

Some Lessons from Alcibiades 1 and Plato's Seventh Letter for Philosophical Practitioners

Patricia Anne Murphy¹

Abstract: In this paper I illuminate several themes that I find of great import in understanding the practice of Philosophical Practice as a process. I do this through a careful consideration of two often disputed texts by Plato: *Alcibiades 1* and *Plato's Seventh Letter*. I do not wish to defend the authenticity of the authorship of the texts, but simply extol the usefulness and appropriateness of these two lesser considered texts as displaying a number of important teachings that I often use in Philosophical Practice. I take these teachings to be central to Plato's meta-philosophy and the notion of self-concept.

Key-words: Philosophical Practice; Philosophy; Plato's Seventh Letter; Alcibiades 1;

Introduction

It was too much of a coincidence to attend the first APPA Agora on February 23, 2023, to hear our great "GURU" Pierre Grimes speak so eloquently about the "distortions of the self" that he named as being an

¹PhD, philosophical practitioner, St. Joseph's University E-mail: pmurphy@sju.edu,

incentive for appropriate Philosophical Practice. In that, he alluded to the “false selves” that are envisioned in Plato’s Symposium in a passage between Socrates and the character of Alcibiades. I was taken back to a favorite topic first studied in a seminar in graduate school titled *Plato: The Secret Doctrines and Meta-philosophy* or something roughly equivalent. During that semester, two texts especially struck me, those being Plato’s Seventh Letter and Alcibiades 1, both new to me, and which proved continually thought-provoking to me unto the present. I suddenly thought anew about the many lessons appearing in both of these texts as being especially important for Philosophical Practice, though for very different reasons. I would like to share a few features of each that I find helpful in my own practice, as well as in my reflections upon what philosophy IS.

As philosophical practitioners, the process that we choose bespeaks central values of what we *think philosophy is*. Of course there are many different ideas assumed and defended about Plato’s meta-philosophy, as well as that of Socrates.

Part one: Alcibiades 1

Plato’s dialogue, Alcibiades 1, enjoyed a pride of place for about 700 years as the lead dialogue in Plato’s canon. Until approximately the time of Kant, the dialogue was known by the subtitle “On the Nature of Man.” I do not know if its prominence of place or its subtitle revealed that the editors of Plato’s work at the time thought it to be a snapshot of how the process of philosophy *ought to be done*, but I often do. Therefore, in my own practice, I find the dialogue to be of greatest assistance in my intake interview with a potential client.

In the Alcibiades 1 we see essentially a “success” story of Socrates involved in a lively elenchus with Alcibiades that at least on the face of it leads us to believe that the rash, young, and politically ambitious man has indeed arrived at a maturity wherein he can appreciate the process of philosophy. We learn (interestingly) at the very beginning of the dialogue that Socrates has not approached or spoken to the younger man for an indeterminate period of time prior to the day on which the dialogue opens. There is sufficient reason through examining many of the dialogues and processes of questioning and interacting between Socrates and his interlocutors to make the argument that Socrates has not deemed

Alcibiades to be “ready” for the actual process of doing philosophy. But there is also reason at the very end of the dialogue to believe that Socrates opines that while some authentic change or transformation has indeed occurred within Alcibiades, there is less than compelling evidence that the nature of the change we see in Alcibiades is actually authentic or abiding. (See 135e 5-7 [Plato, “The Alcibiades 1,” Cooper 1997] for Socrates’ final statement, within his own reflective process, that may be considered anywhere from realistically doubtful to cynical in its expression.) In my own practice, I too am trying to “size up” or at least trying to understand the motivation for the request for Philosophical Practice—and the client’s “readiness” to engage in it.

Returning to the text, a second lesson I take from the Alcibiades 1 has to do with self-concept. As the elenchus proper progresses (107-117), Socrates acknowledges that Alcibiades has balked at what Socrates has said. Socrates is quick to remind Alcibiades that Socrates’ role, at least thus far, is to simply ask questions, and that therefore the apparent assertions that are found displeasing are Alcibiades’ own words and statements. This is a first instance of holding up a mirror in which Alcibiades may see his own self. As I interact with a potential client and talk about what I perceive as the way we will work together (if we are to do so), I find an opportunity to clarify what I think we will be doing in the long run. I explain that I am not there just to give positive feedback or to necessarily agree with the client. I expect our interactions may cause uncertainty or even confusion about what the client thought they knew, and how their view of things may be changed.

It seems especially significant that Alcibiades is essentially stopped in 116e 2-5 and confused by his own perplexity. There he says, for a first time, “I swear by the gods, Socrates, which I do not know what I am saying. Verily I am in a strange state for when you put questions to me I am of a different mind in successive instants” (Ibid.). This is an important admission for a man motivated by political expediency who is preparing even then to speak to the whole government about what is just and unjust! He is surprised by his own uncertainty. If you will, the gadfly has stung, and the “numbing fish” has struck, and he experiences discomfort at what he thought he knew. At this point in my interview, I often present my view that Philosophical Practice is not reducible to behavioral change. I know this is a view not shared by a number of my colleagues, but I think it is

significant. I may talk about what we do or have, as opposed to what we are. I unapologetically associate the difference in what I take Philosophical Practice to entail to be opposed to, or at least not simply reducible to, behavioral modification, or an intervention that targets cognitive processes, though these may certainly have important uses in our practices. I actually use the "O" word: ontology.

This dovetails rather nicely with the complex recipe that is presented by Socrates and Alcibiades: knowledge of what we truly are (our true self) requires the recognition of what we are not. In lines 127d 5-8 (Ibid.), Alcibiades shows once again the perplexity that he finds himself in. "Indeed Socrates, I do not know what I am saying; and I have long been unconsciously to myself in a most disgraceful state" (Ibid.). The reference to "being in a state," just as he stated in his first realization of perplexity, has morphed: from "strange" to "disgraceful." Quite a heavy lift for someone who quite recently was so certain about the meaning of the just, the unjust, and the equation of justice with political expediency, that his own surpassing value to the state was about to be demonstrated as he addressed the citizenry of Athens. The simplicity of the disjunctive argument about what we are (not the body, not some combination of the body and the soul, therefore the soul) illuminates the import of *existence itself*, as opposed to what we have or do or believe (Ibid., 130c 1-6).

The image that is presented by Socrates in 133 a1-133 d2 (Ibid.) is an enormously important one. The discussion surrounds the seeing of oneself reflected in the pupil of the other's eye: a sort of mirror that the other becomes for oneself. I think it is important to note that this is an image that is also presented in the Epic of Gilgamesh from the Sumerian culture, considered the first surviving human text, dating from perhaps three millennium prior to being put into the mouth of Socrates in Alcibiades 1 in oral form, and more than two millennium prior to the writing of the Alcibiades 1 in written form. In the Epic, the protagonists are in the midst of a fierce battle to destroy one another. Suddenly the reflection in the eye of the other transforms their animosity and ferociousness into sudden dissolution. Inexplicably, but certainly, this is the moment when they form the true friendship that characterizes their common existence enabling their epic journey.

The implication for the last few paragraphs of the dialogue that we are considering (Ibid., 134-135) reveals that the proper diligent care of the

self, once we understand what that true self is (recognition of the divine via reflection of oneself in the soul of the other), requires the attainment of knowledge that can only be truly achieved through the doing of philosophy, which entails (for both Socrates and Plato, as we shall examine in the Seventh Letter) a turning away from false selves, mistaken or incomplete ideas and notions, and the pursuit of virtue itself. As we shall see developed in the Seventh Letter, this must include a braided formula of true friendship, virtue, spoken word, and a reflective and careful understanding of what knowledge is.

Part two: The Seventh Letter

I would like to simply mention a few of the reverberating themes, some of which are presented in the Alcibiades 1, that I take to be of great interest for philosophical practitioners that appear in Plato's own voice, in the Seventh Letter. It is my hope to go into greater depth of these ideas in another paper. It is my hope that that paper may be an appropriate match for the next ICPP meeting, currently scheduled to be held in Croatia in 2025. The less well-known text of the Seventh Letter, or Epistle VII, is of invaluable assistance in my own practice. When I first encountered it, I felt it was a Rosetta Stone for understanding what Plato, and by extension, what Socrates is doing in the Dialogues. It provides a fullness and complexity of meta-philosophy that has been challenged historically for its authenticity, value, and place in the canon. Yet I find it unmatched in presenting important and applicable ideas for what it means to do philosophy between individuals. From the salutation of the letter, "From Plato, to the friends of Dion," to the closing paragraphs in which the writer says, "My advice has mainly been given," we encounter astonishing possibilities of what is actually being done therein. We know that Plato has been asked for advice from these friends who have written to him, and yet we may also imagine that the advice (if ever given) may be completely given in vain. We see it quickly become a kind of travelogue of Plato's trips to Sicily, the intrigue of a political ideologue who may be seeking expediency at the price of truth and a commitment to philosophy. The tandem relationships of Plato with both Dion and Dionysius are recounted. We learn about Dionysius' own alleged desire and, indeed, his self-proclaimed success in doing philosophy (this is certainly reminiscent of

Alcibiades as he appears at the beginning of Alcibiades 1), and we see a considered and complex teaching about philosophy that necessarily entails an interlocutor, the inadequacy of the use of the written word, a degree of true friendship and matching virtue between teacher and student. We see two extremely important digressions within the text: the Advice Digression, beginning 330 c8 and running to a concluding passage in 332 e1 (Plato, "The Seventh Letter," Cooper 1997), as well as the very famous Epistemological Digression (341-344) through which we are the inheritors of a five-level theory of knowledge.

We learn that the four rungs on the ladder to knowledge are all necessary and sufficient, but incomplete. While each stage may contribute to the fifth, each level represents merely a quick glimpse or way of achieving partial knowledge. The highest level (the Fifth) of the ascent to knowledge pronounces metaphysical transformation and the insufficiency of words in its experience.

Indeed, this is where Plato states that he himself has never written a word of philosophy, although if anyone could, he would be the one to do it (Ibid., 344 b4-8). It is at this point that Plato speaks about the limitations of the written word. Much more about this should be said in future study. But for our purposes as practitioners of philosophical counseling, I simply want to underscore the vehemence of his teachings on the matter—and our need to reflect on the conversations and queries between the philosophical counselor and the client. The danger of the static word and its inability to be questioned or amended in authentic experience with another proves fatal to the proper end for which philosophy is to be engaged in. The Letter itself defies the characterization of a doctrine or treatise.

As in Alcibiades 1, we cannot come away from a careful reading of the Seventh Letter without a new respect for the difficulty of the journey, the rigor required of the journeyers, and a sense that something of inestimable value is at stake. We find, embedded in the text of the letter, a cautionary note about the pursuit of philosophy because of its difficulty, as well as a "test" that one may initiate to test the resolve and strength of one who claims to want to do philosophy (Ibid., 340 d6-341 a5). We even have a cautionary note about the need for a "guide," as attempting the journey alone may result in one getting "lost," or falling prey to "false summits."

We learn, in addition to the two important clear digression passages, frequent referral to the import of friendship, qualified as “true” or “false,” the role of such friendship in proof of one’s character, and the desires to assist in Dionysius’s education in philosophy by Plato and Dion. We learn as well about the developments both interiorly and historically surrounding the three central figures.

The Letter itself represents a kind of “test” for the recipients, including us. What are they authentically seeking? Silver bullets and quick fixes for political gain, or an understanding of what philosophy truly is? If the former, we can imagine the recipients will give up somewhere in the middle of the Letter in despair, and feel they have not received what they sought. If the latter (thereby proving their true allegiance to Dion and Plato, as well as a commitment to true education and philosophy), we can imagine them as enormously thankful and overwhelmed with useful advice and direction for their lives that must be discussed again and again in their growing friendship and wisdom.

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