. Vernant and P. Vidal-Naquet, *Mythe et Tragédie en Grèce Ancienne* (Paris, 1973), pp. 41–74.

7. On *Supp.* and *Ag.*, see A. F. Garvie, *Aeschylus' Suppliants* (Cambridge, 1969), pp. 130–32.

If rational decision is so important in Aeschylus and Sophocles, what is the role of the irrational? In particular, do they recognize incontinence? The influence of nonrational motives is an old literary theme. In Homer the Girdle of Aphrodite includes love, desire, and seductive conversation that "steals away" the mind (*vóos*) even of the wise (*Il.* 14. 216–17). Homer's fused use of "mind" makes it hard to say whether love is supposed to prevent someone from thinking straight (as Aristotle thinks, *EN* 1149b14–17), or to overwhelm someone with desire even when he does think straight. The account of the effects of the girdle on Zeus is equally indecisive.⁸ Hesiod, no less ambiguously, presents *eros* conquering the mind and counsel.⁹ Archilochus speaks of love in similar ways. It "looses the limbs," as both sleep and love do in Homer (cf. Archil. 118 with *Od.* 20. 57, 18. 212, and Hesiod *Theog.* 121), and conquers its victims. Sappho describes it as "driving" the lover—another Homeric comparison for fear (Sappho 137; cf. *Od.* 22. 298–308). At the same time it is said to steal one's wits (Archil. 112).

Archaic poets recognize the "helplessness" (*ἀμαχανία*) of the individual against external hazards (e.g., Simonides, *PMG* 542. 14–16); and desires and passions can leave him equally helpless (Archil. 104, 117; Sappho 137). But it is not clear how these external and internal forces leave someone helpless; none of these poets ever suggests that someone is overcome against his better judgment; hence none of them clearly recognizes incontinence.¹⁰

Aeschylus and Sophocles are not completely clear either. Aeschylus recognizes possible success or failure for the wits in governing the spirit (*Pers.* 767).¹¹ Sophocles speaks of *eros* as irresistible (*Ant.* 781–90; cf. *Trach.* 441–44); Deianeira even suggests that, since Heracles like anyone else could not resist love, he is not to be blamed (*Trach.* 444–48). But how do these nonrational motives work? The tragedians are familiar with warped or misguided deliberation resulting from infatuation (*ἄρτη*), when "the evil appears good" to the deluded agent (*Ant.* 620–25). Love seems to work in the same way, by perverting the lover's wits (*Ant.* 792) and causing madness (790) or disease (*Trach.* 444). To illustrate the power of Aphrodite, the chorus in the *Trachiniae* mention the *deception* of Zeus (499–500), indicating error rather than incontinence. In the same way, Laius's begetting of Oedipus is explained by his being overcome by foolishness (*Sept.* 750) and madness (756–57); this is the same sort of madness that Eteocles is taken to display in his decision to fight Polyneices.

Recognition of nonrational motives does not imply recognition of incontinence. Someone can be influenced by nonrational, foolish, mad motives so that the decision he makes is foolish—wildly incorrect and unreasonable. But the decision may nonetheless be rational (as we have previously distinguished these terms). Where we might expect Aeschylus

8. See *Il.* 14. 199, 294, 316, 328, 353.

9. See *Theog.* 122; *Hymn. Hom. Ven.* 3, 7, 33, 36, 38, 251; *Theognis* 1388.

10. On *ἀμαχανία*, see Snell, *Discovery*, pp. 51–54; H. Fränkel, *Early Greek Poetry and Philosophy* (Oxford, 1975), pp. 133–36, 309–13, quoting D. L. Page, *Poetae Melici Graeci* (Oxford, 1962), no. 541; G. M. Kirkwood, *Early Greek Monody* (Ithaca, 1974), pp. 34–38.

11. See T. B. L. Webster, "Some Psychological Terms in Greek Tragedy," *JHS* 77 (1957): 149–54.

and Sophocles to see incontinence, they see foolish perversity; they present people acting on bad rational decisions, not acting incontinently against their rational decisions.¹²

In other literary sources before the time of Socrates and Euripides clear recognition of incontinence is hard to find. Heraclitus says: "It is hard to fight the *thumos*; for what it wants it buys at the price of the soul" (D.-K. B 85).¹³ Does he describe incontinence? That depends on whether *thumos* takes our wits away so that "evil seems good" to us, or causes us to do what we believe to be evil. Heraclitus does not say enough to let us decide what he means. A possible echo of his remark by Democritus is no clearer and not certainly pre-Socratic (D.-K. B 236).

III

We can now perhaps approach Euripides with the right questions and expectations. We need not try to understand him against an implicitly Socratic background; for we have found no such background—we have not found that Homer or later Greeks were cognitivists. At the same time the recognition of incontinence is not so commonplace as to deserve no comment; it is not found in Euripides' literary predecessors, despite their interest in different types and sources of irrationality.

In the *Hippolytus* Phaedra describes and explains her desire for Hippolytus and her attitude to it.¹⁴ She says (377–87):

Human beings seem to me to do worse¹⁵ not because of the nature of the judgment. For many have sound mind.¹⁶ We must look at it this way: The things we know and recognize to be good we do not perform—some from laziness, some having preferred some other pleasure before the fine. There are many pleasures in life—long talks, leisure, a pleasant evil; and shame.¹⁷ There are two kinds,¹⁸ one not evil, the other a burden on houses; if the occasion were clear, there would not be two things having the same letters.

12. Some of these issues are illuminated by B. M. W. Knox, "Second Thoughts in Greek Tragedy," in *Word and Action* (Baltimore, 1979), pp. 231–49 (= *GRBS* 7 [1966]: 213–32).

13. On *thumos*, see W. J. Verdenius, "A Psychological Statement of Heraclitus," *Mnem.* 3. 11 (1943): 115–21; C. H. Kahn, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus* (Cambridge, 1979), pp. 241–43. Contrast M. Marcovich, *Heraclitus* (Mérida, 1973), pp. 383–88 (less plausible).

14. Recent discussions of this passage include W. S. Barrett, in his edition of the *Hippolytus* (Oxford, 1965), ad loc.; H. Lloyd-Jones, review of Barrett, *JHS* 85 (1965): 164–71; C. W. Willink, "Some Problems of Text and Interpretation in the *Hippolytus*," *CQ* 18 (1968): 11–43; D. Claus (see n. 2); C. P. Segal, "Shame and Purity in Euripides' *Hippolytus*," *Hermes* 98 (1970): 278–99; F. Solmsen, "Bad Shame and Related Problems in Phaedra's Speech," *Hermes* 101 (1973): 420–25; D. Kovacs, "Shame, Pleasure and Honour in Phaedra's Great Speech," *AJP* 101 (1980): 287–303.

15. I read *πράσσειν κάκιον*, i.e., "fare worse," with Willink ("Some Problems," p. 12), not *πράσσειν κακίον* (Barrett, "*Hippolytus*," ad loc., who translates "do wrong").

16. I follow Willink, "Some Problems," p. 13, against Barrett, "*Hippolytus*," pp. 228, 433, and Solmsen, "Bad Shame," p. 420 (n. 1), in preferring *ἀ χρηστὸν* . . . *ἐκπονούμεν* το *τὰ χρηστὰ* . . . *ἐκπονούμεν* δ'. The preferred reading makes it clearer that we know them to be good. Cf. *Prt.* 358C7–D2, οὐδ' ἔστι τοῦτο, ὡς δοκεν, ἐν ἀνθρώπων φύσει, ἐπὶ ᾧ οἴεται κακὰ εἶναι ἐθέλειν ἵεναι. Euripides' use of the relative clause neatly denies the exact point that Socrates asserts. (I do not mean, of course, that Euripides was reading the *Protagoras*, but only that this would be the natural way for Socrates to formulate his view.)

17. I agree with Willink ("Some Problems," pp. 14–15) against Barrett ("*Hippolytus*," ad loc.) in taking *ἀργία* and *αἰδώς* to be pleasure; *τὸ καλόν* may be one, too. This is not difficult if pleasures are *sources* of pleasure (as in 383–84) rather than *episodes* of pleasure. Socrates also reduces the motives allegedly overcoming knowledge to pleasure (353C–354D).

18. Willink, "Some Problems," p. 15, rather plausibly supplies *ἡδοναί* with *δυσσαί*. At *Prt.* 351C Socrates rejects an apparently similar distinction.

The important questions here concern the use of "judgment," "sound mind," "know and recognize." If they are to be understood cognitively, then Euripides recognizes incontinence here.

It is useful to compare Phaedra's remarks with the view ascribed to "most people" by Socrates (Pl. *Prt.* 352B3–C2):

The many think something like this about knowledge; it is not powerful, it is no leader or ruler. They do not think of it as something like this. No: often, they think, knowledge is in a human being, but it is not knowledge that rules him, but something else—now anger, now pleasure, now pain, sometimes lust, often fear. They think of knowledge just as though they were thinking of a slave, dragged about by all the other things.¹⁹

Both Phaedra and the many seem to think knowledge is insufficient for right action. Phaedra seems to describe the phenomenon that Socrates calls "being dragged about"; each of them lists some of the motives that cause people to act against their knowledge. Euripides seems to recognize unambiguously that someone can know what is better and still not do it; hence he seems to recognize incontinence.

Why should we resist this view of Phaedra's speech? Two doubts need to be resolved.

First, some readers have emphasized "*nature* of the judgment," and supposed that Phaedra's only concern is to deny that error is the result of natural vice. This issue may be raised later in the play (921–22) when Hippolytus says that it is hard to teach sound mind (*τὸ εὖ φρονεῖν*) to the foolish (*μὴ φρονοῦντας*).²⁰ But Phaedra is hardly concerned with this question. To explain what she means in speaking of the "nature of the judgment" she says, "For many have sound mind." Her explanation of "nature of the judgment" contrasts sound mind with failure to act; it does not contrast the natural with the acquired; hence "nature of the judgment" did not imply this contrast either. Moreover, her analysis would be a feeble reply to a claim about natural vice. The only natural vice it would exclude is natural ignorance; for all she says, the other sources of error—laziness and so on—might reflect natural vices. Hence we should not restrict "judgment" and "sound mind" to natural, untaught qualities, but should take them to include all cognitive states, once again suggesting that Euripides affirms the possibility of incontinence.

Second, is it safe to assume that these cognitive terms have purely cognitive senses? Might Euripides be using them in the "fused" senses familiar in Homer? It is true that "judgment" has a fairly wide range in Euripides and contemporary sources. But this passage makes it fairly clear that Euripides intends it in its cognitive sense. It is explained by "sound mind." Is this also to be understood in a cognitive sense? It is further explained by "know and recognize." If all these are to be understood in a fused sense, referring to both cognitive and affective mental

19. Who are "the many"? Probably Socrates refers to the *implicit* views of most people. (Contrast A. W. H. Adkins, *From the Many to the One* [London, 1970], note on p. 161.) I do not pursue the interesting question whether incontinence is clearly recognized in, e.g., Gorgias, Thucydides, or Antiphon.

20. See, e.g., Barrett, "*Hippolytus*," p. 229.

states, how could they fail to produce right action? To say that someone has all the right mental states but does not try to do the right action is to leave his failure inexplicable. This is plainly not Euripides' intention. He wants to say that judgment and knowledge can be correct and the action wrong because of some other mental state—including those he lists. Hence he cannot intend "judgment" and the others in a fused sense, which would make his claim absurd. He must intend them in the cognitive sense, which makes his claim intelligible.²¹ In that case he affirms the reality of incontinence. Indeed, he may have rewritten the first version of the *Hippolytus* to display the reality of incontinence. In the first version Phaedra was shameless. In the second version she displays shame, but is too weak for her desires.²²

Euripides' view in the *Hippolytus* is relatively clear. If we agree that he recognizes incontinence here we will be less reluctant to see it elsewhere. The *Medea* is harder. Medea thinks of killing her children; then when they look at her she wavers: "my heart has left me," she says (1042), and she abandons her previous deliberations (1044, 1048). Then she considers the shame and ridicule she will suffer if she just accepts her position; she forms her intention again to kill the children (1049–55). She reproaches her *thumos* for this intention (1056–59), but does not waver from it. Finally she says: "And I know well the evils I am about to do; but my *thumos* is stronger than my deliberations; it is the cause of the greatest harms to mortals" (1078–80).

How much of the whole passage did Euripides even write?²³ A central puzzle concerns the different roles of "deliberations." First Medea rejects her deliberations, referring to her plan to kill the children (1040–48). Then she reverses her intentions, and says that her *thumos* is stronger than her deliberations; here her deliberations are contrary to her intention to kill the children. Deliberation and feeling seem to be on opposite sides in rapid succession. Is this not a sign of intolerable incoherence, clear enough to show that Euripides cannot have written it all?

Euripides has good reason to present Medea's changes of mind as our text presents them. First (up to 1040) Medea has deliberated and formed a rational decision to kill the children. Then when she looks at them she changes her mind, abandoning her deliberations and her decision (1040–

21. Barrett takes all the cognitive terms in fused senses. He cites 427, 920, 996, and 1304, where, however, a cognitive sense is perfectly possible. See further P. Huart, "*Gnōmē*" chez Thucydide et ses contemporains (Paris, 1973), pp. 37–42; cf. esp. *IA* 565–66, where the function of γνώμη is ἐξορᾶν τὸ δέον—quite suitable for Phaedra. However, even if γνώμη can sometimes be used in a fused sense, Phaedra cannot intend it in this sense; for if she did, she would never say that γνώμη is insufficient for action.

22. On the two versions of the *Hippolytus*, see Snell, *Scenes*, p. 26; Barrett, "*Hippolytus*," pp. 11, 18 (quoting frag. 430), 30–31. If frag. 431 is a fragment of Sophocles' *Phaedra*, it may suggest that Sophocles treats *eros* here as he treats it in the *Antigone* and *Trachiniae*.

23. The whole passage is treated sceptically by M. D. Reeve, "Euripides, *Medea* 1021–1080," *CQ* 22 (1972): 51–61. Contrast D. L. Page, in his edition of the *Medea* (Oxford, 1938), ad 1058; and F. Solmsen, *Intellectual Experiments of the Greek Enlightenment* (Princeton, 1975), pp. 133–34. Other relevant questions are raised in W. W. Fortenbaugh, "On the Antecedents of Aristotle's Bipartite Psychology," *GRBS* 11 (1970): 233–50; J. Moline, "Euripides, Socrates and Virtue," *Hermes* 103 (1975): 45–67; H. Diller, "θυμός δὲ κρίεισιν τῶν ἐμῶν βουλευμάτων," *Hermes* 94 (1966): 267–75.

48). Here she thinks of the consequences; she is enraged and ashamed at the prospect of dishonor, and now her *thumos* dominates her. Previously her deliberations would have determined her action; now they make no difference to it. The contrast between her earlier and her later rejection of deliberation is clear; earlier she was not dominated by an incontinent desire, but later she is. It is not inconsistent if her feelings for the children first count against the deliberations and later (apparently at 1071 ff.) are part of the deliberations that she disregards. Her feeling upsets her deliberation; at the same time the fact that she has the feeling is a fact to be considered in deliberation. There remains a crucial difference between her earlier and her later attitude to her deliberations. Earlier she abandons them; she no longer thinks she has made the right decision (1040–48). Later she does not abandon them; she still thinks they are the correct deliberations, but she has a stronger contrary desire.

If Euripides intends to describe incontinence here, he does it well. The apparently illogical transitions are both psychologically and dramatically intelligible. The parallel with Phaedra is close. Medea also has “sound mind”; she knows what is bad about what she wants to do, but she wants to do it, and does it, nonetheless.

To avoid misunderstanding, and to clarify the connection with Socrates, a further common feature of the *Medea* and the *Hippolytus* should be noticed. Neither passage is especially concerned with morality, if morality essentially includes concern for the interests of others. A problem about incontinence can be raised if purely self-interested deliberation is considered, when no moral questions need arise for the agent. This is the problem raised by Socrates and by Medea and Phaedra: How can someone know that this action is more advantageous to him and still prefer the other action? Phaedra and Medea are not represented as worrying primarily about the interests of others, but as concerned with their own interests; this is the standard they consider when they find that what they most want to do is bad—bad for them. Euripides’ presentation of their condition is exactly right if he wants to expose the central puzzle of incontinence.

The complete extant plays are not our only evidence for Euripides’ recognition of incontinence. The relevant fragments are less useful, insofar as they lack contexts, but the coincidence in outlook shows that incontinence is no passing or casual concern of Euripides.

When Plutarch wants to illustrate the difference between intemperance and incontinence he writes (*Virt. mor.* 446a):

But what incontinence says is something else, and quite different [Plutarch quotes Eur. frag. 840]—Though I have judgment, nature forces me. And [he quotes frag. 841]—Alas, this is an evil sent by gods to human beings, whenever someone knows the good but does not practice it.²⁴

In a similar series of illustrations of emotion and appetite conflicting with reason, Clement quotes the first passage, and ascribes it to Laius in the

24. Or “does not use his knowledge”: Snell, *Scenes*, p. 64.

tragedy; he adds Medea (*Med.* 1078–80) and Ajax (frag. adesp. 110), and says: “*Thumos* makes a tragedy of these, and appetite of myriads of others, Phaedra, Antheia, Eriphyle” (*Strom.* 2. 63. 1–64. 1). Albinus chooses Medea and Laius to illustrate the Platonic division of the soul:

Moreover in the case of Medea the *thumos* is seen fighting reasoning. For she says . . . [he quotes *Med.* 1078–79]. In the case of Laius when he is abducting Chrysippus, appetite is seen fighting reasoning [he quotes frag. 841].²⁵

Two other fragments are relevant here:

Many mortals suffer this evil; they understand, but are not willing to obey their judgment; for they are in many things defeated in their soul by what is dear to them (frag. 220).²⁶

This one thing is the first of all to know, to bear what happens without resentment. This is the best man, and events afflict him less. And yet we know how to say this, but lack the resources to do it (frag. 572).

All these passages suggest, the first two fairly precisely, the same sort of incontinence that is displayed by Medea and Phaedra. At least as early as Chrysippus the passage from the *Medea* was recognized as a description of apparent incontinence (see Galen *Hippoc. et Pl. plac.* pp. 272–73, 382 Müller), with other Euripidean passages on related phenomena (p. 385, quoting Eur. frags. 340, 645; p. 379, quoting *Andr.* 629–30). Perhaps some of this philosophical argument, in which Euripides seems to have been used on both sides (cf. Galen, p. 382), is the source of the combinations of passages cited or mentioned by Plutarch, Clement, and Albinus. Later students of rational and irrational action recognize a debt to Euripides when they quote these passages and allude to him; and we have no reason to suppose that they misread him.

IV

We can be fairly confident, then, that Euripides sometimes describes incontinence, and hence that he means to describe the phenomenon whose existence Socrates denies.²⁷ It by no means follows that he describes it in conscious opposition to Socrates. Two other possibilities are open:

25. *Eisagōgē* 24 (in Plato, ed. K. F. Hermann [Leipzig, 1884], 6: 166–67, s.n. “Alcinous”). The evidence does not make it certain that Euripides is the author of frags. 840–41.

26. Here I partly follow T. B. L. Webster, *The Tragedies of Euripides* (London, 1967), p. 209, partly Snell, *Scenes*, pp. 64–65.

27. Barrett, “*Hippolytus*,” pp. 228–29 comments: (a) “[Phaedra] is polemizing not against the Socratic explaining away of moral weakness in terms of ignorance, but against the much simpler view that wrongdoing is ordinarily due to natural vice.” (b) The similarity between Phaedra’s words and the words of the many in the *Protagoras* is “no more than one would expect in two straightforward statements of a very straightforward opinion.” (c) Cognitive terms are to be taken in a fused sense: “This is not a conscious intellectualization of moral behaviour, but a habit of thought and language inherited from primitive times . . . [d] though it did of course mean that when the Greeks turned to philosophy they were often too apt to explain moral behaviour in intellectual terms.” Barrett’s claims are inconsistent. For (a) denies, and (b) asserts, that Phaedra maintains the view of the many. Moreover, (c) is inconsistent both with (b) and with (d). Fused senses imply no predisposition to intellectualism; and if (c) is true, it is the Socratic Paradox, not its denial by the many, which is the straightforward opinion. For a similar combination of inconsistent views, see Dodds (n. 2 above).

(1) He has in mind someone other than Socrates who defends the cognitivist view that is rejected in the plays.

(2) He has no particular opponent in mind. He is describing a psychological predicament, not defending belief in its existence against anyone.

Neither of these possibilities can be decisively excluded. But how probable is either of them?

A simple fact prevents us from excluding the first possibility. We know too little about Greek thought to be sure that Socrates is original, that none of his predecessors or contemporaries is a cognitivist. However, we know of no one else who is a cognitivist. We have seen that it is a mistake to represent traditional Greek thought as implicitly cognitivist. We have no evidence that any of Socrates' contemporaries outside his own circle agreed with him. The Socratic Paradox is taken to be a real paradox, repugnant to most people's views.

We found that Aeschylus and Sophocles do not allow any role to incontinence in the explanation of action. This does not mean that they deny the *existence* of incontinence, but only that they see no tragic interest in it. Hence it is unlikely that when Euripides insists on its *existence* he is consciously arguing against them.

Might he have no definite opponent in mind? This view is the most plausible alternative to the belief in a reference to Socrates. Surely Euripides could recognize and insist on the impotence of knowledge even if he had never heard of Socrates' insistence on the power of knowledge. Phaedra's remarks, however, are emphatic. She first insists that bad judgment does not explain failure (377), then says twice that we can have good judgment (378, 380), and finally claims that we do not act on it (381). Her emphatic tone is more easily understood if she is answering someone who might think good judgment is sufficient for action. And who among Euripides' predecessors and contemporaries is known to think this except Socrates?²⁸

We should conclude, then, that, first, a reference to Socrates fits Euripides well, and that, second, it is the most plausible explanation of the evidence. The second conclusion should be held far less confidently than the first. The view that Euripides could not be, or is not likely to be, referring to Socrates rests on a misunderstanding of Socrates or of Euripides or of both. The view that he is referring to Socrates is only one of the possible explanations; but it is more plausible than the others.

The most we have shown so far is that Euripides presents characters

28. At *Prt.* 352C8–D3 Protagoras is made to say that it would be shameful for him not to accept that wisdom and knowledge are strongest. But his own position in the dialogue assumes the falsity of the Socratic Paradox; see C. C. W. Taylor, *Plato's "Protagoras"* (Oxford, 1976), pp. 172–73. No other convincing non-Socratic evidence of someone affirming the Paradox has been presented. Moline, "Euripides," p. 47, cites Hesiod *Op.* 293–94; Aesch. *Supp.* 101–3, 598–99; Heraclitus B 112; Thuc. 4. 45. 5, 81. 2; Democritus B 181; [Hippoc.] *Peri Technēs* 11. None of these maintains anything close to the Paradox.

A Socratic reference in Euripides (*Med.*, *Hipp.*, or both) is defended by Snell, *Scenes*, pp. 59–68, and by, among others, Dodds, *Greeks and the Irrational*, pp. 196, 199–200; N. E. Collinge, "Medea vs. Socrates," *Durham University Journal* 11 (1949–50): 41–67. P. Decharme, *Euripides and the Spirit of his Dramas* (New York, 1906), p. 33, agrees about the actual conflict with Socrates, but is noncommittal about an intentional reference.

who maintain an anti-Socratic position. Can we decide whether he endorses it or not?

Hippolytus suggests that all women are naturally unreliable, and that intelligence only gives some of them more opportunity (640–48). But he speaks in ignorance of Phaedra's case, and from his own fixed assumption that natural virtue or vice determines action (cf. 79–81, 916–22). Phaedra shows that Hippolytus's assumption is foolishly oversimplified; someone's nature need not be all bad or all good, but may include right judgment, which Hippolytus takes to be crucial, along with misguided and overpowering desires. Phaedra tried to overcome her foolishness with sound mind, but failed to conquer Aphrodite that way (398–402). Hippolytus emphasizes his own soundness (*σωφροσύνη*, 80, 993–95, 1007–8, 1100–1101); but he supposes that sound nature and judgment is all that is needed for right action; and Phaedra answers his assumption.²⁹

The *Medea* offers even less to challenge the recognition of incontinence. Medea's later resolution to kill the children shows again that she realizes she is harming herself (1242–50, esp. *κακά* 1243, and *δυστυχής* 1250). Jason's attitude may be similar to Hippolytus's view of Phaedra. He suggests that if Medea could be an unscrupulous traitor to her own family earlier and could bring herself to kill her children now (1329–32), she cannot have normal human attitudes and feelings at all (1339–43; note *φύσιν* 1343). He cannot see how else Medea could have thought that the harm done to her justified her action (1367–69). Medea's account of her motives has shown where Jason is wrong; intelligible wounded pride and shame have moved her to act against what she takes to be her own interest. Jason assumes that if any ordinary person had been aware of the bad consequences of action like Medea's he would have avoided it; hence Medea cannot have been aware of them. Medea's account of herself has shown that awareness of the evil does not prevent the choice of it.

Hippolytus sees natural virtue and vice everywhere, while Jason sees sensible, calculating, businesslike people contrasted with unintelligible monsters. The presentation of these characters suggests that their account of human nature is likely to be limited, and that Phaedra and Medea expose a limitation in it.

It is reasonable to infer that Euripides not only presents characters talking about incontinence, but also thinks incontinence really happens, and that Socrates is wrong to deny its existence. This conclusion is open to reasonable doubt; but we can defend it without assuming, indefensibly, that every Euripidean character is a mouthpiece for the views of the poet.

V

One rather common source of resistance to this conclusion should be noticed. Some readers reject any Socratic reference because they think it

29. *Σωφροσύνη* in *Hipp.* is discussed by Barrett, "*Hippolytus*," pp. 172–73, 297; H. F. North, *Sophrosyne* (Ithaca, 1966), pp. 79–81. The treatment of incontinence and its relation to nature and character is relevant to the aspects of *Med.* and *Hipp.* explored by Knox, *Word and Action* (see n. 12), pp. 239–41. Knox appears to reject any Socratic reference (p. 248, n. 35), though it fits his general view very well.

would be inconsistent with Euripides' character as a dramatist.³⁰ It will be useful, then, to show that Euripides' interest in incontinence need not be irrelevant to his properly dramatic concerns.

Many of Euripides' dramas will disturb someone who assumes that human agents and the universe as a whole are rationally ordered. Aphrodite and Artemis in the *Hippolytus* are gods, not simply human emotions. But they are not just; they do not guarantee a rational order in the universe as a whole. In the *Heracles* Hera sends Lyssa to drive Heracles mad, for no good reason; his madness is not an expression of some flaw in his character, or a punishment for crime. The *Troades* and *Hecuba* display the conflict of human and divine passions leading from disaster to disaster.

Euripides displays madness taking away someone's capacity to make rational decisions. He displays perverse values leading to unreasonable but rational decisions; Eteocles wants to be a tyrant so badly that he will stop at nothing (*Phoen.* 503–10, 521–25). Incontinence is different. An incontinent person may have correct values; he makes a reasonable and rational decision; he is not mad, and does not lose his wits; he simply has desires too strong for him to act on his rational decision. An incontinent person is not protected by madness or perversity from clear awareness of the foolishness of what he does.

Euripides' interest in the forms of irrationality and the weakness of reason makes him aware of differences that others might overlook. Heracles and Eteocles show the impotence of reason in two forms; Medea and Phaedra show it in a third form not reducible to either of the first two. We might suppose that the dangers to us are external—from the gods or other aspects of the world beyond our control—or that they result from mistaken beliefs and values. If we are optimistic, we will claim that mistaken beliefs and values make us vulnerable to external disaster, from the world and from the gods, and that the right views protect us from these hazards. This claim is accepted, with qualifications, by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Socrates. Euripides rejects it. Heracles is meant to show that wisdom and good character are no protection against external hazards. Medea and Phaedra show that external hazards are not the only danger; a further danger is the strength of our own nonrational desires.

Recognition of incontinence raises a hard question about responsibility. If we cannot control our nonrational desires, and they control some of our actions, then some of our actions are beyond our control. Heracles' madness diminishes his responsibility; but we, before we reflect on Euripides' plays, assume there is no similar excuse for Medea or Phaedra. Euripides shakes this assumption, too. Phaedra is not overcome by blind passion; she sees clearly what she wants, and though she tries to overcome her desire, she cannot (*Hipp.* 398–402). Laius replies to someone's advice and reproof that he agrees, but nature forces him (*βιάζεται*)

30. H. Lloyd-Jones, *The Justice of Zeus* (Berkeley, 1971), p. 146, presents this "anti-propagandist" view clearly, against Shavian and Ibsenian views of Euripides.

nonetheless. The contrast with Aeschylus is striking here. In Aeschylus it is persuasion that forces someone and takes his wits away (*Ag.* 381–87). In Euripides no previous injustice is needed; Laius's wits are not taken away, but he is forced nonetheless. Euripides draws no explicit conclusions about responsibility; but conclusions are easily drawn. They give Socrates one powerful reason for wanting to deny the existence of incontinence.

These general remarks merely reflect an old view neatly expressed in the title "Euripides the Irrationalist."³¹ They may suggest how his major dramatic concerns make it reasonable and appropriate for him to consider incontinence. He correctly sees that the Socratic Paradox raises a crucial question for someone concerned with the strength and weakness of human reason. Euripides' answer to the question makes possible a distinctive type of tragic situation.

VI

Euripides describes incontinence. He probably intends to reply to the Socratic Paradox. We can be far more confident about the first claim than about the second, which would allow a confident decision only if we had far more evidence than we have. But still, the second claim deserves acceptance on the strength of the available evidence. If we accept it, we learn something about Euripides' contribution to the intellectual life of his time. We learn something more about his dramatic concerns. We learn that he can contribute to theoretical disputes without taking time off from being a dramatist. His interest in incontinence is an aspect of that interest in the power of reason that he shares with Socrates. It is no wonder that they should both be concerned with the same issue.³²

Cornell University

31. See E. R. Dodds, "Euripides the Irrationalist," in *The Ancient Concept of Progress and Other Essays* (Oxford, 1973), chap. 5 (= *CR* 43 [1929]: 97–104).

32. For helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper, I am grateful to my colleague G. M. Kirkwood, to R. L. Gordon, to a referee for *CP*, and to the Editor.