

Interpretation

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Plato's *Alcibiades I*

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Although Plato's *Alcibiades I* has not been analyzed extensively in modern times, ancient authors treated it as a fundamental work. Proclus discussed it in a full-length commentary, for example, and it is the first dialogue that Alfarabi summarized in the section on Plato in his *Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*. For this reason alone, it deserves to command our respect. More fundamentally, the cause of its earlier prominence is as significant now as in the past: it has much to teach us about the arts, knowledge, justice, and the soul.

The *Alcibiades I* portrays a conversation between Socrates and Alcibiades, with no onlookers. Its privacy contrasts with the visibility of Alcibiades' life, as if we are being told that we need to have seen nothing of that life in order to understand what Plato is teaching in the dialogue. The discussion is divided into seven parts, with the last three paralleling the first three. But this structure is something that we must discover for ourselves: neither Plato nor Socrates furnishes us with an outline. Indeed, even if Socrates had explicitly described the structure of the *Alcibiades*, it might still be imprudent to take him at face value, because the dialogue features a wonderful array of intentionally misleading arguments. In my judgment, it would also be imprudent to make any element of the interpretation of *Alcibiades I* depend on the picture of Alcibiades presented in the *Symposium* or *Alcibiades II*. Only when we become familiar with each discussion on its own terms can we discuss with confidence the connections among them.

In what follows, I will first summarize a part of the dialogue and then comment on it. The commentary is intended to make clear how Socrates' explicit arguments, the shortcomings of these arguments, and the dramatic details of the conversation combine to illuminate the basic problems that are the *Alcibiades'* underlying subject. The summary is intended to allow the reader to follow Plato's argument in a manner that is faithful to him. Because I am summarizing and not offering a complete translation, however, it will sometimes be more useful to bring out details of Plato's text, such as some examples that Socrates uses, in my commentary, rather than in the summary itself.

I

In the first part of the conversation (103a–106c3), Socrates succeeds in winning Alcibiades' consent to serve him by answering questions. Socrates manages this largely by presenting two speeches.

In the opening speech, he flatters Alcibiades by describing the resources that allow Alcibiades to stand apart from others and to overcome them. At the same time, he makes clear that he himself has not been overcome by Alcibiades and, indeed, that his own movements are governed by demons, not men. Alcibiades, whom Socrates describes as needing no man, wonders about Socrates, who stays put while the others flee.

Socrates' speech and Alcibiades' reply are, first, merely an elevated version of the ridiculous combination of cajolery and posturing by which lovers still stalk their prey. Saying extraordinary things, as Socrates does here, belongs to the ordinary commerce of love (see, e.g., 103a5–6). Beyond this, Socrates presents clearly, but without thematic emphasis, the group of questions inherent in the phenomena of wonder, causality, motion, need, and stability (see, e.g., 103 a1, 103a6, 103b6, 104a2, 104c8).

Having aroused Alcibiades' interest, Socrates must now strengthen and retain it. He does so with a speech that makes him appear even more strange than he did at first. Socrates reads Alcibiades' mind and discovers his hope: to be the most powerful and renowned, not only in Athens, before whose assembly he plans to speak presently, or Greece, or Europe, but in Asia too—to be another Cyrus or Xerxes. But, claims Socrates, only he can transmit (this) power to Alcibiades; he can show Alcibiades that he is the most valuable to him. Indeed, only because Alcibiades has these hopes has the god now allowed Socrates to talk to him.

Socrates retains and increases Alcibiades' attraction by seeing into and through him—by displaying his concern, attention, and understanding—and, simultaneously, by continuing to flatter him. More broadly, he presents himself almost as a god, who can read intentions and who answers only to other gods (see 105a16–7 105d8–106a1).

Despite Socrates' flattery, he nonetheless also subtly displays Alcibiades' limits by emphasizing his parents and relatives—those on whom he in some measure always depends—even as he is claiming that Alcibiades hopes to go beyond them. More subtly still, Socrates indicates these limits by setting as Alcibiades' goal something that would not in fact differentiate him from Cyrus or Xerxes. Nor does he even name this goal—world tyranny—as such. Moreover, he does not claim that Alcibiades himself seeks to be a god.

Alcibiades finds Socrates' "speech" to be even stranger than his "looks" (106a2–4). In neither case does Alcibiades have in mind something general, but the theme of the connection between looks ("ideas") and speech has been raised. Moreover, in his byplay with Alcibiades after his first speech, Socrates had also spoken commonsensically about Alcibiades' desire to know what Socrates' intention is, and about Socrates' own difficulty in "ending" what he is about to "begin" (104d7–10, 104a1–3, 104e1–2). One way in which to interpret what might otherwise seem to be the merely decorative, gratuitous, or, indeed, random use of these terms is to see that by employing them Plato subtly

lays in place elements of an unspoken but evident theme of the dialogue—the possibility that the philosopher's attempt to know the whole of things brings us closer than can any political way of life to the comprehensive grasp that Socrates divines to be Alcibiades' wish.

Alcibiades' byplay with Socrates after Socrates' second speech (106a2–c3) makes clear Alcibiades' mastery and Socrates' greater mastery. Alcibiades accepts Socrates' characterization of his intention with a minimum of coyness, but not frankly. He asks a question, to which Socrates replies with a question, a refusal, and an offer to show how, if Alcibiades will serve him, he can help Alcibiades reach his intention. Alcibiades consents, but only if the service is easy, and his opinion is that answering questions is easy. But he answers only after Socrates allows him to command Socrates to ask!

II

Socrates has established that Alcibiades' first step will be to come before the Athenian assembly (105a9). The second part of the dialogue (106c4–114e11) consists of his showing to Alcibiades the rudimentary requirements of advising, and the subject of Alcibiades' first effort at advice. In the first section of this part (106c4–108d8), Socrates begins by equating speech in the assembly with advising, next wins Alcibiades' agreement that we advise others on what we know through learning or discovery, and then shows Alcibiades that he will not be advising the assembly on the three things—writing, wrestling, and harping—that he has learned. He then leads Alcibiades to say that he will advise about the city's "things," especially war and peace, and shows him that all advice is about what is "better," according to the art in question, such as gymnastics or music. But Alcibiades disgracefully cannot even think of the word to describe what is "better" in war and peace until Socrates leads him with much prompting to mention the just and the unjust. Socrates thus achieves the remarkable result of displaying to Alcibiades his ignorance of what he is about to discuss before all Athens, although it is not until Alcibiades' complete defeat in the argument about justice itself, in the third part of the dialogue, that he admits the depth of his perplexity (116e2–5).

Socrates achieves his result here in two ways, both dubious. First, he is able to equate advising to speaking before the assembly only by abstracting from everything in speaking before the assembly that is not identical to advising. He acts as if rhetoric, charm, persuasion, display, and economic class have no place in politics, or even outside it (106c4–d2, 107b4–c2; see also 114b7–d7). This abstraction is tendentious: to take only the most obvious example, Alcibiades has hardly overwhelmed his wouldbe lovers through the power of his logic alone. Socrates alludes to the limits of his own argument by making otherwise extraneous and inexplicable references to rich and poor, and tall and

short, and by discussing music, thus paying playful but silent homage to the place of rhythm, tone, and display in speaking before assemblies (108c12–13).

Second, Socrates is able to show Alcibiades that he is completely ignorant of the arts he has not learned only by treating every art as if it is as self-contained as possible, so that what is “better” in, say, gymnastic is solely what is more “gymnastical,” and can therefore be known only by the trainer. Socrates deals with the end or purpose of an art, which we ordinarily believe is known by an art’s user or customer at least as well as by the artisan himself, as if it is in no way apart from the art and the artisan. In the course of the argument, indeed, Alcibiades becomes so tamed by Socrates that when Socrates asks him whether he will advise about what ships the city needs, he says that he will not, as if only the shipbuilder should say what ships should be built and not the general, the assembly, or the statesman who will use them. In short, Socrates abstracts from the user of the art’s product, from the way in which, for example, the purchaser of a house, with his varied needs, is a source, separate from the architect and his skill as such, of the goal that directs the architect’s design.

Even when we consider artistic examples that less obviously involve producers and their products, we still see that it is not *only* the artist who knows some of what Socrates says that he alone knows. Such an assertion is quite problematic, for instance, in Socrates’ own example of the “healthy” as that which specifies what is meant by “better” when the physician says that some food is “better” than another at this time or in this amount (108e6–109a5). For what health is (as distinguished from how best to restore it) is something that many people, not only physicians, know. As is true of the rest of us, physicians learn what health is before they arrive at medical school.

Socrates also abstracts from ends that go beyond any of the arts and that link or rank them, as, say, courage helps to guide what is proper in war and, consequently, helps to define useful and proper gymnastic training beyond what the trainer—who could quite easily be ignoble, insufficiently courageous, or even cowardly—knows as such. Instead of considering these ends, Socrates treats the connection of the arts, in this section, primarily as a matter of mere naming (108c6–10; also 108a12–b4). He also ignores the arts’ competition about similar subjects, which further makes evident the peculiarity of treating each art as if it is the self-contained master of its own fully discrete purpose. Should the physician, chef, or diviner, for example, tell us how to prepare sacred cows? Which treatment is “better”? Even were we to suggest that medicine is the only true art among these three, it is clear in other ways that health is not a good that is simply isolated from all the other goods; it, therefore, could not be the “better” that completely defines appropriate food and drink. For health is not what the aged nobleman who seeks one last political honor, or the courageous and wounded general who desperately attempts to save his city in war, or even the ill gymnast who strives to win a vital competition, should choose: there are

good reasons why we do not follow the doctor's orders everywhere and always. The bodily example of a human good that is closest in its breadth to justice—health—thus shows the inadequacy of Socrates' nonetheless demonically perplexing argument.

Here as earlier, of course, Socrates indicates that his abstractions are intentional. The chief way that he makes his self-awareness clear to us is through apparently trivial matters such as the order and identity of the examples that he uses, the different terms that he employs for “know,” and the like. (See, e.g., 106c9, d3; 107a10–11, c8–9; 108e6–7. The task of the commentator is to offer an account of the “substance” of the dialogue that also explains such mundane matters, coherently and completely.) Another way in which we can see that Socrates' abstractions are intentional is by recognizing that we observe them primarily by reflecting on what is available to us through the same ordinary opinion and common sense on which he himself draws in order to conduct his discussion and make it intelligible.

By treating each art as independent, as self-contained, Socrates has led us to reflect briefly on instances in which the arts are interrelated, overlap, and are hierarchically ordered, i.e., on instances where they are in fact not independent. Let us also say a word about the related problem of the ambiguity of their beneficiary. Whom exactly is it that an art makes better? The artisan is improved by his art, but only incidentally; his reward comes from others. And, if the art improves only the artisan, how useful is it? The person whom an art treats may be improved, but not by all arts at once, or consistently. The “city,” or the Athenians, may be improved, but also not by all arts at once in the same degree. Indeed, this problem is exacerbated by art's cosmopolitan status, that is, by the fact that not merely one individual or city, but many—indeed, possible competitors—can equally be improved or destroyed by, say, the art of war. What, then, is the proper “whole” that the arts or some arts can improve simply by being artistic? For whom, and in what ways, is knowledge good?

It is too early to say just why Socrates chooses to take the tendentious direction that he does in his discussion of advising and the arts, beyond his immediate goal of forcing Alcibiades to see that *knowledge* is crucial and his general goal of encouraging us to reflect on the phenomena of knowledge, virtue, and the city. After all, the best way to begin to convince Alcibiades that knowledge is important is to act as if it is everything. What will become clear as the dialogue continues, however, is that Socrates is exploring the powers and limits that a variety of phenomena—Alcibiades' tyranny, the arts, his own philosophic way of life—display when we look at them as if they could have the full independence from, or mastery of, other phenomena that they intentionally or unintentionally crave. If the *Alcibiades I* truly is about its traditional subtitle—human nature—it is because Socrates explores and shows the limits of human activities insofar as they claim, or imagine that they could claim, to be fully comprehensive and self-sufficient, i.e., to be that nature. The limit of each of

our activities, the impossibility of its simple self containment, shows that nothing human can be altogether independent and self sufficient. We are oriented to what is natural, but we cannot ourselves be completely natural.

Socrates' "dialogue" with Alcibiades in this section of the second part also touches, usually unobtrusively, on several issues that we mentioned when commenting on the opening part. What is discussed more or less thematically is knowledge, in keeping with the fact that lack of knowledge—obviously and commonsensically, however playful the argument—is the singular deficiency of Alcibiades that Socrates brings to light in this section. Socrates claims that whatever one knows one is taught, or discovers for oneself, and he elaborates his claim by making clear that discovery is primarily searching, and that searching requires that one consent to know (106d6–d14).

One consents and is, therefore, able to search, Socrates says, because one knows that one does not know. But we can see that conscious ignorance is often insufficient as a spur to discovery, because one may be indifferent or unconcerned about something of which one is ignorant, as Alcibiades is said here to be indifferent to fluting, and, therefore, fail to seek to know it. Indeed, the insufficiency of conscious ignorance as a spur is even more obvious if one equates using an art properly with knowing it, as Socrates does here. For without justice and concern an art will not be used at all, or will be misused, even if one possesses its knowledge. (Who could murder an enemy, or cheat a sick patient, more successfully than a subtle physician?) It is not difficult to see, however, how Socrates' own philosophic searching is the one activity that shows his argument connecting art, knowledge, and proper use to be simply true. The philosopher as such has no motive but the desire to know. Therefore, there is no ground on which his knowledge could be misused, and nothing that could cause him to withhold his consent from an attempt to know.

Socrates' treatment of knowledge also conveniently leaves out opinion, as if one either knows fully or is fully ignorant. This may be true ultimately, but not ordinarily: Socrates does not acknowledge here what we know when we have more or less true opinions.

My reminders are not meant to suggest that, in opposition to Socrates' argument, we can come to know other than through learning or discovery. Remembering, seeing, and the like, which might seem to be additional ways of knowing, are types of discovery, and though they may not always require our immediate consent, they require our consent in the last analysis if their discoveries are not to be obliterated. Even things that we have "always" known we in fact either discover through memory or exercise as a skill. Of course, we are able to do many things before we can teach the skill to others or recognize knowledge, as such, in ourselves. What Socrates abstracts from here is not some third way of knowing, but the dependence of knowledge upon ability or "nature." This abstraction fits together with his attempt to moderate Alcibiades by elevating the status of knowledge and art, which Alcibiades, however great his gifts, does not fully possess.

In the next section of the dialogue's second part (108d9–114e11), Socrates wins Alcibiades' agreement both that "justice" is what is "better" in making war (and, therefore, should be the subject of his advice to the assembly), and that Alcibiades does not know what justice is because he has neither discovered nor learned it. He has not discovered it because he has believed that he has known it since he was a child. And if, as Alcibiades says, he learned it from the many, he did not learn from mature teachers, because the many differ about the just, but good teachers do not disagree. In fact, Socrates continues, the many differ most of all about just men and things and, as Homer shows, fight because of these differences. Alcibiades is in fact bewildered about the just things.

Alcibiades counters that the Greeks deliberate about what is expedient, not about what is just. Yet, because he has neither learned nor discovered what the expedient is, how does he know this? But, Socrates says, let him persuade Socrates that the just and the expedient are different, if he can. Persuading one man is no different from persuading many, so persuading Socrates will not be different from persuading the assembly. Alcibiades accuses Socrates of insolence, and Socrates then insolently claims that he will persuade Alcibiades that just things are expedient.

What Socrates does in this section is to treat justice as something known in the way that the arts are known; he then makes clear that Alcibiades does not know what justice is. In conducting his argument, he continues to take for granted that the standard used by an art is self-contained within the art, and, implicitly, that the art wields its standard or produces its good for the sake of the one on whom the art is practiced. Alcibiades becomes trapped within the argument at the same time that he is overwhelmed by the insolence, the madness, of what it implies here—that war is for the sake of the enemy's justice.

Near the beginning of this section, Alcibiades had said that the difference between the just and the unjust is the whole difference in all (109b9–10), though he concludes the section by differentiating the just from the expedient. Along the way, Socrates is able to turn to his own argumentative advantage the connection between the just, lawful, and noble. As was true earlier, however, Socrates still leaves largely in the dark the issue of the interconnection among the arts themselves, the things to which they apply, and the goods with which they deal. From the standpoint of the reigning conceit, or experiment, of the dialogue such unity would have to be found in Alcibiades himself, or in his insolent teacher Socrates, who asks Alcibiades to "imitate" him (108b6).

Some light on these issues of interconnection is shed by considering the "agreement" that Socrates treats as a criterion for knowledge in this section, and by reflecting on the examples that he uses in his discussion (see 111b2 ff.). Perhaps the surest thing that those in all Greek cities know is Greek itself; almost as certain is that they all talk about (in)justice. This agreement, however, hardly makes them friends, because they often go to war. All artisans may agree in their art, and, therefore, be as one, but physicians from two

warring cities will be enemies. All citizens of Athens may be citizens, but the noble are noble and the base, base, and the noble or wouldbe noble can, as is true of Alcibiades here, act “disgracefully.” Each of us may know what “stones” are (another of Socrates’ examples), but perhaps only a unique insolence can convert stones into currency or jewels. Socrates, all this is to say, does not explore how far the various “agreements” stretch: which transcend the city, at what times? Indeed, he presents neither a comprehensive commonsensical division and agreement of things based on bodies or conventions nor a conventional or natural unity based on hierarchy or imitation. This abstraction enables Socrates to achieve many of his results in the argument, because he can move easily among different examples of discovery, teaching, and agreement and ignore differences in the examples’ scope and range. Witness, for example, the insolent way in which he can treat persuading one as identical to persuading many, as if dialogue alone were sufficient and rhetoric unnecessary, or as if persuading and teaching were one and the same.

Socrates’ discussion of agreement also obviously advances his consideration of learning and discovery. We are struck most of all, however, by how much his conversation depends on “knowledge” that is neither artistic or scientific, nor attained by discovering after a search. Once again, the way in which the discussion is conducted silently limits and corrects the arguments that are presented explicitly. Alcibiades “knows” what justice is by learning Greek and hearing opinions, and he can confidently and from the time of his youth call a variety of things, such as cheating and stealing, unjust without knowing enough about justice to discuss with clarity its relation to expediency. Everyone apparently “knows” what wood is and stones are, without—pace Socrates—having to be a carpenter or stonemason (110b1 ff., 111b10–d7). Upon reflection, of course, it is easy to see that not everyone knows fully what all the stones are, or which are useful, or beautiful, or why. Socrates himself makes this clear when he encourages Alcibiades to confirm that although we all know what a man or horse is, few know what a horse able to run is, not to mention a good horse or man simply (111d8 ff.). Once more, his argument indicates that though we may know this or that, we “know” it only by treating it as independent: combining it properly with other things or properties—and, therefore, truly differentiating it—is more difficult.

Beyond this, these examples, Alcibiades’ knowing in the course of the argument that two is greater than one and his ability to follow Socrates, within limits, again draw our attention to the place of ability, opinion, and half-knowledge in coming to know things strictly (112e8–13). One might say that being willing to learn and seeking to discover are necessary but not sufficient for knowledge: there are things that some of us cannot learn no matter how much we try, and none of us can learn or discover at all unless what is knowable makes its appearance, constantly, however much it is distorted. It is not that Socrates is incorrect in claiming that knowing is always a matter of learning or

discovering but, rather, that he does not make these other elements in knowledge clear, although he points to them. On the one hand, Socrates acts as if discovery flows from inquiry, inquiry depends on willingness to learn, and willingness to learn follows from knowing that one does not know. This is correct, but it draws attention away from curiosity and delight in coming to know things, and from the attractiveness of what one wishes to know. Similarly, Socrates draws attention away from testing one's abilities, and exercising one's spirit. Socrates downplays for Alcibiades these Alcibiaden factors in knowing. On the other hand, Socrates' examples make more clear than his discussion itself the degree of imposition that is sometimes connected to coming to know—others often name things for us, perhaps before we asked (111c6–9; see 118b4–6). Indeed, Socrates himself appears here more as a conjurer and diviner—a god—than as a seeker. Ultimately, and even by and large, what Socrates says is completely true. But he does not discuss fully the preconditions of knowledge or the characteristics of the knower.

III

Socrates now continues the discussion of the relation between justice and expediency with which the second part concluded by demonstrating to Alcibiades, in the dialogue's third part, that the just things are the expedient things. He uses war as his battleground, nobility and goodness as his intermediaries, and courage and death as his examples. Just things, he argues, are noble things; his example of nobility is a virtue (courage). Noble things are good things, because the good things are the most choiceworthy things. (What is more choiceworthy for a man such as Alcibiades than a virtue such as courage?) Therefore, just things are good things (and good things and expedient things are more or less equated) (115a1–116e1).

Socrates' proof is clearly inadequate, although it convinces Alcibiades. For Socrates' true aim here, successfully achieved, is to leave Alcibiades bewildered.

The argument succeeds only by making several intentional abstractions or errors. First, Socrates can show only that a noble thing is a good thing in respect of the thing or act itself, for example, an act of courage. But he does not show that it is good for the man (or city) who performs the act. Common-sensically, a noble act that leads to one's death is not expedient for the brave man, however good the courageous act itself is. Second, Socrates abstracts from the fact that just things are not all noble because some may be too ordinary, or even disgraceful: retreat can be just, but is it noble? Noble deeds have a splendor that most just deeds lack, indeed, a splendid isolation—do all noble things justly serve the community? Third, that (all) just things are noble and (all) expedient (good) things are noble no more proves that just things are good

than does the fact that all crows are black and all telephones are black prove that crows are telephones. But this is the form of Socrates' argument. At the least, he alternates between saying that good things are noble and noble things are just as if, for this argument, the order makes no difference. Even if Socrates had stayed with the correct order (just things are noble; noble things are good), he would still have needed to speak of all noble things or of "the" noble, the just, and the good. In fact, he speaks only of some things or things.

Although the proof is inadequate, we should reflect on it further. Most immediately, the equation of the just and the expedient is politically healthy, even if here Socrates' demonstration of this identity is ironic. If we then consider where it might be simply true to say that justice is good, our attention is turned to the question of the unity for which and with regard to which the equation could be correct. Indeed, this issue becomes partially thematic late in the dialogue. Is the proper unity the individual? The ruler? His body? His soul? Or is the unity somehow beyond this, say, the goodness of the whole of things as Socrates presents it in the *Republic*?

Socrates had concluded his discussion of justice and expediency by asking Alcibiades whether he could now do anything but ridicule someone who would say that just things are evil. For has he not said that just things and expedient things are the same? But, arguing that what is unjust can be profitable, and what is just, disadvantageous, i.e., arguing that what is just is not expedient, is precisely what Alcibiades had done earlier (113d1–9).

IV

Hence, in the dialogue's central section, Alcibiades replies by swearing that he feels altogether strange, answering now with one opinion and then with another. This feeling, Socrates shows him, is bewilderment, and it comes from his ignorance of what he is discussing, and, more, from his ignorance of what he believes he knows. For one is not bewildered, nor does he make mistakes in action, about things he knows he does not know, but, rather, he entrusts these to others. (Alcibiades admits, for example, that he does not know how to ascend to heaven.) This ignorance causes evil, moreover, and from ignorance of the greatest things comes the greatest evil. Alcibiades is bewildered because he is ignorant of the greatest but believes he knows them although he does not (116e2–118b3).

Socrates needs no trickery to show Alcibiades his bewilderment, because he is in fact bewildered. What Socrates must do is to account for this in a way that advances his intention: strange, bewildered, artlessness is caused by believing that you know what you do not know (rather than, say, by a web of sophisms in which someone else has ensnared you).

For a brief moment at least, Alcibiades is now completely different from the

way in which Socrates had presented him at the beginning: Socrates has reduced—elevated?—the masterful Alcibiades to a dizzying swoon, and where his lovers had once run from Alcibiades, now he himself changes from one moment to the next.

Socrates convinces Alcibiades that he is bewildered because he believes he knows what he does not, and this enables Socrates to continue to teach him. But we must recognize that bewilderment does not spur us to knowledge in the same way that wonder might, and that Alcibiades is not now portrayed as experiencing wonder. This is to say that he is not attracted by what he does not know, not charmed by the imperfect appearance in opinions and deeds of what can be known. Socrates is able to convert Alcibiades' initial wonder at Socrates himself into his current bewilderment, but not (either here or later in the dialogue) into an unbridled search for knowledge simply (see 104d5–7). He does not, and indeed, cannot, show Alcibiades that knowledge is simply attractive, but at most that it is necessary.

For bewilderment, rather than playful irony, is the characteristic way in which full ignorance announces itself to a man of Alcibiades' abilities and intentions, as these are depicted here. It is of a piece with his wishes, as Socrates divines them, to rule completely, with courage as the example of what is noble, with death as a leading yet ambiguous example of evil, and with "nature" largely reduced, as it is in this dialogue, to birth and blood (see 119c1–2, 123d4–7). Whatever the traditional view of him, the Alcibiades presented in *Alcibiades I* is not erotic—he does not seek to join himself with another to imitate or produce. He does not love or give thanks. Socrates attempts to have Alcibiades join him in dialogue, imitate him, be his friend and beyond, but he does this by presenting himself at first as demonically strange and later as necessary and useful (see 106a2–8). Alcibiades is not fascinated with what is around him; indeed, there are several things that he is too proud to even try to learn.

Rather than being portrayed as erotic, Alcibiades is pictured as wishing to stand apart from and over, to master, to stand nobly and courageously alone, to differentiate himself. His extremism, his madness, is not the madness of erotic longing, but, rather, the extremism of separateness and isolation, whose ultimate success would be permanent mastery simply because of who he is, the particularity of his name, his renown (see 113c2–7, 118e1–5). Death is not simply opposed to this wish—for Alcibiades, it is at most equal in evil to cowardice, but not more evil (115d7–e8)—because it needs to be risked to validate his singularity. Alcibiades' bewilderment is in fact the true state of a soul that recognizes nothing outside itself, because such a soul can as easily and as properly hold an opinion as its contradiction. Indeed, Alcibiades' bewilderment shows that the "courageous" isolation of such a soul is ultimately hardly different from utter panic and cowardice: the extremes of a virtue and its vice sometimes look no different from each other. In the last analysis, Socrates

might show to Alcibiades that his hopes and powers could be fulfilled and justified only in the truest version of the differentiation for which he wishes and toward which Socrates' reliance in this argument on Alcibiades' ability to discriminate numbers points. But he does not take the argument this far and, indeed, never mentions philosophy to Alcibiades, because Alcibiades lacks the awestruck longing that is both a condition and a characteristic of the philosophic life.

Nonetheless, Socrates does indicate the power of knowledge: ignorance of the greatest things is, or causes, what is most harmful and base. Again, this would be simply true were knowledge ever both necessary and sufficient to be or to cause what is good, but this is not so with political or moral things. Ignorance, as we say, may sometimes be blessed and some ignorance—some believing that one knows even though one does not—is necessary to attain what most people desire. Who could obtain anything who asked always whether his own desires were worth filling? Nonetheless, the opinion that Socrates is suggesting here is fundamentally correct, and it is salutary for Alcibiades to believe it, however briefly, because it will moderate him and may lead to his better serving the city by educating himself and especially by turning to those who know, if, indeed, he can learn who these are.

The brief section on bewilderment gives way to the dialogue's final three parts, which mirror the first three.

V

Because Alcibiades is wedded to stupidity, Socrates claims, he wishes to enter politics before he is educated, just as do all but a few who deal with the city. Pericles may be an exception, as Alcibiades says, because he consorted with wise men, but he has taught no one, and one demonstrates knowledge, Socrates now tells us, by making others learned.

Alcibiades now takes heart: Socrates is correct, but this does not mean that he must now take care to learn and to practice, because his rivals are such amateurs that his nature will be enough. Not so, says Socrates: how unworthy of Alcibiades' looks and beginnings; a proud man's contest is not with the mean barbarians here, but with the Spartan kings and generals and the Persian Great King. Alcibiades may believe that these are not so different from others, but he would take more care and not harm himself if he feared them. Besides, the well-born likely give birth to better natures who when well reared are perfected in virtue. And, as Socrates shows in a brilliant speech, their birth and rearing are in fact better than Alcibiades' or Socrates', as are their wealth and virtue (118b4–124b9).

In this section Socrates returns to the beginning of the dialogue. He ironically mentions some of his own rivals—Damon, Anaxagoras, and Zeno, for

example—in the course of developing the discussion, and he delivers the long speech that he refused to deliver near the conversation's start (cf. 108a1–5 and 119a1–7, 106b1–3 and 121a3–124b6).

Socrates' claim that one proves his knowledge by teaching another who can teach still another is commonsensical: we usually find our professionals through word of mouth and are especially prone to trust physicians attached to medical schools, and other teaching professionals. Nonetheless, Socrates, for this argument, leaves hidden what his long speech soon displays—the inherent circularity of the process. For mistakes can be handed down from generation to generation. Socrates abstracts from this possibility and again acts as if there is no standard known by an art's user that can be used to check whether the artisan is wise. Moreover, Socrates passes over the fact that not everyone who wishes to learn can in fact be taught, even the simple—sometimes especially the simple—arts such as horsemanship. And, as Socrates himself indicates, not everyone who could be taught is willing to learn. In general, Socrates here, as earlier, understates the importance of bodily differences and native abilities when he is emphasizing the importance of knowledge.

Socrates' abstraction may account for the tack that Alcibiades now takes in order to make clear why he need not take care to learn: he points to his nature. In any event, his quick recovery from his bewilderment displays this nature. But Socrates is able to defeat Alcibiades' move by indicating the utility, nonetheless, of prudent fear of one's rivals and by then paralleling the dialogue's beginning: he appeals to Alcibiades' proud intentions, but he subtly reduces Alcibiades (and his "nature") to the blood and generation that he shares with others. More generally, Alcibiades' dealing with politics before he learns the important things is simply an extreme version of a universal error: Alcibiades is reminded that he is never as altogether special as he believes.

Socrates' long speech about the Spartans and Persians elicits ungrudging praise from Alcibiades, who at its completion no longer bothers to be coy about his intentions: Socrates has shown his mastery in the type of display Alcibiades had sought from him (106a7–b5). Brilliant as the speech is, however, it does not in fact show what it pretends to: that Alcibiades' abilities are inferior to those of the Persians and Spartans.

VI

Nonetheless, the speech convinces Alcibiades that his competitors are not easy marks. So, after Alcibiades exclaims that Socrates' speech is very likely true, Socrates, in the dialogue's sixth part, proceeds to consider in common with him the care that they need to take in order to become better or, indeed, the best. But in what virtue are they to become the best? The doing (or managing) of things, says Alcibiades. But which things or business? Not horsemanship.

ship or seamanship, they say, but the Athenian gentleman's business. But because each is good insofar as he is prudent and bad wherein he is not wise, the same man, by this argument, is both good and bad, and this is contradictory. Perhaps the good men are, as Alcibiades now says, those able to rule the city or other men? But in what do they rule men and what is their characteristic knowledge, if some artisan, say, a physician, rules men in each case, say, illness?

Perhaps they rule for the better management and preservation of the city. But while health becomes present when the body is better preserved, what becomes present when the city is preserved?

Alcibiades replies that it is friendship that becomes present, with hatred and faction absent. But friendship is agreement, Socrates shows, and it is an art—such as arithmetic—that in each case brings agreement in a city or a man. What, then, is the agreement that Alcibiades has in mind and what is its art? Is it, say, the friendship and agreement between brothers or between husband and wife? But, as Socrates shows, husbands and wives could not agree on the arts—such as the military art and wool working—that only one of them has. Therefore, they are not friends in these, and husbands and wives, and cities, have no friendship or good order when each person does his own business.

Perhaps friendship arises on account of each doing his own, Alcibiades now says. But how can there be friendship when there is no agreement? Yet, when each does his own business he does what is just, and friendship, they agree, does arise among citizens when each does what is just. Therefore, it is unclear what this friendship or agreement is about and in whom it is, in which they must be wise in order to be good. For, by Alcibiades' account, the same both have and do not have it (124b10–127d8).

Socrates once more perplexes Alcibiades (and leads him at 127d6–8 to swear about his ignorance and proclaim his disgrace) with an argument that is strictly correct in a special instance and remarkably tendentious in almost all normal circumstances. He achieves his result by ignoring the obvious. Husband and wife are in fact "friends" because their actions are directed toward obtaining or producing goods for their own use. Their "care" stems from and is directed toward a common repository. Socrates ignores the full family, city, or man as the user or enjoyer of goods. (He also ignores the goods that can be produced only in common—children, for example—and the implications of his consulting with Alcibiades in "common" here.) This abstraction parallels the earlier abstraction from use and enjoyment in the second part of the dialogue, an abstraction that also had enabled Socrates to treat arts and sciences as mastering both their products and how they are produced, as if the user of the product and his understanding of its purpose were irrelevant, and as if luck, wealth, or untutored qualities—e.g., Alcibiades' good looks—could not help one to obtain goods.

Socrates' argument might be strictly correct were care for one's own ever to be identical with love of some good, if a science on which we agreed were that

good, and if we wisely possessed that science. Here, however, he does not point out the limits of his argument. For Socrates' goal is to moderate Alcibiades' excessive self-absorption by ensnaring him in an argument whose result is that all differentiation makes agreement impossible and, therefore, opposes justice and what is good; in fact, he acts as if differentiation itself is contradictory. Indeed, we presume that Alcibiades has allowed Socrates to replace a discussion of how Alcibiades will win renown with a discussion of how he will become the "best" precisely because for Alcibiades there ultimately is no difference between them—we all want the best for "ourselves" and therefore distort what is good to a greater or lesser degree.

Socrates' discussion of justice, understood here as each doing his own, advances the conversation and brings to light more about the city than meets the eye, as long as we attend to the surface blemishes of the argument and keep in mind the contradictory result with which this part of the dialogue concludes. He and Alcibiades, we remember, cannot find the business that belongs to the gentleman—the good they seek—or the basis of his rule. But when we consider the problem of rule from the standpoint of using, enjoying, and producing goods in common—as we do if we try to account for Socrates' references to use and production—we can see that the statesman's purpose might precisely be to choose who will produce, enjoy, or use which goods, at which times, and in what amounts. This statesmanlike function, of course, raises questions about the city as a "whole," as opposed to the individual, and about the variety of political types. Most urgently, it raises the question of how we know that the goods being distributed are indeed good.

Now, the city that Socrates portrays here is composed of artisans each of whom disagrees with the practitioner of every other art. It is not surprising that he and Alcibiades can find no place for the gentleman or statesman here, because in such a city there is no measure that might guide production other than what occurs in production itself. The city composed of disagreeing artisans is essentially a city for the sake of satisfying each desire as if it were unlimited by any other desire; at root, it is a city either dominated by the limitless production of the strongest producer or dedicated to satisfying one disconnected desire after the other—it is a city (or for that matter an individual) for the sake of its sheer, immediate, unqualified, "thisness." Such a city is an appropriate political analogue to Alcibiades, who ultimately desires to be the only one in the world whose name is heard anywhere. But such a city would be an unsatisfactory home for Alcibiades because it neither needs nor can admit a ruler. Alcibiades' love of renown, however, would, if driven to the extreme and fully achieved, lead to similarly unsatisfactory results. Alcibiades seeks to have all by ruling all, but the difference between all and nothing (extreme courage and death) is insignificant when all that one does is for one's name, and one's name is all that remains.

Socrates points to the problem that we have been discussing of the connec-

tion, agreement, and disagreement of the arts through the examples he uses. He also indicates the complexity of the problem by differentiating in the course of his discussion between the body's health, the eye's sight, and the ear's hearing (126a6–b8). Is there a single "health," or is health itself always the health—the sight, the hearing—of this or that bodily part? More broadly, if all our ends are produced by arts and care for the body, as is true in the city that Socrates presents here, there is no clear ground on which to condemn Alcibiades or any lesser Alcibiades, because the ends that guide us suffer from the same defect: each fails to differentiate citizens and their tasks in a way that could lead to agreement, justice, and rank, because no one who is totally self-absorbed need listen to any other; some simply have stronger natures or more ability.

So, on the basis of Socrates' discussion so far, it is unclear how any ordinary goal or set of goals is different in kind from what Alcibiades seeks. Indeed, even the virtues that are noble, or choiceworthy, in themselves appear in the discussion up to now to be dispositions that ultimately are related to things of the body. Therefore, even if politics or the individual is for the sake of producing or maintaining a type of "soul"—a type of user or enjoyer of goods and capacities such as this city's would-be ruling gentleman—the soul in fact appears ultimately to be for the sake of the body. The implication here is that if men are only their bodily desires and the arts that serve these desires, there can be no true agreement among them.

We can see, nonetheless, that goods do exist—such as the music to which Socrates refers, or magnificent courage and other virtues that I have just mentioned—that are far removed from the body's needs, even though they shape and affect it. Indeed, despite any implications to the contrary, the "soul" does seem somehow different from the body and connected to these and other transcendent goods. Perhaps, then, if we better understood the soul we might find the unity for which there can be both agreement and differentiation and, therefore, standards (justice). Moreover, if we better understood the soul we might be able to separate the arts as examples of knowledge from the bodily goods to which they are connected. Furthermore, understanding the soul might enable us better to account for Alcibiades' own abilities, his "bewilderment," his pride, and his intentions—the characteristics that set him apart while characterizing him. Discussion of the soul, that is to say, may make intelligible how there can be goods that are apart from, or not simply reducible to, the body. Beyond this, it may allow us to develop Socrates' intriguing references to arithmetic and counting here. How are the differentiating and assembling in mathematics related to Alcibiades' peculiar gifts, and how are they related to the broader theme of separating and combining, and types of wholes or commons, on which Socrates has been touching? In order to illuminate such questions, therefore, Socrates now turns to the issue of the soul. His turn strikes us as both natural and surprising, for he has prepared the ground for discussion of the soul, but he has not done so explicitly.

VII

In the sixth part of the dialogue, Alcibiades had contradicted himself about justice, friendship, and agreement, and he concluded by swearing that he had, unawares, been disgraceful. Now, in the seventh part, Alcibiades agrees with Socrates that he must care for himself. This, however, does not mean caring for what is *of* (or belongs) to him any more than we care for our feet by caring for our shoes: although it is the shoemaker who makes shoes better, it is gymnastic that makes the body better.

We cannot know the art that improves us, and will not know how to care for ourselves, unless we know what we ourselves are. This is difficult, but we can discuss it, Socrates now says, if we discover the same in itself.

The user and what he uses are always different, as are the shoemaker, cutter, and harper different from their tools and from the hands and eyes that they use. Man is different from his own body: he is the user of the body. The user or ruler of the body is either nothing, or it is the soul; it cannot be the body itself or the whole of body and soul because the body does not rule. This (statement), however, is not exact, because they have not discovered the same in itself, but, rather, have considered what each (thing) is: at least, nothing dominates us more than the soul.

Socrates, therefore, is speaking to Alcibiades' soul, and to know oneself is to know the soul. The physician, farmer, craftsman, and moneylender know things of the body, and not even their own things, let alone the soul: they do not know themselves and are not moderate. Alcibiades' lover, therefore, loves his soul, not his body, and will not release him: Socrates, thus, is his only friend and will not leave him as long as he does not become deformed by becoming a lover of the Athenian people. He can take precautions against this by learning before he enters politics.

If they can bring about knowledge of the soul, they continue, they will know themselves and care for the soul. As the eye can see itself in a mirror or in the pupil where the virtue of the eye, sight, is, so the soul knows itself if it looks especially where the virtue of the soul—wisdom, knowledge, thought, or any other like this—is. If we, then, do know ourselves, we will also moderately know what belongs to ourselves and to others. One who does not know this could not be a statesman and will do evil and be wretched and, therefore, unhappy. To be happy, cities will have virtue, and, therefore, the one who will manage the city rightly and nobly will have the citizens participate in virtue and thus must first acquire virtue—justice and temperance—for himself, and not rule in order to do as he wishes. One who can do as he pleases, but without intelligence, will do evil. Alcibiades, therefore, needs virtue, not tyranny. Alcibiades, Socrates concludes, will, therefore, care for justice, as long as Socrates is not overcome by the strength of the city (127d9–135e8).

This part has the salutary personal and political result of leading Alcibiades

to see that he must care for justice not tyranny. Socrates does not lead him to philosophy, however, even though his explicit mention of the same in itself and the implicit problems he raises make us think of it. Neither philosophy nor “regime” is said in the dialogue. As with the earlier parallel section, the just—or justice—is shown to be both noble and good. Our delight with this is tempered, however, when we remember that the problems left after the just-concluded discussion of justice, friendship, and agreement remain unsolved. Moreover, this connection of the just, noble, and good is accomplished by first sundering the grounds for the equation, for in order to claim that man is soul, Socrates must unnaturally (and unconventionally) completely separate improving something, artifices that effect an improvement, and the tools that produce these artifices. Whereas Socrates had earlier shown the equivalence of the just, noble, and good by enclosing within the artisan’s mastery everything that his art touches, he now shows this equivalence by separating everything with which the artisan deals. Socrates demonstrates his uncanny skill by reaching the same conclusion from opposite paths!

Socrates’ discussion of soul is notable for saying so little about soul. It is the user, the ruler, and its virtue is wisdom. But what are its powers and parts? Who is the soul’s physician or trainer? What, so to speak, are its feet and hands, its shoemaker and shoes? More directly, while Socrates talks of fear, love, and care throughout the dialogue, he does not connect them to the soul here. The passions are not discussed explicitly, nor are the soul’s movements, its reaching toward and pushing away, its eros and self protection. In a sense, the soul is the very nothing that Socrates suggests that it is. Most significant of all, although the soul’s virtue is said to be wisdom, its orientation toward what it knows is not brought out. Indeed, knowing the soul and knowing its perfection are substantially identified, as if they are unmeasured by anything outside them. The earlier self-enclosure of an art and its purpose has given way to the self-enclosure of the soul and its virtue, with the body and the arts ruled by the soul—but for what, and how, it is not said. Socrates almost acts as if there could be soul without body and without anything other than itself for a soul to know.

In presenting this picture, Socrates has revealed his own—or his rival educators’—deepest wish: soul without body, whose only perfection is to know itself. This picture, indeed, is the analogue to Alcibiades’ deepest wish. For to be the single somebody all else serves is hardly different from being a simple, self-reflective, self-absorbed “soul,” wholly independent from, even if identical to, others. The difference between completely prideful separation and mastery and completely absorbed self-reflection is practically immaterial, and Socrates no more here than earlier describes the complex of hierarchical connections within which the arts, the virtues, and their objects are embedded. Socrates thus shows the similarity between the deepest wishes of tyranny, religion, and poetry and an utterly self-absorbed, or disembodied, thinking that springs from

bewilderment and is rooted insufficiently in attraction. However, there is, of course, truth in thinking of man as soul, because the movements and passions that, together with reason, come to mind when we mention the soul indicate the shortcoming of what is presented as the soul here. Were the “soul” simply to reflect what it sought to know, it would be indistinguishable from what it reflected. But in that case the thinker would no longer need care or courage for himself: he would no longer be soul.

Socrates' remarks about the same in itself, about likeness and resemblance, about wholes, and about the self-contained arts enable us to consider further several issues concerning thinking and the order among the things that are thought. These issues are beyond the dialogue's immediate problem. But they are the deeper cause of the immediate task, which is to lead the masterful Alcibiades to wish to be just.

Socrates' ease both in equating things (e.g., the just, noble, and expedient) and strictly differentiating them (e.g., justice and the arts, the arts and what they serve) is remarkable. The ease is caused, among other things, by the manner in which he deals with what is the same in itself. When Socrates says that he and Alcibiades have dealt with each one, but not with the same in itself, he has several intentions. They have not dealt with sameness as such, nor have they considered the way, if any, in which each thing that they treat as the same in itself, or identical to itself, is or can be in itself. Socrates does not speak of “idea” or of “nature” in this context. He does not even discuss self-sufficiency, or independence, or change. Nor does he ask what makes each just thing just, or what makes each soul a soul, nor why there are so many souls. His analyses are never exact, although there is always some level at which they are correct.

Socrates also does not discuss the parts of the city or the soul, the different types of wholes, or what resemblance and imitation are.

Because of this reticence, he also does not ask how each thing remains what it is when it is combined with other things. He provides the clues to examining these issues because he mentions them all, but almost never as issues. The reason for this is what we have called his experiment in the dialogue: to push to their limits the possible independence or enclosure of certain things (the soul, the single name of surpassing renown, arts, and virtue [justice]). Sophistry (philosophy), tyranny, artistic (poetic) making, and virtuous rule are all shown in their deepest wish: to stand fully alone and, ultimately, to stand alone while not being open to other parts of a whole. In each case but that of wisdom (the soul), the limit is shown explicitly through a contradictory argument; and further problems are shown implicitly. With the soul the limit is announced but not reached in argument. Socrates has revealed something of how each thing must be if it is to be simply.

As we have said, Socrates' experiment justifies the dialogue's traditional subtitle: on human nature. For men to have a nature, strictly, we would need to be able to be fully independent in one of the ways just mentioned. If we cannot

be entirely independent—and the dialogue means to teach that we cannot—we do not have a nature simply, however much we are open to or formed by nature, and however much this openness varies among different men. Men cannot be without being conventional. By the same account, men are natural in greater and lesser degrees; what is natural provides us with guiding standards.

One might ask, of course, how those things that can be simply are to be connected in a manner that still allows each to be. In the *Alcibiades*, Plato's image of this is Socrates' love for Alcibiades. Socrates "loves" Alcibiades for what he can be, for his good, and, therefore, for what he is in terms of what he can be. But does this love help enable Socrates to be what he can be? Is he merely protecting himself and others from Alcibiades? Or does Socrates see in Alcibiades something he needs, although he might also find it in others?

The wish to be nothing but a thinking soul, whose thought would be like counting measured merely by itself, leads to a distortion that would make Socrates less than he can be. Socrates needs to be attached to the full range of what can be articulated, and, therefore, to other men. But this need also means that Socrates might discover in another something that would surpass himself. Perhaps Socrates hoped that his own care would be perfected in Alcibiades.