3 Guiding *Eros* Toward Wisdom in *Alcibiades I*

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The Socratic method is generally associated with a special type of questioning that aims at testing the consistency of an argument and usually forces the participant to reconsider his or her initial beliefs. But if one looks closely at the academic literature and the classroom practice, there seems to be no shared definition of the Socratic method that is broadly accepted. On the contrary, there are various views of what it actually consists of.¹

In this chapter, I argue that the Socratic method consists of redirecting an erotic – and therefore potentially tyrannical – soul toward philosophy. The outline of my argument is as follows: based on passages in the *Symposium*, Socrates describes himself as an expert in matters of love with *eros* understood as a fundamental drive that deeply shapes human life. I complement this picture of *eros* by turning to the *Republic*, where Socrates explains how the philosopher's *eros* aims at wisdom and is stronger than any other desire within the philosopher's soul. Astonishingly, Socrates emphasizes that the tyrant, too, is driven by an enormously strong *eros*, which forces the affected person to live a tyrannical life strictly opposed to a philosophical one.

In a next step, I seek to elucidate in *Alcibiades I* how Socrates tries to turn his lover's *eros* toward philosophy. In this dialog, Socrates meets Alcibiades, an ambitious aristocrat, whose *eros* aims at political power to “rule the world.” By working out the contradictions in Alcibiades' understandings of politics and justice, Socrates forces him to admit he does not have the necessary knowledge to become a good politician. The refutation of Alcibiades' mistaken ideas enables Socrates to redirect the young man's *eros*. Socrates further points out the importance of self-knowledge, an explicit reference to his own philosophical motivation derived from the Delphic maxim to “know thyself.” Finally, I conclude with some remarks on how the Socratic method as presented in the *Alcibiades I* might be applicable to classroom practice in the twenty-first century.

Different Accounts of the Socratic Method

Scholars distinguish two forms of the Socratic method present in Plato's dialogs. The first type consists in refuting the interlocutor's opinion by pointing out its inconsistencies. This confutative method is most prominent in the early dialogs like *Charmides*, *Laches*, or *Republic I*.² Because all these dialogs end in *aporia*, some scholars conclude that Socrates was a skeptic and that the rejection of any definition given by his partners demonstrates the limits of human reason.³ The second type of Socratic method is a way of imparting knowledge by asking specific questions. Commentators who favor this *maieutic* approach refer to *Meno* or *Theaetetus*.⁴ They claim that Socrates' main intention is to help people “give birth” to their own ideas. Both approaches are consistent in themselves, but once we look for a way to combine them into one overall method, we stumble upon the so-called Socratic ignorance.

Socrates, as presented by Plato, claims that he does not know the things he is asking his interlocutors.⁵ If Socrates' ignorance is seen simply as an ironic stylistic device, the Socratic method consequently appears as a way to impart knowledge or – in a negative way – to manipulate.⁶

However, this account contrasts with diverse passages within the Platonic corpus where Socrates insists on not knowing what matters most in life. He explains his epistemic position most prominently in the *Apology*. Socrates says that he never acted as a teacher, and he firmly rejects the idea that he ever had a pupil (*Apology*, 33b). Both aspects – the emphasis on his ignorance and the rejection of the idea of teaching – seem to contradict the thesis that Socrates' ignorance is simply ironic.

An alternative would be to take the Socratic ignorance literally. If Socrates really does not know what courage, justice, prudence, or piety mean, then his way of questioning his fellow citizens is a method which provides a basis for moral discussion that does not presuppose any specific knowledge. The Socratic method therefore seems to be a neutral procedure to lead a conversation such that it enables the interlocutor to "give birth" to his own ideas whereas the Socratic part does not interfere with the content.⁷ Even though this interpretation seems promising and attractive, it fails to explain one crucial element of the Socratic dialog: Socrates is never satisfied with simply assisting his interlocutor to generate a claim. He always insists on testing the idea advanced by his partner (*Apology*, 29e; *Theaetetus*, 150c). If we take his ignorance literally, how can Socrates actually test an opinion? Socrates must have known something, but what exactly?

Against this background, I offer another approach to the Socratic method that does not focus on Socratic ignorance but rather on Socratic knowledge about *eros*. I understand the Socratic method in a broader sense: I define it by its overall philosophical motivation rather than by particular rhetorical techniques. I consequently shift my focus on Socrates' intention while discussing with his interlocutor, i.e., Alcibiades, in the dialog of the same name.

Socratic Expertise on *Eros*

As stated in the beginning, Socrates is famous for his ignorance. He frankly admits that he does not know the things he is asking his interlocutors (*Apology*, 23a). In this light, the rare passages where Socrates does claim to know something become even more interesting and call for further investigation. Maybe one of the most revealing dialogs about Socrates himself is the *Symposium*. As I later take a closer look at the relationship between Alcibiades and Socrates in the *Alcibiades I*, it is worth mentioning that Plato gives the most impressive characterization of his master through the mouth of Alcibiades. Apparently, Alcibiades knows Socrates better than anyone else does – except, of course, for Plato.⁸

In *Symposium*, Agathon celebrates his victory at an Athenian festival in honor of Dionysius and invites his guests to a banquet (*Symposium*, 173a).⁹ Instead of raising their glasses to toast their host Agathon, the guests instead agree on delivering speeches to praise *Eros*¹⁰ (177d). So, what does Socrates know about it?

Eros, i.e., love, is always love of something (199e). Love is a relation between the lover and the beloved – it is *not* the beloved itself. Love expresses a desire for something, but we only desire things we do not have yet or we already have but are afraid of losing (200d). Because *Eros* is attracted by beauty, it follows that he cannot be beautiful himself (201c). The previous speakers Socrates holds, misunderstood this fundamental structure. Hence, all the positive attributes they ascribed to *Eros* are really the attributes of the beloved.

But if *Eros* is not beautiful, this does not mean necessarily that he is ugly, as Socrates explains reproducing a conversation he once had with the priestess Diotima (202b). He is in between, the *metaxy*; and *Eros* is neither ignorant nor wise – but philosophical (204b). This point is remarkable as it might give us an enriched idea of what philosophy actually means. Philosophy as the love for wisdom is relational – it has a center of reference, namely wisdom and truth, and it has not yet reached what it is seeking. The philosopher is neither ignorant (he *knows* that he does not know) nor wise (he knows that he *does not know*) – a clear reference to Socrates himself. Thus, philosophy represents the basic erotic condition of human life: we yearn for the things that we do not have yet

but so desperately need. This link between *eros* and philosophy later becomes more evident when Alcibiades identifies Socrates as *Eros* (214b).

Love is not completion but the striving for it. It longs for the beautiful by which it hopes to attain the good and everyone wants to have the good forever (205a). Diotima describes how a true erotic lover can reach the highest good and hence satisfy his desire. First, as a young man, he loves a beautiful person and impregnates him with beautiful speeches (210a). After a while, he realizes that there are many beautiful people and his beloved is not the only one. At this point, the lover extends his love to all beautiful people. If there are many beautiful bodies, beauty cannot be identical to any specific one (210b). It is pivotal to note that the expansion on the physical level – many beautiful bodies – is the first step to overcome the mind's fixation on an empirical object. He thus has to overcome the sensual level and enter the intellectual sphere.¹¹ Therefore, he now loves his lover's beautiful *soul* which is of greater consistency than his body.

At this stage, the philosopher lover aims at improving the beloved soul through "beautiful speeches." He continues to recognize the beauty in the community's laws and morals (210c), until he becomes aware of the beauty of science and knowledge (210c/d). At this abstract level, he is only one step away from the end. By practicing sciences and training his intellect, the lover will be able to grasp the beauty itself which is absolute and perfect. Although the ascent to the beautiful becomes more and more abstract, it is worth going: once the philosopher perceives beauty itself, he knows the source of all beautiful things which are always imperfect in some way and therefore never as beautiful as their cause. Knowing beauty itself enables the lover to create true virtue (212a) and only then is he at the end of his journey: he gains the good by creating it.

If one stops reading at this point, all the prerequisites regarding Plato's concept of love seem to be met: it is impersonal, ignoring the individual, objective, and only interested in intellectual objects, i.e., the Forms.¹² But this is not actually the case. To prove Socrates' and hence philosophy's personal erotic engagement, Plato appeals to someone as a witness whose credibility regarding love no one in Athens would have dared to question: Alcibiades¹³ who has the last saying in the *Symposium* and his description of Socrates is anything but prudish.¹⁴

Alcibiades enters Agathon's house accompanied by dancers and flutists. He is drunk and wants to share his inebriation with the other guests. Alcibiades refuses to praise *Eros* but instead wants to pay tribute to Socrates (214d). This scene introducing Alcibiades already gives an idea of the young Athenian's major characteristics: on the one hand, he is dictatorial and gives orders, and on the other hand, he is desperately in love with Socrates that he even associates his beloved with *Eros* itself.

How does he describe Socrates? Alcibiades compares him to the satyr Marsyas, a sort of demon, whose appearance is ugly but who bewitches humans by playing his flute. Socrates, by contrast, charms his fellows with his dialogs. Alcibiades confesses that he is so deeply moved by Socrates' words that he considers his own life not worth living on those terms (216a). And although it seems that Socrates mostly speaks about craftsmen, his words are full of wisdom and reason and "none are so divine, so rich in images of virtue" (222a).

Like *Eros*, Socrates always pursues the beautiful and is purely philosophical (216d). Driven by his love for wisdom, Socrates has achieved the highest level of Diotima's ascent by realizing virtue: he is braver than anyone else on the battlefield and he is modest, be it in times of shortage or abundance (220a/b, 221b). This is the reason why Alcibiades loves Socrates: he literally embodies the good. By following his *eros*, Socrates became what he was searching for.

Seemingly, Alcibiades is able to acknowledge the beauty of Socrates but is unable to follow him and lead a philosophical life. Alcibiades' *eros* was corrupted by his desire for power. Alcibiades represents another erotic character that is not philosophical but tyrannical. This will become more evident in the next section consulting the *Republic* and Plato's portrayal of the philosopher and the tyrant.

For present purposes, this short sketch of the *Symposium* shall be sufficient to show Socrates' expertise on love. Philosophy, as Socrates practices it, is erotic. One could even say that Socratic

philosophy is the most profound expression of love. For this reason, Socrates knows that an erotic nature is highly deficient and yearns for its beloved object.

Eros as Common Ground of Philosophy and Tyranny

So far, we have met an erotic person going in one direction – the ascent to beauty and the good. Although Socrates' previous speakers have no philosophical ambitions, one cannot deny their enthusiasm. The most emotional speech is that of Alcibiades – he represents erotic passion that resembles madness. Alcibiades' appearance – escorted by girls, dancers, and musicians, crowned with ivy and considerably drunk (*Symposium*, 212e) – is reminiscent of Dionysus, the god of wine and ecstasy. Alcibiades is erotic, but surely not in a philosophical sense. He is in love with Socrates but chooses another way of life. In the *Republic*, Plato describes the character which comes closest to the philosopher regarding his erotic passion – the tyrant.

It is therefore worth carving out the parallels of the philosopher in the *Symposium* and the *Republic*. After Socrates has stated that the philosophers are the ones who should rule the city (473c/d), he defines what a real philosopher is in order to meet potential objections (474b).¹⁵ First, he remarks that loving something means wanting it completely and not just parts of it. Philosophers love all sorts of knowledge because they desire all wisdom (475b). Because philosophers are not the only ones who are curious, he specifies his definition: whereas lovers of spectacles are delighted by beautiful sound and sights, the philosopher looks for the beauty itself. Here again, the philosopher is characterized as someone who goes beyond the phenomena and looks for the intellectual principle that manifests itself in material objects. The other lovers – those of spectacles, music, and so on – stay on the second level of Diotima's ascent: They are overwhelmed by the sheer amount and variety of sensual effects, but they are not capable of going one step further. They love many beautiful things without realizing *why* they love about them.

A philosopher is committed to *eros* and yearns for the good, but her or his passion is not necessarily satisfied. There are multiple dangers to a philosophical nature: First, the philosophical soul's so-called positive attributes – bravery, sobriety, and more – can pull it away from philosophy.¹⁶ A second danger is miseducation: Socrates states that bad education harms endowed souls more than others (491e). The philosophical soul features cognitive skills that can be exploited for any purpose – be it good or in bad faith. After all, "[...] a weak nature will never be the cause of anything great, either for good or evil" (491e). Philosophical natures can therefore potentially threaten their environment if they choose to use their excellence in a wrong sense.

Once the soul is corrupted, it becomes very difficult to recapture it for philosophy. Because his fellow men are also aware of his talents, they try to exploit the young person by cajoling him. In this regard, it is very unlikely that the young arrogant man will listen to someone who tells him the truth; he is in a deplorably ignorant state unless he starts to philosophize (494d). Later we will see how Socrates tries to convince Alcibiades of his ignorance in order to win him for philosophy, a task that Socrates ultimately fails.

To understand the consequences of a corrupted soul, a look at the decay of political constitution in the *Republic* reveals that tyranny grows on the grounds of democracy.¹⁷ Because every insufficient form of government fails by absolutizing its guiding principle, democracy's biggest problem is its love for liberty (562c). Democracy tends to arbitrariness and even anarchy, because democrats love their freedom so much that they disapprove of any sort of rule and hierarchy (563a). Where the oligarchic person is still able to control his ambitions to achieve an oligarch's aim, i.e., wealth, the democrat fails to overrule his desires, because his soul has never learned to obey.¹⁸ Moreover, the democrat's moral indifference draws interest to those who promote egalitarianism and break common rules.

This toxic mixture of unbounded desires and weakness makes the democrat's soul very prone to the seduction of those whom Plato calls "dread magi and king-makers" (572e).¹⁹ These people introduce

the young democrat to a debauched lifestyle full of conviviality. He is overwhelmed by all sorts of pleasures; and the more he follows his lust, the more he destroys prudence in his soul. Finally, he is willing to devote himself completely to his desires, even the forbidden and most wicked ones,²⁰ and "all [his] doings [...] are entirely swayed by the indwelling tyrant *Eros*" (573d).

The development from a democratic to a tyrannical person is illuminating: by indulging his numerous passions, he loses control to one desire that eventually dominates all others. Plato calls this ruling passion *eros*; and the tyrant himself is subjected to the tyrant *Eros*. Some translations try to avoid the word "*eros*" in this context, although the Greek text leaves no doubt that *eros* also stands for ruthless appetite.²¹ And it is indeed astonishing that the same force that earlier was described as the decisive drive toward wisdom and beauty might also deprave a man or even a whole state; or, as Scott puts it: "*eros* is to the soul of the tyrant as a tyrant is to his city."²²

Apparently, the philosophical and the tyrannical *eros* are not similar with regard to contents, but they do share some formal characteristics: Once *eros* is unleashed, it is impossible for the obsessed to resist: the philosopher is unable to do anything else than search for truth, whereas the tyrant must indulge his unnecessary desires no matter what the cost. From an outside perspective, this radicalism may manifest itself in asocial behavior. Whereas the philosopher in his admiration for truth is unwilling to engage in the conventional struggle for power, honor, and money, the tyrant ignores social rules and anything else that might limit his *pleonexia*.²³ Philosopher and tyrant are driven by the same force to the extreme, but in opposite directions. Both share the same talent for enthusiasm, but, unfortunately, the tyrant chooses the wrong object of love and is condemned to live an unjust and therefore unhappy life (576c).²⁴

It is worth repeating that only a gifted person with certain capacities can achieve greatness, which also means that only an exceptional character can become a veritable tyrant. As Socrates had mentioned earlier in the *Republic*, the young talent must not be corrupted by the moral standards of the many but his love must be directed toward truth. We have seen that a democratic environment is especially dangerous because its *laissez-faire* attitude promotes desires to grow unchecked.

The Socratic Method as a Deflection of Eros: The Case of Alcibiades I

In *Alcibiades I*,²⁵ Socrates meets the twenty-year-old Alcibiades who plans to stake out a leading position in Athens. His political ambitions are the starting point of the following conversation. In Socrates' attempt to turn Alcibiades' *eros* toward wisdom, I argue there are three steps. First, he seduces the young man and catches his attention. Second, Socrates dismantles Alcibiades' ignorance by refuting the aristocrat's incomplete beliefs about politics and justice. Once Alcibiades accepts his deficient state, Socrates can finally redirect the young man's *eros* toward wisdom by teaching him the art of self-knowledge.

Socratic Seduction

Plato's introduction of the two characters is revealing. The initial encounter of Socrates and Alcibiades resembles the idea of *paidierastia*: the ancient Athenian institution of an elder citizen taking a teenager as his lover, who is supposed to learn virtue in return. The date of their first meeting is not accidental: Socrates' *daimonion* has forbidden him to approach Alcibiades earlier although he has stalked him for years. The reason for Socrates' patience must be linked to his educational intention: now that Alcibiades' physical attractiveness is beginning to vanish,²⁶ his intellectual beauty is on the rise. This is a first sign that Socrates is not interested in Alcibiades' body but rather in his soul, as he later confirms (131d). At twenty, Alcibiades stands at the threshold to adulthood which is socially marked by the participation in the assembly, the most important political institution in democratic Athens at that time. If Socrates wants to influence Alcibiades' development, he cannot wait any longer: Alcibiades is now old enough to enter the political stage.

Therefore, he is potentially endangered by the corruptive effects of power and democratic public opinion, both of which can harm a talented soul (*Republic*, 494c).²⁷

Socrates' further description of Alcibiades shows that the young man is already at the brink of tyranny: Alcibiades thinks that he has "no need of any man in any matter" (104a), because he is already perfect. He is very beautiful and athletic, he comes from the noblest families of Athens, he has powerful friends – his guardian is Pericles himself – and he is very rich which, however, seems the least important to him (104b–c). Socrates has observed that Alcibiades is aware of his exceptional personality, seeing that his arrogant attitude has driven away all his lovers (103b).²⁸

But why does Socrates not give up on him? The following passage is a very impressive characterization of the young Athenian and delivers insight into Socrates' love: Socrates admits that he would have resigned long ago if he had seen the young man enjoying his life. But he claims that Alcibiades is not happy at all: he would probably prefer to die if he were not to "fill one may say, the whole world with [his] name and [his] power" (105c). The desire for absolute domination clearly implies a strong *eros*. Socrates hopes to persuade Alcibiades that only Socrates can give what Alcibiades desires (105e) – Socrates claims to be the only one who can fulfill Alcibiades' love.

Socrates' statement in this passage is quite uncommon because he usually never makes promises, especially not any of such kind.²⁹ But if we take his expertise on *eros* into consideration, his words make sense in two ways: he seems to acknowledge Alcibiades' strong *eros* which makes him receptive to both philosophy and tyranny.³⁰ Thanks to Socrates' explanation,³¹ Alcibiades learns about his own secret hopes and ambitions, probably for the first time in his life, because he neither refuses nor does he confirm Socrates' claim (105c).³²

Moreover, by promising Alcibiades what he desires, Socrates easily catches the young man's attention, who actually listens full of curiosity (106c). As Zuckert remarks, "... Socrates used his knowledge of *ta erotika* to 'seduce' Alcibiades."³³ Of course, the power Socrates promises is not quite what Alcibiades expects: before ruling others, Alcibiades has to control himself first, a task which he does not find easy.³⁴

Socratic Refutation

Once Socrates secures Alcibiades' attention by having appealed to his *eros*, he explains how Alcibiades can achieve his goal. However, Socrates cannot teach him by making a long speech, but he will prove his claim if Alcibiades answers his questions (106b). Socrates is able to give a long speech, as he later demonstrates (120e–124b), so the reason for the dialogical approach cannot be Socrates' poor oratorical skills. It is rather a first hint that the dialog as a form is central to Socratic philosophy and his method.³⁵ Only by conducting a Socratic dialog can Alcibiades attain power over himself and others. It is worth noting to see how the dialog influences Alcibiades' thinking and what overall function it plays in turning Alcibiades' *eros* toward philosophy. Thus, I focus on the dialog's effects and not on its subject, i.e., justice.

The starting point is Alcibiades' political ambition. By entering the assembly and participating in public deliberations, Alcibiades asserts that he is able to consult the Athenians in political affairs (106c). Giving advice to someone implies a difference in knowledge between the advisor and the advised; hence, Alcibiades' intention means that he claims to know more than his fellow citizens (106d). Socrates, however, deconstructs the young man's presumption by showing that he does not know anything at all about politics which, he says, is based on justice (109c).

Although Socrates dismantles Alcibiades' ignorance of justice (112b), the latter is not very impressed and sees no reason why he should abandon his initial claim for political leadership. Instead, Alcibiades changes the topic by stating "that the Athenians and the rest of the Greeks rarely deliberate as to which is the more just or unjust course [...] and consider which course will prove more expedient in the result" (113d). This tactical move from the just to the expedient reveals

Alcibiades' inconsistency and flippancy. He thinks that by arbitrarily changing the subject, he will be able to escape Socratic refutation. But he ignores that his maneuver enlarges his claim of knowledge which has already been proven baseless. He even anticipates Socrates' argument and refuses to be proven wrong in the same way as before (113e).

After Socrates has revealed that Alcibiades neither knows what justice is nor what is expedient, Alcibiades tries one final elusion. Because Alcibiades thinks that his fellow citizens do not know anything about the just and expedient, he sees no need for himself to learn about these either: "For I am sure that my natural powers alone will give me an easy victory over them" (119c). Facing this level of hubris and convenience, Socrates highlights during a long speech that Alcibiades' true rivals are not his untalented fellows, but the kings of Persia and Sparta. These monarchs excel Alcibiades' gifts by far so that his only chance to compete against them is by "pains and skill." Therefore, Socrates recommends that Alcibiades listen to him and the Delphic motto "know thyself" (124a/b).

Some interpreters criticize that Socrates would never admire wealth and power and therefore argue that this hymn on the Persian and Spartan kings proves the dialog's inauthenticity.³⁶ But if one takes Socrates' educational intention into account, this speech seems to have a persuasive function and rather expresses Alcibiades' thoughts than those of Socrates.³⁷ By pointing at his true competitors, Socrates incites Alcibiades' *eros*, for he knows that the young man is enamored of glory "more [...] than anyone else ever was of anything" (124b). Socrates' speech is also reminiscent of the educators' attempt to persuade a talented soul of its ignorance (*Republic*, 494d). All of Socrates' efforts aim at bringing Alcibiades to terms. The young man must be made to accept his ignorance and the consequences of it; otherwise, he is lost for philosophy and will probably continue his way toward tyranny.

Socratic Teaching

The last section of the dialog keeps its dialectical structure, even though Socrates is trying to pass knowledge on to Alcibiades. After the speech about his Persian and Spartan rivals, Alcibiades appears understanding and asks that Socrates enlighten him. Before Socrates starts his lesson, he emphasizes the importance of joint consideration (124d). Both partners commit to the inquiry, Socrates as well as Alcibiades. This call for cooperation anticipates the process of mutual self-knowledge described in the allegory of the reflecting eye at the end (133d).

Socrates starts once again by asking Alcibiades how to become an Athenian gentleman whose task it is to improve the city (124e). A city is well managed when its citizens are friends. But Alcibiades cannot tell how to create friendship and once again he is helpless. In contrast to his former failures he now blames himself, admitting that "I do not even know what I mean myself, and I fear that for some time past I have lived unaware in a disgraceful condition" (127d). Here, Socrates has seemingly succeeded in qualifying Alcibiades for a certain level of self-reflection. He therefore encourages Alcibiades instead of rebuking him. Alcibiades again asks what to do and Socrates again replies that the young man has to answer his questions (127e).

Now that Alcibiades does not object anymore, Socrates directs the conversation toward the question of the self. Because Alcibiades understands that he has to care for himself, Socrates reasons that self-care presupposes self-knowledge. Therefore, he concludes, they have to understand what the self actually is, for otherwise they could not improve it (129a).³⁸ What, then, is the self? Socrates identifies the self with the soul (130d). This implies that Socrates is Alcibiades' true lover because he loves his soul and not his physical appearance (131a). The soul knows itself by reflecting itself in another soul.

How does this work? An eye, for example, sees itself when looking into a mirror. Now, an eye is a mirror itself if another eye looks into it and reflects itself in the other eye's pupil (133a). Therefore, Socrates concludes that a soul can know itself by looking into another soul, or more precisely into

its best part; that is where we find wisdom (133b).³⁹ Only those who know themselves by this way will make the right decisions for themselves and their community and will be good politicians.

The allegory implies that achieving self-knowledge is a procedure which involves two parts mutually reflecting one another. Because the self is the soul and more precisely the part of the soul that houses reason, the self knows itself when it becomes aware of its intellect. This only happens through dialog. By giving account to a counterpart, one is forced to reason and to reflect upon one's own thinking.⁴⁰ In Alcibiades' case, he gets to know himself through Socrates who reflects the young man's beliefs and tests them.⁴¹

Socrates explains that the soul only knows itself if it looks into *another* soul, "and especially: that region of it in which occurs the virtue of a soul – wisdom" (133b). Thus, self-knowledge means to achieve wisdom, which is also the greatest desire of a philosophical *eros*. In this sense, self-knowledge and the knowledge of being, beauty, and good seem to correlate. By illustrating how to know oneself, Socrates initiates Alcibiades into the heart of philosophical inquiry. The desire of this sort of knowledge implies that it is not present yet. Yearning for something that one lacks but which one desperately needs is an unambiguous description of *eros*; hence, once one has accepted his or her ignorance concerning the self and the good, *eros* becomes the driving force to search for knowledge. The Socratic dialog therefore is the methodological link between self-knowledge and philosophical inquiry.

In *Alcibiades I* Socrates' method has two main components. First, he inspires Alcibiades' *eros* by proving his ignorance. Once Alcibiades is ready to accept his deficiency, Socrates can move on to introducing him to philosophy. This also happens through dialectical inquiry, even though the latter section of *Alcibiades I* is more of a monologue. This, however, does not have to be a contradiction: just as Socrates makes a long speech to cut back Alcibiades' pride, he uses the allegory to encourage and stimulate Alcibiades' mind.

At the end of the dialog, Socrates and Alcibiades have changed their parts. Alcibiades declares that he will be Socrates' lover and will make an effort to learn about justice (135d/e). However, the now beloved Socrates is skeptical about Alcibiades' love. He concludes that the seductive power of the Athenian people might overcome both, which proves later to be true.

Conclusion: Applying Guiding Eros Toward Wisdom

So far, I have argued that *eros* represents the decisive power which turns a person to philosophy: seduces him or her to tyranny. The philosopher Socrates who is, due to his profession, an expert in love matters, tries to redirect Alcibiades' *eros* toward wisdom. After gaining the young man's attention, Socrates reveals that Alcibiades lacks knowledge of politics, justice, and himself. To overcome his deficiency, Alcibiades has to reflect his most wise and prudent part of himself into another soul. This theory of self-knowledge refers to the dialog itself.⁴² What then are the implications for the Socratic method and how can we apply it?

My interpretation of *Alcibiades I* may offer a holistic understanding of the Socratic method. Because Socrates uses many different rhetorical and didactic approaches, it seems impossible to limit the Socratic method to one technique. Still, if one hastily denies the unity of the Socratic method, one ignores the coherence it produces throughout the dialog. Therefore, I conclude that the Socratic method is the attempt to turn the interlocutor's *eros* toward wisdom. To accomplish this feat, Socrates uses dialectical refutations, exhorting monologues, or encouraging allegories: anything that may help to make the partner accept his ignorance and motivate him to overcome his current status. Of course, it is possible to distill these techniques from Socratic philosophy. However, if they are deprived of their context, there is no need to call them "Socratic" anymore.

How can we apply this understanding of the Socratic method in the classroom? To begin with, Socrates undeniably fails to persuade his partner. Alcibiades, as described in *Symposium*, has reverted to his initial beliefs and turned away from philosophy (216a). Even though he is still in love

with Socrates (222c), he is unwilling to follow the way his lover illustrated in their first conversation, i.e., *Alcibiades I*. Apparently, Alcibiades does not want to subject himself to reason but to keep his own arbitrary mind. Instead of turning his *eros* toward truth and wisdom, he prefers to stay the way he is.

In face of Socrates' failure, the difficulty of his method becomes evident. Indeed, one might wonder if it is possible to apply it at all. Still, the interpretation of *Alcibiades I* offers some practical advice. *Alcibiades I* highlights the importance of *eros* for education. Only by appealing to the student's *eros* can one gain his or her attention. As long as the student is not addressed both on an intellectual and emotional – or better at an existential – level, it is unlikely that he or she is willing to listen. At this point, it is necessary for a reminder of what *eros* stands for. *Eros* is a strong desire for something we want but do not have yet. This means that if a teacher wants to inspire his or her student for the love of wisdom, the teacher needs to reveal that the student is not wise yet. Now, we see the importance of the so-called Socratic ignorance: as long as we think that we already know something, we do not search for knowledge. And we only learn of our ignorance if our pretended knowledge is refuted. Once the student has accepted his ignorance and realizes that he needs to change, he is motivated to learn.

Appealing to the student's *eros*, however, is no guarantee for success. As we have seen in *Alcibiades I*, Socrates seduces Alcibiades but still cannot redirect the young man's *eros*. The reasons for Socrates' failure are difficult to detect and require a more detailed analysis. One starting point for further research may be to put oneself in Alcibiades' shoes in his dialog with Socrates. This approach may offer insight into Alcibiades' mind and the limits of philosophical seduction – and at best, it may lead to self-knowledge.

Notes

- 1 Thomas C. Brickhouse and Nicholas D. Smith, "Socratic Teaching and Socratic Method," in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Education*, Harvey Siegel, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 183.
- 2 For chronology of the dialogues, refer to Leonard Brandwood, "Stylometry and Chronology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*, Richard Kraut, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 90–120; Terence H. Irwin, "The Platonic Corpus," in *The Oxford Handbook of Plato*, Gail Fine, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 63–87; Gerard R. Ledger, *Re-counting Plato: A Computer Analysis of Plato's Style* (Oxford: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 1989).
- 3 Nicholas Denyer, *Alcibiades* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 3f; Andre Archie, *Politics in Socrates' Alcibiades: A Philosophical Account of Plato's Dialogue Alcibiades Major* (Cham: Springer, 2015), 4.
- 4 Brickhouse and Smith, "Socratic Teaching and Socratic Method," 184.
- 5 Plato, *Apology*, in *Plato: In twelve volumes*, R.G. Bury, ed. (Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library and Harvard University Press, 1984), 23a. All in-text citations and translations of Plato's dialogues are taken from here.
- 6 Brickhouse and Smith, "Socratic Teaching and Socratic Method," 179.
- 7 Brickhouse and Smith, "Socratic Teaching and Socratic Method," 185.
- 8 See Jacqueline Romilly, *Alcibiade ou les dangers de l'ambition* (Paris: Éd. de Fallois, 1996), 28.
- 9 For the interwoven plots and background story, see Barbara Zehnpfennig, "Einleitung," in *Symposion: Griechisch-deutsch*, Barbara Zehnpfennig, ed. (Hamburg: Meiner, 2000), VIII.
- 10 Capitalized *Eros* refers to the mythological god, while lower-cased *eros* denotes the psychological phenomenon of passion and love.
- 11 According to Zehnpfennig, the awareness of an intellectual principle behind the forms of appearance helps the lover to transcend himself: he can no longer arbitrarily define what beauty means for him personally but has to gain an objective access. This becomes even more evident when Diotima speaks about beautiful laws and virtues which, by definition, surpass the individual. Barbara Zehnpfennig, *Platon zur Einführung* (Hamburg: Junius, 2005), 152.
- 12 Gregory Vlastos, *Platonic Studies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 31.
- 13 Descendant of some of the most prestigious Athenian royal houses, Alcibiades was raised by Pericles. He was said to be the most beautiful, most talented, and most infamous man of his time: he provoked numerous

- scandals, won the Olympic Games, led the Athenians to several military victories, was sentenced to death by his compatriots and later brought back from exile and celebrated like a star. Peter J. Rhodes, *Alcibiades* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2011); Walter M. Ellis, *Alcibiades* (London: Routledge, 2014).
- 14 Nussbaum emphasizes the personal character of the whole *Symposium* and the task of self-examination that Socrates indirectly demands by challenging the previous images of love. Nussbaum is right to take Alcibiades into consideration even though she fails to link his speech to Diotima's theory and Socrates practice. Martha Nussbaum, "The Speech of Alcibiades: A Reading of Plato's Symposium," *Philosophy and Literature* 3/2 (1979): 133f.
 - 15 Plato was aware that people would reject his model (*Republic*, 473e).
 - 16 To solve this paradox, one could argue that Socrates refers to Adeimantus' concept of virtue which lack the pivotal orientation toward the good.
 - 17 According to Plato, all constitutions which do not provide the philosopher-kings are defective. These constitutions digress from the ideal in the following order: timocracy, oligarchy, democracy, and tyranny.
 - 18 Plato frames the transition of the constitutions by the sequence of generations. The current constitution is represented by a father who passes some characteristics to his son who represents the future constitution: e.g., a timocratic father might create an oligarch who might raise a democratic son and so on.
 - 19 They might correspond to those who try and distract a young talented man from philosophy to manipulate him, like Socrates described earlier (*Republic*, 494c/d).
 - 20 Socrates classifies two sorts of desires: necessary and unnecessary ones which in turn can be either legal or illegal (*Republic*, 571b).
 - 21 For examples, see Dominic Scott, "Eros, Philosophy and Tyranny," in *Maieusis: Essays in Ancient Philosophy in Honour of Myles Burnyeat*, Myles Burnyeat and Dominic Scott, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 154.
 - 22 *Ibid.*, 138.
 - 23 Scott states that the philosopher is asocial, i.e., he disregards the political in favor of the divine. *Ibid.*, 151. This seems plausible only in parts: It is true that the philosopher has no interest in common political competition as exemplified in the ship metaphor (*Republic*, 487b–489a). But Socrates calls himself the "true statesman" (*Gorgias*, 521d) who dedicates his life to Athens' cause (*Apology*, 30e). The philosopher is not interested in political affairs in general, he just has another understanding of what politics should look like.
 - 24 One of the leading motives in the *Republic* is that Glaucon and Adeimantus pledge Socrates to prove justice is better than injustice in every way (367e).
 - 25 Because of Schleiermacher's harsh comment on *Alcibiades I* in the nineteenth century, the dialog's authenticity is regularly put into question. Nicholas D. Smith, "Did Plato Write the 'Alcibiades I'?" *Apeiron: A Journal for Ancient Philosophy and Science* 37/2 (2004): 93–108; Jakub Jirsa, "Authenticity of the Alcibiades I: Some Reflections," *Listy filologické/Folia philologica* 132/3–4 (2009): 225–44. At present scholars tend to be accepting Plato's authorship, with which I agree. Eugenio Benitez, "Authenticity: Experiment or Development: The *Alcibiades I* on Virtue and Courage," in *Alcibiades and the Socratic Lover-Educator*, Marguerite Johnson, ed. (London: Bristol Classical Press, 2012), 119–33; Franco Renaud, "Self-Knowledge in the *First Alcibiades* and the commentary of Olympiodorus," in *Inner Life and Soul: Psychē in Plato*, Maurizio Migliori, ed. (Sankt Augustin: Academia, 2011), 207; Denyse Alcibiades.
 - 26 According to the idea of *paiderastia*, the relationship, which was clearly hierarchical, usually ended when the young lover's beard started to grow. The twenty-year-old Alcibiades was too old for a conventional love affair. Carola Reinsberg, *Ehe, Hetären und Knabenliebe im antiken Griechenland* (München: Beck, 1993), 165.
 - 27 For a detailed comparison between Alcibiades and the tyrant described in *Republic*, see Annie Larivé, "Eros Tyrannos: Alcibiades as the Model of the Tyrant in Book IX of the Republic," *The International Journal of the Platonic Tradition* 6/1 (2012): 1–26.
 - 28 The historical Alcibiades allegedly mocked his numerous lovers on various occasions. Rhode *Alcibiades*, 25f.
 - 29 For some interpreters, this passage proves the dialog's inauthenticity, see Smith, "Did Plato Write the 'Alcibiades I'?" 101.
 - 30 Gordon and Kühn suggest this reading, too. Gordon adds that Socrates' way of claiming his power over Alcibiades may also impress the young man. Jill Gordon, "Eros and Philosophical Seduction in *Alcibiades I*," *Ancient Philosophy* 23/1 (2003): 27; Ulrich Kühn, "Das Liebesverhältnis zwischen Alcibiades und Sokrates: Der platonische Bericht," *Perspektiven der Philosophie: Neues Jahrbuch* 37 (2011): 96.
 - 31 Rider adds that by this way, Socrates forces Alcibiades to reflect on his ambitions and what he wants for his life. Benjamin A. Rider, "Self-Care, Self-Knowledge, and Politics in the 'Alcibiades I,'" *Epoch: A Journal for the History of Philosophy* 15/2 (2011): 403.

- 32 See the twenty-fifth endnote.
- 33 Catherine H. Zuckert, *Plato's Philosophers: The Coherence of the Dialogues* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 229.
- 34 Brüscheiler notes that Socrates may veil the difference between his and Alcibiades' understanding of power on purpose to keep the young man's expectations high. Andreas Brüscheiler, *Sokrates' Jugend und seine ersten philosophischen Gespräche* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2010), 182.
- 35 For a dialectical interpretation of the whole dialog, see Albert Joosse, "Dialectic and Who We Are in the Alcibiades," *Phronesis* 59/1 (2014): 1–21.
- 36 Gregory Vlastos, *The Presocratics*. Daniel W. Graham, ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 291; Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Über die Philosophie Platons: Geschichte der Philosophie. Vorlesungen über Sokrates und Platon (zwischen 1819 und 1823). Die Einleitungen zur Übersetzung des Platon (1804–1828)*, P.M. Steiner, A. Arndt, J. Jantzen with assistance (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2013), 321.
- 37 Carpenter and Polansky offer a slightly different interpretation: they distinguish two types of refutations. First, Socrates argues that Alcibiades' prejudice on his enemies has bad consequences, namely deficient self-care. Second, Socrates shows in his long speech that Alcibiades' view is likely to be false. Still, both approaches seem to intertwine. Michelle Carpenter and Ronald M. Polansky, "Variety of Socratic Elenchi," in *Does Socrates Have a Method? Rethinking the Elenchus in Plato's Dialogues and Beyond*, Gary A. Scott, ed. (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002), 95; see Gordon, "Eros and Philosophical Seduction in *Alcibiades*," 15; Christopher L. Lauriello, "Political Science and the Irrational: Plato's Alcibiades," *Interpretation: A Journal for Political Philosophy* 37/3 (2010): 245.
- 38 Karl observes that the practical problem – how to become a good politician – turns into the existential question of what it means to live a good life. Jacqueline Karl, *Selbstbestimmung und Individualität bei Platon: Eine Interpretation zu frühen und mittleren Dialogen* (Freiburg: K. Alber, 2010), 90.
- 39 In the following, Socrates states that this is the most divine part of the soul. This means that by looking at God the soul knows itself. Because this passage is peculiar in many aspects, some scholars assume that it was inserted *ex post*. For further discussion see Joosse, "Dialectic and Who We Are in the Alcibiades," 16ff.
- 40 This counterpart does not necessarily have to be another person. In *Theaetetus*, Socrates explains that thinking is nothing more than dialoguing with oneself (189e).
- 41 According to Rider, Socrates offers Alcibiades two dimensions of self-knowledge. First, he shows the young man what he really wants in life; second, by accepting his deficiency, Alcibiades is able to look for the standard he has to achieve, i.e., he needs to look for the true self. Annas argues in a similar way, however she emphasizes that the self which Alcibiades is looking for is his personal self and not impersonal incorporation of the good or even God. In her view, self-knowledge means knowing one's social position. Rider replies that this reading fails to integrate the aspect of self-cultivation: improving one's soul only makes sense if it is not perfect yet. Moreover, Gordon criticizes Annas' interpretation of self-knowledge by pointing at the "inner dimensions of the self." For her, Socratic self-knowledge focuses on getting to know and cultivating one's *eros*. Rider, "Self-Care, Self-Knowledge, and Politics in the 'Alcibiades I,'" 405–7; Julia Annas, "Self-knowledge in Early Plato," in *Platonic investigations*, Dominic J. O'Meara, ed. (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1985), 121; Gordon, "Eros and Philosophical Seduction in *Alcibiades I*," 21.
- 42 The idea that self-knowledge is only accessible through dialog also explains why Socrates emphasizes several times the importance of joint consideration and the necessity of Alcibiades answering his questions. For this interpretation see Rider, "Self-Care, Self-Knowledge, and Politics in the 'Alcibiades I,'" 402–5; see Joosse, "Dialectic and Who We Are in the Alcibiades," 20.

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