PLATO

Alcibiades

First-read translation and commentary

Translation by Ruby Blondell
Commentary by Jacob Stump

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The Open Plato Project team: Marc Gasser-Wingate, Sukaina Hirji, Robert Howton, Emily Kress, Patricia Marechal, Katy Meadows, Evan Rodriguez, Gabe Shapiro, Jacob Stump, and Claudia Yau.

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The Alcibiades

In Plato's *Alcibiades*, Socrates approaches the young, soon-to-be-infamous politician Alcibiades to convince him that only Socrates can provide him with what he truly wants. Piqued by this bold claim, Alcibiades agrees to entertain a few questions about his ambitious plans. The ensuing conversation touches on themes of knowledge and ignorance, right and wrong, virtue, discipline, and the true nature of the self. It closes with a discussion of how to best care for ourselves and why we might want to make this our focus. Along the way we see Socrates in his typical refutational mode, bringing in everyday examples of shoes and shoe makers, sticks and stones, wrestlers, navigators, and more to press Alcibiades on whether his ambitions hold up to scrutiny. We see Alcibiades slowly come to realize that he may not really know what he thinks he does—or indeed what he really wants—and that he may not yet be up to the task of competing with the great Persian empire.

Socrates' initial line of questioning has to do with Alcibiades' plan to speak in front of the Greek assembly. What could he possibly be qualified to speak to the Athenians about? What he has studied either is irrelevant to the affairs of the assembly or a subject that others know as well as he does. Nor does he have any other specialist knowledge to bring to the table, not even knowledge of right and wrong. Though Alcibiades insists he is still better off than other Athenians, Socrates stresses that his advantages are no match for the Persian royalty. What is left, then, is for Socrates and Alcibiades both to figure out how to better themselves. And this care of the self will require knowing what the true self is in the first place.

Alcibiades, a real historical figure who likely did have a close relationship with Socrates, will go on to betray his native Athens and the Greeks more broadly multiple times over. This would have been common knowledge by the time the *Alcibiades* was written. Ancient authors portray Alcibiades as both capable and flamboyant; he used his wealth and family connections to enter an unprecedented seven chariots in the Olympic Games, winning the race and several other top places besides. He enthusiastically advised the Athenian assembly to undertake what became a disastrous defeat in the Sicilian expedition. As Alcibiades rose to take joint command of the army for the expedition he also was charged with religious infractions, so he defected to the Athenian rival Sparta, and from there to Persia. After an

unlikely return to the Athenian command and the absolution of his religious charges, he defected to Persia for a second time and was eventually assassinated. The *Alcibiades* ends on an ominous note, suggesting that Socrates will fail in his attempt to win over Alcibiades—a failure that foreshadows his tumultuous life and ultimate downfall, and may well have affected Socrates' own reputation among his fellow citizens.

Although in ancient times no one doubted that Plato wrote the *Alcibiades*, its authenticity has been in question since the 19th century. Doubts began when Friedrich Schleiermacher declared this dialogue to be "very insignificant and poor, and that to such a degree, that we cannot ascribe it to Plato" (1836, 329). This claim was very influential, and the *Alcibiades*, which was before extensively read, fell into oblivion. It is worth noting that there are two ancient commentaries on this dialogue—one by Proclus (412–485 CE) and one by Olympiodorus (495–570 CE)—and that the *Alcibiades* is mentioned in most ancient catalogs of Plato's works without any mention of doubts concerning its authenticity. See Denyer (2001), Smith (2004), and Jirsa (2009) for arguments for and against the authenticity of this dialogue.

Alcibiades

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103a S[ocrates]: You're probably wondering why I'm still following you around, son of Clinias, when the rest have given up. I was the first to fall in love with you but I haven't even said hello in all these years, unlike the others, who kept pestering you to talk to them. The reason for this was nothing human: what prevented me was a kind of divine opposition. You'll hear more about that later. But
103b now it's stopped preventing me, so I've come to talk to you. And I'm optimistic that it won't prevent me in future.

Anyway, I've been observing you all this time and gotten a pretty good idea of how you treat men who are in love with you. There have been a lot of them, with a high opinion of themselves, but every single one has retreated. They're put off by your high-and-
104a mighty attitude. I'd like to explain the reasoning behind that attitude. In your opinion you don't need anyone for anything; you've got so much going for you, body and soul, that you think you don't need anybody else. First off, you think of yourself as very tall and good-looking—and you're clearly right about that. You also belong to the most enterprising family in Athens—the greatest city
104b in Greece—and have a huge number of distinguished friends and relatives on your father's side, to help you out if you need anything, and just as many on your mother's. Most powerful of all, you think, is Pericles, son of Xanthippus, whom your father named as your and your brother's legal guardian. He is so powerful that he can do anything he wants, not just here in Athens but everywhere in
104c Greece, and in many major non-Greek regions as well. I'll also add that you're wealthy (though I don't think you pride yourself much on that). It's because you feel superior in all these ways that you've defeated your suitors, who gave up because they just weren't in your league—as you're well aware. That's why I'm certain that you're wondering what on earth I can be thinking. Why haven't *I* given up on my passion for you? What gives me enough hope to stay put when the rest have all retreated? ◆

104d A[lcibiades]: You may not realize this, Socrates, but you just beat me to it. I was meaning to approach you myself to ask these very questions. What on earth do you want? And what gives you enough

◆ 104c

The dialogue begins with a confession of love: "I was the first man to fall in love with you," Socrates says to Alcibiades. That is the sort of thing that you say when you want something. What is it that Socrates wants from Alcibiades?

Socrates is perhaps familiar to you. He is often the main character of Plato's dialogues, and his typical behavior is to ask people questions until it is shown that they are ignorant about what they thought they knew. He rids people of intellectual arrogance. He tries to motivate them to think about things fresh.

Who, though, is Alcibiades? We get many details about him in this opening. He is a young man (not yet 20 years old: see 123d). He is tall. He is extraordinarily handsome. He comes from a rich and powerful family. His guardian, or official mentor, is the most influential politician in all of Athens. In short, he has almost every advantage that a young person could hope for. He is in every way set up for success.

This seems to be the very first conversation between Socrates and Alcibiades (though Socrates pursued him for many years, he never spoke to him). What is it that Socrates wants?

hope to keep on pestering me, going to so much trouble to show up wherever I happen to be? I'm genuinely wondering what you're up to, and I'd love to hear you explain.

S: If you're really eager to know what I'm thinking, as you claim, will you *listen* eagerly as well? Can I be sure that I'm talking to someone who'll stay around to hear me?

A: Absolutely! Go ahead and talk.

104e S: Watch out then! Don't be surprised if it's as hard for me to stop talking to you as it was to get started in the first place.

A: Go ahead and talk, please. I *will* listen.

S: Then I guess I'll have to talk. It's difficult, as someone in love, to approach a man who doesn't give in to those who are in love with him, but I'll have to get up the nerve to tell you what I think. I'd have given up on my passion a long time ago—or so I've convinced myself—if I saw you living contentedly with the advantages I just mentioned, and thinking you should spend the rest of your life that
105a way. But it's my belief that you have other things in mind. Let me explain to you in person. This will also prove that I really have been thinking about you all this time.

Here's what I think. Suppose some god asked you, "Alcibiades, would you rather live with all the advantages you have now, or drop dead if you can't obtain even greater ones?" I think you'd choose death. What hope is keeping you alive, then? I'll tell you. You think that as soon as you're old enough to address the Athenian
105b public—in just a few days—you'll demonstrate to the Athenians that you deserve greater honors than Pericles or anyone else who ever existed; that this will make you the most powerful man in Athens; and that if you're the greatest here you'll also be the greatest in the whole of Greece, and not only in Greece, but among all the non-Greeks living on our continent. And if that same god
105c informed you that you must limit your power to Europe, and won't be allowed to go to Asia or get involved in things over there, I don't think you'd be willing to live under such restrictions; you'd rather die than not spread your name and power among practically all the human race. And I think you believe no one in history has ever been really significant except Cyrus and Xerxes. I'm not just speculating: I know for sure that these are your hopes.

Since you know I'm speaking the truth, your response might be,
105d "How is this relevant, Socrates?" I'll tell you, my dear son of Clinias and Deinomache. It's impossible for you to accomplish all these plans without my help. That's how much power I think I have over you and your doings. I think this is why the god wouldn't let me talk to you for so long, so I waited until he would let me. You're hoping to demonstrate to Athens that you deserve everything it has
105e to offer, which will instantly give you total power, or so you hope; in the same way, I'm hoping to gain the greatest possible power over you by demonstrating that I deserve everything you have to offer, and that no guardian or relative, or anyone else except me, can give you the power you crave (god willing, of course). I believe the reason the god prevented me from talking to you when you were younger, before you were filled with such hope, was so that
106a our conversation wouldn't be a waste of time. He's unleashed me now because at this point you may actually listen. ◆

A: Socrates, now that you've started talking you appear even weirder than you did when you were just silently following me around—and you looked pretty weird even then! But regardless of whether you're right about what I'm thinking, you appear to have made up your mind, and I won't get anywhere trying to convince you otherwise, even if I deny it. Okay then. Let's say you're absolutely right about what I'm thinking. How is it that I'm going to get all this with your help, and can't get it without you? Can you tell me?

106b S: Are you asking if I can make a long speech, like the ones you're used to hearing? That's not my way. But I think I may be able to demonstrate that I'm right, provided you're willing to do me just one little favor.

A: Sure, as long as it's not anything difficult.

S: Do you think answering questions is difficult?

A: No.

S: Then please answer me.

A: Go ahead and ask.

S: Is it okay if I question you on the assumption that I'm right about what you have in mind?

◆ 106a

Alcibiades is from a rich and powerful family. He could spend his life in leisure, like children from exceptionally wealthy families have always done. However, he is not that sort of person. He was born with many advantages—but he wants even more. He wants to be the most famous and powerful person in the world. He is full of ambition.

It's worth pausing to check in with yourself. What do you think of this ambition? Do you admire Alcibiades for it? Or do you think that it is suspicious?

Socrates tells us what he wants from Alcibiades. He thinks that Alcibiades will not be able to fulfill his ambitions without him. He wants to convince Alcibiades of that, so that Alcibiades will be dependent on him. He wants Alcibiades to need him—to believe that, without Socrates' help, he will not be successful.

What could Alcibiades possibly need Socrates for? Socrates is not a politician. He is not a businessman. He is poor, notoriously ugly, and known for going barefoot in public spaces. What does Socrates have to offer someone like Alcibiades?

106c A: Sure, if you want. That way I'll find out what you have to say.

S: All right then. As I said, you're intending to address the Assembly ◆ soon, to give them your advice. Suppose I cornered you on your way up to the podium and asked, "Alcibiades, what subject is up for deliberation? What are you going to advise the Athenians about? Is it something you know better than they do?" What would your answer be?

106d A: I'd say, of course, that it's something I know better than they do.

S: So you're a good advisor about things you actually know.

A: Of course.

S: And everything you know you either learned from other people or found out by yourself?

A: Sure. How else could I know anything?

S: Is there any way you could ever have learned something from someone else, or found it out, without wanting either to learn about it or to look into it by yourself?

A: No.

S: And would you have wanted to learn or look into something you thought you already knew?

A: Of course not.

106e S: So for the things you know now, was there once a time when you thought you *didn't* know them?

A: There must have been.

S: Well I have a pretty good idea of what you've learned. Tell me if I leave anything out. If I remember rightly, you learned your letters, and to play the lyre and to wrestle. (You didn't want to learn to play the pipe.) Those are the things you know about—unless of course you learned something else without my knowledge. But as far as I'm aware you've never left the house, day or night, to pursue any other studies.

A: No, I haven't been seeing a teacher for anything else.

107a S: So when the Athenians are deliberating about letters, i.e. how to write correctly, will you stand up to give them your advice?

◆ 106c
The Assembly was one of the main governing bodies of Athens. It was open to all adult male Athenians. It was a forum of direct democracy. Anyone could speak up and debate the meeting's proposals, which included things like going to war, making new laws, and electing officials. A vote would be taken, and the majority's decision would be sovereign.

A: Certainly not, by Zeus!

S: Or how to play the lyre?

A: No way!

S: And wrestling is surely not something they are in the habit of deliberating in the Assembly.

A: No.

S: On what subject *will* you advise them then, when they're deliberating? Not construction, presumably.

A: Of course not.

S: Because a builder will give them better advice about that than you.

A: Yes.

107b S: And not prophecy?

A: No.

S: Because a prophet could advise them on that better than you.

A: Yes.

S: And he could be tall or short, good-looking or disgraceful-looking, noble or low-born?

A: Of course.

S: In each case, I think, they take advice from someone who knows about the subject at hand, not someone who's rich.

A: Of course.

S: And when someone advises the Athenians about public health, they don't care whether he's rich or poor◆. They just look for someone who's a doctor.

107c A: That makes sense.

S: When would it be correct, then, for *you* to get up and advise them? On what subject of inquiry?

A: When they're discussing their own business. ◆

S: Do you mean the business of ship-building, such as what kind of ships they should get built?

◆ 107b
Socrates is nudging Alcibiades to think that his advantages in life (such as his wealth) are irrelevant to whether or not his fellow citizens will listen to him in the Assembly. They don't listen to the richest person whenever they need advice. They listen to the expert—to the doctor, for example, whenever they need advice about public health.

◆ 107c
A bit vague, isn't it? Perhaps Alcibiades doesn't really know what he has in mind.

A: No I don't, Socrates.

S: Because you don't know how to build ships. Is that why, or is there some other reason?

A: That's the reason.

107d S: Then what kind of business *are* you talking about?

A: When they're deliberating about war or peace, Socrates, or any other aspect of the city's business.

S: Do you mean deliberating about who to make peace or go to war with, and how to do it?

A: Yes.

S: Shouldn't they make war or peace with those with whom it is better to do so?

A: Yes.

S: And when it's better?

107e A: Of course.

S: And for as long as it's better?

A: Yes.

S: Okay. If the Athenians were deliberating about who to wrestle with, and who to just spar with, and how to do it, would you or a trainer give better advice?

A: A trainer, of course.

S: Can you tell me what the trainer would focus on when advising them to wrestle with some people but not others, and when and how to do so? For example, they should wrestle with those with whom it is better to do so, right?

A: Yes.

S: And to the extent that it is better?

108a A: Yes.

S: And when it is better?

A: Absolutely.

S: What about the lyre? A singer has to play notes and take steps in time to the music, right?

A: Yes, he does.

S: At the moment when it is better?

A: Yes.

S: And to the extent that it is better?

A: I agree.

S: All right then. Since you used the word “better” for both skills—
108b wrestling and singing to the lyre—what do you call “better” in the case of lyre playing? In the case of wrestling, I call it “athletic.” What do you call it, along the same lines, for the lyre?

A: Nothing comes to mind.

S: Just try to follow my example. My answer was that in every case “better” means “correct.” And “correct” presumably means “done with the relevant skill,” right?

A: Yes.

S: And wasn’t the skill in question athletics?

A: Of course.

108c S: And I used the word “athletic” for what is better in wrestling.

A: That’s what you said.

S: Wasn’t it well said?

A: I think so.

S: Come on, now it’s your turn. After all, speaking well is presumably appropriate for you too. First, tell me what skill includes playing the lyre, singing, and moving correctly to the music. What’s this called as a whole? Can you still not say?

A: No, I can’t.

S: Try it this way. What goddesses are the patrons of this skill?

A: Do you mean the Muses, Socrates?

108d S: Yes. Think, then: what word derived from the Muses do we use for this skill?

A: I think you mean “music.”

S: I do. What does it mean, then, to use this skill “correctly”? Answer the way I did before, when I talked about using the skill of athletics correctly. What do you say in this case? How is it done correctly?

A: When it’s done musically, I think. ◆

◆ 108d
This discussion might be a bit confusing. Think about it like this.

Suppose someone tells you to do an activity *better*. What exactly should you do?

Well, that depends on the activity.

Are you playing a sport? Then for you to be better you need to be *more athletic*.

In contrast, are you playing a musical instrument? Then for you to be better you need to be *more musical*.

The basic point is that each activity has a unique standard of goodness. What it is to be good when playing a sport is different from what it is to be good when playing a musical instrument. We use the same word—good (or “more good,” i.e., better)—but the standard is different.

S: Well said! All right then, when it comes to doing better in
108e matters of war and peace, what do you mean by “better”? In our previous examples you said that “better” means, in the one case, “more musical,” and in the other, “more athletic.” Try to say, in the same way, what it means in this further case.

A: I really can’t.

S: Suppose you were giving advice about food (saying this is better than that, and it’s better to eat it at a specific time and in a specific quantity), and someone asked, “What do you mean by ‘better,’ Alcibiades?” Surely it would be disgraceful if in that case you could
109a answer that what is better is healthier, even though you make no claim to be a doctor, but when it comes to something on which you do claim to be knowledgeable, about which you’re going to stand up to advise the Assembly as an expert—won’t you feel disgraced if, when asked about *that*, you have nothing to say, as seems likely? Won’t that appear disgraceful?

A: Absolutely.

S: Think about it then, and do your best to tell me. By what criterion do we decide what is better when it comes to making peace and waging war on the people that we should?

A: I *am* thinking, but I can’t figure it out. ◆

◆ 109a
Why did Plato write dialogues?

There are many possible answers. You might notice, though, how the conversation is affecting you.

Socrates asks a question, and Alcibiades says that he doesn’t know. That makes space for *you* to think about what the answer might be.

Give it some thought. By what criterion do we decide what is better when it comes to making peace and going to war?

In other words, what is the standard of goodness with such activities? What is it that makes going to war done well? Fill in the blank: going to war is done well when it is done _____.

S: Don’t you know the kind of injury we accuse each other of when we go to war, and what we say to justify taking such a step?

109b A: Sure. We say we’ve been injured by deception, or violence, or theft.

S: Hold on! Injured how by these behaviors? Try to explain the different ways of being injured.

A: By “different ways” do you mean “rightly or wrongly,” Socrates?

S: Exactly!

A: Well that makes all the difference in the world.

S: Okay then. Which group will you advise the Athenians to make war on, wrong-doers or those who are behaving rightly?

109c A: That's a challenging question. Even if someone *did* intend to make war on people behaving rightly, he wouldn't admit it.

S: Presumably because that's not lawful.

A: It certainly isn't. And I don't think it's admirable either.

S: So you too will appeal to these principles in your speech?

A: I'll have to.

S: So here's the answer to the question I was asking just now: what does "better" mean when deciding whether to go to war or not, and against whom to do so or not, and when to do so or not. It turns out that "better" actually means "more rightly."

A: That's what it looks like.

109d S: What, my dear Alcibiades? Don't you realize that this is something you don't know? Or did *I* not realize that you learned about it after all, by seeing a teacher who taught you to tell the difference between right and wrong? Well, who is he? Do tell me! That way you can recommend me to him as a student.

A: You're joking, Socrates.

S: No I'm not. I swear by the sacred bond of our friendship, which I would never, ever betray. Just tell me who he is, if you can.

109e A: What if I can't? Don't you think I could know some other way about what's right and wrong?

S: Yes, if you found out by yourself.

A: Well, don't you believe I could have done that?

S: Certainly, if you looked into it.

A: So you don't think I could have looked into it?

S: Sure I do, if you thought you didn't already know.

A: So wasn't there ever a time when I thought that?

110a S: Well said! In that case, can you tell me just when it was that you thought you didn't know about right and wrong? Come on! Were

you looking into it last year, thinking you didn't know? Or did you think at that time that you *did* know? Tell me the truth, or our conversation will be a waste of time.

A: I thought I did know, of course.

S: And the same goes for two years ago, or three, or four?

A: Yes.

S: But before that you were just a child, right?

A: Yes.

S: And I'm certain that back then you *did* think you knew.

A: What do you mean, you're "certain"?

110b S: When you were a child I often used to overhear you, at school and other places, playing dice or some other game. You certainly didn't sound like someone who was confused about right and wrong. On the contrary, I'd hear you loudly and indignantly accusing some other child of wrongdoing, calling him a dirty rotten cheat. Isn't this true?

A: But Socrates, what else was I going to do when someone wronged me?

S: You mean, what *should* you have done, if you didn't actually know at the time whether you were being wronged or not?

110c A: But I did know, by Zeus! It was perfectly clear to me that I was being wronged.

S: So even as a child, it looks like you thought you knew about right and wrong.

A: Yes. And I did know, too!

S: After finding out when, exactly? Presumably not during the time when you already thought you knew.

A: Of course not.

S: So when *did* you not believe that you knew? If you think about it, you'll find there was no such time.

A: By Zeus, Socrates, I've nothing to say to that.

110d S: So you don't know about these things from finding them out by yourself.

A: It really doesn't look like it.

S: But just now you also said that you knew without ever having learned them. If you didn't learn them from anyone else, or find out by yourself, then how *do* you know them? Where did your knowledge come from? ◆

A: Maybe I answered incorrectly, when I said I knew from finding them out by myself.

S: Then what *did* happen?

A: I learned just like anyone else, I think.

S: We've come round in a circle. Who did you learn from? Do tell me!

110e A: People in general.

S: If you give the credit to people in general then you're not relying on serious teachers.

A: Why not? Aren't they capable of teaching?

S: They couldn't even teach someone to make a good or bad move in checkers, and I think that's less important than what is right. What? Don't you agree?

A: Yes.

S: And if they can't teach a less important subject, can they really teach a more important one?

A: Yes, I think they can. They can teach a lot of things more important than checkers, anyway.

S: Such as?

111a A: Well, for example, I learned to speak Greek from people in general. I couldn't name any particular teacher, but I credit those people that you don't consider serious teachers.

S: Yes, my noble friend! People in general *are* good at teaching Greek. You'd be right to turn to them for this kind of instruction.

A: Why's that?

S: Because on that subject they have something all good teachers need.

A: Which is?

◆ 110d

What's going on? Let's go back a few steps. Socrates got Alcibiades to admit that he intends to give advice in the Assembly about when it is right or wrong to undertake military action. He now wants to know whether Alcibiades has knowledge of what is right and what is wrong—or, more specifically, about justice and injustice. *That's* what Alcibiades is going to speak about. So, will he know what he's talking about?

Where *does* knowledge come from? It must come from somewhere... but where?

The assumption in the conversation is that you gain knowledge either by learning it from someone else or thinking carefully and discovering it for yourself.

Alcibiades, though, says that he never learned from someone else what is right and what is wrong, and he seems not to have ever given it careful thought on his own.

Is it likely, then that he has knowledge of it?

As always with Plato, the questions that Socrates asks to the interlocutor are useful to ask yourself.

You probably call some things right and other things wrong. You might even do that feeling certain that you are correct.

Who, though, did you learn about the nature of the right and the wrong from? Are you confident that they were a good instructor? (You might have liked them, they might have been nice to you, but that is a different matter.)

Or was there a time when you thought carefully and discovered on your own the nature of what is right and what is wrong? (You probably *have* thought about it before, but have you thought about it rigorously enough to be certain that you are correct?)

Socrates implies at 110b that Alcibiades would be mistaken to call something wrong without being certain that he has knowledge of what it is for something

continued on next page →

S: You know that people who are going to teach anything at all must first know it themselves, right?

111b A: Of course.

S: And if they really know something they must agree on it, not disagree?

A: Yes.

S: If there's something they don't agree on, would you say they know it?

A: Of course not.

S: Then how could they teach that subject?

A: There's no way they could. ◆

S: Well then. Do you think people in general disagree on what a
111c stick or a stone is? If you ask someone, they all agree on the answer, right? And when they want a stick or stone they all reach for the same thing? The same applies to anything of that kind. That's more or less what I take you to mean by knowing or not knowing Greek. Right?

A: Yes.

S: So on this sort of thing they agree, as we said, both with each other and in their own minds. And our cities, as civic entities, don't get into disputes with each other because they have different opinions on such matters?

A: No, they don't.

S: So it makes sense that for *these* things people in general would make good teachers.

111d A: Yes.

S: And if we wanted to make someone knowledgeable about this, we'd be right to send him to people in general for instruction?

A: Absolutely.

S: What if we wanted to know not just what a human being is, or a horse, but which ones would be good or bad at running? Would people in general be capable of teaching that?

A: Certainly not.

◆ 110d *continued*

to be wrong. Do you think he is right about that?

Suppose you think that he *is* right about it (after all, how could you know that something in particular is wrong if you didn't know what it is for something to be wrong in the first place?). What does it imply for how we should behave in calling things right and other things wrong? Should we abandon that altogether if we do not have knowledge of such things? Should we proceed with more caution?

◆ 111b

It's useful when reading Plato to keep in mind what Socrates is trying to do. At this point, he is trying to convince Alcibiades that he could not have learned the nature of what is right and wrong from people in general. He could not have learned it in the same way that he learned how to speak Greek. He could not have learned it simply by absorbing it from his environment.

Why not?

Here is the argument in valid premise-conclusion form:

(i) If someone can teach something, then they must know it for themselves (111a).

(ii) If people in general disagree about something, then they do not all have knowledge about that thing (111b).

(iii) People in general disagree about the nature of right and wrong (111b).

(iv) So, people in general do not all have knowledge of the nature of right and wrong. *This follows from (ii) and (iii)*.

(v) So, people in general cannot teach the nature of right and wrong. *This follows from (i) and (iv)*.

What do you think of the argument?

Look at premises (ii) and (iii). Are they true?

People *do* disagree about what is right and wrong. So, they cannot all have

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111e S: And the fact that they completely disagree is sufficient evidence for you that they don't really know about it and aren't qualified to teach it?

A: It is.

S: What if we wanted to know not just what human beings are, but which ones are healthy or diseased? Would people in general be capable of teaching us that?

A: Certainly not.

S: And if you saw them disagreeing on the subject, that would be evidence that they were bad teachers?

A: Yes, it would.

S: Well then, when it comes to people or actions that are right or
112a wrong, do you think people in general agree, either with themselves or with each other?

A: Far from it Socrates, by Zeus!

S: In fact, don't you think these are the things they agree on least of all?

A: Very much so.

S: I doubt you've ever seen or heard people disagreeing so fiercely about what is or isn't healthy that they came to blows over it and killed each other.

A: Certainly not.

S: But when it's a question of what's right or wrong, I know you've
112b heard of this happening—even if you haven't seen it—from many sources, including Homer. You've listened to both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*◆, right?

A: Of course I have, Socrates.

S: Both poems are about a disagreement over whether something is right or wrong, aren't they?

A: Yes.

S: And this disagreement brought fighting and death to the Greeks and, on the other side, to the Trojans, and also to Penelope's suitors and Odysseus.

◆ 111b *continued*
knowledge of it, else they would not disagree about it (compare: most English speakers know how to spell "grass," and that's why they do not disagree about it).

On the other hand, you might think that we can disagree about particular cases without disagreeing about the nature of the thing we are disagreeing about. Could we not agree, say, about what makes a good friend, but disagree about whether or not this person is indeed a good friend?

You might also call to mind that you sometimes disagree with *yourself* about the nature of right and wrong, perhaps changing your mind from day to day. Does this also show that you do not have knowledge of it?

As for premise (i), it's worth considering what conception of teaching Socrates must have in mind. What is the sort of teaching that requires knowledge to be able to do? Is there a different sort of teaching that doesn't require knowledge?

◆ 112b
There is a popular culture at each time and place in history. In Plato's time, that popular culture included Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. These epic poems were well known throughout Greece. They were in the air of the place—literally in the air, since their most common way of being transmitted was through public recitations with simple musical accompaniment. You listened to Homer being recited in a way not too dissimilar to how today you might go to a concert to hear a recitation of certain popular songs.

112c A: True.

S: And when Athenians and Spartans and Boeotians died at Tanagra, and later at Coronea—where your own father met his end—the fighting and death were caused, I think, by a disagreement about precisely this, i.e. about right and wrong. Am I mistaken?

A: No, that's true.

112d S: Are we to say, then, that these people actually know about the things they disagree on, which they dispute so vehemently that they make each other pay the ultimate price?

A: Apparently not.

S: Isn't this the kind of teacher you're giving credit to, then? People who lack knowledge, as you yourself agree?

A: It looks like it.

S: How likely is it, then, that *you* know what's right and wrong, when you vacillate like this on the subject, and obviously haven't learned it from anyone or found it out by yourself?

A: Not likely, based on what you're saying.

112e S: You shouldn't have said that, Alcibiades. Can you see why?

A: Said what?

S: You said *I* was making those statements.

A: Well, aren't you saying I know nothing about right and wrong?

S: No, I'm not.

A: Oh, you mean *I* said it?

S: Yes.

A: How so?

S: Let me explain it this way: if I asked you which is more, one or two, you'd say two?

A: I would.

S: By how much?

A: By one.

S: So which of us is saying two is one more than one?

A: I am.

S: I asked the questions, and you answered, right?

A: Yes.

S: In this case is it obviously me, the questioner, who's saying something, or you, the answerer?

113a A: It's me.

S: What if I ask you how to spell the name "Socrates," and you tell me? Which of us is saying something?

A: I am.

S: Okay, now tell me in general terms. If two people converse using question and answer, which of them is saying something, the questioner or the answerer?

A: The answerer, Socrates, I think.

113b S: And wasn't I asking the questions all the way through our discussion?

A: Yes.

S: And you were answering them?

A: Absolutely.

S: So which of us was saying things?

A: It looks like I was, Socrates, based on what we just agreed.

S: On the subject of right and wrong, then, here's what was said: Alcibiades, good-looking son of Clinias, doesn't know about these things but thinks that he does, and is about to go to the Assembly to advise the Athenians on things he knows nothing about. Wasn't that it?

113c A: Apparently so.

S: So, Alcibiades, it follows that, in Euripides' words, you probably "heard this from yourself, not me." I'm not the person who said these things: you are. You can't hold me responsible. But that doesn't mean you misspoke: the project you have in mind is a crazy one, my excellent friend: undertaking to teach something you don't know without bothering to learn it yourself. ◆

◆ 113c

This is the upshot of the first stretch of Socrates' argument (106c–113c).

Alcibiades' strategy for winning fame and power is to speak up in the Assembly to give advice about when it is just and unjust to engage in military action.

Socrates has shown, though, that Alcibiades does not have knowledge of the nature of justice and injustice.

That isn't something that Alcibiades seemed to be aware of before the conversation. So, he has now been brought to recognize that he is ignorant about something that he believed himself to know (or, at least, he has enough to draw that conclusion when he is ready to admit it to himself).

Alcibiades' strategy, then, has been exposed to be one of undertaking to teach something that he doesn't know—a risky strategy, one that is potentially disastrous for acquiring the social status that he desires.

113d A: But Socrates, I think it's rare for the Athenians and the rest of the Greeks to deliberate whether something is right or wrong. They think this kind of thing is clear, so they set it aside and consider, instead, what will benefit them in practice. ◆ Because I don't think what's right is the same as what's beneficial. A lot of people have benefited from committing terrible wrongs, and others, I think, have done the right thing without benefitting personally.

113e S: So? Let's say that what's right and what's beneficial are as different as they could be. Surely you don't think *you* know what is beneficial for human beings, and for what reason?

A: Yes I do, Socrates. Why shouldn't I? Unless you're going to ask me all over again who I learned from or how I found out by myself.

S: What a way to talk! If you say something incorrect, and this can actually be demonstrated using the same reasoning as before, you think you should hear something new and different. You demand another set of proofs, as if the earlier ones were worn-out old clothes and you won't get dressed again unless someone brings you
114a fresh, unsoiled evidence. Shall I overlook your derailing of the argument and ask you, all the same, how you learned what's beneficial and who your teacher was, in other words ask you all the same things as before, bundled into a single question? But if I do the outcome will clearly be the same. You won't be able to demonstrate that you know what's beneficial either because you learned it from someone or because you found out by yourself. But since you're too pampered to enjoy the taste of the same old argument, I'll set aside the question of whether you know or don't
114b know what benefits the Athenians. Instead, why don't you demonstrate to me whether what is right is the same as what is beneficial, or different? If you want, you can do it by questioning me, like I did you, or just talk through it on your own.

A: I don't know if I'm capable of going through it in front of you.

S: Please, my friend, just think of me as the Athenian public in the Assembly. When you're there you'll have to convince each individual, right?

A: Yes.

114c S: And if someone can convince people one by one, can't he also convince them collectively, provided he knows what he's talking

◆ 113d

In other words, Alcibiades is saying that people tend to think it's obvious what is right and wrong. They don't deliberate about *that* in public forums. What they deliberate about instead is what will benefit them.

Notice that Alcibiades' point implies that what is right for a person to do can be different from what benefits a person. An action can be right for you to do even though it is not the action that would benefit you in the situation. For example, maybe telling the truth is right for you to do, even though it would come at the cost of the other person's no longer liking you or inviting you to their events.

What do you think? Is it possible for an action to be the right thing to do even though it does not benefit you?

Or, in contrast, does doing what is right also always benefit you?

These questions are relevant to the ensuing discussion, where Socrates will argue that what's right and what's beneficial are not separate. They do not come apart.

about? A schoolteacher, for example, can presumably convince either an individual or a large group on the subject of letters?

A: Yes.

S: With numbers, too, won't the same person be able to convince one student or a large group?

A: Yes.

S: And that person will be someone who knows the subject, i.e. an expert in arithmetic?

A: Absolutely.

S: Doesn't this apply to you as well? If you're able to convince a large group, won't you also be able to convince just one person on the same subject? ◆

A: I guess so.

S: And that subject will clearly be something you know about.

A: Yes.

114d S: Then the only difference between an orator addressing the Assembly and one conversing the way we are now is that the first convinces people collectively, while the second does so individually?

A: Probably.

S: Okay then. Since it looks like anyone that can convince a large group can also convince an individual, why don't you practice on me now? Try to demonstrate that what's right is not always beneficial.

A: You're a bully, Socrates!

S: Maybe, but my bullying is going to convince you of the opposite of what *you* were unwilling to convince *me* of.

A: Go ahead and talk, then.

S: Just keep on answering my questions.

114e A: No! You do the talking.

S: What? Don't you want to be well and truly convinced?

A: Of course I do.

◆ 114c

Think about this question for a moment. What's the right answer?

Suppose you can convince a large group to believe something. Does that mean that you will also be able to convince one person to believe it?

No, right? There are many rhetorical techniques that are effective on large crowds that are not effective when talking only to one person. People think differently whenever they are in large groups. In a one-on-one conversation, there is often a greater ability to think carefully and rigorously.

Look back to the dialogue. Socrates asks this question, Alcibiades agrees, and then Socrates continues. Alcibiades agrees, even though the correct answer is fairly obviously the *opposite* of what he says.

Does Socrates not realize that? Why is he leading Alcibiades to admit something that is false?

Always keep in mind what Socrates is trying to accomplish. He wants Alcibiades to realize that he is incapable of speaking effectively in the Assembly. He wants him to realize that his own natural talents and advantages are insufficient for him to be successful. He wants him to realize that he needs more education—in particular, that he needs help from Socrates to have a chance of satisfying his ambitions.

Alcibiades answers yes to Socrates' question. He thus affirms that the following claim is true:

If you can convince a large group, then you can convince one person.

Now suppose that Alcibiades *cannot* convince one person. Suppose that he *cannot* convince Socrates that what is right and what is beneficial are separate matters. It would thus follow (according to the claim above) that he could not convince a large group (since, if he could convince a large group, he *would* be able to convince one person).

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S: And if you yourself say that something's the case, won't that mean you *have* been well and truly convinced?

A: I think so, yes.

S: Keep on answering then. And if you don't hear from your own lips that what's right is also beneficial, then don't take it on faith from anyone else.

A: I won't. In that case I'll have to answer. But I don't suppose it'll do me any harm.

115a S: You have prophetic powers! Now, tell me, are you saying some right actions are beneficial and some are not?

A: Yes.

S: Well then, are some of them admirable, and some not?

A: What do you mean?

S: I'm asking if you ever thought anyone behaved in a way that was disgraceful but also right.

A: No.

S: Rather, everything that's right is also admirable?

A: Yes.

S: What about admirable things, then? Are they all good, or are some of them good, but not others?

A: In my opinion, Socrates, some admirable things are bad.

S: And some disgraceful things are good?

A: Yes.

115b S: Is this the kind of thing you mean? Many people are wounded or killed in battle when going to the aid of a comrade or relative, while others, who don't bring such aid when they should, get away unhurt.

A: Absolutely.

S: And you'd call this kind of assistance admirable, in that they tried to help those they should, which is courage. Right?

A: Yes.

◆ 114c *continued*

Why does that matter? It matters because it would mean that Alcibiades needs more education. It would mean that his current strategy for satisfying his ambitions is doomed to fail. And so it opens the door for him to need Socrates' help.

S: But you'd also call it bad, right, in that they were wounded or killed?

A: Yes.

115c S: Aren't death and courage different things?

A: Absolutely.

S: So aiding one's friends is both admirable and bad, but not in the same respect?

A: Apparently so.

S: Next, consider whether this kind of assistance is also good, at least in so far as it's admirable, as in the example I used. After all, you agreed that it's admirable in that it's courageous. Look at courage itself, then: is it good or bad? Look at it this way: which would you rather have, good things or bad?

A: Good ones.

115d S: And the greatest goods most of all?

A: Yes.

S: And this is the kind of thing you'd be least willing to be deprived of?

A: Of course.

S: What about courage, then? How much would you accept to be deprived of that?

A: I'd rather die than be a coward!

S: So you think cowardice is the ultimate evil.

A: I do.

S: As bad as death, apparently.

A: I agree.

S: Aren't life and courage the polar opposites of death and cowardice?

A: Yes.

115e S: And you'd want to have the first two most of all, and the second two least?

A: Yes.

S: Because you think the first two are best and the second two are worst?

A: Absolutely.

S: So you believe courage is one of the best things, and death one of the worst?

A: I do.

S: In so far as aiding your friends in battle is admirable, then, that's because it involves something good, i.e. courage, which is why you called it admirable?

A: It looks like it.

S: But you also called it bad, because it involves something bad, i.e. death?

A: Yes.

S: Then this is the right way to talk about each outcome: if you call it bad in so far as it produces something bad, you must also call it good in so far as it produces something good.

116a A: I think so, yes.

S: And in so far as it's good, it's admirable, but in so far as it's bad, it's disgraceful?

A: Yes.

S: So when you say aiding friends in battle is admirable but bad, that's no different from calling it good but bad.

A: I think that's true, Socrates.

S: So nothing admirable, in so far as it *is* admirable, is bad, and nothing disgraceful, in so far as it's disgraceful, is good.

116b A: Apparently not.

S: Here's another way of looking at it. A person who's doing admirably is also doing well, right?

A: Yes.

S: And those who do well thrive?

A: Of course.

S: And they thrive because they've got good things?

A: Absolutely.

S: And they obtain good things by doing well and admirably?

A: Yes.

S: So doing well is good?

A: Of course.

S: Isn't good behavior admirable?

A: Yes.

116c S: So once again the same thing has turned out to be both good and admirable?

A: It looks like it.

S: So if we find something admirable we'll also find it good—based on this argument, at least?

A: Yes, we'll have to.

S: Well then, are good things beneficial or not?

A: They are.

S: Do you remember what we agreed when we were talking about right and wrong?

A: I think it was that people who are behaving rightly must also be behaving admirably.

S: And vice versa?

A: Yes.

116d S: And that good things must be beneficial?

A: Yes.

S: So, Alcibiades, what's right is beneficial. ◆

A: It looks like it.

S: What? Aren't you the one who's saying this, while I just ask questions?

A: It looks like I am, apparently.

◆ 116d

That's a whirlwind of an argument. What happened?

Here is one way to understand it.

(i) If you behave rightly, then you behave admirably.

(ii) If you behave admirably, then you are doing well, i.e., you are experiencing something good.

(iii) To experience something good is to be benefitted.

(iv) So, if you behave admirably, then you are benefited. *This follows from (ii) and (iii)*.

(v) So, if you behave rightly, then you are benefited. *This follows from (i) and (iv)*.

It follows that it is impossible to do what is right without its benefiting you. If you do what is right, then you will be benefited. Your life will be improved. That is what the conclusion says.

Give some thought to each premise. Is each premise plausible?

S: Then if someone stands up to advise the Athenians, or even the Peparethians, thinking he understands what's right and wrong, and states that what's right is sometimes bad, wouldn't you just laugh at
116e him? After all, you're the one saying that what's right and what's beneficial are the same. ◆

A: By the gods, Socrates, I don't even know myself what I am saying! I feel weirdly disoriented. What I think changes from one moment to the next when you're questioning me.

S: Don't you know what's wrong with you, my friend?

A: No, I don't.

S: If someone asked, "Do you have two eyes or three?" or "two hands or four?" or anything else like that, do you think you'd answer differently from one moment to the next? Or would your answer always be the same?

117a A: At this point I'm afraid of what I may be getting into, but I think it would be the same.

S: And isn't that because you know the answers?

A: I think so, yes.

S: So if you give opposite answers about something, without meaning to, you clearly do not know about that subject.

A: I guess not.

S: You say you vacillate on the subject of what's right or wrong, admirable or disgraceful, beneficial or not. Isn't it clear that the reason you're vacillating is that you don't *know* about these things?

117b A: Yes, it is.

S: Is this true in general, then: when someone doesn't know something, his soul necessarily vacillates on that subject?

A: Of course.

S: Really? Do you know how to fly?

A: No I don't, by Zeus!

S: Does your opinion on that also vacillate?

A: No.

S: Do you know the reason, or shall I tell you?

◆ 116e

Hm. Is that what Socrates' argument showed?

It did show that acting rightly always results in experiencing benefit.

However, Socrates and Alcibiades agreed that sometimes acting rightly results also in experiencing harm. It sometimes results in experiencing something bad. You did the courageous action, and in some way it did benefit you (perhaps it benefited your character), but it also harmed you. It caused you to lose money, for example, or it even resulted in your death (see 115e–116a).

It can seem, then, as if Socrates is concluding here more than he has actually shown. He and Alcibiades agreed that what's right *really* is sometimes bad (to a certain extent or in a certain way). It might also be good, but it can be both good and bad: good insofar as it's courageous, but bad insofar as it results in death.

What does that imply for whether what's right and what's beneficial are the same?

A: Tell me.

S: It's because, my friend, you don't think you *do* know how to do it, when you don't.

117c A: Again, what do you mean?

S: Look at it with me, as my partner. If you don't know something, and realize you don't know it, do you vacillate on that subject? I assume you know, for example, that you don't know how to cook a meal.

A: Certainly not!

S: Do you have opinions about cooking, which vacillate, or do you just leave that to someone who knows how to do it?

A: I leave it to them.

117d S: What if you were traveling by ship? Would you have opinions about whether to steer to port or starboard—opinions that vacillate because you don't really know—or would you keep quiet and leave it to the pilot?

A: I'd leave it to the pilot.

S: So you don't vacillate about things you don't know, as long as you *know* you don't know them?

A: I guess I don't.

S: Are you aware that mistakes in behavior are caused by the same kind of ignorance, i.e. by thinking we know things when we don't?

A: Again, what do you mean?

S: If we undertake an action, we do so, presumably, at a time when we think we know what we're doing?

A: Yes.

117e S: And when people don't think they know how to do something, they hand it over to someone else?

A: Of course.

S: Such people lack knowledge but still live their life without mistakes, because they leave these things to others?

A: Yes.

S: Who makes mistakes, then? Presumably not people with knowledge.

118a A: Certainly not.

S: If it's not people with knowledge, and not those without it who know that they don't know, who does that leave but people who *don't* know but think that they *do*?

A: Nobody. Those are the ones.

S: So *this* is the ignorance that causes bad things, and *this* lack of knowledge is reprehensible?

A: Yes.

S: And when it concerns the most important things, that's when it does the most harm and is most disgraceful, right?

A: Very much so.

S: Well, can you name anything more important than what is right and admirable and good and beneficial?

A: I certainly can't.

S: And aren't these the subjects on which you say you vacillate?

A: Yes.

118b S: But if you're vacillating, isn't it clear, from what's been said, that you are not only ignorant of the most important things but also think that you know them, even though you don't?

A: Probably. ◆

S: Wow, Alcibiades, you're in a really bad way! I hesitate to spell it out, but since it's just the two of us I have to say something. You're wedded to the ultimate ignorance, my excellent friend—a crime of which you stand accused both by your own argument and from your own lips. That's why you're rushing into politics without getting a proper education. But you're not the only one in such a state. The same applies to most people conducting this city's business, except for a few—possibly including your guardian, Pericles.

118c A: You know, Socrates, people say he didn't become wise of his own accord, but by associating with a lot of wise people, including

◆ 118b

Why do people make mistakes? What explains it? Why do people do things that end up harming them?

Socrates outlines three options:

(a) People make mistakes when they know how to do something.

(b) People make mistakes when they recognize that they do not know how to do something.

(c) People make mistakes when they wrongly think that they know how to do something (but in fact they are ignorant about it).

He reasons that (a) cannot be right, since, if you know how to do something, you will not make a mistake. For example, you likely know how to tie your shoe. You likely know how to light a match. In these cases, you do not make mistakes (setting aside rare exceptions).

He reasons also that (b) cannot be right. If you recognize that you do not know how to do something, then you will not try to do it. You will entrust it to an expert. For example, you likely recognize that you do not know how to fly a plane or craft a lens that fixes your vision. You do not make mistakes trying to do them, because you do not try to do them. You entrust them to experts—to the pilot or the lenscrafter.

What about (c)? Has it ever happened that you thought you knew how to do something but actually you were wrong? Has it ever happened that you were wrong about what you thought that you knew?

Of course. And notice that it is here that you make mistakes. Your belief that you know how to do it gives you the confidence to try it out, but that belief is false—you do not know how to do it—and so you do something that is incorrect or ends up harming you.

For example, perhaps you think that you know how to provide emotional comfort to your friend, so you try it out, but you got it all wrong. Or perhaps you

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Pythoclides and Anaxagoras. Even now, at his advanced age, he spends time with Damon for the same reason.

S: Well, have you ever seen someone wise who was incapable of transmitting his wisdom to others? Take the person who taught you your letters, for example. He was both wise on that subject and able to make you that way, plus anyone else that he wanted to, right?

A: Yes.

118d S: And you too, having learned from him, will be able to teach someone else?

A: Yes.

S: And the same goes for the lyre player and athletic trainer?

A: Absolutely.

S: Because if a knowledgeable person can demonstrate that he's passed on his knowledge to someone else that's good evidence, presumably, that he really is knowledgeable?

A: I think so, yes.

S: Well then, can you tell me who Pericles made wise? Let's start with his sons.

A: But Socrates, both his sons turned out to be idiots.

S: Then what about your brother, Clinias?

A: Why bring up Clinias? He's crazy!

S: Okay, if Clinias is crazy, and Pericles' sons are idiots, what excuse shall we give him for letting *you* remain in such a state?

A: It's my own responsibility, I think, for not giving it any thought.

119a S: Well then, tell me anyone at all—Athenian or foreigner, free or enslaved—who is reported to have become wiser by spending time with Pericles. After all, I can tell you about Pythodorus, son of Isolochus, and Callias, son of Calliades, who spent time with Zeno: they each paid him 100 minae◆ and have become famous for their wisdom.

◆ 118b *continued*

think that you know how to do the action that is courageous in this circumstance, but you are wrong about what courage is, and you do something that ends up being harmful. Or perhaps, like Alcibiades, you think that you know how to make an impressive speech in a public forum, but it turns out that you have no idea what you are talking about, and you end up spreading false information or embarrassing yourself.

In all of these cases, what is responsible for the mistake is your thinking that you know what you do not actually know.

Wouldn't it be great to stop making mistakes—to stop doing things that end up being harmful?

If Socrates is right, there is one simple solution for that: stop believing that you know what you do not know. Get rid of your false belief in your own competence or knowledge. Stop being so intellectually arrogant. Acquire intellectual humility, such that you do not believe that you know anything that you actually do not know. You might then still do the actions of providing emotional comfort to a friend, standing up for yourself, or giving a public speech, but you will do so with an appropriate level of cautiousness and self-awareness.

Look around you. How widespread is intellectual humility? How often do you hear someone saying sincerely, without hesitation, this phrase: "I don't know"?

Why isn't intellectual humility more widespread?

Why do people so often think that they have more knowledge than they actually do?

◆ 119a

A mina is a unit of currency in the ancient Greek world.

One mina is equivalent to 100 drachmae, and one drachma is the

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A: I really can't, by Zeus. ◆

S: All right. Then what do you intend to do about yourself? Remain in your current state, or take steps to improve yourself?

119b A: Let's consider that as partners, Socrates. But I do understand what you're saying, and I agree. I don't think the people conducting the city's business, with a few exceptions, *have* had a real education.

S: Why do you say that?

A: If they had been educated, then anyone trying to compete with them would have to learn things and get into training before going up against them, as he would for an athletic contest. But since they've entered public life as ordinary citizens, why should *I* go to the trouble of training or learning? I'm certain that I'll do far better than them, thanks to my natural ability. ◆

119c S: Wow! What a thing to say, my excellent friend! How unworthy of your good looks and everything else you have going for you.

A: Why do you say that, Socrates? What's your point?

S: You're infuriating! And so is my passion for you!

A: Why's that?

S: Because you think *those* people are your competition.

A: Who is, then?

119d S: What a great question, for a man who thinks so highly of himself!

A: What do you mean? Are they *not* my competitors?

S: If you were intending to pilot a warship, on the brink of battle, would it be enough for you to be the most skillful pilot among your sailors? You'd assume that was necessary, of course, but wouldn't you focus on your real competitors—the enemy—not on your fellow soldiers, the way you're doing now? You'd have to be so much better than your own men that they wouldn't even think of
119e competing against you, but would stand at your side—even though you look down on them—to compete together with you against the enemy. That's if you really do intend to carry out some admirable exploit for everyone to see—something worthy of yourself and Athens.

◆ 119a *continued*

amount that a physical laborer would make for one day of work.

In the United States, an entry-level construction worker makes about $200 per day. That's roughly equivalent, then, to one drachma in the ancient world.

So, one mina would be roughly equivalent to $20,000, and 100 minae would be roughly equivalent to $2,000,000.

Socrates is saying, then, that Pythodorus and Callias paid the teacher Zeno roughly two million dollars each for their education.

That is expensive tuition!

◆ 119a

Socrates and Alcibiades are recognizing that often the children of wealthy and powerful people turn out to be incompetent—"crazy" and "idiots," Alcibiades calls them. Why is that?

Socrates says that, if a person is wise, then he can transmit his wisdom to someone else. He can make other people wise, too.

Are these wealthy and powerful people not actually wise, then? Perhaps they acquired their status in society by some means other than having extraordinary knowledge.

Another option is that they do not care enough about their own children to educate them properly.

Alternatively, maybe Socrates and Alcibiades are wrong to think that, if a person is wise, then he can transmit his wisdom to someone else. Maybe these two things are separate matters: being wise, and being able to teach someone else in a way that makes them also wise.

It is worth considering whether things change depending on the domain. Maybe, for example, wisdom about spelling implies that you can teach others how to spell, but wisdom about virtue does not imply that you can

continued on next page →

A: That certainly *is* what I intend!

S: How worthy of you, then, to be content with surpassing your own men, instead of training to become better than the ordinary soldiers and then focussing on the leaders of your adversaries. ◆

120a A: Who are you talking about, Socrates?

S: Don't you know that our city is constantly at war with Sparta or the Great King of Persia?

A: True.

S: If you intend to govern Athens, then, wouldn't it be correct to think of yourself as competing against the kings of Sparta and Persia?

A: That's probably true.

S: But oh no, my friend! You should *definitely* focus on Meidias the
120b quail-fighter and people like that—people who take on the city's business even though they're so uncultured that they haven't rid their souls of the cropped hair of slavery—what women call a servile haircut—and still can't speak proper Greek. They're here to suck up to the city, not rule it. And *these* are the people you have to focus on, instead of improving yourself! Really? On the brink of such a serious contest shouldn't you learn everything that can be
120c learned, and train in the skills that require training, and not enter public life until you are prepared in every possible way?

A: I do think what you say is true, Socrates. But I also think that the Spartan generals and the Persian king are no better than anyone else.

S: Take a closer look at your thinking, my excellent friend.

A: What about?

120d S: First, do you think you would or would not make more of an effort to improve yourself if you were afraid of them and thought them intimidating?

A: Clearly I would, if that's what I thought of them.

S: I assume that you don't think improving yourself would do you any harm?

A: Far from it. I think it would do me a lot of good.

◆ 119a *continued*

teach others how to be virtuous. If there *is* this difference, though, we'd want some explanation for it. What do you think?

◆ 119b *(passage on previous page)*

Suppose that you want to compete against the athletes of a professional sports league. You would need decades of practice that includes training from the best coaches.

In contrast, suppose that you want to compete against professional politicians —to run against them for public office, for example.

Why is it that, in this case, you might win against them even without significant practice and training?

Alcibiades thinks that it is because the politicians lack specialized education. There isn't any special training that they have received to hold public office. So, anyone stands a chance when competing against them—no specialized training required.

Maybe that is so. It is worth wondering, though, whether, in an ideal society, the politicians would be required to gain an education before holding public office—a specialized education, one that prepares them to do their job well.

What would that education look like?

What would it teach them?

What would it look like to be a top student in that sort of education?

◆ 119e

Notice what Socrates is doing here. He is stoking Alcibiades' ambition. He wants Alcibiades to desire not only to be superior to all of the men in Athens but to be superior *also* to all of the men in all of Greece (and beyond).

Why is Socrates doing that?

It helps to remember Socrates' goal in this conversation with Alcibiades. He announced that goal earlier in the text: "I'm hoping to gain the greatest

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S: So that's the first flaw in your thinking, and it's a big one.

A: True.

S: The second is that it's false. Look at it in terms of likelihood.

A: How do you mean?

120e S: Are naturally gifted people more likely to be born in noble families, or ordinary ones?

A: In noble families, clearly.

S: Isn't it likely that the naturally gifted, if they're also brought up well, will grow up to be completely good?

A: They would have to, yes.

S: Then let's compare our own situation with the kings of Sparta◆ and Persia. First, do you think they come from humbler families? Don't we know, in fact, that the Spartan kings are descended from Heracles and the Persian king from Achaemenes, both of whom trace their line back to Perseus, son of Zeus?

121a A: Yes, Socrates. And *my* line goes back to Eurysaces, and his to Zeus.

S: Yes, noble Alcibiades. And *my* line goes back to Daedalus, and his to Hephaestus, son of Zeus. But *their* royal lineages, from the present all the way back to Zeus, consist exclusively of kings born from kings, some of them kings of Argos or Sparta, others of Persia and often of Asia too (as they are at the moment). But you and I are
121b ordinary citizens, and so were our fathers. If you had to make a speech to Artaxerxes, son of Xerxes, glorifying your ancestors and Salamis, the home of Eurysaces, or Aegina, the home of Aeacus even earlier, can you imagine how much laughter you would bring down on yourself?

Here's another thing to consider. Those men don't just have a loftier lineage than we do, but also a better upbringing. Or haven't you heard what great advantages the Spartan kings enjoy? Their wives are guarded by the ephors at public expense, so that, as far as possible, no king can be secretly sired by anyone who is not of
121c Heracles' line. The king of Persia is even more powerful, so much so that no one even suspects an heir could be sired by anyone but him. That's why there's nothing guarding the king's wife, except

◆ 119e *continued*
possible power over you by demonstrating that I deserve everything you have to offer, and that no guardian or relative, or anyone else except me, can give you the power you crave" (105e).

Socrates wants Alcibiades to need him. Alcibiades is convinced that he can become superior in Athens merely by the use of his natural advantages. He doesn't need Socrates for that (so he thinks). Perhaps, though, he *would* need Socrates' help to become superior in all of the Greek world. Socrates wants him to *want* that so that Alcibiades might come to depend on him.

◆ 120e
Sparta, like Athens, was a polis (city-state) in the ancient Greek world. It was much smaller than Athens, but it was Athens' main rival—and a serious one at that, due to the discipline and toughness that it instilled in its citizens. Athens (and its allies) fought against Sparta (and its allies) in the Peloponnesian War.

fear. And when the eldest son, the heir to the throne, is born, first there's a festival for all the king's subjects, then every year, forever after, the whole of Asia celebrates his birthday with sacrifices and
121d festivals. But when *we* are born, Alcibiades, to quote the comic poet, "even the neighbors don't hear a thing about it."

Next, the royal heir is raised, not by a paltry female nurse but by the eunuchs considered the very best in the king's household. They are tasked with improving the newborn. Among other things, they contrive to make the child grow up as good-looking as possible, by
121e shaping and straightening his limbs. And they're honored highly for this work.

When the boys turn seven they are sent to learn horsemanship from the proper teachers and start hunting wild animals. When the heir turns fourteen he's put into the care of people called the royal tutors. These are Persian men of mature age, selected because they're thought to be the very best. There are four of them: the most wise, the most righteous, the most self-disciplined, and the
122a most courageous. The wisest teaches the boy the magic of Zoroaster, son of Horomazus (a form of religious worship); he also teaches him what a king needs to know. The most righteous teaches him to be truthful throughout his life. The most self-disciplined teaches him not to be governed by any pleasure whatsoever, so that he gets used to being a free man and a true king: one who in the first instance governs his own impulses rather than being enslaved to them. The most courageous trains him to be brave and fearless, in the belief that fear makes someone a slave.

122b Contrast your own situation, Alcibiades. The person Pericles put in charge of you, to be your tutor, was Zopyrus the Thracian, whose extreme age made him the least useful slave in the whole household. I could go on to describe the rest of your competitors' upbringing and education, but it would be a big job, and in any case I've said enough to make the rest clear. But as for *your* birth, upbringing, and education, Alcibiades, and that of any other Athenian, virtually no one takes any care over it, unless someone happens to be in love with you. ◆

Here's another thing: if you want to look at the Persians' wealth,
122c their luxury, apparel, flowing garments, exotic perfumes, vast retinues, and all the rest of their pampered decadence, you'd feel

◆ 122b

And who *is* in love with Alcibiades...

Socrates. See again his confession of love in the opening line of the dialogue. Here he is hinting to Alcibiades, then, that he is one of the only people who will care enough about him to give him a proper education.

disgrace at your own situation, realizing just how far you fall short. On the other hand, if you want to look at the Spartans' self-discipline and decorum, their fortitude, composure, high opinion of themselves, orderliness, courage, endurance, and love of hard work, victory and honor, you'd think yourself no better than a child in any of these respects.

122d Let's not leave out your wealth either, in case you pay any attention to that, thinking it makes you something special. Perhaps this will make you realize where you stand. If you want to look at the Spartans' wealth, you'll realize that ours falls far short. As for all the land they own, in both Sparta and Messene, there's not a single person in Athens who would dispute its abundance and richness or its wealth of slaves, especially the Helots, or indeed of horses, or
122e the other herds pastured in Messene. But even if we set all that aside, there's more gold and silver in Sparta alone than the rest of Greece put together. It's been flowing in over many generations,
123a from all the Greeks and often from non-Greeks as well, but it never flows out again. It's just like what the vixen said to the lion in Aesop's fable: the tracks of the money heading into Sparta are clearly visible, but no one can see them coming out. You can know for sure, then, that the Spartans are the wealthiest of the Greeks in gold and silver. And their king is the wealthiest of all, since such riches accrue to the kings most often and most abundantly. Added to that, the Spartans pay their kings a considerable sum in tribute.

123b Even though the Spartans' wealth is vast compared to the rest of Greece, however, it's nothing compared to that of the Persians and their king. I once met a trustworthy man who had traveled inland to the king's court, and he told me he'd passed a very large, rich piece of land, nearly a day's journey across, which the locals call
123c "the queen's belt." He told me there's another place called "the queen's veil," and many other beautiful, rich areas, each named for a specific piece of raiment, which have been set aside to finance the adornment of the queen. So imagine if someone said to Amestris, mother of the king and wife of Xerxes, "Dinomache's son intends to pit himself against your son. Her adornments are worth 50 minae at the very most, and he has less than 300 acres of land in Erchia."
123d She would wonder, I think, what gives this Alcibiades person the confidence to compete with Artoxerxes. I think she'd say the only thing that can be making this man so confident is wisdom and self-

improvement, since the Greeks have nothing else worth mentioning. But if she heard that this Alcibiades was behaving in such a way, first, before he's even turned twenty ◆, and second, without a real education; not only that, but, when the man who's in
123e love with him tells him he has to learn, and improve himself, and go into training before trying to compete with the king, he doesn't want to, and says he's fine as he is—if she heard all that, I think she'd be surprised and ask, "Then what on earth gives this teenager his confidence?" And if we replied that it comes from being tall and good-looking, and from his noble birth, wealth, and natural gifts, she'd think we were crazy, Alcibiades, when she considered how
124a much *they* have of everything like that. I think Lampido, the daughter of Leotychides, wife of Archidamus, and mother of Agis—who were all Spartan kings—would be surprised too, considering all they've got going for them, if you intend to compete with her son after being brought up so badly. And yet, don't you think it's disgraceful if our enemies' *women* understand better than we do ourselves what kind of people we need to be if we're to take them on? ◆

No, my carefree friend, put your trust in me and the Delphic
124b inscription, and "know thyself." By which I mean, know that *these* are the people we are competing against, not the ones you had in mind. And the only way we'll surpass them in any respect is by self-improvement and skill. If you come up short in these respects, you'll also fall short of winning fame among Greeks and non-Greeks alike, and I think you're more passionate about that than anyone ever was about anything.

A: Then how exactly should I improve myself, Socrates? Can you explain? Because it looks like what you said is absolutely true. ◆

124c S: Yes, I can. But let's consider as partners how both of us can become as good as possible. Because I'm not saying that you need educating and I don't. I'm no better than you, except in one way.

A: What's that?

S: My guardian is better and wiser than your Pericles.

A: Who are you talking about, Socrates?

◆ 123d
This is the main detail in the text for Alcibiades' age. He is younger than 20 years old.

◆ 124a
What was the status of women in ancient Athens?

In short, women were oppressed. It was illegal for women to participate politically. They could not be present in the Assembly. They did not have voting power. They had limited rights to own private property. Women from wealthy families would not appear in public without a chaperone (women from less wealthy families would be seen in public running daily errands like going to the market). Women's responsibilities were confined to managing the household and raising children.

In all of Plato's dialogues, the conversation is between men (Socrates reports a conversation with the female priest Diotima in Plato's *Symposium*, but it is still Socrates speaking). Why is that? Is it because Plato thought that women were incapable of philosophical discussion?

No. There is strong evidence that Plato thought women were capable of doing philosophy. In the *Republic*, Plato depicts Socrates making the argument that women just as much as men should be rulers of society. There are philosopher kings in Plato's ideal society, and there are also philosopher queens. Socrates argues in the *Republic* that the souls of men and women have the same nature. He does add that, while "[w]omen share by nature in every way of life just as men do... in all of them women are weaker than men" (455d), but this line needs to be read in the context of his claiming also that "many women are better than many men in many things" (455d).

◆ 124b
This is a big moment. It seems like Alcibiades is now receptive to Socrates'

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S: A god, Alcibiades, the one who wouldn't let me talk to you until today. He's what makes me confident that it is through me and no one else that your revelation will be made manifest.

124d A: You're kidding, Socrates.

S: Maybe. But I'm speaking the truth when I say that we need to improve ourselves. This applies to everyone, of course, but most especially to the two of us.

A: You're not wrong, in my case.

S: Or in my own. ◆

A: What should we do, then?

S: We must not hesitate or weaken, my comrade!

A: No, Socrates, that wouldn't be appropriate.

124e S: No it wouldn't. So we must inquire together as partners. Tell me this: we say we want to become as good as possible, right?

A: Yes.

S: With what kind of goodness?

A: Clearly the kind that makes men good.

S: Men good at what?

A: Clearly at getting things done.

S: What kind of things? Do you mean horsemanship?

A: Certainly not.

S: Because for that we'd go to horsemanship experts?

A: Yes.

S: Do you mean seafaring, then?

A: No.

S: Because for that we'd go to seafaring experts?

A: Yes.

S: What kind of thing, then? Whose activities must we be good at?

A: Those of the Athenian elite.

125a S: By "elite" do you mean people with or without understanding?

◆ 124b *continued*
advice. (*Finally*, you can imagine Socrates saying to himself.)

◆ 124d
It's notable that Socrates takes himself to be in a similar position to Alcibiades. He *also* needs education. He *also* needs self-improvement. He seems to be genuinely humble in this respect, not overestimating his own abilities, and likewise not thinking that he knows something that he doesn't actually know.

Wait a moment, though. Wasn't Socrates saying that he was the only one who could give Alcibiades a proper education? How can he help Alcibiades fulfill his ambitions if he too needs to improve himself?

It must be that Socrates thinks that he can give Alcibiades something *other* than some substantial wisdom that he has himself.

What could that be?

A: With understanding.

S: Isn't each person good at what he understands?

A: Yes.

S: And if he doesn't understand something, he's useless at it?

A: Of course.

S: A cobbler understands about making shoes, doesn't he?

A: Absolutely.

S: So he's good at that?

A: Yes, he is.

S: But he lacks understanding about making clothes, right?

A: Yes.

125b S: So he's bad at that.

A: Yes.

S: So the same person is both good and bad, at least according to this argument.

A: It looks like it.

S: Are you saying good men can also be bad?

A: Certainly not.

S: Then who do you mean by "good men"?

A: I'd say those capable of governing in the city.

S: Not, presumably, governing horses?

A: Certainly not.

S: But rather, human beings?

A: Yes.

S: When they're ill?

A: No.

S: Or sailing?

A: No.

S: Or harvesting?

A: No.

125c S: When they're doing nothing, or something?

A: Doing something.

S: Doing what? Try and make it clear to me too.

A: Living together, collaborating, and managing each other, as we do when we live in cities.

S: So you're saying they govern people who manage other people?

A: Yes.

S: You don't mean they govern the timekeepers who manage rowers?

A: Certainly not.

S: Because it's pilots who are good at that?

A: Yes.

S: Then are you saying they govern pipe players, who head up a chorus and manage the dancers?

125d A: Certainly not.

S: Because it's chorus masters who are good at that?

A: Absolutely.

S: Then what *do* you mean, when you say they're able to govern people who manage other people?

A: I'm talking about people who are involved in civic society and collaborate with each other. Those are the people in the city whom they govern.

S: What's their skill, then? Suppose I asked you again, as I did just now, what skill gives someone the knowledge to govern people involved in seafaring?

A: The skill of a pilot.

125e S: And what knowledge enables someone to govern people involved in choral song?

A: The knowledge you mentioned just now, that of a chorus master.

S: Well then, what do you call the knowledge that enables someone to govern people involved in civic society?

A: I'd call it the ability to give sound advice, Socrates.

S: Well then, do you think a pilot gives bad advice?

A: Certainly not.

S: In fact, his advice is sound?

126a A: I think so, at least if the goal is to keep people safe during a voyage.

S: Well said! Okay then, this ability to give sound advice that you mentioned, what is *its* goal?

A: To regulate the city better and keep it safe.

S: And what needs to be present or absent for it to be better regulated and kept safe? For example, if you asked me "What needs to be present or absent for the body to be better regulated and kept safe?" I'd reply that health must be present and disease must be absent. Wouldn't you agree?

A: Yes.

126b S: And if you asked me next, "What needs to be present for eyes to be better?" I'd reply, along the same lines, that sight needs to be present, and blindness absent. Ears too: they're improved and better cared for if deafness is absent and hearing is present.

A: Correct.

S: What about a city, then? What needs to be present or absent for it to be improved and better cared for and regulated?

126c A: In my opinion, Socrates, this happens when there is mutual friendship among its members and an absence of hatred and discord.

S: By "friendship" do you mean agreement or disagreement?

A: Agreement.

S: What skill allows cities to agree about numbers?

A: Arithmetic.

S: Isn't that also the case for ordinary citizens?

A: Yes.

S: And that's also what allows each person to agree with himself?

A: Yes.

126d S: What skill allows each person to agree with himself about whether a cubit is longer or shorter than a hands-width? Isn't it measurement?

A: Of course.

S: And that's also how cities and ordinary citizens reach agreement?

A: Yes.

S: And isn't it the same with weight?

A: I'd say so.

S: Then this "agreement" you're talking about, what is it? What's it about, and what skill produces it? And is it the same thing in a city and an ordinary citizen, both internally and in regard to others? ◆

A: I guess so.

126e S: What is it then? Don't get tired of answering. Do your best to tell me.

A: I think I mean the friendship and agreement between a loving father and mother and their son, or two brothers, or a husband and wife.

S: Do you think a husband and wife can agree about wool working, which is something she knows about but he doesn't?

A: Certainly not.

S: And he doesn't need to either: that's a woman's area of expertise.

A: Yes.

127a S: Okay then, could a woman agree with a man about armed combat, even though she doesn't know anything about it?

A: Certainly not.

S: You'd probably say that's a man's area.

A: I would.

◆ 126d

There are multiple parts to a city. Likewise, there are perhaps multiple parts to a person. You can thus think of a city agreeing with itself (all of its parts agreeing), and you can think too of a person agreeing with themself (all of their parts agreeing). So far, so good. It's a bit surprising, though, that Socrates implies that it's "the same thing" that produces agreement in a city and agreement within a person (such that, for example, all of the parts of you are in agreement with each other).

What would that thing be? What skill would bring about agreement in both of these cases?

S: So according to your argument, men and women have distinct areas of expertise?

A: Of course.

S: So there can't be agreement between men and women, at least in these areas?

A: No.

S: So there can't be friendship between them either, if friendship really is agreement.

A: Apparently not.

S: In so far as women operate in their own sphere, then, men can't be friends with them?

127b A: It doesn't look like it.

S: And the same applies to men who operate in *their* sphere: women can't be their friends.

A: No.

S: So when each group operates in its own sphere, cities are not well regulated?

A: No, Socrates, I think they *are*.

S: What? Even though they lack friendship? Didn't we say that cities are well regulated if friendship is present and not otherwise?

A: But Socrates, I think this is exactly what gives rise to mutual friendship: the fact that each group operates in its own sphere.

127c S: That's not what you said before. So now what are you saying? Can there be friendship without agreement? Or can there be agreement on things that one group knows about and the other doesn't?

A: No. That would be impossible. ◆

S: And when each group operates in its own sphere, are they doing what is right or wrong?

A: What is right, of course.

S: When citizens in a city are doing what is right, then, doesn't that produce mutual friendship?

◆ 127c

Often, when reading the history of philosophy, the text says something that is surprising—perhaps even something that at first seems obviously wrong.

Look again at this bit of text. Isn't it obviously wrong that there cannot be agreement between someone who knows something and another person who does not know something?

Imagine, for example, that you know the components of a biological cell or the capital of Thailand. Suppose that I do not. You tell me, and I agree with you. That is very much possible!

What is happening in the text, then? Are Socrates and Alcibiades really agreeing to something that is so obviously false?

That would be surprising. Think back to the dialogue so far. Socrates and Alcibiades are not dumb. You might disagree with them, but they are discussing things at a high level—with care, precision, and thoughtfulness.

It would be surprising, then, if they were making so blatant of a mistake here. It must be then that Socrates and Alcibiades mean something different than the way that I interpreted them above. It must be that they are making some other point.

Scholars of philosophy (especially the history of philosophy) often use the *principle of charity* when interpreting texts. The principle says that we should be charitable when interpreting what a text means.

What does that look like in practice? It looks like assuming that, whatever the text is saying, it is *not* saying something that is obviously false (or dumb). There are exceptions, of course, but we should not think that something is an exception until we have tried to interpret it differently—until we have tried to interpret it in a way where it is *not* obviously false.

Is there a way, then, to interpret what Socrates and Alcibiades are saying here so that it actually makes some sense?

A: Yes, Socrates, I think it must.

127d S: Then what *are* you saying about friendship and agreement? You said that if we're to be good men, friendship is a subject on which we must be wise and able to give sound advice. But I can't figure out either what it is or who has it. Based on your argument, the same group of people clearly has it at some times but not at others.

A: By the gods, Socrates, I don't even know what I'm saying myself! I've probably been in a thoroughly disgraceful state for ages, without realizing it.

S: Cheer up! If you didn't come to this realization until you were
127e fifty it would be difficult for you to improve yourself. As it is, though, you've reached it at exactly the right age.

A: And now that I have, Socrates, what should I do next?

S: Just answer my questions, Alcibiades. If you do that, then, god willing—and if we should have any confidence in my prophecy—both you and I will attain a better state.

A: That *will* happen, if all I have to do on my end is keep answering.

S: All right then, what *is* self-improvement? After all, we often think we're improving ourselves without realizing that in fact we're
128a not. And when does someone do it? When he improves what belongs to him, is he also improving himself?

A: I think so, yes.

S: Okay then, when does someone improve his feet? Is it when he's improving what belongs to his feet?

A: I don't understand.

S: Would you ever say something "belongs" to a hand? For example, does a finger ring belong to any other part of a person than the finger?

A: Of course not.

S: And along the same lines, doesn't a shoe belong to a foot?

A: Yes.

S: And clothes and bedding belong, similarly, to the body as a whole?

A: Yes.

128b S: When we improve our shoes, then, are we improving our feet?

A: I don't really understand, Socrates.

S: Okay then, Alcibiades. Would you say there's a correct way to improve anything, no matter what?

A: I would.

S: When someone makes something better, wouldn't you call that the correct way to improve it?

A: Yes.

S: What skill makes shoes better, then?

A: Cobbling.

S: So we use cobbling to improve our shoes?

A: Yes.

128c S: And do we also use cobbling to improve our feet? Or do we use the skill that makes feet better?

A: The latter.

S: And that's the same skill that improves the rest of the body, right?

A: I think so, yes.

S: And that skill is athletics?

A: Absolutely.

S: So we use athletics to improve our feet, but cobbling to improve what belongs to our feet?

A: Sure.

S: And athletics to improve our hands, but ring making to improve what belongs to our hands?

A: Yes.

S: And athletics to improve our bodies, but weaving and so on to improve what belongs to the body?

128d A: Absolutely.

S: So in each case, the skill we use to improve something is different from the one we use to improve what belongs to it.

A: It looks like it.

S: So it's not true that when you improve what belongs to you, you're improving yourself.

A: Not at all.

S: Because it looks like we don't use the same skill to improve both ourselves and our belongings.

A: Apparently not.

S: Okay then, what kind of skill would we use to improve ourselves?

A: I can't say.

128e S: Well, are we agreed on this much: it's not the same skill that we would use to make anything belonging to us better, but one that makes us better ourselves?

A: True.

S: If we didn't already know what a shoe was, could we know what skill makes shoes better?

A: That would be impossible.

S: Or what skill makes rings better, if we didn't know what a ring was?

A: True.

S: Okay then. If we don't know what we ourselves are, could we ever know what skill makes a person better?

A: That would be impossible.

129a S: Is "knowing thyself" actually easy, then? Was it some nobody who had that inscribed on the temple at Delphi? Or is it difficult, and not for everyone? ◆

A: I've often thought anyone can do it, Socrates, and often that it's extremely difficult.

S: Well, Alcibiades, whether it's easy or not, this is the state we're in: if we know ourselves we may, perhaps, come to know how to improve ourselves, but if we don't know that, then we never can.

◆ 129a

How do you improve yourself? Many answers are likely to come to mind. There are whole industries dedicated to self-care and self-improvement.

Socrates is arguing, though, that improving yourself is more complicated than you might first think. You must be sure that the activity that you are doing is really improving *yourself* (instead of merely something that belongs to you).

So, a prior step to improving yourself is knowing yourself—knowing who you really are. Without that, you might *think* that you are improving yourself when actually you are improving something that is not really you.

Know thyself. This maxim was famously inscribed on the Temple of Apollo at Delphi. You are likely to have heard it before. What does it take to know yourself? Is it easy, or is it difficult?

What does it even mean to know yourself? One way to think about this question is to ask *what sort of things exactly you would know* if you really did know yourself. What is the content of self-knowledge?

A: That's true.

129b S: All right then, how can we go about discovering what "self" means? If we do that we may perhaps find out what we ourselves are, which is surely impossible as long as we don't know the meaning of "self."

A: Correct.

S: Hold on, by Zeus! Who are you having this conversation with? With me, right?

A: Yes.

S: And I'm conversing with you?

A: Yes.

S: So Socrates is doing the talking.

A: Absolutely.

S: And Alcibiades is doing the listening?

A: Yes.

S: And isn't Socrates using words to talk?

A: Of course.

129c S: I assume you'd say talking and using words are the same thing?

A: Absolutely.

S: But isn't the user different from what he uses?

A: What do you mean?

S: For example, a cobbler presumably uses knives and other tools to cut leather.

A: Yes.

S: Isn't the person using the tools to do the cutting different from the tools he uses to cut with?

A: Of course.

S: And isn't the lyre player, in the same way, different from the instruments he uses for playing?

A: Yes.

129d S: That's what I meant just now, when I asked whether you think the user is always different from what he uses.

A: I think so, yes.

S: Going back to the cobbler, then, should we say he cuts leather only with his tools, or also with his hands?

A: Also with his hands.

S: So that's something else he uses?

A: Yes.

S: And does he use his eyes, too, when he's making shoes?

A: Yes.

S: But we agreed that the user is different from what he uses?

A: Yes.

129e S: So are the cobbler and the lyre-player different from the hands and eyes that they use to do their work?

A: Apparently.

S: In fact, doesn't a person use his whole body?

A: Absolutely.

S: But we established that the user is different from what he uses?

A: Yes.

S: So a human being is different from his body.

A: It looks like it.

S: What *is* a human being, then?

A: I can't say.

S: Well you can say this much: it's what uses the body.

A: Yes.

S: Is there anything that does that apart from the soul? ◆

130a A: No.

S: And it does so by governing the body, right?

A: Yes.

◆ 129e
Notice that this alone is a complete argument:

(i) The human being (the self) is what uses the body.

(ii) Nothing uses the body other than the soul.

(iii) So, the human being (the self) is the soul.

S: And here's another thing that I think anyone would accept.

A: What's that?

S: That a human being is one of three things.

A: What things?

S: Soul, body, or the two combined into a whole.

A: Of course.

S: Well, didn't we agree that the thing governing the body is the human being?

A: We did.

130b S: And does the body govern itself?

A: No way.

S: Because we said that it "is governed."

A: Yes.

S: So that can't be what we're looking for.

A: It doesn't look like it.

S: So does the soul-body combination govern the body? Is *that* what a human being is?

A: Certainly—perhaps.

S: No, that's the least likely candidate. Because there's no way the combination could govern unless both its elements participate in governing.

A: Correct.

130c S: So neither the body nor the soul-body combination is what a human being is. What's left, I think, is that either it's nothing at all, or else, if it *is* something, that something turns out to be nothing other than the soul.

A: I completely agree.

S: Do you need any clearer demonstration, then, that the soul is the human being◆?

A: No, by Zeus. I think this is sufficient.

◆ 130c

Here again is the conclusion of the argument. Who are you? The argument says that you are your soul.

What is the soul?

To the ancient Greeks, all living things had souls, including plants, animals, and people. Plato thought the human soul was (a) the source of life (death is the soul's leaving the body); (b) the location of what today we could call mental activity (thinking happens in the soul); and (c) the location of your character (you can have a good soul or a bad soul).

So, the ancient Greek conception of the soul is not far off from the modern conception of the mind. We tend to think that some activity of the mind is necessary to be alive, that mental activity happens in the mind, and that a person can have a good mind or a bad mind (can be mentally healthy or mentally unwell).

The argument says, then, that who you are is your soul (or your mind). The main contrast is with your body. You are not your body, according to the argument. You are your soul (or your mind).

Think about this argument a bit more. Let's push it past the point where it stops in the text.

The argument relies on the premise that the user of something is different from the thing that is used. Now think about the components of your soul or your mental life. Do you use any of them?

Of course, right? You use your thoughts to solve problems. You use your memory to recall things from the past. You use your imagination to see things in the future. You use your desires to motivate you, your beliefs to categorize the world, and your emotions to connect with others.

The user is different from the thing that is used. If that premise is true, and if you really do use these components of your mental life, then it follows that you are *not* those components. In some sense,

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130d S: It's not very precise, but it's good enough. We'll know about it more precisely when we discover something that we skipped over earlier because it required so much investigation.

A: What's that?

S: What we said just now: that first we have to examine the meaning of "self." Instead, we've examined each self individually. But perhaps that may be adequate. After all, I don't suppose we'd call any aspect of ourselves more authoritative than the soul?

A: Certainly not.

S: Is this a good way to think about it, then: when you and I are talking to each other, one soul is using words to address another soul?

A: Absolutely.

130e S: So this is what we were actually saying just now: Socrates is conversing with you, Alcibiades, using words that are addressed, apparently, not to your face but to Alcibiades himself, that is, to your soul.

A: That's what I think.

S: So the person who commanded us to "know thyself" is really telling us to know our souls?

131a A: It looks like it.

S: So someone who knows about an aspect of the body knows about things that belong to him, but doesn't know himself?

A: Correct.

S: So no doctor knows himself, in so far as he's a doctor; and no trainer, in so far as he's a trainer?

A: It doesn't look like it.

S: So farmers and other craftsmen are a long way from knowing themselves. Apparently their skills don't even enable them to know about things that belong to them, only things that are even more
131b distant. Because they only know about things belonging to the body, which are used to care for it.

A: True.

◆ 130c *continued*

you are your soul (or your mind). However, you are not your thoughts, memories, imaginations, desires, beliefs, or emotions. You use those things, so you cannot be them.

What is left? Is there a part of your soul or mental life that you do not use? Is there a part that only ever does the using but is never used itself?

It might help to think about a slightly different premise.

The argument relies on the premise that the user is different from the thing that is used.

A similar premise is that the observer is different from the thing that is observed.

You observe your thoughts, memories, imaginations, desires, beliefs, and emotions. You observe other components of your mental life, too. So, you cannot be identical to them. You are not them.

Is there, though, a component of your mental life that you do not observe—a part that *is* the observer?

If so, then the logic of the argument would imply that *that* part is who you really are.

Socrates does not push the argument to this point. However, we arrive at this point by using the exact logic that is in the argument.

S: So if knowing oneself is self-discipline, none of these people has become self-disciplined as a result of his skill.

A: I don't think so, no.

S: That's presumably why these skills are thought of as lower-class, not suitable to be learned by an elite man.

A: Absolutely.

S: Again, someone who cares for his body isn't caring for himself, only for something that belongs to him?

A: Probably.

131c S: But someone who cares for money is not caring for himself *or* what belongs to him, but for something even more distant?

A: I think so, yes.

S: So the money maker is no longer really operating in his own sphere?

A: Correct.

S: So if someone falls in love with Alcibiades' body, he's not really in love with Alcibiades, only with something that belongs to Alcibiades?

A: True.

S: But the person who's in love with your soul is in love with *you*.

A: Based on the argument, it looks like that must be the case.

S: If someone's in love with your body, won't he vanish as soon as the flower of beauty starts to fade?

A: Obviously.

131d S: But someone who's in love with your soul won't give up, as long as you continue to improve? ◆

A: I guess so.

S: That's me! I'm the lover who won't give up on you, but will stay at your side when your body starts to go downhill, after everyone else has left.

A: And a good thing too, Socrates. Don't ever leave me!

S: Then do your best to be as admirable as possible.

◆ 131d

This is a common trope: someone who loves you only for your body, or only for how you look, doesn't really love *you*.

The person who really loves *you* loves you for who you really are—for your soul, according to Socrates' previous argument.

Socrates says that someone who loves you for your body will stop loving you when the beauty of your body begins to fade.

He says also that someone who loves you for your soul will continue to love you—*so long as* you continue to improve your soul.

That leaves open the possibility that someone who loves you for your soul will *stop* loving you if the beauty of your soul begins to fade—*just like* someone who loves you for your body will stop loving you if *its* beauty begins to fade.

Are the two cases really so different, then? In both cases, it seems that the love fades once the beauty of the object of love fades.

There is perhaps this difference. Perhaps the beauty of the body fades inevitably. Time takes it away.

In contrast, perhaps the beauty of the soul does not fade inevitably. Time does not inevitably take it away. Time passes, but one can use that time (always?) to improve one's soul.

In any case, notice that nowhere in the text is it implied that there is a sort of love for a person that will remain *no matter what*. In both the case of the body and the soul, the love stays only if the body or soul stay in a good condition (or even only if the condition continues to improve).

A: I certainly will.

131e S: Here's the situation, then. It looks like there is not, and never has been, more than one man—one precious individual—who's in love with Alcibiades, son of Clinias. That man is Socrates, son of Sophroniscus and Phaenarete.

A: True.

S: When I approached you earlier, didn't you say I'd just beaten you to it? You'd been meaning to approach me first, because you wanted to find out why I was the only one who hadn't given up on you?

A: That's what I said, yes.

S: Well this is the reason: I was the only one in love with *you*. The rest were only in love with things belonging to you. Those things
132a are passing their prime, but *you* are just coming into flower. And now I'm never going to leave you, as long as you don't get ruined by the Athenian public and disgrace yourself. This is my greatest fear: that you'll be ruined by falling in love with the public. ◆ This has already happened to a lot of good Athenians. The progeny of "great-hearted Erechtheus"—I mean the Athenian public—has a pretty face, but you need to look at him without his clothes. So I suggest you take this precaution.

◆ 132a
In other words, Socrates is afraid that Alcibiades will care too much about social status and popularity, and that will lead to the corruption of his soul.

A: What precaution?

132b S: Strip and get into training first yourself, my carefree friend. Go into public life only after learning what needs to be learned ahead of time, and not before. That way you'll have an antidote, to prevent anything terrible from happening to you. ◆

◆ 132b
Why does Socrates think that Alcibiades needs to get a proper education before entering public life?

So far, the reason has been that, without that education, Alcibiades will not be able to fulfill his ambition. His speeches in the Assembly will not be impressive (109a, 116d).

Here, though, is a new reason. It is that, without that education, Alcibiades will be harmed by entering public life. It might cause him to become a worse person or experience harmful consequences.

A: I think what you're saying is right, Socrates. But please try and explain how we can improve ourselves.

S: We've already made this much progress: we've reached agreement—more or less—about what we are. We were afraid that if we got *that* wrong we'd be improving something else, without realizing it, instead of ourselves.

A: That's true.

132c S: Next we agreed we should improve our souls—that this should be our focus.

A: Clearly.

S: And we should give other people the job of improving our bodies and property.

A: Of course.

S: How, then, can we come to know the soul most clearly? Because it looks like if we know this, we'll also know ourselves. But wait! By the gods, are we misunderstanding that eloquent Delphic inscription, which we mentioned just now?

A: Why do you say that, Socrates? What are you thinking?

132d S: I'll tell you what I suspect the inscription is saying and advising us to do. There's probably only one good model for this, and that's sight.

A: How do you mean?

S: You think about it too. Suppose the inscription spoke to one of our eyes, as if it were a human being, and said "see yourself." What advice would we take it to be giving? That the eye should look at the thing in which it's going to see itself, right?

A: Yes, clearly.

132e S: Is there anything we can think of that we can look at if we want to see both it and ourselves at the same time?

A: Clearly you mean mirrors, Socrates, and things like that.

S: Correct. And isn't there something of the same kind in the eye with which we see?

A: Absolutely.

133a S: Have you ever noticed that when you look at someone's eye your own face appears in the reflective surface of that eye, as if in a mirror? We call that the pupil or "doll," since it's a miniature likeness of the person who's looking.

A: True.

S: So by gazing at another eye, and looking into the best part of it —the part it sees with—an eye can see itself?

A: Apparently so.

S: But it won't see itself if it looks at any other part of a human being or at anything else, except something that resembles the eye.

133b A: True.

S: So if an eye's going to see itself it must look at another eye, specifically at the region where an eye's goodness is located. And that, presumably, is sight?

A: Yes.

S: Along the same lines, then, my dear Alcibiades, if the soul's going to know itself, it must look at a soul, and especially at the region where a soul's goodness—i.e. wisdom—is located, or at something else that resembles the soul.

A: I think so, Socrates.

133c S: Is there any aspect of the soul that we could call more godlike than its concern with knowledge and understanding?

A: No.

S: So this aspect of the soul is like a god, and anyone who looks at it and comes to know the godlike as a whole—both god and understanding—will also attain the best knowledge of himself?

A: Apparently so.

S: So then, just as a mirror is clearer than the reflector in the eye, and purer and brighter, in the same way the god is actually purer and brighter than the best aspect of our soul?

A: So it appears, Socrates.

S: By looking at the god, then, we would be using that most beautiful of mirrors, and in the human realm we'd do the same by looking at the goodness of the soul, and that's how we would most successfully see and know ourselves? ◆

A: Yes.

S: But we agreed that self-knowledge is the same as self-discipline?

A: Absolutely.

S: If we don't know ourselves, then, and aren't self-disciplined, could we ever know what belongs to us, whether good or bad?

A: That would be impossible, Socrates.

◆ 133c

Catch your breath. That was a whirlwind of an argument. What happened?

You want to know yourself—to gain knowledge of your soul. How can you do that?

The main claim is that you can do that by looking at *another* soul.

That is confusing. Why would I look at *another* soul if I want to know my own soul?

My eye is able to see itself in another eye because the other eye is reflective. I look closely into the other eye, and I see a little reflection of my own eye. The other eye functions as a mirror.

One thought, then, is that another person's soul is reflective in a similar way. I can interact with another person's soul in a way that reflects myself back to myself. I can talk with another person, say, perhaps discuss philosophy together, and thereby come to know who I really am.

Is that the best interpretation of the text?

Maybe. Notice, though, that there is no mention of reflection when Socrates talks about looking at another soul. Perhaps, then, I come to know myself by looking at another soul *not* by seeing my own soul reflected somehow but *rather* by seeing the thing in the other person that *also* is me. Perhaps who I really am is the same as who the other person really is. I look at their soul to see the part of them that is in some sense identical to the part of me that is who I really am.

These are only two options for interpreting the text. There are other options, too.

In the text, who I really am gets called "the soul's goodness," "wisdom," the soul's "concern with knowledge and understanding," and "the godlike."

What exactly is that? It isn't obvious. It also isn't explained further. It is up for interpretation.

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133d S: Perhaps that's because, in your view, it would be impossible for anyone who doesn't know Alcibiades to know that what belongs to Alcibiades is his.

A: Utterly impossible, by Zeus!

S: So if we don't know ourselves, we can't know that what belongs to us is ours, either?

A: How could we?

S: But if we don't even know what's ours, then we also can't know what belongs to the things that are ours?

A: Apparently not.

S: So we weren't entirely correct when we agreed just now that some people know themselves without knowing what is theirs, and others know what belongs to the things that are theirs. It looks like all these things fall under the purview of a single person and a
133e single skill: oneself, what is ours, and what belongs to the things that are ours.

A: Probably.

S: And, on the same principle, presumably someone who doesn't know what's his won't know what belongs to other people?

A: Of course not.

S: And if he doesn't know what belongs to other people, he won't know what belongs to cities either?

A: He couldn't.

S: So a man like that can't become expert at politics?

A: Certainly not.

S: Or at managing a household?

A: Certainly not.

134a S: And he won't know what he's doing, either?

A: No, he won't.

S: And won't someone who doesn't know what he's doing make mistakes?

A: Absolutely.

◆ 133c *continued*

The passage, then, leaves us with some big questions. How is it that by looking at another soul I come to know myself? What exactly is the part of myself that I come to know when I see who I really am? Is that part in me the same as that part in someone else, or are the two of them substantially different? What exactly is the content of self-knowledge?

S: And because he makes mistakes, he'll do badly in both private and public life, won't he?

A: Of course.

S: And if he does badly won't he be miserable?

A: Very much so.

S: What about the people he has dealings with?

A: Them too.

S: So it's impossible for anyone to thrive without being self-disciplined and good.

134b A: Impossible.

S: So bad people are miserable.

A: Very much so.

S: So it's not by getting rich that a person avoids misery, but by practicing self-discipline.

A: It looks like it.

S: So, Alcibiades, cities don't need walls, or triremes, or dockyards if they're to thrive, or numbers or magnitude, unless they have goodness.

A: They certainly don't.

134c S: So if you're really going to conduct the city's business correctly and admirably, you must distribute goodness among the citizens. ◆

A: Of course.

S: Can anyone distribute something he doesn't have?

A: How could he?

S: So you must first obtain goodness yourself, and so must anyone else who's going to govern and improve not just himself and his private life but the city and public life. ◆

A: True.

S: So what you must obtain, for yourself and the city, is not the power to use governing to do whatever you want, but righteousness and self-discipline.

◆ 134c

It's worth recalling what Alcibiades cared about at the start of the conversation. His ambition was to become the most famous and powerful person in Athens and even all of Greece. He seems at this point to care about more than that—about conducting the city's business in a way that is genuinely beneficial for its citizens.

Did the conversation with Socrates cause that change? Or did he care about that even at the start of the conversation? Does he really care about that at this point, or is he merely temporarily under the spell of Socrates' words?

◆ 134c

You might have thought that you could improve someone even if you haven't yet taken the time to improve yourself.

How could you, though? To improve the other person is to impart goodness to them—and how could you impart that to them if you do not have it yourself? To give them some water, you would first need to have some water yourself. Why would it be any different with goodness?

A: Apparently so.

134d S: Because if you and the city do what is right and self-disciplined, you will both be pleasing the gods.

A: I guess so.

S: And as we said earlier, you'll be acting with your eyes turned towards what is radiant and divine.

A: Apparently so.

S: Very well then, if you look in that direction you will attain vision and knowledge, both of yourselves and of what is good for you.

A: Yes.

S: And won't you then behave correctly and well?

A: Yes.

134e S: Very well then, if you behave like that you have my personal guarantee that you will thrive.

A: That's a guarantee I can rely on!

S: But if you do what is wrong, looking towards what is dark and godless, your behavior will most likely be dark and godless too, ◆ because you will lack self-knowledge.

A: It looks like it, yes.

S: Because, my dear Alcibiades, if someone has the power to do whatever he wants, in private or public life, but lacks
135a understanding, what's likely to happen? For example, if a sick man has the power to do whatever he wants but doesn't understand medicine, and is so tyrannical that no one can criticize him, what's going to happen? Isn't it likely that his health will be completely ruined?

A: True.

S: Or on a ship, if someone had the power to do what he thought best, but lacked a good pilot's understanding, can you see what would happen to him and his fellow sailors?

A: I certainly can. Everyone would die.

◆ 134e
What is the primary ethical action? Suppose you want to be a good person. What is the primary thing that you should do?

Interestingly, both here and above at 133d, Socrates emphasizes orientation. The primary ethical action is to be oriented in the right direction—to make sure that you are paying attention to the right things, e.g., to what is "radiant and divine."

S: Doesn't the same apply to a city, and any situation that involves governing and power? Without goodness, bad behavior will result. ◆

135b A: Yes, it has to.

S: If you're going to thrive, then, my excellent Alcibiades, you must obtain goodness, not tyranny, for both yourself and the city.

A: True.

S: And until he has goodness, it's better for a man—not just a child—to be governed by someone better than himself, rather than governing others.

A: Apparently so.

S: And isn't what's better also more admirable?

A: Yes.

S: And what's more admirable is more appropriate?

135c A: Of course.

S: So it's appropriate for a bad person to be enslaved, because it's better that way.

A: Yes.

S: So badness is appropriate to the enslaved.

A: Apparently.

S: And goodness to the free.

A: Yes.

S: Shouldn't we run, my comrade, from anything appropriate to slaves?

A: Absolutely, Socrates.

S: Are you aware of the state you're in now? Is it appropriate to a free man, or not?

A: I think I'm very well aware of it.

S: Then do you know how to escape your current predicament? (I won't embarrass a good-looking man like you by naming it.)

135d A: I do.

◆ 135a

It is sometimes thought that having power is good—that it makes your life go better.

However, Socrates points out that having power in the sense of being able to do whatever you want *when you do not also have knowledge of what is beneficial for you* is highly dangerous. You are empowered to act, but you have no guarantee that your actions will benefit you.

If that is right, then it provides strong motivation *first* to gain knowledge of what is actually beneficial for you before you set about gaining power in the world.

S: How?

A: I can do it if *you* want, Socrates.

S: Don't say that, Alcibiades.

A: What should I say, then?

S: That you can do it if god wills it.

A: That's what I'm saying, then. But I'll add this: the two of us will probably be switching roles, Socrates, with me taking your place and you mine. There's no way *I* won't be following *you* around from this day forward; *you* will be the one to have *me* as your constant attendant.

135e S: So my passion for you will be like a stork, my noble friend: after hatching a winged passion in you, it will be cared for in turn by its offspring.

A: It certainly will! I'm going to improve my understanding of right and wrong, starting today.

S: I do want you to achieve that, but I'm very much afraid that you won't. It's not that I lack confidence in your natural gifts; but I can see how strong the city is. In the end, it may defeat both me and you.



About the Open Plato Project

Mission statement

The Open Plato Project aims to create a new kind of digital edition of ancient Greek philosophical texts, intended for both expert and non-expert audiences and produced in collaboration with scholars from multiple disciplines. The Project's mission is to widen the audience of people who are able to find joy and meaning in the study of these texts. Its core belief is that expanding access to the study of philosophical texts is beneficial both to society and to scholarship.

The Open Plato Project team is composed of: Marc Gasser-Wingate, Sukaina Hirji, Robert Howton, Emily Kress, Patricia Marechal, Katy Meadows, Evan Rodriguez, Gabe Shapiro, Jacob Stump, and Claudia Yau.

About this edition

This digital edition of the *Alcibiades* is the result of an extended collaborative effort to generate a new, open access translation and commentary on the dialogue. The initial rough drafts of both the translation and commentary were developed during a workshop held at the Center for Hellenic Studies during the summer of 2023. We are grateful to the CHS for its generous support, and to our workshop participants for their many philosophical and interpretative contributions: Ruby Blondell, Emily Fletcher, Mary Louise Gill, Verity Harte, Brad Inwood, Tushar Irani, Grace Ledbetter, Fiona Leigh, Hendrik Lorenz, MM McCabe, Susan Sauvé Meyer, Mark Schiefsky, and Rachel Singpurwalla. (Any mistakes in the translation or commentary are of course to be attributed to the OPP team alone.)

From these early drafts, the following teams worked to produce the *Alcibiades* digital edition as it appears here:

- The translation team (Marc Gasser-Wingate, Emily Kress, Patricia Marechal, Katy Meadows, and Evan Rodriguez) prepared the scholarly translation
- The commentary team (Marc Gasser-Wingate, Emily Kress, Patricia Marechal, Katy Meadows, Evan Rodriguez, Gabe Shapiro, and Claudia Yau) prepared the commentary
- Marc Gasser-Wingate and Patricia Marechal prepared the glossary for the scholarly translation

- The web app team (Marc Gasser-Wingate, Robert Howton, and Evan Rodriguez) prepared the Greek text, translation, and commentary for online display
- Ruby Blondell prepared the first-read translation
- Jacob Stump prepared the first-read commentary

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- The editorial team (Marc Gasser-Wingate, Emily Kress, Katy Meadows, Evan Rodriguez, Jacob Stump, and Claudia Yau) devised and streamlined the editorial process

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