BRILL

POLIS, THE JOURNAL FOR ANCIENT GREEK AND ROMAN POLITICAL THOUGHT 40 (2023) 221–233

POLIS

brill.com/polis

Articles

Did Platon (*Politeia* 571d) Believe That Every One of Us Is a Repressed Cannibal?

Cătălin Enache | ORCID: 0000-0001-9219-0486
Lecturer, Institut für Klassische Philologie, Universität Wien, Vienna, Austria
catalin.enache@univie.ac.at

Abstract

At the beginning of Book 9 of the *Politeia* (571cd), Platon suggests that all people bear in themselves unlawful desires like the desire to have sex with their own mother or with any other human, god, or beast, the desire to murder anyone, or the desire to eat anything. Modern scholars take it for granted that by the desire to eat anything, Platon means cannibalism. This view is based on the fact that Platon discusses unlawful desires in connection with the tyrannical man and that the tyrant is, elsewhere in the *Politeia*, twice connected with anthropophagy (at 8.565d–566a and 10.619c). This paper challenges this *communis opinio* and argues that we have no reason to assume that at *Politeia* 9.571d Platon claims that every one of us has the hidden desire to consume human flesh. Also, the alleged cannibalism of the Platonic tyrant is questioned. A close reading of the passages 8.565d–566a and 10.619c reveals that in the depiction of the tyrant Platon makes use of mythological motifs and literary topoi but never literally claims that the tyrant has cannibalistic desires.

Keywords

Platon – *Politeia* – *Republic* – cannibalism – tyrant – dreams – unlawful desires

Published with license by Koninklijke Brill NV | DOI:10.1163/20512996-12340406
© CĂTĂLIN ENACHE, 2023 | ISSN: 0142-257X (print) 2051-2996 (online)
This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the CC BY 4.0 license.
Downloaded from Brill.com 03/04/2024 06:31:00PM
via Open Access. This is an open access article distributed under the terms
of the CC BY 4.0 license.
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

At the beginning of Book 9 of the *Politeia*, Sokrates points out that the unnecessary pleasures and desires – an issue he dealt with earlier in Book 8 (8.559) – are either lawful or unlawful (παράνομοι, 9.571b). The unlawful ones, he says, are present in every one of us (with a few exceptions) although they do not usually come to manifest themselves, as they are repressed by law/custom and other, better desires which collaborate with reason.[1] The remark that unlawful desires are present in every one of us is later reiterated by Sokrates in the conclusion to the argument: 'It is important to acknowledge that there is a terrible, wild, and lawless (δεινὸν καὶ ἄγριον καὶ ἄνομον) sort of desires in everyone (ἑκάστῳ), even if some of us seem to be quite moderate' (*Politeia* 9.572b2–5). But how does anyone know about the existence of something that is not manifest? The evidence adduced by Sokrates is the subjective experience of sleep and dream (*Politeia* 9.571c3–d5):

> [I mean] those [desires] which wake up in sleep when the rest of the soul – the thinking and gentle and ruling part – reposes and the wild and animalic part,[2] full with food or drink, becomes active, shakes off sleep and tries to follow its own instincts. As you know, it dares do everything in this time when it's released and liberated from any shame and judgement: it obviously does not shy away from intercourse with the mother or any other (ἄλλῳ ὁτῳοῦν) man or god or beast, it is ready to murder anyone (μιαιφονεῖν ὁτιοῦν) and does not abstain from any food whatsoever (βρώματός τε ἀπέχεσθαι μηδενός). In short, it leaves no senseless or shameless thing unattempted.

During sleep, pleasures and desires that do not come to the fore in waking seek satisfaction. In Sokrates' view, this is enough evidence that they are always there, despite their not being visible in daylight. Such pleasures are the pleasures of sex, killing, and eating. Obviously, these unlawful (and, of course, unnecessary)[3] pleasures and desires are not unlawful in themselves but in virtue of the objects that satisfy them. This holds true with certainty for sex and eating, which in Book 8 of the *Politeia* also illustrate the distinction between

1 9.571b3–6: 'It seems to me that some of the unnecessary (μὴ ἀναγκαίων) pleasures and desires are unlawful (παράνομοι); they appear to be present in everyone (παντί), though they are subdued by laws and the better desires with the aid of reason'. All translations from the Greek are mine.

2 I deal with this bipartition of the soul in more detail in C. Enache, 'Dualism and tripartition in Platon. Unlawful desires, sleep, and shame in Book 9 of the *Politeia* (571b–572a)', *Museum Helveticum* (forthcoming).

3 All unlawful desires are unnecessary but not all unnecessary desires are unlawful.

Downloaded from Brill.com 03/04/2024 06:31:00PM
via Open Access. This is an open access article distributed under the terms
of the CC BY 4.0 license.
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

necessary and unnecessary desires. At 8.559a–c, Sokrates explains that to long for bread and (simple?) cooked food in order to be healthy and have a good condition is a necessary desire, while to long for other sorts of dishes[4] is an unnecessary desire insofar as it harms both body and soul and can be eradicated over time. Put together, the passages 8.559a–c and 9.571b–d indicate that the pleasures of sex and eating can be, depending on the object which satisfies them, (1) necessary; (2) unnecessary yet lawful; (3) unnecessary and unlawful. It is not clear, however, whether murder, which Sokrates mentions in the above passage along with sex and eating as an unlawful desire, is unlawful in the same sense as the other two desires, namely in virtue of the object that satisfies it. On the one hand, in illustrating the unlawful desires, Sokrates seems to specify no difference between murder and the other two desires; moreover, he emphasizes their arbitrary, or indefinite, object choice in very similar terms (μείγνυσθαι … ἄλλῳ ὁτῳοῦν; μιαιφονεῖν ὁτιοῦν; ἀπέχεσθαι μηδενὸς βρώματος). On the other hand, there is no way that murder, in this typology, could be regarded as anything but an (unnecessary and) unlawful pleasure, since it is neither a necessary nor a lawful pleasure regardless of the object that satisfies it. Thus, the precise meaning of the parallel between murder and the other two desires which illustrate the concept of 'unlawful desires' must remain open.

But this is not the only difficulty in the above passage. If the unlawfulness of a pleasure depends on its object choice, one would certainly want to know which objects make each of the three pleasures unlawful. Sokrates, however, is not very specific about this. Of course, he does explain what unlawful sexual pleasure is: it is the sex with one's own mother or with any other human, god, or animal.[5] But in the case of murder and notably food he gives no hint whatsoever as to what he means by 'killing anyone' or 'eating anything'. Even if we

4 No example given: ἡ πέρα τούτων καὶ ἀλλοίων ἐδεσμάτων ἢ τοιούτων ἐπιθυμία (8.559b8); see however 2.372cd. On Platon's *political* cuisine see F. Notario, 'Plato's political cuisine. Commensality, food, and politics in the Platonic thought', *Agora. Estudos Clássicos em Debate* 17 (2015), 123–58.

5 Let us note that at *Laws* 8.838ab Platon seems to revisit his view about the widespread inclination toward incest. There, he says that most people, including the unlawful ones (παρανόμους, 8.838a5), (not just do not commit incest but) actually do not feel the desire for such sexual satisfaction (οὐδ' ἐπιθυμία ταύτης τῆς συνουσίας τὸ παράπαν εἰσέρχεται τοὺς πολλούς, 8.838b4–5). One might attempt to reconcile the two passages by supposing that Platon, in the *Laws*, refers exclusively to waking life; but even so, the categorical assertion has a clearly different tone than *Politeia* 9.571cd. Nevertheless, there is also a point which the two passages have in common: the instance opposed to incest (and preventing it) is in both cases the law (νόμος ἄγραφος 'unwritten law', 8.838b1, explained several lines later as δύναμις τῆς φήμης 'the power of the public opinion', 8.838c8–d1).

Downloaded from Brill.com 03/04/2024 06:31:00PM
via Open Access. This is an open access article distributed under the terms
of the CC BY 4.0 license.
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

suppose that 'killing anyone' means 'killing' *tout court*,[6] there still remains the question of 'unlawful hunger'. In this case, it seems that we cannot make much sense of the desire's unlawfulness in the absence of specific objects.[7] In other words: what makes the pleasure of eating, which can also be (1) necessary or (2) unnecessary yet lawful, be (3) (not just unnecessary but also) unlawful?

It is a widespread assumption that Platon refers here to cannibalism. This assumption, which is more than a hundred years old,[8] is embraced not just by the scholars of Platon in the strict sense[9] but is also attested in studies on ancient culture, religion, and anthropology,[10] so much so that the reader

6 At *Phaidon* 113e, in connection with the judgement of the souls in the afterlife, Platon makes the distinction between incurable and curable crimes. The former category includes temple-robbery and unjust and unlawful murders (φόνους ἀδίκους καὶ παρανόμους), while the latter includes violent anger against one's parents. Here, too, no example of (unjust and) unlawful murder is given, though the fact that violence against one's parents is a curable crime (when committed in anger and regretted afterwards the whole life) suggests that parricide (if βίαιόν τι does indeed include murder) might not necessarily be an unlawful crime. In this case, the key to the difference between incurable and curable crimes seems to lie rather in the contrast between the numerous (i.e. premeditated) temple-robberies and unjust and unlawful murders (ἱεροσυλίας πολλάς … φόνους πολλούς) on the one hand, and the murders (or rather: unique murder) committed in anger (ὑπ' ὀργῆς) and followed by repentance (μεταμέλον) on the other. But, if this argument is valid, it means that at *Phaidon* 113e the unlawfulness of a murder does not depend on the object choice or the identity of the victim alone.

7 At *Laws* 8.839a the law that bans sexual debauchery, including incest (see above), also bans gluttony. Surprisingly, the law seems to be concerned with the quantity rather than quality of food (πωμάτων καὶ σίτων τῶν ἀμέτρων πάντων, 8.839a8).

8 J. Adam, The Republic of Plato. Edited with critical notes, commentary and appendices (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1902), Volume 2, p. 320 on 571d21.

9 S. Benardete, *Socrates' second sailing. On Plato's* Republic (Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 206; B.S. Hook, 'Oedipus and Thyestes among the philosophers: incest and cannibalism in Plato, Diogenes, and Zeno', *Classical Philology* 100 (2005), pp. 17–40, at p. 22; P. Ludwig, 'Eros in the Republic', in: G.R.F. Ferrari (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Plato's* Republic (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 202–231, at pp. 229–30; D. Scott, '*Eros*, philosophy, and tyranny', in: D. Scott (ed.), *Maieusis. Essays on ancient philosophy in honour of Myles Burnyeat* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 136–53, at p. 139; C. Arruzza, *A wolf in the city. Tyranny and the tyrant in Plato's* Republic (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 171.

10 M. Detienne, *Dionysos mis à mort* (Paris: Gallimard, 1977), p. 144; M. Detienne, J. Svenbro, 'Les loups au festin ou la Cité impossible', in: M. Detienne, J.-P. Vernant (eds.), *La cuisine du sacrifice en pays grec* (Paris: Gallimard, 1979), pp. 215–37, at p. 228; R. Parker, *Miasma. Pollution and purification in early Greek religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 98, p. 327; C. Catenacci, *Il tiranno e l'eroe. Per un'archeologia del potere nella Grecia antica* (Milano: Bruno Mondadori, 1996), p. 214; C. Avramescu, *An intellectual history of cannibalism* (Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009, translated from Romanian by A.I. Blyth), p. 98.

Downloaded from Brill.com 03/04/2024 06:31:00PM
via Open Access. This is an open access article distributed under the terms
of the CC BY 4.0 license.
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

acquainted with the bibliography on any of these topics might easily get the impression that this is the only possible approach to the *Politeia* lines quoted above.

My aim in this paper is to challenge this *communis opinio* and to show that we have actually no reason to suppose that Platon had here the consumption of human flesh in mind. I will not bring forward any alternative suggestion as to what food would better qualify as the object of unlawful pleasures; instead, I will argue that it is preferable to leave the question open just like Platon did rather than take for granted an interpretation without support in the text.

The main reason that has led to the assumption that 'eating anything' in dreams means 'eating even human flesh' is the contextual evidence that the excursus on unlawful pleasures and desires is, in the *Politeia*, part of the description of the tyrannical character. Indeed, in this connection Sokrates points out that the tyrant lives every day in waking what other people (or he himself before becoming a tyrant) only experience in sleep: '[The tyrant] is now all the time during the day as he was before only every now and then in his dreams: he abstains from no terrible murder, or food (βρώματος), or deed' (*Politeia* 9.574e2–4).

This comparison between dream and the most wicked life – a comparison which, to be sure, runs counter to our common understanding of the word 'dream' – is reiterated shortly afterwards at 9.576b. Although Sokrates is not any more specific about the menu of the tyrant in these passages either, it is usually assumed that the analogy between the tyrant and the oneiric self is enough reason to transfer to the latter any culinary suggestions we might find associated with the former. It is, therefore, worth noting that the triad murder – food – deed, which in these lines is obviously meant to bring back to mind the unlawful pleasures mentioned before at 9.571d, does not exactly reproduce the oneiric triad sex (with the mother/gods/animals), murder, and food. In my opinion, it is no accident that abnormal sex is here inconspicuously replaced with the considerably milder 'any (terrible) deed'.[11] A possible explanation of this dissimilarity is that Platon realized that, while he could attribute abnormal sexual pleasure to the oneiric self without further ado, he could not claim that the typical tyrant had sex with his mother, with gods (!), or with animals on a regular basis. Dream pleasure and real life are two different things, even if it is the life of a tyrant. This insight should make us wary of taking Platon's comparison between tyrannical behaviour and oneiric desires too literally and of transferring features from one element to the other too easily.

11 The adjective δεινοῦ might be seen to determine all three nouns.

Downloaded from Brill.com 03/04/2024 06:31:00PM
via Open Access. This is an open access article distributed under the terms
of the CC BY 4.0 license.
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

There are two passages in the *Politeia* which seem to bring tyranny and anthropophagy together and on which the current, i.e. cannibalistic, interpretation of the unlawful pleasure of eating manifested in dreams (9.571d) is based. I will take a closer look at them in a moment. But before doing this I wish to point out two aspects. First, the interpretation of 'unlawful hunger' as cannibalism, while adducing the context in which the tyrant – or rather: the Platonic tyrant – is portrayed with all his excesses, tends to forget that the excursus on unlawful pleasures and the oneiric self explicitly refers to *every one of us*. Thus, to adduce the alleged cannibalism of the tyrant as a piece of evidence in the interpretation of 'unlawful hunger' means to ascribe to Platon the opinion that all human beings (with a few exceptions) are cannibals who, by day, successfully repress their deepest desires. However, this conclusion has, to my knowledge, not been drawn so far for understandable reasons, although it follows with necessity from the cannibalistic interpretation of the passage 9.571d. Conversely, anyone who is not willing to accept this conclusion, and to answer the provocative question I ask in the title of this paper in the affirmative, cannot agree with the common reading of the passage 9.571d. Second, in the Freudian era we still live in, incest with the mother is connected with parricide like two sides of the same coin. What could Platon have meant by 'killing anyone' if not 'killing one's own father'? That Platon does *not* mention parricide[12] is, on this approach, a detail as insignificant as the difference between reading and interpretation.[13] Thus, taking the context into consideration, or forcing a contextual interpretation on a passage, can mean putting to work not just the immediate context of the *Politeia* but the entire mythological and anthropological background of the Greek world together with our own – not always unbiased – perspective on it. Following this line of thought, one can find at *Politeia* 9.571d *the* three most terrible crimes incest, parricide, and cannibalism grouped together, three crimes which are otherwise not attested as a

12 At *Phaidon* 113e parricide seems not to be an unlawful murder, see above.

13 Here a prominent example, Detienne, *Dionysos*, p. 144: 'Dans la *République* platonicienne, le comportement tyrannique marque l'apparition au grand jour des appétits sauvages qui ne s'éveillent ordinairement en nous qu'avec le sommeil quand, sous l'effet de la boisson, la partie bestiale de l'âme, *to theriodes*, entreprend en rêve de commettre l'inceste avec sa mère, de violer n'importe qui, homme, dieu ou animal, de tuer son père ou de manger ses propres enfants.' In support of these views the author refers to *Politeia* 9.571c and 10.619bc, neither of which mentions parricide (see more on 10.619bc below). This reading of the passage 9.571d ascribes to Platon the opinion that all humans have the drive to eat their own children, a drive which, in waking, reason prevents them from pursuing!

Downloaded from Brill.com 03/04/2024 06:31:00PM
via Open Access. This is an open access article distributed under the terms
of the CC BY 4.0 license.
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

group in Ancient Greece unless we want to regard this very passage, by means of a circular argument, as a piece of evidence.[14]

But does Platon really claim that tyrants are cannibals?[15] Two passages are usually referred to by the supporters of this idea, namely 10.619c and 8.565d–566a. I will now take a closer look at each of them.

In the last pages of the *Politeia* Sokrates narrates the *post mortem* experience of Er, the Armenian who has witnessed in the afterworld the souls' choice of their future life on earth. The story goes that the first soul who, before embodiment, had the chance to choose from the many available destinies pounced on the greatest tyranny – because of foolishness and greed, as Sokrates/Er explicitly remarks (ὑπὸ ἀφροσύνης τε καὶ λαιμαργίας, 10.619b8). The choice of becoming a tyrant is a hasty decision which the soul soon regrets. This is expressed in the words οὐ πάντα ἱκανῶς ἀνασκεψάμενον (ἑλέσθαι) '(he made his choice) without examining everything sufficiently' (10.619c1) and ἐπειδὴ δὲ κατὰ σχολὴν σκέψασθαι (κόπτεσθαί τε καὶ ὀδύρεσθαι τὴν αἵρεσιν) 'when he examined more closely (he struck himself and lamented his choice)' (10.619c3). Some things are not visible at first sight but require precise scrutiny. The soul overlooked (λαθεῖν, 10.619c2) the consequences of its decision, in particular the fact that tyranny involves innumerable hidden misfortunes like eating one's own children (παίδων αὐτοῦ βρώσεις καὶ ἄλλα κακά, 10.619c2). On the whole, the happiness balance of tyranny is negative, which is why anyone capable of seeing behind

14 A. Moreau, 'A propos d'Œdipe: la liaison entre trois crimes – parricide, inceste et cannibalisme', in: S. Saïd, F. Desbordes, J. Bouffartigue, A. Moreau (eds.), *Études de littérature ancienne. Homère, Horace, Le mythe d'Œdipe, Les 'Sentences de Sextus'* (Paris: Presses de l'École Normale Supérieure, 1979), pp. 97–127, at p. 103. This idea had some success in its time (J.-P. Vernant, 'Le Tyran boiteux: d'Œdipe à Périandre', *Le temps de la réflexion* 2 (1981), pp. 235–55, reprinted in J.-P. Vernant, P. Vidal-Naquet, *Mythe et tragédie en Grèce ancienne* 2 (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 1986) = J.-P. Vernant, *Œuvres. Religions, rationalités, politique* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2007), pp. 1202–21, at p. 1221; J. Bremmer, 'Oedipus and the Greek Oedipus complex', in: J. Bremmer (ed.), *Interpretations of Greek mythology* (London: Routledge, 1987), pp. 41–59, at p. 51; M. Halm-Tisserant, *Cannibalisme et immortalité. L'enfant dans le chaudron en Grèce ancienne* (Paris: Les belles lettres, 1993), p. 120 n. 45) but seems to be less frequented as of late. It should be noted however that incest, parricide, and cannibalism had already been grouped together by S. Freud, 'Über einige Übereinstimmungen im Seelenleben der Wilden und der Neurotiker', *Imago* 1 (1912), pp. 17–33 (= *Totem und Tabu*. Teil 1 (Leipzig/Wien: Heller, 1913) = *Studienausgabe Band IX*, (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2000), pp. 295–310, at pp. 296–7) and S. Freud, *Die Zukunft einer Illusion* (Leipzig/Wien/Zürich: Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag, 1927) (= *Studienausgabe Band IX* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2000), pp. 135–89, at pp. 144–5). Moreau actually attempted to prove that Oidipus also had cannibalistic drives.

15 E.g. M. Patera, *Figures grecques de l'épouvante de l'antiquité au présent. Peurs enfantines et adultes* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2015), p. 117: 'Platon qualifie le tyran d'anthropophage'.

Downloaded from Brill.com 03/04/2024 06:31:00PM
via Open Access. This is an open access article distributed under the terms
of the CC BY 4.0 license.
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

its alluring appearance will prefer to avoid it. The passage is meant to illustrate individual responsibility and the importance of thoroughly examining every alternative when confronted with a momentous decision. In the end, the life choice described by Sokrates/Er is the choice between justice and injustice, or between happiness and unhappiness, which is the main topic of the *Politeia*.

The common interpretation of 9.571d suggests that the passage 10.619bc indicates what Platon meant by an unlawful pleasure of eating. But, if we consider the two contexts more exactly we see that, apart from the mention of 'food' or 'eating' (βρῶμα, 9.571d3; βρῶσις, 10.619c2), they hardly have anything in common. At 9.571d eating is seen as a pleasure, while at 10.619c it is a punishment. At 9.571d the focus lies on the absolute freedom of (food) choice, while at 10.619c the tyrant has no choice whatsoever as to the punishment imposed on him by destiny. At 9.571d the (unspecified) food choice is conscious and therefore significant, while at 10.619c the tyrant is unaware of the ingredients of one particular meal which he abhors like anyone else.[16] At 9.571d eating is an expression of hunger, i.e. the fulfilment of a vital need, while at 10.619c children-eating (τεκνοφαγία) reflects the atrocity of one person's crimes and is the monstrous climax of his retribution rather than an expression of genuine hunger. At 9.571d hunger and eating are the object of interdiction, restraint, and transgression, while at 10.619c the main point is the death of the tyrant's children, symbolising the annihilation of his line (like in the Kronos myth).[17] At 9.571d eating is seen as a recurrent process very much like nutrition, while at 10.619c children-eating (τεκνοφαγία) is a once-in-a-lifetime event. At 9.571d Sokrates refers to the hunger we all experience every day, while at 10.619c, where he apparently has mythical figures like Thyestes and Tereus in mind, he does not even maintain that any tyrant has actually ever eaten his children, let alone fed upon them.

The act of eating one's own offspring, or τεκνοφαγία, is a rather specific mythological motif in which the identity of the victim and the blood relationship between the eater and the eaten play a central part. It is usually a revenge motif occurring in connection with succession wars or family conflicts.[18] Therefore τεκνοφαγία, especially when performed unwillingly, can hardly be equated with the unleashed, i.e. voluntary, omnivorousness, or παμφαγία, mentioned at *Politeia* 9.571d where neither the eater nor the eaten have any identity whatsoever. Moreover, we cannot suppose that the tyrant mentioned at 10.619c takes pleasure (even unconsciously!) in eating his offspring as long as both he and

16 On the distinction between premeditated and 'occasional' crimes in Platon see above.

17 Detienne, *Dionysos*, pp. 136–8.

18 Halm-Tisserant, *Cannibalisme et immortalité*, pp. 90–105.

Downloaded from Brill.com 03/04/2024 06:31:00PM
via Open Access. This is an open access article distributed under the terms
of the CC BY 4.0 license.
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

the destiny regard τεκνοφαγία as the most severe punishment available. Yet, at 9.571d it is the pleasure (of eating) which Sokrates wants to explain. The difference between (abhorrent) τεκνοφαγία and (pleasant) παμφαγία becomes even clearer if we take another look at the passage 9.574e (quoted above). If Platon had meant any connection between *Politeia* 10.619c and 9.571d he would have surely suggested it in the only passage where he really deals with the tyrant's meals. Yet, at 9.574e he gives no hint that giving free rein to the desire of eating (ἀπέχεσθαι, 9.571d3; ἀφέξεται, 9.574e3) could be either painful or dangerous.[19] While 'unlawful hunger' is held in check by reason or the law (9.571b), these are obviously not the reasons which prevent a tyrant from enjoying the meat of his children if he wanted to. All this shows that the tyrant's punishment mentioned at 10.619c does not answer the question raised by the concept of 'unlawful hunger' at 9.571d.

The other passage usually adduced in support of the cannibalistic interpretation of *Politeia* 9.571d is 8.565d–566a. Here, Sokrates compares the transformation of a leader of the people into a tyrant with the transformation of a man into a wolf (*Politeia* 8.565d4–566a4):

> When does a leader begin to turn into a tyrant? Is it not obvious that it is the moment in which the leader begins to do what the story (μύθῳ) about the Arkadian temple of Zeus the Wolf says?
>
> What story? he said.
>
> The one about the man who tastes human flesh (ἀνθρωπίνου σπλάγχνου) when it is mixed with the meat of sacrificed animals and who inevitably becomes a wolf. Have you never heard that story?
>
> Of course I have.
>
> Isn't this what happens when a leader of the people taking over a rather obedient crowd doesn't refrain from kindred blood (μὴ ἀπόσχηται ἐμφυλίου αἵματος) but, making unjust charges, as they usually do, brings people to court and murders them (μιαιφονῇ) and, destroying human lives, tastes with his unholy tongue and mouth of his own slaughtered kinsfolk (γλώττῃ τε καὶ στόματι ἀνοσίῳ γευόμενος φόνου συγγενοῦς), when he banishes, and assassinates, and plans to cancel the debts and redistribute the land? Isn't it inevitable that such a man ends up either slain by his enemies or as a tyrant, turning from a man into a wolf (λύκῳ ἐξ ἀνθρώπου γενέσθαι)?

19 Compare also 10.609e–610a.

Downloaded from Brill.com 03/04/2024 06:31:00PM
via Open Access. This is an open access article distributed under the terms
of the CC BY 4.0 license.
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

At first glance, these lines might invite the impression that they deal with the pleasure of eating and the conscious, deliberate food choice. And, in a way, they do, of course. Yet, it is important to acknowledge that the reference to eating is here entirely metaphorical and that we learn nothing about the taste of the person who exercises the office of a tyrant. In my opinion, Sokrates does not mean to suggest here that the persons who act as tyrants put pieces of human meat in their mouth when they sit at the table to still their hunger nor that they drink human blood from a cup when they are thirsty. The obvious reason is that this description of the transformation of a man into a wolf is a metaphor. Sokrates does not intend to give a zoological account of a (visible) transformation,[20] but a psychological one. He does not claim that the accomplished tyrant belongs taxonomically to another species, or that the tyrant differs from (other) humans in his aspect, which identifies him as a wolf, but that the attitude of a man towards his fellow humans sometimes bears a certain resemblance to the attitude of a predator towards other animals. Moreover, he introduces his reference to the Arkadian myth of Lykaon by the very term 'myth' (μύθῳ, 8.565d6), which seems to suggest that he himself does not take lycanthropy literally.[21] As a matter of fact, the mythical anthropophagy of Lykaon, with its focus on small children, seems to have considerable similarities with the τεκνοφαγία mentioned at *Politeia* 10.619c.[22] It is therefore important to point out that hazard plays an important part in this myth as well because in the circle of devotees celebrating the sacrificial rite on Mount Lykaion no one knows in advance who will get the part containing human meat.[23]

Besides, the comparison of a (violent) ruler with a wolf (or another wild animal: *Phd*. 82a) on grounds of his voracity was not at all new with Platon. In the *Ilias* (1.231), Achilleus accuses Agamemnon of being a δημοβόρος βασιλεύς 'king who devours his people'; Theognis (1181) uses the synonymous expression

20 As does Ov. *Met.* 1.236–7: *in villos abeunt vestes, in crura lacerti; fit lupus* 'his clothes turn to fur, his arms to legs; he becomes a wolf'. On the myth of Lykaon: G. Piccaluga, *Lykaon. Un tema mitico* (Roma: Edizioni dell'Ateneo, 1968); W. Burkert, *Homo necans. Interpretationen altgriechischer Opferriten und Mythen* (Berlin/New York: Walter der Gruyter, 1997), pp. 98–108. On the wolf in Greek mythology: C. Mainoldi, *L'image du loup et du chien dans la Grèce ancienne d'Homère à Platon* (Paris: Editions Ophrys, 1984); R. Buxton, 'Wolves and werewolves in Greek thought', in: J. Bremmer (ed.), *Interpretations of Greek mythology* (London: Routledge, 1987), pp. 60–79.

21 Burkert, *Homo necans*, p. 102: 'Platons Bezeichnung "Mythos" drückt den Zweifel an der Wahrheit aus.'

22 Piccaluga, *Lykaon*, pp. 42–6; Burkert, *Homo necans*, p. 105; pp. 114–5; pp. 121–5.

23 Mainoldi, *L'image du loup*, p. 12: 'Il ne faut pas sous-estimer non plus l'importance du hasard dans ce rituel: la métamorphose touche seulement ceux qui, au hasard, ont gouté aux morceaux humains mélangés à ceux d'autres victimes.'

Downloaded from Brill.com 03/04/2024 06:31:00PM
via Open Access. This is an open access article distributed under the terms
of the CC BY 4.0 license.
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

δημόφαγος τύραννος; Alkaios (fr. 129, 23–4) says that the tyrant Pyttakos 'devours the city' (δάπτει τὰν πόλιν); and Herodotos (5.92.β3) reproduces a Pythic oracle referring to the tyrant Kypselos as a λέοντα καρτερὸν ὠμηστήν 'fierce lion feeding on raw flesh'.[24] These and other similar examples show that the gaping, threatening mouth was a traditional feature of the conventional portrait of the tyrant long before Platon.[25] Against this background, the metaphor of the werewolf-tyrant was quite obvious.[26] This raises the question whether Platon's use of a literary topos concerning the tyrant justifies such far-reaching conclusions as an assumption about his view on human nature, especially since this particular cannibalistic element is nowhere else attested in his dialogues. By the same token, we could ask ourselves whether a statement like *homo homini lupus* is meant to imply cannibalism.

The tyrant's actions which invite the comparison with a wolf's voracity are explicitly enumerated by Sokrates: unjust charges, false accusations, murders, banishments, cancellation of debts, and land distributions.[27] Among these, murder is the act which most resembles animal behaviour, since everything else presupposes a political context in which the tyrant has the possibility to abuse his powers. However, at 9.571d the desire to murder (anyone) is clearly

24 A discussion of this topos can be found in M.G. Fileni, 'Osservazioni sull'idea di tiranno nella cultura greca arcaica (Alc. frr. 70,6–9; 129,21–24 v.; Theogn. vv. 1179–1182)', *Quaderni Urbinati di Cultura Classica* 14 (1983), pp. 29–35 and Catenacci, *Il tiranno e l'eroe*, pp. 212–7. B. Kunstler, 'The werewolf figure and its adoption into the Greek political vocabulary', *Classical World* 84 (1991), pp. 189–205, at 196–205, provides a mythological approach.

25 N. Luraghi, 'The cunning tyrant: The cultural logic of a narrative pattern', in: A. Moreno, R. Thomas (eds.), *Patterns of the past. Epitēdeumata in the Greek tradition. Studies in honour of Oswyn Murray* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 67–92, at p. 83: 'The analogies between tyrant and trickster are many and striking. […] Like the trickster, forever hungry and in search of food, the tyrant is the one who "eats up the *polis*", as Alcaeus says'. See also V.J. Rosivach, 'The tyrant in Athenian democracy', *Quaderni Urbinati di Cultura Classica* 30 (1988), pp. 43–57; N. Luraghi, 'Anatomy of the monster: The discourse of tyranny in Ancient Greece', in: H. Börm (ed.), *Antimonarchic discourse in Antiquity* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2015), pp. 67–84.

26 Kunstler, 'The werewolf figure', p. 196: 'Political ideas took a long time to emerge, linguistically and institutionally, from their mytho-religious background. The tyrant, seen as abusing legal and political institutions for his own ends and reformulating *timē* and *dikē*, could logically be referred back to the more archaic figure of a werewolf/outlaw, an eater of unholy portions of human meat at the sacrificial table at which a more primitive *timē* was allocated. Both werewolf and tyrant devoured unconsecrated portions of communal sacrifice and fed off essential human substance.' On the distribution of the loot and the food, a point to which Platon's γῆς ἀναδασμόν (8.566a1) alludes, see also Detienne and Svenbro (n.9), pp. 218–22; 225; 230. According to Detienne and Svenbro 'Les loups au festin', p. 222, 'le contrat social est d'abord une opération culinaire'.

27 Kunstler, 'The werewolf figure', pp. 195–6.

Downloaded from Brill.com 03/04/2024 06:31:00PM
via Open Access. This is an open access article distributed under the terms
of the CC BY 4.0 license.
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

distinguished from the desire to eat (anything). This means that if we look for a connection between the presumptuous acts described at 8.565e–566a and the unlawful desires of the oneiric self described at 9.571d, all we can say is that the acts described in the former passage reflect the (unlawful) desire to kill (μιαιφονῇ, 8.565e6; μιαιφονεῖν, 9.571d3) but tell us nothing about the 'unlawful hunger' (nor, for that matter, about the unlawful sexual pleasure).

Thus, the representation of the tyrant as 'tasting blood' with his 'unholy tongue and mouth' is indeed a powerful image prompted by the comparison with a ferocious beast but nothing more than an image.[28] Is this visual metaphor a reason to believe that at *Politeia* 9.571d Platon actually maintains that (not just the tyrant but) every one of us secretly nourishes cannibalistic desires?[29] Wouldn't such a baffling idea have been worth more than a vague insinuation (if the words 'eating anything' are indeed an insinuation)? Let us also consider that at 9.588c–e Sokrates says that man can be imagined as a whole made of three animals (reflecting the three parts of the soul), namely a human (rather small), a lion (somehow larger), and a wild beast with many heads (very large). This image obviously suggests that humanity is the smallest part of us and that most of the time (in waking!) we act like beasts (τὰ θηριώδη τῆς φύσεως, 9.589d1; τὸ θηριῶδες, 9.571c5, 9.591b2).[30] This would have been a good occasion for Platon to allude to intrinsic cannibalistic drives if he had held the view that anything like this were latent in every one of us, all the more so since the point of this allegory is to contrast the human, i.e. mild, appearance with the bestial psychic reality. Moreover, in describing the delicate symbiosis of the three dissimilar creatures Sokrates points out that if the soul harmony is not sufficiently cultivated, they can go so far as to eat one

28 Compare also 9.576a5–6: 'a tyrant's nature never tastes freedom and true friendship' (ἐλευθερίας καὶ φιλίας ἀληθοῦς τυραννικὴ φύσις ἀεὶ ἄγευστος). See also 9.582bc.

29 Note also that, despite the ambiguous emphasis on the tyrant's brutality *towards kinsfolk* (γευόμενος φόνου συγγενοῦς, 8.565e7) and the wide-spread interpretation of this passage, the point of the simile is to reveal the *difference* between tyrant and his subjects and the *irreversibility* of his transformation (see e.g. D. Lanza, *Il tiranno e il suo pubblico* (Torino: Piccola Biblioteca Einaudi, 1977), pp. 65–7). In Sokrates' words, from the moment the tyrant tastes blood, he is no longer human. This means that, even if we take the metaphorical transformation at face value, there is no point in time at which a human feeds on other humans (or a wolf feeds on other wolves). Yet, if a wolf eats humans we have no reason to use the term cannibalism.

30 U. Dierauer, *Tier und Mensch im Denken der Antike. Studien zur Tierpsychologie, Anthropologie und Ethik* (Amsterdam: Verlag B. R. Grüner B. V., 1977), pp. 67–8; K. Morgan, 'Theriomorphism and the composite soul in Plato', in: C. Collobert, P. Destrée, and F.J. Gonzalez (eds.), *Plato and myth. Studies on the use and status of Platonic myths* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2012), pp. 323–42, at pp. 329–30.

Downloaded from Brill.com 03/04/2024 06:31:00PM
via Open Access. This is an open access article distributed under the terms
of the CC BY 4.0 license.
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

another.[31] Nevertheless, despite this explicit cannibalistic metaphor depicting the intrapsychic conflict nothing in this passage suggests that humans bear in themselves the inclination to eat one another.[32] What is more, the absence of this notion in a context where it would have fitted more than anywhere else is a strong argument against the assumption that Platon believed that we were all repressed cannibals. Maybe this is the reason why this passage has never been adduced in support of the cannibalistic interpretation of 9.571d.

To conclude, when Sokrates says at 9.571d that everyone takes pleasure in having sex with their mother, with gods, or with animals in dreams, he does not mean it metaphorically but literally.[33] And when he says that everyone takes pleasure in murdering other people in dreams, he really means murder, that is to say putting an end to other people's lives on purpose. Therefore, when he mentions eating, we have to think about putting pieces of edible stuff in our mouths, chewing, and swallowing.[34] The question is: when is this pleasure that we all experience every day unlawful? What do we eat in our dreams that reason and the law prevent us from eating when we are awake? At *Politeia* 9.571d Platon seems to believe that the answer is obvious, otherwise he would not illustrate the concept of 'unlawful pleasure' by the 'unlawful hunger'. Though I see no way of telling what he meant, I see no reason to assume that he meant cannibalism.[35]

---

31 9.589a3–4: 'they bite from themselves, fight and devour one another' (ἐν αὑτοῖς δάκνεσθαί τε καὶ μαχόμενα ἐσθίειν ἄλληλα).

32 Note also that at *Laws* 6.782bc cannibalism is only mentioned as an indication that food habits change with time and space. No suggestion of the universality of cannibalistic desires is implied.

33 This is why we do not look for a dream interpretation similar to Herodotos 6.107, on which see P. Holt, 'Sex, tyranny, and Hippias' incest dream (Herodotos 6.107)', *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 39 (1998), pp. 221–41.

34 Consequently, although dream pleasures are essentially visual pleasures (αἱ ὄψεις τῶν ἐνυπνίων φαντάζονται, 9.572a8–9), the functional analogy of the eye and the mouth (e.g. W. Deonna, *Le symbolisme de l'œil* (Berne: Éditions Francke, 1965), p. 56), does not operate here.

35 I would like to thank Monika Poschner for carefully proof-reading this paper.

Downloaded from Brill.com 03/04/2024 06:31:00PM
via Open Access. This is an open access article distributed under the terms
of the CC BY 4.0 license.
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/