

The *hybris* of Socrates: A Platonic ‘revaluation of values’ in the *Symposium*

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Abstract: In the final speech of Plato’s *Symposium*, the young, aristocratic Alcibiades accuses Socrates of being characteristically *hybristic*. This is a startling claim that requires explanation, in relation both to the rest of the *Symposium* and to Plato’s broader ethical and metaphysical concerns. Previous interpretations of the meaning and purpose of Alcibiades’ speech miss the main point: namely, the notion of a philosophical or Socratic *hybris* complements the discussion by Socrates-Diotima of the ideal nature of *eros*. Just as all desire in fact aims at eternal ends, so the Platonic philosopher acts ‘hybristically’, by typically asserting his own activity and insights vis-à-vis temporal, contingent values. Therefore, Alcibiades’ speech should be understood in the context of a more general Platonic ‘revaluation of values’ that reorients traditional words and concepts towards ideal ends.

At the end of Plato’s *Symposium*, Alcibiades bursts into Agathon’s house and proceeds to deliver a speech in praise of Socrates. It is a deeply ambivalent speech. Intermixed with genuine admiration for Socrates’ moral virtues, intelligence and physical strength, is the recurrent and insistent condemnation of Socrates for *hybris*. Alcibiades levels the charge at the beginning of his speech when he compares Socrates to the satyr Marsyas: ‘You are a *hybristes*, Socrates. If you deny it, I will produce witnesses’. Alcibiades repeats this specific charge of *hybris* three times and peppers his speech with references to Socrates’ scorn (*kataphronesis*) and arrogance (*hyperephania*), as if these were *typical* characteristics of Socrates’ behaviour.¹ Indeed, Alcibiades would

¹ The three accusations: Pl. *Symp.* 215b7, 219c5, 222a7-8. For similar language and concepts, see *Symp.* 216d7-e5, 217e4-5 (Σωκράτους ἔργον ὑπερήφανον), 219c6 (δικασταὶ γὰρ ἐστε τῆς Σωκράτους ὑπερηφανίας), 216d7-e2 (Socrates’ scorn [καταφρόνησις] for physical beauty, wealth, honour), 220b7-c1 (Socrates’ seeming καταφρόνησις for the other soldiers at Potidaea). Diotima’s speech: *Symp.* 210b4-6 (τοῦτο δ’ ἐννοήσαντα κατασῆναι πάντων τῶν καλῶν σωμάτων ἐραστήν, ἐπὸς δὲ τὸ σφῶδρα τοῦτο χαλάσαι καταφρονήσαντα καὶ μικρὸν ἠγησάμενον); *Symp.* 210c3-6 (those who have seen the Form of Beauty consider bodily beauty a mere μικρόν). Throughout, I refer to the Oxford Classical Text (ed. J. Burnet, 1967); all translations are my own.

seem to present a general portrait of the man: not only Alcibiades, but also Charmides, Euthydemus and ‘many many others’ have suffered from Socrates’ *hybris*.² Alcibiades’ accusation is a complex one and a full explication would involve a proper understanding of *hybris* both in itself and in relation to Alcibiades’ speech, to the *Symposium* and even to Plato’s idealism as a whole. Unlike the interpretations of scholars like Gagarin, Nussbaum and Fisher, I will here argue that Alcibiades’ accusation complements Socrates’ speech on *eros*. Namely, Socratic *hybris* becomes emblematic of a new moral outlook, and should be construed as one element in a more general Platonic ‘revaluation of values’, according to which a relative dishonouring of conventional attitudes is both a prelude to and consequence of wisdom.

Before developing this interpretation in more detail, let us briefly review some of the major work on the meaning of the term *hybris*. Here two general tendencies emerge, which have been well synthesized by D. Cairns. First, D. M. MacDowell, M. W. Dickie and others emphasize that *hybris* is a form of ‘high spirits’, a kind of rough self-assertion rising from an excess of energy. This interpretation emphasizes the lasting disposition of the hybristic agent, rather than any particular hybristic acts or intentions; hence, *hybristes* and *hybristikos* can be used to sum up a person’s whole character.³ Fisher, on the other hand, stresses the intentional aspect—in particular the desire to belittle, demean and in some way dishonour another: for Fisher, *hybris* ‘is essentially the serious assault on the honour of another... [T]he typical motive for such infliction of dishonour is the pleasure of expressing a sense of superiority, rather than compulsion, need

² Pl. *Symp.* 222a-b

³ D. M. MacDowell, ‘Hybris in Athens’, *Greece and Rome* 23 (1976), pp. 14-31; M.W. Dickie in *Greek Poetry and Philosophy: Studies in Honour of Leonard Woodbury*, ed. by D.E. Gerber (Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1984), pp. 83-109; N.R.E. Fisher, *Hybris: A Study in the Values of Honour and Shame in Ancient Greece* (Warminster Aris & Phillips, 1992), pp. 3-5; and D. Cairns, ‘Hybris, Dishonour, and Thinking Big’, *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, cxvi (1996), p.1 n.2 for a survey of other relevant literature. As a side-note, one must remember that the still-common view of *hybris* as ‘overweening presumption suggesting impious disregard of the limits governing human action in an orderly universe’ (as defined by the 2002 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*) is too narrow in its scope.

or desire for wealth'.⁴ In accordance with this definition, Fisher demands that each *hybristic* act have *some* dishonoured victim, even if that victim is present only by implication. This demand can lead to a strained interpretation of some passages.⁵ Noting this, Cairns has argued for a synthesis of the two approaches: the pleasure of brusque self-assertion usually entails a disregard and dishonouring of others, though not always; MacDowell and Fisher only emphasize different aspects of the same phenomenon.⁶ The degree to which Plato's use of the term can deviate from conventional usage is a controversial question. Fisher treats Platonic use, at least in the *Phaedrus* as highly unusual, while Cairns cannot find any essential divergence from normal use.

Neither, however, emphasizes the unusual nature of Alcibiades' accusations in the *Symposium*, and indeed no interpreters to my knowledge (including Gagarin) have adequately stressed how and why *hybris* is a *leitmotif* in the dialogue as a whole. But *hybris* is present almost from beginning to end: the attentive reader should not be surprised by Alcibiades' seemingly sudden accusation.⁷ The theme is perhaps

⁴ Fisher, p. 1 Cf. Fisher's summary is worth quoting: 'The center of attention in uses of *hybris*, the core of the concept, is beyond any doubt the committing of acts of intentional insult, of acts which deliberately inflict shame and dishonour on others. Sometimes the focus of interest may be on the dreadfulness of the intention of the agent, and its possible explanation in terms of his age, status, wealth, political stance or character; at others, it may be on the degree of shame inflicted. But in almost all cases the victim of the *hybris* is patently present in the context; where it can or has been doubted that there is a victim, in all cases it can be plausibly argued that one is supposed by the argument. No cases have been found where *hybris* can plausibly be supposed to mean no more than high spirits, good fun, overconfidence, pride, enjoying success or "thinking big"; nor is it anywhere shown to be specifically a "religious" term, though, naturally, it can be used to condemn acts of outrage against the gods or their cult.' (p. 148)

⁵ Such as Herodotus 2.32.3, discussed by Fisher, pp. 98-9

⁶ 'Expressing one's excess energy self-indulgently means placing oneself and one's pleasure first, and thus losing sight of one's status as one among others. Self-aggrandizement constitutes an incursion into the sphere of others' honour, because the concept of honour is necessarily comparative' (Cairns, p. 32). I will follow Cairns' conclusions here, while keeping Fisher's *stress* upon *hybris* as deliberate dishonouring.

⁷ *Hybris* or its cognates occur eight times in the *Symposium*, at 174b6, 175e7, 181c4, 188a7, 215b7, 219c5, 221e3-4, 222a8

most obvious in Aristophanes' speech. While it is true that Aristophanes does not use the word *hybris* itself, he does include many concepts and phrases related to the first understanding of *hybris* as gratuitous self-assertion. Thus, Aristophanes tells a story about the great energy (*dynamis*) of the first humans. 'Terrible in their strength and power', they 'thought big' and were so filled with riotousness (*aselgia*) that they stormed Olympus like the giants Otus and Ephialtes. To punish this act of excessive self-assertion, Zeus split them and formed the human race, with all the peculiarities of its present shape, sexuality, longings and fulfillment. Thus, in Aristophanes' vision, humanity bears the scars and vestiges of an ancient *hybris*. Indeed, there is still a danger that this *hybris* might erupt again, for not all are temperate and self-restrained (*kosmioi*).⁸

Less obvious, however, are the clues that thread through the dialogue. These suggest that *hybris* was a typical characteristic of Socrates, and so foreshadow Alcibiades' more explicit accusations. The first of these indications is at the very beginning of Apollodorus' narrative. Socrates happens to meet Aristodemus, and as if acting on a momentary whim, he takes the liberty of inviting Aristodemus to Agathon's symposium: 'How would you feel about going uninvited to the dinner?'⁹ To bring one's own guests to a symposium was not the 'done thing', particularly if the extra guests might not be welcome, and one wonders whether this was the case with Aristodemus. For as Apollodorus notes, Aristodemus was one of the more vehement followers of Socrates at the time, always going barefoot, following his master everywhere, as if awaiting his command.¹⁰ When this eccentric Socratic appears at the door,

⁸ Strength, power and 'thinking big': Pl. *Symp.* 190b5-6. The phrase **μεγάλα φρονεῖν** or Plato's **τὰ φρονήματα μεγάλα εἶχον** is a near synonym for *hybris*, as Cairns shows (pp. 10-7). **ἀσελγία**: *Symp.* 190d4. Not all are **κόσμοι**: *Symp.* 193a3-5

⁹ Pl. *Symp.* 174a9-b1

¹⁰ Pl. *Symp.* 173b1-173b4 (**σμικρός, ἀνυπόδητος ἀεί... Σωκράτους ἑραο τῆς ὦν ἐν τοῖς μάλιστα τῶν τότε**). Aristodemus appears as the literal 'follower' of Socrates at the beginning and end of the dialogue. In the beginning, he has reservations about going uninvited to the dinner, but is willing to do whatever Socrates orders (*Symp.* 174b2), or to go if 'invited' by Socrates (*Symp.* 174c7-d1). At the end of the dialogue, he wakes up to follow Socrates out, 'as was his custom' (223d8-10).

Agathon welcomes him, saying that he had been searching for him the day before to extend an invitation, but could not find him.¹¹ This may be just a polite fiction: here, as elsewhere, Agathon is a gracious host, but one senses that in fact he did *not* invite Aristodemus.

That Socrates' invitation is an act of *hybris* is not left simply to the reader's surmise, however. For Socrates' own banter along the road¹² suggests that he is indeed acting hybridically in bringing Aristodemus. Quoting the saying, 'the good go of their own accord to the feast of the good', Socrates suggests that he and Aristodemus should, like Homer, 'destroy' and 'commit *hybris*' against the proverb. For Homer makes Menelaus, a 'soft spearman', go uninvited (ἄκλητος) to the feast of Agamemnon, a 'man good at war'. Analogously, Socrates takes Aristodemus to the feast of Agathon, 'the good'; Socrates' Aristodemus is to Agathon as Homer's Menelaus is to Agamemnon. If the proverb holds that the 'worse' should not go to the house of the 'better', then Menelaus should not go to the feast and sacrifice of Agamemnon. So too, by implication, Aristodemus should not go the house of Agathon, perhaps because Aristodemus would not be considered as one of the 'gentlemen' (*kaloï kai agathoi*) like Pausanias and Agathon. In fact, Socrates does not single out Aristodemus, but uses the plural: 'let us destroy the proverb',¹³ as if Socrates were also amused at the incongruity of *his* attending this *soirée* of *glitterati*. Socrates has 'prettified himself' (ἐκαλλωπισιάμην) with a bath and slippers, so that he 'might go, beautiful to the company of the beautiful'. There may be a wry self-deprecation in these comments of Socrates, particularly given the widespread agreement on Socrates' physical ugliness and Agathon's good-looks.¹⁴ But on the other hand, Socrates' repartee may also represent a lighthearted challenge to conventional categories: who is to say who is 'beautiful' and 'good'? Who has the authority to invite guests to the party? With regard to this latter question, Aristodemus worries about what 'defense' Socrates

¹¹ Pl. *Symp.* 174e4-a5

¹² Pl. *Symp.* 174b3-c4

¹³ Pl. *Symp.* 174b3-4

¹⁴ On Agathon's beauty: Pl. *Symp.* 212e6-8, 213c4-5

might make for inviting him, but Socrates nonchalantly waves aside his anxieties with another cheery quotation to the effect ‘We will think of something on the way there’, and off they march.¹⁵

Socrates’ banter about committing *hybris* against the proverb might be passed over, but for the fact that his mild *hybris* appears again in the very next episode. Again, Agathon is the main victim. After inviting Aristodemus, Socrates falls behind in the road and arrives late—very late, for the guests are already in the middle of dinner. He is late, of course, because he has been waylaid by a thought along the way; he stands there, as in trance, thinking it through. In the meantime, Agathon is left fretting, and we see him turning to Aristodemus repeatedly, worrying what he should do. Here, Socrates’ intellectual zeal has relatively minor consequences. Yet, given the broad scope of the word, his lateness might be plausibly construed as a form of mild *hybris*: here, driven by great intellectual energy, the philosopher asserts his own characteristic activity over against social conventions, to the discomfort, even dishonour, of Agathon. Here, of course, any dishonour done is relatively minor, and the whole passage, again, might be unremarkable but for the fact that it is part of a pattern. Preceded by the invitation of Aristodemus, it is followed in the next episode by the first obvious instance of Socratic *hybris*.

This time, the word is introduced explicitly, even emphatically. Socrates has finally arrived, and Agathon calls him over to sit by his side, so that he ‘might get hold of him and get some pleasure from his wise insight’. Agathon’s remarks are playfully suggestive, coy, flattering. Socrates’ response is equally coy, but satirical: if wisdom could flow from one person to another, then he would most gladly sit next to Agathon, for his wisdom is ‘radiant and filled with promise, having blazed forth so fiercely and so brightly yesterday, in the presence of more than thirty thousand of the Hellenes’. Socrates ostensibly praises Agathon, but his note of sublimity in the last sentence is too august to be serious. Agathon’s first triumph before a Panhellenic audience has been transmuted into something

¹⁵ Pl. *Symp.* 174c7-d4

vaguely ridiculous.¹⁶ Immediately noting the mockery, Agathon retorts briefly and somewhat jocularly, ‘You are a *hybristes* (ὕβριστης εἶ), Socrates’.

It is true that one should not over-interpret this interchange. The term *hybristes* is used elsewhere in the Platonic corpus in a jocular, teasing fashion.¹⁷ But one should not glide over Agathon’s words either. After all, teasing can have a sharp edge and here it does: Agathon is brief and gracious, but he *is* defending himself and the victory that Socrates has just slighted. Moreover, this is the first interchange between the two men—hence a highly significant one and a foreshadowing of more to come. Plato leaves no doubt that this is foreshadowing, as in the next sentence Agathon promises later to make Dionysus the arbiter of their rival claims to wisdom. Later, Dionysus does indeed appear in the guise of Alcibiades, drunk and wreathed in ivy. This Alcibiades will crown Socrates over Agathon, while still reproaching Socrates with Agathon’s words—‘you are a *hybristes*, Socrates’; again, the words will be in response to a romantic slight.¹⁸

Before that, however, Socrates *hybristes* has a few other unruly and mildly hybristic moments, notably when his turn to praise Eros comes round. His speech as a whole, in its method and content, should be seen as an instance of Socrates’ self-assertion vis-à-vis the conventions of Phaedrus’ game, as well as conventional notions of Eros. First, Socrates’ speech contains some gratuitous attacks on the other symposiasts. In this regard, Socrates is not alone: in keeping with the conventionally agonistic atmosphere of the symposium, the speakers refer

¹⁶ The passage is Pl. *Symp.* 175c6-d2. Similar in tone is Socrates’ in *Symp.* 194a8-b5. Cf. *Phdr.* 234d1-8; and *Menexenus* 234c1-235c6 for a prolonged send-up of rhetoric of the funeral orations (*epitaphioi logoi*). For a similar comparison of the words of Agathon and Alcibiades, see M. Gagarin, ‘Socrates’ Hybris and Alcibiades’ Failure’, *Phoenix* 31 (1977), 22-37 (p. 33).

¹⁷ Fisher warns against over-interpretation, noting ‘jocular’ uses of the word *hybristes* in *Meno* 76a, *Prot.* 355c, and *Euthyd.* 273a (pp. 453-54). But Fisher misses the strategic placing of Agathon’s reproach, the many other examples of Socrates’ hybristic behavior through the *Symposium*, as well as the generalizing tendency of Alcibiades’ speech at the end: contrary to Fisher, these do in fact ‘justify the conclusion that Socrates is regularly hybristic’ (p. 465).

¹⁸ Alcibiades first crowns Agathon’s ‘wisest and most beautiful head’, but then transfers the honours to Socrates’ ‘amazing brow’: Pl. *Symp.* 212e3-213e6

critically to their rivals, either by name, or by asserting the superiority of their own approach.¹⁹ But Socrates raises this rhetoric of self-assertion to a new pitch. First, he prefaces his speech with extensive remarks that essentially depict *all* the other speakers as flatterers. Socrates thought that the speech-making would involve simply telling the truth about *eros*, but now he realizes that an encomium is successful to the degree that it includes all manner of fine phrases and empty compliments. Socrates would alone speak the truth, and make truth his praise. The implication is that *nothing* worthwhile has been said all evening. He threatens not to participate at all unless given complete freedom to speak in his own manner.²⁰

The other symposiasts are quick to oblige, little suspecting that Socrates would proceed to submit Agathon to the grilling of an *elenchus*. After the barrage of questions, Agathon meekly confesses that in fact Eros is not beautiful, and that he ‘knew nothing about what he was talking about’. ‘And yet’, Socrates replies in this awkward moment, ‘at least you spoke beautifully, Agathon’.²¹ So Socrates gently twists the knife, depicting Agathon as a naive orator, a mere poet who mouths words thoughtlessly, as if Agathon were simply filled with empty bombast. Throughout this interchange, Socrates’ tone is characteristically polite and measured. But this should not distract one from what has happened: essentially, Socrates has ridiculed Agathon’s fine speech, discomfited a host before guests in his own house, belittled the craft of a poet who has just won the state’s highest artistic honors; he has summarily dismissed the many classical representations of Eros as a young,

¹⁹ Thus, Pausanias criticizes Phaedrus for his univocal account of Eros (180c3-d3). Eryximachus proclaims that Pausanias made a good start, but it requires the superior knowledge of medicine to bring the argument to completion (185e6-b2). Aristophanes does not refer to the other symposiasts, but makes the general criticism that mankind as a whole has not yet recognized the power of the god. Agathon similarly mentions no names when he claims that none of the former speakers have praised the god himself (194e5-195a1).

²⁰ Pl. *Symp.* 198c5-199b5

²¹ Pl. *Symp.* 201c1 (καὶ μὴν καλῶς γε εἶπες, φάναι, ὦ Ἀγθάων). Note the limiting γε (a beautiful speech, but nothing more), and the emphatic καὶ μὴν introducing a point ‘deserving special attention’ (Liddell & Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th Edition).

beautiful god. This then is Socrates' most egregious act of *hybris* that evening. Yet he seems untroubled by any sense of social impropriety. He proceeds on with calm imperturbability, unceremoniously dropping Agathon²² in order to move onto his main argument.

In the course of this argument, Socrates levels a cheap blow at his other main contender, Aristophanes. Through the voice of his Diotima, he states that nobody desires their other half: wholeness or bodily integrity are desired only if good or if seemingly good, and there are instances of people cutting off hands and feet if these seem harmful.²³ Such a 'counter-example' is hardly a generous response to Aristophanes' myth, and afterwards, Aristophanes is about to respond. Might he too have retorted, 'You are a *hybristes*, Socrates'? We do not hear Aristophanes' response, for just then Alcibiades bursts in. But like Aristophanes, Alcibiades will praise a type of romantic love between two individuals. Like the comedian, his intention is not to raise a laugh, but to speak the truth. Such parallels between the two speeches suggest that at one level, Alcibiades may speak for Aristophanes.²⁴

In any case, Alcibiades certainly does call attention to *hybris* as a *general* characteristic of Socrates' behaviour. To sum up the strangeness of this philosophical creature, Alcibiades resorts to mythical images. Socrates cannot be compared with any one individual living or dead, Pericles or Nestor, Brasidas or Achilles. Instead, Socrates is like a satyr, silenus or Marsyas himself. There are several points implicit in the comparison. Like the satyrs, Socrates is ugly. Like the hollowed silenus-figures, he has many layers—great inner depth. Like the flute-playing Marsyas, Socrates is a master-musician who can enthrall by force of words alone.²⁵ Finally, Socrates is as hybristic as a

²² *Symp.* 201d1: καὶ σὲ μὲν γε ἤδη ἔάσω.

²³ *Pl. Symp.* 205d10-206a2

²⁴ This parallel is drawn also by M. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 171 and Fisher, p. 460.

²⁵ One notes that Alcibiades does not call attention to the *hybris* of Marsyas who challenged Apollo in music, lost and was flayed. Is there a 'religious' *hybris* in Socrates' assertion that mortals can know the highest realities? The traditionally pious might see this as a violation of the Delphian Apollo's commands 'know thyself' and 'nothing overmuch': mortality must be content with little, e.g. with empirical particulars. Marsyas-Socrates is not thus content,

satyr. The satyrs were wild, lawless beings, filled with a potentially violent sexuality. The typical satyr of vases and paintings rushes after the maenad, who ever flees his embraces. Filled with excessive energy, careless of the honour of their virgin prey, satyrs are paragons of *hybris*.²⁶ Alcibiades' simile is particularly striking given that through the *Symposium*, as elsewhere in the Platonic corpus, Socrates is depicted as a highly erotic creature. In the *Charmides*, it is a physical *eros* that surges forth when he sees inside Charmides' cloak. In the *Symposium*, it is philosophical desire that Socrates exemplifies: he knows only *ta erotika*; the young men clamor to recline near this seductive sage; and in Socrates' own allegory of *Poros* and *Penia*, he seems to add some autobiographical touches, for his *Eros* is, like himself, bare-footed, poor, a schemer and 'sophist' ever seeking the heavenly 'wealth' that is his true inheritance and reward.²⁷

Alcibiades' comparison, then, has great resonance as a depiction of the Platonic Socrates. His brief accusation becomes even more fraught with implication, however, when one concentrates on the paradox that it is *Alcibiades* who here accuses Socrates of *hybris*. For Alcibiades was notorious among contemporaries as being *the* personification of *hybris* and *eros*. In his *Memorabilia* Xenophon states categorically that Alcibiades was 'the most hybristic' of the Athenians,²⁸ a description that might have been corroborated by Plutarch, writers of the Academy, Thucydides and many others. Certainly, Alcibiades' reputation for *hybris* seems to have been well-deserved. After

and evokes the demand, so central to Dionysiac and Orphic thought, that one be unified with the divine—even that one *become* the god. This may be implicit in Alcibiades' accusation, but one must remember that Alcibiades focuses on Socrates' *hybris* towards him, in the human world, not any *hybris* vis-à-vis the divine.

²⁶ Fisher, p. 121 ('Satyrs, notorious for general insolence and drunken rapes, are naturally often held to be hybristic'), citing F. Lissarrague in *Nothing to Do with Dionysos? Athenian Drama in Its Social Context*, ed. by J.W. Winkler and F.I. Zeitlin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 234.

²⁷ *Charmides*, 155d-e. Socrates as δεινὸς τὰ ἐρωτικά: Pl. *Symp.* 177d7-8, 193e4-7, 198d1-2; cf. 201d5, 207c2-4, 209e5-210a1 (his lessons from the expert Diotima), 216d2-3.

²⁸ *Mem.* 1.2.12. See esp. Thuc. 6.15, [And.] 4 *passim*, Plutarch, *Alc.* 4, 8, 12, 16 etc., and Fisher, pp. 87-88, 108, 148-150 for many anecdotes. For a more general portrait of the man, see D. Dribble, *Alcibiades and Athens* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999).

marrying, Alcibiades brought concubines into the house and would beat his wife; when the woman went to the magistrate to file for a divorce, he carried her away bodily across the *agora* and the city—a terrible humiliation for her, and her family. An arrogant aristocrat, he insulted and struck people with little provocation. In his exile from Athens, rumor had it that he seduced the wife of one of the Spartan kings—an act of *hybris* not only against the king's family and to Sparta, but also to the king *qua* host, and to the sacred and universal laws of hospitality. Such acts of private *hybris* were matched by public ones. As is often noted, the dramatic setting for the *Symposium* is during the *Lenaea* festival in January-February, 416: this is a year before three major events, all linked by Plato's contemporaries to Alcibiades—the mutilation of the Hermes, the devastation of Melos, and the invasion of Sicily. All three were seen by many as acts of *hybris*, unprovoked self-assertion over and against the honour of others: as contemporary rhetoric had it, the invasions were an attempt to 'enslave' Syracuse, Melos and other communities; the mutilation of the Hermes was an insult to Hermes, as well as to the individual householders upon whose property these statues were erected.²⁹ There were also accusations that Alcibiades along with others had mocked the rites of the Eleusinian Mysteries in a symposium—*hybris* against Demeter and the gods, as well as to Athens, keeper of the Mysteries.³⁰ Such charges led directly to Alcibiades' flight from Athens, his treason, and the crucial advice that turned the war in Sparta's favour. All this lay in the very near future, and so the setting of the dialogue January 416 is a poignant one. Alcibiades the *hybristic* is soon to outdo himself in his crimes against the gods, foreign states and Athens.

Needless to say, all this is touched upon very lightly, evoked rather than stated explicitly. Plato refers briefly to a few salient facts: the drunken revelry (*komos*) with companions, the banging at the door, the voice of a flute-girl, Alcibiades crashing into Agathon's house, disrupting the civilized speech-making with his antics, his confrontation with Socrates, his 'satyric speech' by which he seems intent somehow on picking a fight,

²⁹ In fact, Alcibiades may not have been explicitly associated with the mutilation of the Hermes until the next generation.

³⁰ Thuc. 6.28.1-2, Dem. 21.143, Plut. *Al.* 18; cf. Fisher, p. 145.

the resumption of hard drinking. This is stereotypical behavior for an aristocratic symposium: after some hard drinking and perhaps political intrigue, the symposiasts would spill onto the street looking to bully their ‘inferiors’.³¹ But rather than offering a catalogue of lurid details, Plato includes just enough to call to mind the vice that was so strongly associated with Alcibiades’ name—his mania for honour, his disregard for others’ honour, his self-aggrandizement, in a word, his *hybris*.

This association makes Alcibiades’ accusation a stunning one. For here it is Alcibiades, *hybris* personified, who accuses Socrates of being a *hybristes*. This accusation is all the more startling because it overturns the normal link of *hybris* with three groups—the powerful, rich, and young.³² Alcibiades is young, Socrates relatively old. Alcibiades is rich, Socrates barefooted and relatively poor. Alcibiades is near the height of his political power; Socrates has not yet been to court even once—strange for an Athenian—and rarely takes an active part in the assembly. Furthermore, Alcibiades was known for his personal beauty—tall, strong, handsome, charismatic. Socrates too has his own charisma, but he is short, pot-bellied and ugly. All the normal categories seem reversed: young, rich, powerful Alcibiades accuses Socrates, old, poor and powerless of *hybris*.

Yet the paradoxical quality of Alcibiades’ accusation has a further layer. For Socrates’ *hybris* is due, of all things, to his temperance and self-restraint (*sophrosune*).³³ Alcibiades claims to have been led to believe by Socrates that they might be lovers. When Socrates made no moves towards a traditional homosexual partnership, Alcibiades took the initiative. His advances were ignored, leaving Alcibiades feeling jilted and despised. And so, Socrates, he says, is guilty of *hybris* towards me: leading me on, then mocking me, cultivating my friendship, then scorning my offers, treating me just like any other. *Hybris* could be contrasted with *sophrosune*, especially by Plato in later

³¹ On *hybris* associated with the symposium, and Plato’s disdain for vulgar symposia (as *Prot.* 347c-e, *Theaet.* 173d), see Fisher, pp. 100-102.

³² See Lysias 24; Aristotle, *Rhet.* 1378b23-34; Fisher, esp. pp. 19-21, 96-104, and 497 (‘in almost all our texts *hybris* is seen as above all the fault of the rich and powerful’).

³³ Cf. Fisher, ‘This is the central oxymoron of the speech; the extreme of *sophrosyne* is seen as a form of *hybris*’ (p. 462n.43); Gagarin, pp. 30-32.

dialogues.³⁴ In the *Phaedrus*, for instance, *hybris* is defined as the excessive and irrational desire for bodily pleasure; the dark horse, emblematic of the appetite faculty, is repeatedly described as hybriistic.³⁵ Given this typical association, what does it mean to say that Socrates in his *sophrosune* is a *hybristes*? How can a virtue be almost synonymous with its opposing vice?

There have been at least three major responses to Alcibiades' accusation. Two would tend to corroborate Alcibiades' perspective: Socrates is *hybriistic* and should be censured for it. The third gives an essentially political explication of Plato's purposes in composing this last speech. Gagarin's approach, firstly, would tend to locate Socrates' *hybris* in the context of his pedagogy, particularly the *elenchus*. The *elenchus* has the negative aim of breaking inherited prejudices, exposing a student's relative ignorance, and goading him out of any former intellectual complacency. Only when stung by refutation and self-contradiction can the student progress to reconstruct beliefs with greater knowledge and self-awareness. But, Gagarin suggests, Socrates' pedagogy failed in Alcibiades' case: his treatment of students was hurtful, high-handed, and only had the effect of driving Alcibiades away from philosophy and its gentle ideals. Therefore, the political crimes of Alcibiades, as well as his failure as a philosopher, are 'in part traceable to Socrates' and should be seen as 'a direct result of Socrates' *hybris*'.³⁶

Nussbaum also tends to disapprove of Socrates' behaviour. For her, Alcibiades' speech is a profound reminder of the intimacy and fragility of love, and of the fact that true love is the fascination and devotion of two individuals for each other. Thus, the *eros* of Socrates and Diotima is an excessively intellectual affair that subsumes individual beauty under the category of some universal, 'homogeneous' Beauty. Alcibiades is more human and believable: he speaks his love for Socrates in

³⁴ See Fisher, pp. 111-117, 458-492 and esp. 491: in Plato, *hybris* 'becomes a full contrary to all aspects of self-control or *sophrosune*—something which it does on locations show signs of doing in other fourth-century authors, but nowhere else to anything like the same extent'.

³⁵ Pl. *Phdr.* 254c3, 254e1; cf. Fisher, pp. 467-76

³⁶ Gagarin, p. 34. My summary of Gagarin's argument stresses the *elenchus* more than Gagarin himself does.

all his strangeness (*atopia*) and sheer individuality. Socrates, on the other hand, cannot deal with the individual without the mediation of some more impersonal idea. But the body is often the source and locus of individuality. Hence, in rejecting Alcibiades' bodily advances, Socrates rejects Alcibiades himself. His inability to return Alcibiades' love is a real failing. Here he not only dishonours Alcibiades, he dishonours our deepest intuitions: his is a *hybris* that Alcibiades rightly condemns and that Plato, through Alcibiades, would seek to mitigate.³⁷

Differing from both Nussbaum and Gagarin is Fisher, who takes a more traditional line in arguing that Plato sought to exonerate Socrates posthumously from all creeping rumors of corrupting the youth and undermining the Athenian democracy: 'Plato is clearly offering a brilliant type of "explanation" of the failure of Socrates' most famous pupils, who contributed so much to Athens' defeat and the Thirty's horrors'.³⁸ According to Fisher, Plato cunningly depicts Alcibiades in such a way as to distance Socrates from Alcibiades, Critias, Charmides and the traitors of 411 and 404. These tyrannical types sought Socrates as a bedfellow, as it were, but Socrates rejected their advances. He cannot therefore be condemned as a corrupter of the youth or enemy of the state. One might develop such a 'democratic' reading even further than Fisher does. Socrates' various acts of *hybris* through the evening could be seen as acts of *hybris* against types like Alcibiades and Agathon, the influential and self-important *kaloi kagathoi*. Socrates here would become a kind of demotic hero and could be likened, say, to Aristophanes' Philocleon. In the *Wasps*, Philocleon outdoes the aristocratic symposiasts in *hybris*, as he gratuitously insults the other guests, farts out loud, mocks the proceedings. Afterwards, he wanders drunk through the street, shouting, dancing, brawling, beating passers-by.³⁹ As with many other 'comic heroes', Philocleon's

³⁷ Nussbaum's criticism of Socrates for a failure to love the individual was applied to Plato himself by G. Vlastos in an influential article ('The Individual as an Object of Love in Plato', in *Platonic Studies*, ed. by N. Tuana (University Park: Penn State Press, 1973), pp.11-24); and by K. Dover, *Plato: Symposium* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p.113.

³⁸ Fisher, p. 464

³⁹ See esp. Xanthias' speech (*Wasps*, 1300-1325) describing how Philocleon was among the company 'the most hybriatic by far' (ὕβριστότατος μακρῶν, 1303).

assertion of the power of the *demos* must have been cheered by many in Aristophanes' audience: through Philocleon, the common man triumphs, even in the symposium, that most aristocratic of arenas. Socrates is, of course, not so boorish as Philocleon. Yet, he too appears as a member of the great unwashed *demos*: barefoot stonemason, military hero of Athens, throughout the party he slyly snubs his social 'superiors'. And what greater triumph than to see Alcibiades himself tarred with his own brush, complaining peevishly of suffering *hybris* at the hands of a poor man?

All these approaches have an element of truth, so suggestive are these final passages of the *Symposium*. And yet, one feels that there must be more. Again, Alcibiades' speech is a generalizing one, and seems therefore to call for a more general interpretation. What follows takes its main inspiration from the notion of a general Platonic 'revaluation of values', though it focuses primarily on the *Symposium* itself. Namely, Socrates' *hybris* is not of the traditional variety, represented by Alcibiades himself, or by the dark horse of the *Phaedrus*. Rather, this is a new form of *hybris*, a philosophical *hybris* that represents a larger moral shift. Here *hybris* might represent the dishonouring and even rejection of the values that someone like Alcibiades embodies—including traditional *hybris* itself. That is, Socrates rejects wealth, power, status, prestige, intelligence, physical beauty and strength, youth, as *absolute* goods. These regain their value, and even their existence, only when placed in relation to a highest, and eternal source of value. Such a Platonic idealism finds one particular application in the themes of the *Symposium*. In the *Symposium*, the ideal philosopher would subordinate all conventional desires to one single, overriding *eros*. But to desire is to honour, and not to desire is to dishonour. Therefore, there is a new form of *hybris* to complement the new ethic of philosophical *eros*. Socrates *hybristes* and Socrates *erastes* are different aspects of the one character.

Nietzsche's phrase 'the revaluation of values' has often been appropriated to describe aspects of Socratic and post-Socratic movements, and it is invoked by Fisher also in his analysis of *hybris*.⁴⁰ The debt is rarely acknowledged, however;

⁴⁰ Nietzsche's phrase is *Umwertung aller Werthe* (see e.g. *Götzen-Dämmerung*, Foreword). Surveying archaic and classical Greek literature as a whole, Fisher

Nietzsche, similarly, is not always open in admitting his own debt to classical authors like Plato and Thucydides for this, one of his central ideas. There are several passages that depict Plato's Socrates as 'revaluing values' for the purposes of asserting a philosophical idealism. Most obvious are the remarks of Callicles in the *Gorgias*: here Socrates defends the proposition that 'it is better to suffer justice than commit it'. Callicles responds that if Socrates were to persuade others of this, then 'the life of mankind would be overturned'.⁴¹ Other salient passages treating a transfiguration of morals are in Thucydides and the *Republic*. Thucydides' famous description of the *stasis* in Corcyra is a portrait of how party-pressure—the will to assert one's political agenda regardless of other loyalties or considerations—brought a coarsening of attitudes and language.⁴² Plato offers a variation on this theme in his description of the *stasis* between oligarchical and democratic elements in both city and soul. Here, democratic individualism appropriates the language of *arete* in service of a crass self-indulgence: *hybris* is termed 'good breeding', license (*anarchia*) 'freedom', prodigality 'liberality', and shamelessness 'manliness' (*Rep.* 560d-561a). On the other hand, any form of self-restraint (*aidos*, *sophrosune*, *metriotes*) is cast aside as 'foolishness', 'cowardice', or 'boorishness'. Here, as in Thucydides, the main

concludes: 'It remains true, however, and bears repeating, that the term *hybris* itself is nowhere "revalued", explicitly justified as an ideal, without important qualifications. Tyrants, comic heroes, "immoralist" philosophers or sophists, and representatives of imperialist states do not seem to assert that *hybris* is justifiable, as they may say that tyranny, injustice, or *arche* are appropriate goals for "real men" or men or states that obey "the laws of nature"' (p. 123; cf. p. 107-8). Fisher does suggest a revaluing of sorts in middle and later Platonic dialogues (especially the *Phaedrus*), by which *hybris* signifies the dominance of the appetite element in the soul over reason and θυμός (see esp. pp. 467-92, 499). Fisher does not extend this analysis to the *Symposium*, however, not recognizing that this dialogue at least seems to attribute an idealized *hybris* to Socrates.

⁴¹ Pl. *Grg.* 481b10-c4. Alcibiades also hints at the notion that Socrates would 'overturn the world', when he warns the symposiasts not to credit Socrates, for in fact everything is exactly opposite to whatever Socrates may have asserted in his speech: 'Are you convinced by anything that Socrates just said? Don't you know that in everything the case is the opposite to what he would say?' (*Symp.* 214c8-d4: καὶ ἅμα, ὦ μακάριε, πείθει τί σε Σωκράτης ὦν ἄρτι εἶπεν; ἢ οἴσθα ὅτι τούναντίον ἐστὶ πᾶν ἢ ὃ ἔλεγεν;).

⁴² Thuc. 3.82

cause of this perversion of language is party-pressure. But it also derives from sheer self-assertion, and hence, ultimately, from the compulsion of an inner *eros tyrannos*—that is, from the desire to satisfy all one's appetites to the full, without fear of punishment, social censure or the pangs of conscience. Indeed, this notion that *eros* can distort language and one's whole disposition is foreshadowed in Socrates' remarks in *Republic* 474. Here, as in *Republic* 8, Socrates comments on the phenomenon of 'talking something up' and of how lovers, their judgment clouded by infatuation, will find *some* way of praising their beloved. Thus, due to the distorting influence of passion, the large, hooked nose is praised as 'regal' or 'aquiline'; a short, pudgy figure is termed 'tidy', while the figure of the broad behemoth is beautified by euphemisms like 'generous', 'curvaceous', or 'ample'.⁴³

This latter discussion of *eros* is, in fact, a preliminary to the assertion that the ideal philosopher will desire all types of learning. Just as the erotic are attracted by all beautiful bodies, and lovers of honour desire to be honoured in every way possible, so the philosopher or lover of wisdom will seek knowledge in every source. The contention in *Republic* 474 is that *eros* and knowledge need *not* be related as two scales in a balance. When one scale rises, the other must fall, but this is not the case with philosophical desire and knowledge. Subjective desire need not lead to a perversion of attitude and terminology, but can, on the contrary, purify and deepen them. Knowledge is not at all the opposite of desire, but a consequent of it. This point is commonly made about Platonic ethics, but it should be applied also to the interpretation of Socrates' speech in the *Symposium*.

Here, Socrates and Diotima introduce a series of reversals that reappropriate more conventional notions for their own purposes. Namely, the previous speakers—as many lyric

⁴³ Pl. *Rep.* 474d7-a2; the examples (apart from the 'regal' nose) are my own, given that Plato's Greek phrases have little resonance in contemporary English. 'Talking something up' is my very approximate translation of ὕπτοκ ορίζεσθαι, used in both *Rep.* 474d-e and 560c-561a. Liddell & Scott's *Greek-English Lexicon* (9th edition) lists various meanings of the word: 'to call by endearing names [...] to call something bad by a fair name, to gloss over [...] reversely, call something good by a bad name'.

poets in the Greek tradition—have spoken of the great power of *eros*. Eros is a god that sweeps over the lover with a ferocious power that none can resist. Under the influence of *eros*, the lover becomes a slave to his beloved, and is driven half-mad with longing and infatuation. For Socrates and Diotima, *eros* is not a god, but a *daimon* or demi-god. It is not primarily sexual in nature, but first and foremost intellectual. And far from being a tyrannical force that drives the lover willy-nilly, *eros* is in fact the great liberator, opening human beings to a greater consciousness. For Socrates' *eros* ferries human beings from the 'poverty' (*Penia*) of bodily existence—confined by the immediacies of sense-perception and appetite—to the 'wealth' (*Poros*) of a purely intellectual life, which is not so confined. Here, in this realm of Forms, the mind may become 'in a way all things' and may, somehow, contemplate *all* being.⁴⁴ So too, *eros* properly trained will be directed towards progressively more universal objects, yielding a progressive expansion of one's awareness. From the beauty of some one body, the inductee will come to recognize the beauty of all bodies, of laws, of whole institutions and cultures, of individual sciences, and of knowledge as a whole. Then, perhaps, he will see the beauty of something far more miraculous—that 'great sea of beauty', which Socrates mentions so tantalizingly, the paradigm of Beauty itself shining forth unchanged in an unchangeable perfection, abiding even as all other beauties change and fade.⁴⁵

Repeatedly and emphatically, Socrates argues that *eros* is in truth the desire for this eternal realm. *All* living things desire the eternal with varying degrees of intensity. The body demonstrates this desire in the sheer fact of survival, of maintaining its identity through time. Animals desire the eternal

⁴⁴ The mind knows 'all things': *Meno* 81c5-d5 (μεμαθηκίας τῆς ψυχῆς ἀπαντα); cf. Aristotle, *De an.* 431b21 (ἡ ψυχὴ τὰ ὄντα πῶς ἐστὶ πάντα), 405b15-17, 429a18-21. The Platonic philosopher is great-souled, and contemplates 'the whole', all time and all being: *Rep.* 486a1-11; cf. Shorey's Loeb-edition of the *Republic* 486a9 for many more references in Plato (incl. *Theaei.* 173e-174e) and others. Such passages suggest that for Plato, the knowledge of universals *somehow* includes knowledge of particulars, and so to know a universal is to know all the particulars subsumed under it; if so, then Plato's Forms might be partially likened to Hegel's concrete universal, and the contemplation of all universals would constitute omniscience.

⁴⁵ *Symp.* 209e5-212a7

through biological reproduction: children, grandchildren, great-grand-children prolong one's existence through many generations, and so can afford an immortality of sorts.⁴⁶ At a higher level of intensity, some human beings gain a substitute eternity by producing spiritual 'offspring'—reputations, artworks, states, ways of life, philosophies that survive their authors' passing.⁴⁷ To live beyond death, to transcend the individual life-span are to Socrates an image of, or an approximation to, eternal being, for eternity is the utter transcendence of time itself.⁴⁸ In this way, he argues that all conventional forms of *eros* are in fact lesser, shadowy instances of the true *eros*, which is the desire 'to be with' the eternal, eternally. Here indeed is a radical revaluation of the word *eros*. Socrates' ideas, if followed, would not only overturn the life of his Greek contemporaries; they are a perennial challenge to conventional moral hierarchies, a challenge even to natural instinct itself.

Socrates' 'revaluation' of the nature and ideality of *eros*, is, I propose, complemented by a revision of the meaning and value of *hybris*. The desire for and intuition of the eternal results in a *relatively* careless attitude towards temporal externals *per se*. Socratic *eros* leads to a relative dishonouring of goods like friendship, family, wealth, fame, power, even intellectual accomplishment. None of these goods are absolute; in contrast to the tremendous vision of Beauty itself, none can satisfy one's truest longings. Therefore, the Platonic Socrates would relentlessly subordinate temporal goods to the highest human

⁴⁶ See esp. *Symp.* 206c6-8, 206e7-207a4, and 207c9-208b6 for the general principle that the endurance of temporal entities (whether animal species, the body, emotions, ideas and other elements of the soul) represents not true identity, but rather the replacement of the similar by the similar—parent by child, muscle by muscle, emotion by emotion, concept by concept. Sex and procreation, then, are truly 'divine affairs' (θεία πράγματα) because they are 'means by which the mortal participates in immortality' (*Symp.* 208b2-4). Compare this remarkable 'revaluation' of desire, *sub specie aeternitatis*, with the lyric poet Archilochus' so-called 'Last Tango on Paros', where sex is also termed 'the divine thing' (τὸ θεῖον χρῆμα, fr. S478a15), though for more obvious reasons.

⁴⁷ Pl. *Symp.* 208c1-209e4

⁴⁸ In this reading, Socrates' argument seems consistent with the later definition of time in the *Timaeus* as the 'moving image of eternity' (37d).

good—the transforming intuition of the Forms. Here, Alcibiades becomes representative of all lesser temporal values: handsome, strong, tall, athletic, eloquent, charismatic, intelligent, he appears in the *Symposium* in January 416 at the pinnacle of his worldly success, and yet somehow destitute of a deeper joy. Socrates will treat this Alcibiades as a partner in a shared philosophical pursuit. But if Alcibiades demands to be worshipped as a god, as the beloved might conventionally expect to be, then Socrates would set him aside as an obstacle to wisdom. Hence, Socrates does set Alcibiades aside. From Alcibiades' perspective, this is dishonour—*hybris*. From Socrates' perspective, it is just treatment, and a consequence of Socrates' superior insight and temperance (*sophrosune*). Therefore, Socrates' *hybris* against Alcibiades is not simply an isolated private affair, some obscure lovers' quarrel.⁴⁹ Rather, their unusual relationship becomes emblematic of the ideal moral ordering that Socrates proposes in his speech about *eros*. That is, Socrates' *hybris* towards Alcibiades is an image of the Platonic subordination of the conventional to the philosophical, the temporal to the eternal, the particular to the universal.

If so, then Alcibiades does indeed speak the truth about Socrates, but he himself may not realize the full import of his words. Socrates has indeed committed *hybris* against him, as against Charmides, Euthydemus, Agathon and many others, for Socrates would honour the temporal, particular, contingent *only* when they participate in values or truths that are absolute—eternal, universal, necessary. This aspect of Socratic thinking is well expressed by Alcibiades' rich image: Socrates *is* the philosophical satyr who wanders through the world, filled with a spirit of irreverent laughter, caring little for physical beauty, wealth or social status *per se*.⁵⁰ Socrates cares very little for

⁴⁹ Contrary to Fisher's claim that 'the main *hybris* committed by this mixture of satyr and philosophical near-god consists, put crudely, in not having sexual relations with those boys of whom he had seemed to want to be the lover' (p. 463).

⁵⁰ *Symp.* 216d5-e6. For similar language (quoted above, n.1), see Diotima's speech, 210b4-6 (καταφρόνησις towards the particular) and 210c3-6 (those who have seen that Beauty consider bodily beauty a 'small thing'). Apollodorus is also depicted as gratuitously denigrating his companion, as well as the rich and the money-makers, as worthless in comparison with Socrates (173c2-e3). Indeed, Apollodorus is about to launch into an *elenchus*,

conventional sensibilities in themselves. He *will* invite his own guest to Agathon's house; he *will* arrive late without apology; and he *will* disregard the rules of the party to give a speech in his own idiosyncratic style. This Socrates seems actively to tease conventional sensibilities, as if with the view that a little gentle *hybris*—in the form of a ribbing, satire or the *elenchus*—can sting the complacent into new trains of thought. Only thinking can redeem conventional values and set one on the upward path. Socrates' *hybris*, therefore, serves philosophical *eros*, just as much as it is a consequence of it.

And yet, because it has a different origin, this 'revalued' or philosophical *hybris* has a very different tone from the more traditional variety. Socrates himself is depicted as quite gracious, self-effacing and considerate. Here is no Meidias, Conon, Alcibiades, Cambyses, Agamemnon, or 'gift-devouring king'—typical champions of the old, worldly, violent *hybris*. Different origins might explain this difference in tone. The *hybris* of the new philosophical 'aristocrat' is not brought out by wine or power, but by insight into an order that transcends any individual; transcends even the temporal realm. Tempered by such enlightenment, this new philosophical *hybris* is *hybris* in the sense that it rises from a tremendous intellectual energy, and expresses itself in the relative dishonouring of conventional values, and of conventional people. But it differs markedly from conventional *hybris* in that it is gentle rather than violent, thoughtful rather than boorish. It asserts itself by persuasion rather than force. All this makes the new *hybris*, paradoxically, a just one, and it can rightfully assert itself vis-à-vis the conventional *hybris* of people like Alcibiades. Socrates' *hybris* towards the hybristic Alcibiades illustrates this assertion of a new moral stance that is unapologetically idealistic. And so, in the context of a Platonic 'revision of values', Alcibiades is right to accuse Socrates of *hybris*—and right also to be the victim of it in its new incarnation.

Socratic-style: like Socrates with Agathon, he is in danger of forgetting about the proposed speech-making. But again, like Socrates, he is stopped by his companion, who does not want any strife (173e1-6).