

The Self Itself: On Beginning Plato's *Alcibiades I*¹

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Plato's *Alcibiades I* was once famous.² The first two sections of Farabi's 10th-century *The Philosophy of Plato, its Parts, the Ranks of Order of its Parts, from the Beginning to the End* deal with the *Alcibiades*. It is the first dialogue Farabi mentions by name; he understands its concern to be what makes human beings happy, and cites its subtitle as "On Man."³ Centuries before, Albinus identifies it alone as an obstetric dialogue, and Iamblichus finds the *Alcibiades* to be "like a seed containing the whole of Platonic philosophy."⁴ They are followed in this by Proclus and Olympiodorus, from both of whom we have commentaries on the dialogue.⁵ And so

¹ While there is an *Alcibiades II*, henceforth the *Alcibiades I* will be simply referenced as *Alcibiades*.

² In *L'Herméneutique du Sujet*, before making it the basis of his account of the relation of the subject to care, Michel Foucault calls the dialogue (parenthetically) "*le fameux texte de l'Alcibiade*." This seems ironic. See

http://www.arianesud.com/bibliotheque/aa_auteurs/foucault_michel, 5. Foucault never refers to the *Alcibiades II*—thus resisting *alcibiades* as a generic term. Maybe this is why it remains "famous" for him?

³ A Farabi, Mushin Mahdi, ed. and trans., *Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca and New York: 1969), 53-54. Farabi lives from 870-950 A.D.

⁴ For Albinus (c. 150 A.D.) see *The Introduction of Albinus to the Dialogues of Plato in The Works of Plato*, translated by George Burges, Bohn's Classical Library, Vol. 6 (London: 1854), 318. The passage from Iamblichus is quoted in Renaud and Tarrant, *The Platonic Alcibiades I: The Dialogue and its Ancient Reception* (Cambridge: 2018—the translation is my own), 12. Albinus lives in the second century. Iamblichus lives from 245-325 A.D.

⁵ For Proclus (412-485) the *Alcibiades I* deals with "the *archē* of philosophy simply" (*The Platonic Alcibiades I: The Dialogue and its Ancient Reception*, 6); Plato's design, he claims: "was to unfold our nature and the whole essence according to which each of us is defined" (Tayler and Sydenham, *Know Thyself: Plato's First Alcibiades and Commentary*, The Prometheus Trust: 2002, 69). For Olympiodorus (495-570), the *Alcibiades I* gives us a "self-sufficient Socrates akin to the self-sufficiency of the god" (quoted in *The Platonic Alcibiades I: The Dialogue and its Ancient Reception*, 206—the translation is my own.)

the glory days of the *Alcibiades* last for well over a millennium; for us, however, this glory is much diminished. The dialogue is generally thought to be at best a minor work, a product of Plato's youth, and at worst one of the spurious dialogues, so glib in its presentation of Platonic themes as to be unworthy of even the young Plato.⁶ So, our first puzzle: What happened?

Our second puzzle: The *Alcibiades* represents Socrates' very first conversation with Alcibiades. In it, Pericles (Alcibiades' guardian) and his sons are said still to live. Since all three die in the plague in 429, the dramatic date of the dialogue must be before that. And since we know that Socrates shares a tent with Alcibiades in the military expedition to Potidaea in 432-33, the dialogue in which they first meet must also take place before that. Alcibiades appears as a character in Plato's *Protagoras* (see especially 436bff) where he several times comes to Socrates' defense—a strange thing to do were they still altogether unacquainted. At the very beginning of the *Protagoras* Socrates' anonymous interlocutor remarks twice that Alcibiades has just become a man—an *anēr*; yet in the very first word of the *Alcibiades*, Socrates addresses him as “boy.” There is some argument about the dramatic date of the *Protagoras*, but it seems most likely to be 433 or 434. The *Alcibiades* would then have to take place before that. We may tentatively say, then, that the dramatic date of the *Alcibiades* is 435. Now, Alcibiades was born in 450, which would make him 15 or 16 in our dialogue. Socrates, born in 468, would be about 33. There are only three other Platonic accounts of Socrates as this young or younger. All three are narrations, either by Socrates himself (in the *Phaedo* and the *Symposium*) or by another (by a man named Cephalus in the *Parmenides*). Each narration reveals an important mistake made by the young Socrates.⁷ In the *Symposium* (201d-203a), he learns from Diotima that Eros is not a

⁶ There are exceptions. Consider, for example, Foucault, Michel, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* (Picador, New York: 2006), chapters 1-5.

⁷ I owe this observation to Keir Willett.

god but a *daimōn*—a being in between gods and men. In the *Parmenides* (130b-131a), Parmenides forces him to ask why there would be *eidē*—ideas or forms—of high things like the just, the beautiful and the good, but not also of low things like hair, mud, and dirt. And in the *Phaedo* (96a-100a), Socrates discovers by himself that it is not possible, as he had first thought, to learn what things are by looking at them directly, but that one must examine them indirectly through what is said about them in *logoi*.⁸ Question, then: Is the *Alcibiades*, which is the youngest depiction of Socrates in action we have in Plato, also meant to be an account of a youthful Socratic mistake?⁹

It is clear that Plato's Socrates considers Alcibiades extraordinarily gifted. With very few possible exceptions, Alcibiades seems the most talented human being Socrates ever speaks with in the dialogues.¹⁰ At the beginning of the *Alcibiades*, Socrates' *daimonion* (the word is either adjectival, i.e., "belonging to a *daimōn*, or diminutive, i.e., "little *daimōn*"), the negative voice within him that at crucial moments tells him what not to do but never what to do, does not oppose Socrates' intent to speak to Alcibiades.¹¹ Now, we soon learn that Socrates has had his

⁸ This turn to *logoi* marks his rejection of pre-Socratic philosophy.

⁹ Is not acknowledging this mistake in the dialogue, a consequence of its being a direct enactment and so not a retrospective narrative evaluation, somehow the mistake? At *Alcibiades* 112e-113c, Socrates forces Alcibiades, who gives a series of one-word answers ("Yes," and "I") that as the answerer he is really to one speaking, not Socrates. He then quotes from Euripides *Hippolytus*, where Phaedra's nurse finally names Hippolytus as the one Phaedra loves, and Phaedra responds "from you not from me," even though she has clearly led the nurse to this conclusion. As evidence, it is odd, for Socrates demurrals here is no more persuasive. This leads us to wonder whether the "I" and the "I indeed" might show themselves more in asking than in answering, in dialogue more than in narration.

¹⁰ The exceptions are perhaps only Diotima and Parmenides.

¹¹ At *Republic* 496b, this *daimonion* is cited as the cause of philosophy in Socrates alone "or perhaps in one other" who remains unspecified. At *Apology* 31c-32e, it is a voice that turns Socrates away from what he is about to do—in particular in this instance entering politics. In the *Theaetetus* (151bff.), Socrates couples it with the image of himself as a midwife to his students—he aborts their hollow opinions and brings those that are beautiful to term; when some think they can get along without him leave, and when they discover they cannot, ask to return,

eye on Alcibiades for years (106d,110b) and, since his *daimonion* famously only ever says “no,” Socrates relief that he has finally overcome its opposition means that he must have been constantly asking for permission to approach Alcibiades. So, Socrates has been wanting to speak with Alcibiades since he was perhaps nine? In anyone but Socrates, this persistence might look like obsessive serial stalking, and so, a little creepy.

Socrates’ aim in their first conversation is to convince Alcibiades that his grand political ambitions require that he know what is just (which proves later to include knowing both the advantageous and the beautiful—117a), both for himself and for Athens. This will require knowing what he himself is, and this, in turn, that he know what the self itself is. And, finally, he needs Socrates if he is to come to know these things. By introducing philosophy to Alcibiades as an instrument necessary for political rule, Socrates means to seduce him to the satisfactions of philosophizing for its own sake. But this clever bait and switch will fail utterly. Despite Socrates’ persistence, within 20 years Alcibiades grows into the man who, out of a desire to distinguish himself, convinces Athens, in the middle of its war with Sparta, to launch a second front against Sicily (this proves catastrophic for Athens). On his way to Sicily as one of the generals of this expedition, Alcibiades is recalled. His enemies have accused him of impiety. Rather than face these charges, Alcibiades defects to the enemy, Sparta, where he becomes quite influential and an object of admiration¹² until, because of an affair with the Spartan queen (in

the *daimonion* tells him whom to refuse. The *Euthydemus* and the *Phaedrus* take place because when Socrates is about to leave, the *daimonion* stops him. In the *Theages* the function of the *daimonion* is extended; it makes Socrates something of an oracle who can tell others what not to do. However different the cases, though, the *daimonion* is always negative and always somehow connected to philosophy. It is, in a way, a divinized and personified version of the fundamental feature of philosophy as never taking anything for granted.

¹² “So that to have seen him at Lacedaemon, a man, judging by the outward appearance, would have said, "Tis not Achilles's son, but he himself; the very man ‘that Lycurgus designed to

Plutarch's account, it results in a child¹³), he is forced to flee again, this time to Persia, where he ingratiates himself with the satrap Tisaphernes, and so indirectly with the Great King. At first, all of this might seem to be proof that Alcibiades is above the normal parochial perspective of the *polis*—that he sees the world trans-politically. But his is a peculiarly political trans-political perspective, for he does not so much rise above particular conventions as skillfully adapt to them.¹⁴ And this has less to do with philosophy than with self-glorification. The gifted Alcibiades, willing to do anything, more a grand rogue, a *panourgos*, than a philosopher, is Socrates' great failure. Is the *Alcibiades* somehow meant to foreshadow and explain this future failure?

Finally, a grammatical puzzle. The *Alcibiades* has a fairly simple structure. It divides roughly in three. To explain why he has finally approached Alcibiades, Socrates sketches out who he thinks Alcibiades is—what Alcibiades longs for (103-106). This is a supersized account of Alcibiades' political ambition that finds in his premature desire to enter the Athenian assembly a desire to be master of the entire world. In the second part (106-119), Socrates

form.” See, Plutarch, “Alcibiades,” trans. by John Dryden, <https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/plutarch-plutarchs-lives-dryden-trans-vol-2>, 15-16.

¹³ “For while king Agis was absent, and abroad with the army, he corrupted his wife Timaea, and had a child born by her. Nor did she even deny it, but when she was brought to bed of a son, called him in public Leotychides, but, amongst her confidants and attendants, would whisper that his name was Alcibiades, to such a degree was she transported by her passion for him. He, on the other side, would say, in his vain way, he had not done this thing out of mere wantonness of insult, nor to gratify a passion, but that his race might one day be kings over the Lacedaemonians.” See, Plutarch, 16.

¹⁴ “The renown which he earned by these public services was equaled by the admiration he attracted to his private life; he captivated and won over everybody by his conformity to Spartan habits. People who saw him wearing his hair close cut, bathing in cold water, eating coarse meal, and dining on black broth, doubted, or rather could not believe, that he ever had a cook in his house, or had ever seen a perfumer, or had worn a mantle of Milesian purple. For he had, as it was observed, this peculiar talent and artifice for gaining men's affections, that he could at once comply with and really embrace and enter into their habits and ways of life, and change faster than the chameleon.” See Plutarch, 15.

demonstrates to Alcibiades that he does not know what he needs to know in order to enter politics, and that the cause of his ignorance is that he assumes that he does know. In the third and final part (119-135) Socrates answers the question of what is to be done, and argues that for Alcibiades to care for himself, he would need to know himself. For that he would have to know the self itself, and this, the way to moderation, requires that he give himself over to Socrates. Nowhere other than in the *Alcibiades* does Plato use the expression “the self itself.”¹⁵ It is worth quoting its introduction.

Come then, in what way would the self itself (*auto t'auto*) be found? For, on the one hand, in this way we would immediately find whatever we are ourselves, but, on the other hand, still being in ignorance, of this I suppose [we would be] powerless. (129b1-3)

In Greek, the word *autos* functions in three ways. When it is located between the definite article and a noun or pronoun, it means “same,” as, for example, in *ho autos anēr*—“the same man.” When it follows a noun or pronoun or precedes the noun’s definite article, it is an intensive adjective pronoun, as, for example, in *ho anēr autos* or *autos ho anēr*—both meaning “the man himself.” It can perform these two functions in any gender, case or number. Finally, *autos* can stand alone as a pronoun in any gender or number, for example, as “him,” “her,” “it,” or “them”; but it can do so only in the oblique cases (the accusative, the dative and the genitive) never in the nominative. Strictly speaking, then, Plato’s use of *to auto* in the nominative in the passage quoted is ungrammatical. In order to make the intensifier “itself” an object of inquiry, he has treated it as a thing that can stand by itself. By making the self, *to auto*, the subject of the sentence, he has treated it not as grammatically dependent on having something to modify, to intensify, but as a stand-alone substance in its own right. He has made it the noun, “self”; in

¹⁵ I owe this observation to Martin Sitte.

doing so he tacitly grants us the permission to experiment, however ungrammatically, and translate every occurrence of any form of *autos* in the dialogue as “self.” This is, of course, not just a grammatical point. The need to make the self a thing knowable by itself is the linchpin of the entire argument of the *Alcibiades*. Why, we wonder, has it been introduced by way of a grammatical error?

There are two additional complications. First, given the sameness of meaning, for example of *ho anēr autos* or *autos ho anēr*, had Plato changed the word order of *auto t’auto* to *t’auto auto*, it could still have meant “the self itself”; here the second *auto* would be the intensive adjective pronoun. And yet, as the noun and the adjective are identical words here, the expression could equally be translated “the same self.” But perhaps “the self itself” and “the same self” are the same? Does the self-hood of the self consist precisely in its self-sameness? And yet, if so, why would this self-sameness require for its expression the doubling of the self—*auto t’auto*? And secondly, as the Greek of Plato’s time had no punctuation, no lower case letters, and no spaces between words, *auto t’auto* would have been written *AUTOTAUTO*; its plural would have been written *AUTATAUTA*, and so *auta t’auta* (selves themselves) would have been indistinguishable in writing from *auta tauta*, these very things

We can begin to shed some light on these puzzles and what connects them by turning to the beginning of the dialogue, where in his very first word to him—ever. Socrates addresses Alcibiades as “child” (103a1). Only moments later, Socrates describes Alcibiades as self-sufficient and as believing that, should he enter the assembly even now ¹⁶, he would in short order surpass and be acknowledged more worthy of honor than any ever to have spoken there, and that as the greatest citizen of the greatest city of the Greeks, who are the greatest of peoples,

¹⁶ At 16—the minimum age was 18 (see Aristotle, *Constitution of the Athenians*, chapter 42).

he would show himself to be the greatest of human beings to have existed—ever, anywhere (104a-c, 105b-c). Socrates begins by taunting the proud young Alcibiades as a child, only quickly to acknowledge that he is already an *anēr*—a he-man, an hombre (104e). Is this why Socrates is so taken with Alcibiades—because he is a man-child?

“Child of Kleinias, I suppose you wonder . . .” (103a1). Given the lack of punctuation in the Greek of Plato’s time, the opening sentence might have stopped here. The verb, “to wonder” occurs three times in the first two pages, the adjective “wondrous” once; the verb appears only three other times in the dialogue, and so its frequency here arouses our curiosity¹⁷. Is Socrates drawn to Alcibiades because he supposes him to wonder? Elsewhere in Plato and later in Aristotle, wonder is understood to be the origin of philosophy.¹⁸ Socrates suggests that Alcibiades wonders at having been stalked for so many years without having been approached. To this Socrates responds by introducing his daimonic opposition, the cessation of which he interprets as somehow owing to the fact that all of Alcibiades’ other lovers, whether daunted by their beloved’s genuine superiority or put off by his arrogance, have deserted him. Socrates alone has not been “set free,” or, alternatively since the voice of the verb may be either passive or middle, “freed himself.” Using *auto* for the first time in the dialogue, Socrates says that he hopes “it” (referring most obviously to the *daimonion*) will not oppose him in the future (103b). But if we translate *auto* as “self” (illicitly, we must remember), Socrates would be expressing his hope that self will not oppose him in the future—that he himself will not be opposed by himself. Were Socrates to abandon Alcibiades, he would both free himself, and be freed by something

¹⁷ “To wonder” appears at 103a and 104c and 104d; “wondrous” occurs at 104e. The other three occurrences are clustered together at 123c, e, and 124a, where Socrates presents the queens of Sparta and Persia as wondering at Alcibiades extravagant claims.

¹⁸ See Plato, *Theaetetus* 155d and Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 982b.

outside of himself; and he would do so by virtue of something he claims as the common source at once of his persistence and his reluctance, his uncertainty and commitment--¹ “It wouldn’t be a wonder if just as I began with difficulty so also I should stop with difficulty” (104e). Alcibiades wonders at a Socrates divided against himself.

But why might Socrates wonder at Alcibiades’ wondering? To explain the flight of his crowd of lovers, Socrates reports Alcibiades’ “claim not to be in need of anyone among human beings for anything” (104a). Alcibiades is *kallistos te kai megistos*—most beautiful and greatest. In its non-superlative plural form, *mega kai kala*, this is a standard way of referring to the heavenly bodies, “the big beautiful things.” Alcibiades thus claims star quality. By extension, *mega kai kala* is also a way of referring to the gods, beings in whom there is no disproportion between external and internal qualities.¹⁹

Alcibiades believes himself to be like a god, and the many advantages of his situation support this self-assessment—his looks, his influential family and friends, his wealth, and, perhaps most of all, that Pericles is his guardian. Yet this is a strange argument. His powerful “friends and relations . . . would be of service to [him] if there should be some need” (104b), but isn’t the point here to confirm Alcibiades’ claim that he is in need of no one and nothing? By itself, family (especially given its necessarily dual origin in mothers and fathers) points to individual imperfection and incompleteness. And if we depend on our relations, isn’t our independence relative? The general problem is revealed by the ambiguity of the word *genos*—family, clan, tribe, or race, to be sure; but also, genus, kind, or class. As members of a *genos*, a class, we are necessarily akin, linked, comparable. Alcibiades may have all the advantages of a

¹⁹ See, for example

powerful family, but in this he does not differ from his brother Kleinias. As soon as one seeks to justify one's independence with a list of assets, one makes oneself distinct from these assets. They are predicates of the self—things the self has, not what the self is. Socrates' list of admirable qualities consists of nouns—generic, and so in principle belonging to anyone. Even taken together, they do not simply praise Alcibiades himself. If I wax poetic in praise of a beloved by citing the collection of qualities that inspire my love, that cause my love, must this not mean that I will love anyone who possesses this collection of qualities? I do not love my one and only; I love a class. Alcibiades' wish to be incomparable thus shows up only by way of comparison. At the heart of the expression "one of a kind" lies a contradiction. Alcibiades wishes to display the grandeur of his self itself. But, however great it may be, this self shows itself as one among others of its kind, and in so doing, necessarily shows itself as in principle surpassable. The very claim that a home run record will never be broken already involves imagining the number it will take to break it. Alcibiades longs to be measurably greater than, and so on a continuum with, all others while at the same time remaining a unique particular. He wants to be one of a kind—a universal particular. If this is to be a god, gods would seem to be problematic beings. Caesar, first a proper name, is appropriated by subsequent caesars, even as they claim to be gods. Its status as a common noun, and so generic, is settled by the various Kaisers and tsars who follow. Likewise, an Alcibiades I, invites an Alcibiades II,

Having observed Alcibiades for some time, Socrates knows that the boy thinks himself to be the measure of everything good. In the end, whether because insufferably arrogant or because frighteningly true, Alcibiades' high self-regard drives his lovers away—all but Socrates. Why? If Alcibiades thinks himself so perfect, he ought to be like Aristotle's *megalopsychos*—the great-

souled man who “is not inclined to wonder; for nothing is great to him.”²⁰ But then there are the dialogue’s first words, “Child of Kleinias, I suppose you wonder.” Why does the great souled Alcibiades wonder? Do the gods philosophize?²¹ This is all somehow connected to the way his boundless ambition is grounded in utter self-satisfaction—a strange combination of restlessness and contentment that attracts Socrates, who wonders at an Alcibiades divided against himself.

Socrates (who has been himself persistently reluctant in his love of Alcibiades, is unable to free himself, or be freed, from it, and finally approaches the boy because something apart from him, yet present only within him, refrains from telling him not to) describes Alcibiades as follows:

For you seem to me, if any of the gods should say to you, “Alcibiades, are you willing to live having (or, being able) what (or, with respect to what) you now have (or, are able), or straightaway to be dead unless it will be possible for you to acquire more?”, you would seem to me to choose to be dead. (105a)

This perennial dissatisfaction is in its way similar the no-saying *daimonion*. For Alcibiades, everything, because alien, is a possible object of acquisition; for Socrates, everything, because alien, is a possible object of inquiry. Both are constant in their motion. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates says the following:

I am not yet able in accordance with the Delphic writing to know myself. It really appears laughable to me, while still being ignorant of this, to look into the things of others. Whence . . . I look not into these things but myself, whether I happen to be some beast more twisted and more rabid than Typhon, or whether an animal, tamer and simpler, partaking by nature of some divine and modest lot.

(*Phaedrus*, 230a)

²⁰ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1125a2.

²¹ See Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, Section 15, paragraph 2 and Lessing, G.E., *Eine Duplik*, Section 1.

For Socrates, to know himself comes first. Alcibiades himself thus mirrors a curious tension within Socrates himself, a tension between the self as constant, the same, and yet always undergoing change. Socrates is attracted to Alcibiades, for he seems to him the way to what he cares most about—self-knowledge. He seems to see in Alcibiades the perfect representation of the self itself.

But how more exactly do these two need each other? Socrates invents a god to offer Alcibiades a choice—to remain where he is or die. As this is never a real option for anyone, Alcibiades is defined by a counterfactual. The truth of the expression “where there’s life, there’s hope” is not so much that as long as we are alive we can still hope, but rather that life is unintelligible apart from hope or expectation. We cannot choose to remain where we are because to choose means always to hope for change.²² Socrates then glosses this counterfactual offer.

And if, in turn, this same god (*ho autos houtos theos*) should say that you should be master of it [*autou*] in Europe, but to step across into Asia will not be possible for you, nor to apply yourself to affairs there, neither do you, in turn, seem to me to be willing to live only on these terms if you are not to fill all human beings, so to speak, full of your name and your power. (105b-c)

Now, on the one hand, Socrates’ meaning is clear. According to Herodotus, when Xerxes, the Persian king, plans an invasion of Greece, his ultimate goal is to “show forth a Persian earth coextensive with the sky of Zeus.”²³ Like Xerxes, Alcibiades has nothing less in mind than universal conquest—and, of course, this ambition is not peculiar to Xerxes and Alcibiades. So, what is behind this longing to conquer the world? Alcibiades’ longing shows up first always as

²² This is the meaning of the title of Nietzsche’s autobiographical *Ecce Homo: Wie man wird was man ist*. To have a self is endlessly to become what one is.

²³ Herodotus, *Inquiries* 7.8.

longing for an object in the world—a possession. But rather than the possession, he really wants the possessing. The verb *echein* may mean either “to have” or “to be able.” Having is for Alcibiades only the external sign of what he really values—being able. And so, without quite realizing it, Alcibiades doesn’t want the world; he wants himself, himself as the principle of, and necessary condition for, the power of possessing. This is why Socrates introduces the account of this longing for universal dominion by accusing Alcibiades of “other thoughts” “in relation to you yourself (*auton*)” (105a). Alcibiades himself *is* this always wanting more, wanting to be greater—than others superficially, than himself deeply. And in this restlessness, he is akin to Socrates, for whom no question is ever simply settled. The question is how it is possible to grasp and savor this self without treating it as complete, and so not needing more, and so, as dead. How does one explain the self as self-same, and so as what makes ownership even thinkable, and at the same time as essentially longing to acquire, and so to be other? God is the name of this puzzle that Alcibiades wants to be.

It is Alcibiades’ hope²⁴ that he need come forward only once (*parelthōn* is an aorist participle) in the Athenian assembly; this will suffice for him to shine forth immediately as greater than any ever to have been born in Greece, Europe, or Asia²⁵. Should this same god (*ho autos houtos theos*) once again offer him the possibility of resting content with the conquest of Europe, Alcibiades will once again decline, for his goal is to fill all human beings everywhere and always with his name and his power—not with a set of accomplishments, but with whatever

²⁴ Hope and hoping occur frequently at beginning of the dialogue; see 103b1, 104c6, 104d2 (twice), 105a7, 105c7, 105d7, 105e2, and 105e6.

²⁵ Socrates notes the possible exceptions of Cyrus and Xerxes. We are reminded that Alcibiades is one of a *kind* when we realize that we don’t know which Cyrus Socrates means, the founder of the Persian empire or his grandson, the now young Cyrus who will attempt to overthrow his brother Artaxerxes at the turn of the 4th century.

power it is within him that makes these accomplishments possible and to which the proper name “Alcibiades” belongs. This same god gives the illusion that Alcibiades might be satisfied with a possession, with something had, something in the world, or, should we translate differently (and, by now it goes without saying, ungrammatically), *ho autos houtos theos* could mean “the self, this god.” This suggests the possibility that Alcibiades might be content to be master of self (*autou*) in Europe and not cross into Asia. The self understood as like a god, an external being, gives the illusion that it is possible for the self to be content with an external acquisition—a continent. Without this illusion, one would never seek to sate one’s inner restlessness by conquering the world.

Alcibiades is troubled by the fact that what he is on the inside is not immediately manifest on the outside—we are all troubled by this sense of alienation. The boy who refused to play the flute (106e) because it disfigured his face wants his inside and his outside to be in perfect agreement. He plans to begin by courting the approval of the Athenians, who unlike his previous lovers will value him not because he is a winsome child but for what he really is, the greatest of all he-men. But this is only a beginning. The disparity between internal and external, the alienation of his self from the world, can only be altogether overcome if his self controls the whole of the world that would thwart him, if his dominion is coextensive with the sky of Zeus. For Alcibiades, to fill all human beings with his name and with his power means to be able to say “I am the world.” This, the illusion that one can become whole by way of the political, is a perennial temptation. It requires a poetizing of the self that turns the inside out so that one may long to be god—it requires *autos* as a nominative subject.

The irony of the opening scene of the *Alcibiades* is that everything we learn about Alcibiades inner turmoil is revealed not by Alcibiades himself, but by a Socrates who has not yet ever conversed with him. When Socrates finishes his account, Alcibiades says

On the one hand then, whether these things go through my mind or not, you have, as seems likely, decided, and if I deny [it], nothing from me would be such as to persuade you more. Well, if, on the other hand [it is] really [the case] that these things most of all go through my mind, how would they be mine through you but without you not? Are you able (or, do you have [it]) to say? (106a)

According to Socrates, Alcibiades is tortured by the fact that he does not appear on the outside as he understands himself to be on the inside. And yet, when Socrates pulls the curtain aside and shows what is going through Alcibiades' mind, Alcibiades replies rather smugly "How can you possibly be sure of what goes on inside me?" Is Alcibiades as hidden as he thinks himself to be? And if he is not, then does he correctly understand the tension between the inside and the outside? Socrates, after all, claims not to imagine or guess the character of Alcibiades' ambition, but to know it (105c). If true, then there is at least one person in the world, however more absurd or without a place (*atopōteros*—106a) he may seem to Alcibiades, who actually does see inside him. And if this is the case, Alcibiades should be very interested, for Socrates would represent the possibility that the self can go out of itself for the sake of itself, to satisfy itself, without having to conquer the world. Alcibiades seems to sense *that*, but not *how* Socrates might be the solution to his problem. He thinks that with this uncanny knowledge of his secret longings, Socrates may be able to help him satisfy these longings. He does not recognize that Socrates' very awareness of the longings already discredits their claims and points the way to what would quiet them.

On one level then, Alcibiades' motive in all of this is clear enough, but what of Socrates' motive? Alcibiades will come out to the Athenians and Socrates claims he will show him how to

make his inner power, his *dunamis*, visible. But why does Socrates need Alcibiades? Does he plan to use Alcibiades to show what he can do, to make his own inner power visible? Perhaps he too wishes to turn himself inside out, for he refers here for the first time to his *daimonion* as “the god” (105d). If Alcibiades plans to show himself in Athens, does Socrates plan to show himself in Alcibiades? Socrates’ *daimonion* is in at least one respect akin to Alcibiades’ political ambition. Both keep both from being satisfied with anything as it is, leaving both to think “this is not enough” or “I hope for more.”

The two may need each other, but Alcibiades, used to having the upper hand, indicates that if Socrates wishes to be taken seriously, he will have to show what he can do for him. As to inner powers, Alcibiades’ seems to say “show me yours Socrates, and I’ll show you mine,” to which, with one stipulation, Socrates agrees. He will reveal himself only in conversation, *dialegesthai*, not in a speech, *logos*, for his power—his *dunamis*—is not available as a thing to hang out for display. Socrates can show what he is not as a *logos*, but only *through* speech as a *dia/logos*.²⁶ The stand-alone, independent, character of long speech is deceptive. Seeming to reveal fully, a long speech hides its speaker while the hit or miss character of conversation, of question and answer, in their very incompleteness, reveals its participants as selves.

Thus far we have ignored an important distinction. We found our warrant for abusing the grammar of the intensive adjective pronoun at 129b1-3, where Socrates uses it in the neuter *auto* in the nominative to express our need to know the self itself—*auto t’auto*. But, of course, the adjective comes in three genders. In our restless attempt to hold it constant and translate each of its occurrences as “self” in order to see what happens, what are we to do with the other two

²⁶ Socrates announces his stipulation in a clause called a *men solitarium*, a clause where one part of a pair is introduced (on the one hand, this), but the other shoe (on the other hand, that) never drops (106b). We are left wanting more, and of course that is just the point here.

genders, with the masculine *autos* and the feminine *autē*? These three words—auto, autos, and aut—are on the one hand the same, and on the other hand not. Do the differences make a difference?

This is a long story, but part of it is captured beautifully in the details of an argument Socrates makes (110d7-113c7) to refute Alcibiades' claim that he already knows what the just is, that he learned it neither from an expert teacher, nor on his own, but from the many in the same way he learned Greek. Socrates' counter-argument, superficially convincing, is that good teachers must have knowledge of what they teach, that to have knowledge means that one good teacher will not disagree with another (nor will he be unsure of himself because disagreeing with himself), that, because the many (the *hoi polloi*—it is a disparaging term) agree about speech, it is quite plausible that they are good teachers of it, but, as they disagree about justice, about it, they cannot be good teachers. Thus, Alcibiades cannot possibly have learned justice from them, and so, unless he can say from whom he did learn it, he doesn't know it, and so is ignorant of what he needs to know if he is to have any sort of dazzling political career.

There are reasons to wonder about this argument even on the superficial level. Do the many always agree about Greek. What about dialects, age differences, class differences, not to mention something of particular interest to us, grammatical errors? Some years ago there was an advertisement on a local central Pennsylvania television station for "living room suits" done by a news reporter who at another time, in a story about a serious storm to the west of Pittsburgh, ended by saying "But what do we care about that; we don't live there? His home town bias, explicit here, even if only jokingly, was already implicit in his pronunciation of "suite" as "suit." So, the many do not always agree about language; think "tomato," "mischievous," "coupon," or "adult"—not to mention the rather useful "y'all." Or, in Cincinnati the celebrated a food called

“goetta,” (get-uh), a sausage and grain mush. It is said to come from the Low German *Grötte*, and so is probably connected to “grits,” but still, it is a distant cousin, differing not only in substance but in name. The many may be the authority for correct speech, but there are many many’s, depending on time, on place, and on disposition. Furthermore, in calling into question whether Alcibiades has somehow just absorbed his understanding of justice, Socrates remarks in passing (111a6) that the many are “justly praised” as good teachers of speech. How does Socrates, famous for his knowledge of ignorance know this praise to be just? From whom did he learn the meaning of justice?

But at a less obvious level, things get even more interesting. The many are justly praised for *didaskalōn autōn*—either “their teaching”—literally, “the teaching of them” (this would be a subjective genitive), or for the “teaching of selves” (this would be an objective genitive). In the latter case, “self” could be any of the three genders. The many are good teachers because they have what good teachers should have concerning *auta*—“these”, or “selves,” this time neuter plural. Those intending to teach anything should first “themselves know,” or “know themselves”—depending on whether *autous* is the subject or the object of the infinitive, but perhaps even more important, this is the masculine plural. Alcibiades had claimed he learned to speak Greek (the verb is *hellēnizein*, which can also mean to be Greek, just as its opposite *barbarizein* may either mean to speak a foreign language or be barbaric) from the many. Socrates goes on to criticize their teaching “of selves.” He seems initially to mean that to Hellenize selves is to make them agree—whether linguistically or culturally. When the selves are Hellenized, they are masculine. When not, they are neuter. Insofar as the masculine selves differ, they do not know the neuter selves (111b5). When the many, presumably themselves selves, want to grasp something in particular, Socrates asks, “Do they not agree on selves

(neuter), and do they not move toward selves (neuter)?" (111b-c). He concludes his argument with the following:

Isn't it the case then, on the one hand, with respect to these selves (Greek neuter), just as we said, they agree, both with one another and themselves (Greek masculine) with themselves (Greek masculine) in private, and in public cities do not dispute with one another—some affirming these selves (Greek neuter) and, on the other hand, some others? (111c6-8)

In private, alone, the masculine selves agree with themselves on the issue of neuter selves. They then agree in public with regard to the same thing, neuter selves, with other masculine selves in the city. This whole thing is repeated when cities agree with one another about the neuter self.

What does this all amount to? On the surface, while convoluted, its meaning seems clear. You send someone to learn from the many to learn what they all agree on, for example language. This straightforward agreement about language exists within each individual, then between individuals, and finally among all Greek cities. But if one goes to learn not “these things” (*tauta*), but selves (*t'auta*), things look different. What would it mean to go to the many to learn selves? We saw that the language of the many is really not a matter of perfect agreement, and so, one and uniform, but rather manifests tensions, contradictions, and ambiguities. So too with the *nomoi*, the laws and customs that make a distinct people—that Hellenize the Greeks. Athenians *autoi*, themselves, are distinct, for example, because they share a certain understanding of justice. Yet how do they actually experience their self-defining sense of justice? In the fourth book of the *Republic* (432b-c) Socrates is looking for justice in the city he and his interlocutors have constructed and cannot find it; upon discovering it, he proclaims his surprise that it has been rolling around at their feet the whole time. At first, Socrates cannot find justice within the city where it is supposed to be operating perfectly. Where the machine just hums, justice is invisible. He and his companions can see its operation only because they are not

in the city they have created. From within, we notice justice, only when it is not operating, when we experience unfairness. In discovering it, we also discover ourselves. “You can’t do that to me” is the self’s discovery of itself, for only when someone intrudes upon my space do I discover that I have a space. Accordingly, were the language we speak a matter of complete agreement, we would not know we spoke in a particular a language. A “barbarian” tongue would not be for us a language, but mere gibberish—ba, ba, ba.²⁷ And, were our laws and customs to rule us perfectly and unambiguously, they would be unknown to us as rules, as would we ourselves be unknown to ourselves. It is, then, on account of the very many-ness of the many that we learn our selves from them. In exposing us to the contradictions in language and in *nomos*, they reveal to us that we speak *a* language and obey *a* law. They thereby provide for us something specific with which to identify ourselves, and so something “fair” in the name of which we can articulate our sense of “it’s not fair.” All human beings are speaking animals, but no human being speaks speech. We must speak a language—Hebrew or Greek, Latin or Persian—in order to manifest our natures as the *zōa logika*, the animals with speech or reason. Just so, to manifest our natures as the *zōa politika*, the political animals, we must be, say, Athenians.²⁸ Accordingly, our sense of self itself, of *auto t’auto* always shows up as this self that I am, which, in turn, as identified with something specific, identifies me with a species of sorts. *I* become a Greek, or an Athenian, or a “child of Kleinias.” Just as speech shows itself as Greek, the neuter self itself, *to auto*, what we all are and so all in some sense share, shows itself as the masculine

²⁷And so Goethe: “Wer fremde Sprachen nicht kennt, weiß nichts von seiner eigen” (*Einselheiten, Maximen und Reflexionen*, Eckermann and Riemer, eds., Cotta'schen Buchhandlung, 1833—Maxim 91). See also Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, *Essai sur l’origine des langues* (Gallimard: 1990), 59, and Davis, Michael, *The Music of Reason* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), 18.

²⁸“Of political justice,” Aristotle tells us, “one [part] is natural, the other conventional . . .” (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 5, chapter 7, 1134b).

self, *ho autos*, what exactly I am that differentiates and specifies me.²⁹ So, to experience justice itself means something like to experience Athenian justice in its imperfection. To experience the self itself means to experience the Athenian self in its incompleteness. This is what one learns at the feet of the many; one can do so because “they do not even agree with themselves (*hautois*) about selves (*autōn*)” (11d6). Indeed, they seem “to differ most of all about selves (*autōn*)” (112a). On the one hand then, Socrates seems to argue that the many are bad teachers because they disagree. He expresses this conclusion as an ironic question.

Are we to claim then that these have knowledge of that about which they differ excessively in this way, so that, while disputing with one another, they work extremes upon themselves (*spas autous*)? (112c-d)

On the other hand, should we read his question non-ironically, it seems precisely because the many disagree excessively that we learn from them what is most important, for it is in their disagreement (that each is an *autos* and so unlike any other), that they make manifest what it is that they share (that each is an instance of the self itself—*auto t'auto*).

In what immediately follows, Socrates first forces Alcibiades to the conclusion that, since he couldn't have learned justice from the many, he doesn't really know what it is, and then claims that, since it was Alcibiades who was answering, it is Alcibiades who is responsible for this conclusion. This last is established in a short argument (113e10-b7) of ten questions, eight of which Alcibiades answers with one word. As an inflected language, Greek does not require that personal pronouns be used with verbs—they are already understood in the verb endings. In the twenty exchanges that make up this argument, however, the pronoun “I” occurs ten times—by itself, *egō*, makes the “I” emphatic; in this section the yet more emphatic form, *egōge*, occurs

²⁹ Insofar as it shows itself at all in the world, the transcendental ego shows itself in the fact that there are different empirical egos. See Kant, Immanuel, *Kritik der Reinen Vernunft*, B, 157.

twice. The addition of the particle, *ge*, to the pronoun, *egō*, allows for two readings—“I, indeed” and “I, at least.” The first adds emphasis; the second seems to diminish emphasis by saying “this applies to me, but perhaps only me.” So, on one level, the two meanings seem at odds. And yet, to distinguish myself, is to become distinguished. This is another version of the doubleness of the word “I,” which in setting me apart from all others reveals what I share with all others.

We are wont to sympathize with Alcibiades. Socrates first frustrates him by forcing him to say that he doesn’t know what justice is and then frustrates him further by forcing him to say that he himself alone is the one saying that he doesn’t know what justice is. Socrates is supposedly not talking at all even though his questions go on at some length. Alcibiades, who is supposedly doing all the talking, answers in single monosyllabic words. Alcibiades responds to Socrates’ questions by saying “self” or even “self!” because, when Socrates crowds him, the proud Alcibiades resists. As is the rule for him, he defends the fact of his “I” by way of a defense of a specific version of his “I”—his *auto* brings forth an *autos*.

And then there is Socrates, who “only” asks questions. But if the self never simply affirms itself as it is, but always shows itself only in its response to a threat to itself, what of an answer as an affirmation? Alcibiades is no more solely responsible for where this argument ended up, than an answer retains its character as an answer when the question to which it is an answer is forgotten. Just as there is no call for, or even possibility of, saying “I” without the real or imagined presence of another, and no experience of justice apart from perceived injustice, so too is there no direct experience of the self itself, of the self utterly at home with itself.³⁰

³⁰ Consider the very first sentence of Part 2 of Rousseau’s *Discours sur l’origine et les fondemens de l’inégalité parmi les hommes* (Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Oeuvres Complètes*, Éditions de Seuil: 1971, Vol. 2, 228).

Socrates and Alcibiades are attracted to one another by the strength of their mutual restlessness, of the power made manifest in wonder.

What of the third gender of “self”—the feminine *autē*? Our attention is first called to the importance of the feminine by the second cluster of occurrences of the verb “to wonder” at 123e-124a where Socrates uses it three times to describe the hypothetical astonishment of the queens of Persia and Sparta that Alcibiades would dare compare himself to their kings. They are, so to speak, the powers behind the thrones.³¹ We wonder as well whether the feminine here has something to do with its role in tragedy generally as the unspoken ground of things that turns masculine when it speaks itself.³² When Alcibiades suggests that the political art to which he aspires may have as its goal to instill friendship—*philia*—among citizens (126c), Socrates goes on to ask whether he means by friendship “like-mindedness (*homonoia*) or being of two minds (*dichonoia*),” and Alcibiades responds that he means like-mindedness. Socrates then asks,

What do you say like-mindedness [to be] then? What is it, and about what, and what art produces it (or self—*autēn*)? And [is it] what [is] for a city, and [is it] the same (or self—*hautē*) for a private man, for himself (*autōi*) both in relation to (*pros*) himself (*hauton*) and in relation to (*pros*) another? (126d)

Since like-mindedness (*homonoia*) and friendship (*philia*) are both feminine, Socrates has ample opportunity when discussing them here to use pronouns that, in our by now familiar ungrammatical way we have been translating as “self.” And, when Alcibiades is pressed to say on account of what art (also feminine) cities are like-minded about number, and answers “arithmetic,” Socrates can go on to ask, “What then of private men? [Is] it not on account of the same [art]/self (*autēn*)?” (126c6). Each individual is “himself (*autos*) like-minded with himself

³¹ See Herodotus, *Histories* 7.2.

³² See, for example, Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 10-11 and 348-54, and Sophocles, *Antigone* 490-540.

(*autōi*)” (both masculine) (126c11) because of this feminine self. Socrates is in the middle of an argument designed to throw Alcibiades into *aporia*—a state where he is at odds with himself and can see no way out. The source of his perplexity is his inability to say what the like-mindedness is that he would seek to encourage in the city should he rule. On the one hand, the city is most healthy when its citizens feel nothing but kinship with one another—when nothing separates them. With citizens that are altogether alike, the city is completely homogeneous. On the other hand, a city functions most smoothly when each part, as uniquely suited to perform its specific function, is altogether unlike the others. But this “one man one art” principle would entail complete heterogeneity.³³ The city must be and cannot be both homogeneous and heterogeneous. Cast into this *aporia*, Alcibiades is ashamed and swears he does not even know himself what he is saying (127d), for how can he care for himself if he doesn’t even know what he is, and how can he induce like-mindedness, i.e., sameness, in selves when he doesn’t even know what makes selves (*autoi*) the same (*autoi*)? In his shame, Alcibiades discovers himself. Like Adam and Eve, he becomes self-conscious in the sense of self-aware upon becoming self-conscious in the sense of being ashamed. At first it seems strange that he should come to this self-awareness when at odds with himself, when he is of two minds. But were he simply of two minds, he would feel no shame. Being at odds with himself without knowing himself to be at odds with himself, he would not really be one self. He would feel no pain in riding off in all directions at once. One can’t be of two minds without being one.

Plato understood (long before Heidegger) that the self is constituted by a deep and inarticulate sense of mineness, of caring.³⁴ This is the self as *autē*. We experience ourselves as

³³ See *Republic* 423d3-6.

³⁴ In “Hegel and the Greeks,” Heidegger remarks in his own voice that “with [Descartes’] philosophy, for the first time the subject is posited as subject.” Shortly after he quotes Hegel as

one in caring that we are of two minds. Our perplexity bothers us and moves us to affirm the self that feels threatened. But this movement always involves the reification of the hitherto uncanny self, the *autē*, making it a thing to be grasped. This self-articulation transforms the *autē* into something articulable—the *autos*—and so, what is at the ground of all my experience, but thereby cannot itself be revealed in my experience, comes to be experienced willy nilly as something it is not. This is the self's natural tendency to move from inarticulable ground to articulated object. Self is what mistakenly goes out of itself for the sake of itself and finds itself in losing itself. This is the structure of the self itself—beautifully expressed by *auto t'auto*, which points to the fundamental unity or wholeness of the self, but can do so grammatically only by doubling the self. This is what Socrates has made Alcibiades experience.

It is the peculiar nature of Socrates to engage in conversation or dialectic, *dialegesthai*, with others so as to break the connection they have allowed to grow between what they are at bottom, *autē*, and what they understand themselves to be, *autos*, so as to reveal a troubling duality that in turn implies a deeper unity. This is Socrates' *leitmotif*—his famous “knowledge of ignorance”; that he knows that he does not know who he is, is who he is. He himself is and is not his *daimonion*, which, once talked about, comes to be understood as a god. A similar movement occurs in this first conversation with Alcibiades, where late in the dialogue (130a1)

saying “The man (of the Greek world) is not yet returned into self as in our times. He is certainly a subject, but he has not posited himself as such.” Heidegger goes on to say that “because it is not drawn out, the subject as such, not yet . . . determined and arranged conceptually and that means not fully-developed, not concrete, the universal remains the “abstract” (Hegel und die Griechen,” in *Wegmarken* 1960). This is for Heidegger's Hegel characteristic of the “Philosophy of the Greeks,” and so for Plato. It is a view that has been very influential in our age and suggests that in Plato there is an inadequate account of the self itself. In a way, Plato would agree. For what we are shown in the *Alcibiades*, is that owing to home time bias, any account of the self itself will be inadequate. It is an odd thing to say of Heidegger, but perhaps he was not as attentive as Plato to the relation between self, home and home-town bias.

Socrates argues that the self is distinct both from the things of the self and the things of the things of the self. And this unused user is nothing else than the soul. Of course, *psyche* is a real noun in Greek; it need not be invented by grammatical legerdemain. It is in fact *the* word that represents the natural tendency of self out of a longing for itself to treat itself as though it were a thing. Socrates presents it here as the truth of Alcibiades' continent. Still, however natural and necessary, it is still self-objectification, and it is dangerous. Alcibiades longing to conquer the world is one form of its danger.

Four times in the dialogue Socrates addresses Alcibiades with the expression "O, best one"—only to go on to say that he is mad, then utterly unlearned, then that he has said something unworthy of him, and once merely to say he is wrong.³⁵ This seems at first strange praise. There seem to be two sorts of reasons for reifying one's self. The more common seems to be self-praise, and this is certainly Alcibiades' motive. The second is self-critique, and this seems to be Socrates' motive. We turn to ourselves as things either to ask, "Why on earth did you do that?" or to proclaim "Oh, what a good boy am I." Socrates' *daimonion* is a form of self-objectification that represents a desire of the self to be whole and satisfied, but that shows itself only negatively as critique and issues in human knowledge as knowledge of ignorance. When the *daimonion* is turned into a god—an independent being that is no longer either adjectival or diminutive, it becomes possible to want to be a god—a self-standing independent being and not a being the very being of which consists in negating. Socrates is attracted to Alcibiades because of his ambition, his wonder, and his self-dissatisfaction, but Alcibiades always understands these as things to be gotten past. Alcibiades is only dissatisfied with being dissatisfied because he is so self-satisfied. But self-awareness is only possible when you distance yourself from yourself. It is

³⁵ 113c, 118b, 119c and 120c.

only about you when it is not about you. It requires something like Socrates' *daimonion*, Socrates' splitting himself into a young actor and an older narrator, or Plato's artful use of Socrates as a character. Self-awareness is only possible when we who care for ourselves notice flaws in ourselves, and so, it must always take the form "O, best one, you idiot."

We began with three puzzles. Why is the *Alcibiades* no longer famous? What is the mistake the young Socrates makes in the dialogue? And why does Plato choose to present the problem of the self by way of a grammatical error? Everything turns on our deeply felt need to make the self visible to ourselves even as this objectifies it and renders it invisible. We saw that in *Alcibiades* this leads to a longing to conquer the world. To counter this tendency to lose oneself in the world, Socrates introduces the soul. Both are versions of the self's move from *autē* to *autos*—necessary if we are to talk about it at all. It is Plato's wonderful thought to bow to this necessity by way of an offense against grammar, and so to cancel his move even as he makes it. As the last sentence of the dialogue indicates Socrates is not altogether unaware of the danger he risks in making the soul a thing.

But I am in dread, not distrusting your nature in any way, but seeing the strength of the city, lest it prevail over both me and you. (135e)

Socrates knows the great temptation Alcibiades faces. Still, perhaps his error is that he does not yet realize quite how thoroughly this threat defines us, for the uncanny refusal of the self to be known points to a deep contingency in our selves that *auto t'auto* expresses with insufficient emphasis. Socrates does not yet seem to know that even should he reveal philosophy to Alcibiades in all of its glory, Alcibiades might still inexplicably turn away. And for the very same reason, the essential hiddenness of the self, Socrates will never really be able to reveal philosophy in all of its glory. It must remain daimonic and uncanny. Knowledge is not simply

virtue. And even the most artful display of this fundamental contingency will of necessity eventually lose its luster.