

Plato

The First Alcibiades

## Introduction.

The First Alcibiades is a conversation between Socrates and Alcibiades. Socrates is represented in the character which he attributes to himself in the Apology of a know-nothing who detects the conceit of knowledge in others. The two have met already in the Protagoras and in the Symposium; in the latter dialogue, as in this, the relation between them is that of a lover and his beloved. But the narrative of their loves is told differently in different places; for in the Symposium Alcibiades is depicted as the impassioned but rejected lover; here, as coldly receiving the advances of Socrates, who, for the best of purposes, lies in wait for the aspiring and ambitious youth.

Alcibiades, who is described as a very young man, is about to enter on public life, having an inordinate opinion of himself, and an extravagant ambition. Socrates, 'who knows what is in man,' astonishes him by a revelation of his designs. But has he the knowledge which is necessary for carrying them out? He is going to persuade the Athenians—about what? Not about any particular art, but about politics—when to fight and when to make peace. Now, men should fight and make peace on just grounds, and therefore the question of justice and injustice must enter into peace and war; and he who advises the Athenians must know the difference between them. Does Alcibiades know? If he does, he must either have been taught by some master, or he must have discovered the nature of them himself. If he has had a master, Socrates would like to be informed who he is, that he may go and learn of him also. Alcibiades admits that he has never learned. Then has he enquired for himself? He may have, if he was ever aware of a time when he was ignorant. But he never was ignorant; for when he played with other boys at dice, he charged them with cheating, and this implied a knowledge of just and unjust. According to his own explanation, he had learned of the multitude. Why, he asks, should he not learn of them the nature of justice, as he has learned the Greek language of them? To this Socrates answers, that they can teach Greek, but they cannot teach justice; for they are agreed about the one, but they are not agreed about the other: and therefore Alcibiades, who has admitted that if he knows he must either have learned from a master or have discovered for himself the nature of justice, is convicted out of his own mouth.

Alcibiades rejoins, that the Athenians debate not about what is just, but about what is expedient; and he asserts that the two principles of justice and expediency are opposed. Socrates, by a series of questions, compels him to admit that the just and the expedient coincide. Alcibiades is thus reduced to the humiliating conclusion that he knows nothing of politics, even if, as he says, they are concerned with the expedient.

However, he is no worse than other Athenian statesmen; and he will not

need training, for others are as ignorant as he is. He is reminded that he has to contend, not only with his own countrymen, but with their enemies—with the Spartan kings and with the great king of Persia; and he can only attain this higher aim of ambition by the assistance of Socrates. Not that Socrates himself professes to have attained the truth, but the questions which he asks bring others to a knowledge of themselves, and this is the first step in the practice of virtue.

The dialogue continues:—We wish to become as good as possible. But to be good in what? Alcibiades replies—‘Good in transacting business.’ But what business? ‘The business of the most intelligent men at Athens.’ The cobbler is intelligent in shoemaking, and is therefore good in that; he is not intelligent, and therefore not good, in weaving. Is he good in the sense which Alcibiades means, who is also bad? ‘I mean,’ replies Alcibiades, ‘the man who is able to command in the city.’ But to command what—horses or men? and if men, under what circumstances? ‘I mean to say, that he is able to command men living in social and political relations.’ And what is their aim? ‘The better preservation of the city.’ But when is a city better? ‘When there is unanimity, such as exists between husband and wife.’ Then, when husbands and wives perform their own special duties, there can be no unanimity between them; nor can a city be well ordered when each citizen does his own work only. Alcibiades, having stated first that goodness consists in the unanimity of the citizens, and then in each of them doing his own separate work, is brought to the required point of self-contradiction, leading him to confess his own ignorance.

But he is not too old to learn, and may still arrive at the truth, if he is willing to be cross-examined by Socrates. He must know himself; that is to say, not his body, or the things of the body, but his mind, or truer self. The physician knows the body, and the tradesman knows his own business, but they do not necessarily know themselves. Self-knowledge can be obtained only by looking into the mind and virtue of the soul, which is the diviner part of a man, as we see our own image in another’s eye. And if we do not know ourselves, we cannot know what belongs to ourselves or belongs to others, and are unfit to take a part in political affairs. Both for the sake of the individual and of the state, we ought to aim at justice and temperance, not at wealth or power. The evil and unjust should have no power,—they should be the slaves of better men than themselves. None but the virtuous are deserving of freedom.

And are you, Alcibiades, a freeman? ‘I feel that I am not; but I hope, Socrates, that by your aid I may become free, and from this day forward I will never leave you.’

The Alcibiades has several points of resemblance to the undoubted dialogues of Plato. The process of interrogation is of the same kind with that which Socrates practises upon the youthful Cleinias in the Euthydemus; and he characteristically attributes to Alcibiades the answers

which he has elicited from him. The definition of good is narrowed by successive questions, and virtue is shown to be identical with knowledge. Here, as elsewhere, Socrates awakens the consciousness not of sin but of ignorance. Self-humiliation is the first step to knowledge, even of the commonest things. No man knows how ignorant he is, and no man can arrive at virtue and wisdom who has not once in his life, at least, been convicted of error. The process by which the soul is elevated is not unlike that which religious writers describe under the name of 'conversion,' if we substitute the sense of ignorance for the consciousness of sin.

In some respects the dialogue differs from any other Platonic composition. The aim is more directly ethical and hortatory; the process by which the antagonist is undermined is simpler than in other Platonic writings, and the conclusion more decided. There is a good deal of humour in the manner in which the pride of Alcibiades, and of the Greeks generally, is supposed to be taken down by the Spartan and Persian queens; and the dialogue has considerable dialectical merit. But we have a difficulty in supposing that the same writer, who has given so profound and complex a notion of the characters both of Alcibiades and Socrates in the *Symposium*, should have treated them in so thin and superficial a manner in the *Alcibiades*, or that he would have ascribed to the ironical Socrates the rather unmeaning boast that Alcibiades could not attain the objects of his ambition without his help; or that he should have imagined that a mighty nature like his could have been reformed by a few not very conclusive words of Socrates. For the arguments by which Alcibiades is reformed are not convincing; the writer of the dialogue, whoever he was, arrives at his idealism by crooked and tortuous paths, in which many pitfalls are concealed. The anachronism of making Alcibiades about twenty years old during the life of his uncle, Pericles, may be noted; and the repetition of the favourite observation, which occurs also in the *Laches* and *Protagoras*, that great Athenian statesmen, like Pericles, failed in the education of their sons. There is none of the undoubted dialogues of Plato in which there is so little dramatic verisimilitude.

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