

Know Thyself – the beginning of Philosophy

"The most valid and surest starting point for the dialogues of Plato, and, practically for the whole of philosophic investigation is, in our opinion, the discerning of our own being. If this is correctly posited we shall accurately understand both the good which is appropriate to us, and that which is an obstacle to our flourishing." Proclus – Commentary to the First Alcibiades.

*"Nothing is nearer to us than ourselves; if then we do not perceive what is nearest, what means is there of ascertaining the more remote, and what is naturally perceived through our agency?"
Proclus – Commentary on the First Alcibiades.*

Plato's dialogue, the *First Alcibiades*, begins with Socrates greeting the young nobleman, Alcibiades: "Son of Clinias! you wonder, I suppose, that I, who was the earliest of your admirers, now, when all the rest have forsaken you, am the only one who still retains unalterably the same sentiments; and yet, that for so many years I have never spoken so much as a word to you, whilst the others were pressing through crowds of people to converse with you."

As the dialogue unfolds it becomes apparent that Alcibiades was planning to address the Athenian governing assembly but on being questioned by Socrates, he discovers that he lacks the kind of knowledge that would be needed by anyone who had plans to contribute to the political life of the city. In fact he is in a particularly dangerous state – double ignorance, or the condition of not knowing that he does not know. He thought he know what justice is, but on examination does not; the same is true of what "the advantageous" is: gradually he begins to see that Socrates has saved him from himself, in much the same way as someone who imagines that he could navigate a ship across an ocean when he does not, is saved by having his ignorance pointed out before he attempts the crossing. Socrates brings the conversation round to the Delphic inscription, "Know Thyself" – and here we'll pick up the dialogue:

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129a Soc. Let me ask you, then, whether it happens to be an easy thing to know oneself; and whether he was some person of mean attainments in knowledge, he who put up this inscription in the temple at Pytho: or is it a piece of knowledge difficult to be attained, and not obvious to everyone?

Alc. To me, Socrates, it has often seemed easy and obvious to everyone, and often too, at other times, a thing of the greatest difficulty.

Soc. But whether in itself it be an easy thing or not, with respect to us, Alcibiades, the state of the case is this; - had we attained to that piece of knowledge, we should perhaps know what it is to take care of ourselves; but never can we know this so long as we remain ignorant of that.

Alc. These are truths which I acknowledge.

b Soc. Come then, by what means might it be found what is the very self of everything? For so we might perhaps find what we ourselves are: but so long as we continue in the dark as to that point, it will be no way possible to know ourselves.

Alc. You are certainly in the right.

Soc. Attend now, I conjure you in the name of Zeus: With whom is it that you are at this present time discoursing? Is it not with me?

Alc. It is.

Soc. And am not I discoursing with you?

Alc. You are.

Soc. It is Socrates then who is discoursing and arguing.

Alc. Quite true.

Soc. And Alcibiades is attentive to his arguments.

Alc. He is.

Soc. Is it not by reason that Socrates thus argues in discourse?

Alc. Undoubtedly.

Soc. And is not to argue in discourse the same thing as to reason?

Alc. Quite the same.

c Soc. But is not the person who uses a thing, different from the thing which he uses?

Alc. How do you mean?

Soc. As a shoemaker, for instance, cuts his leather with the sheers, and the paring knife, and other tools.

Alc. Well; he does so.

Soc. Is not then the shoemaker, who cuts the leather and uses those tools in cutting it, different from the tools which he uses?

Alc. Without doubt.

Soc. Are not, in like manner, the instruments on which a musician plays, different things from the musician himself?

Alc. Certainly.

Soc. It was in this sense that just now I asked you whether you thought that, in all cases, the person who used a thing was different from the thing which he used.

Alc. I think he is.

d Soc. Now then, to resume the instance of the shoemaker; what say we? Does he cut the leather with his tools only, or also with his hands?

Alc. With his hands also.

Soc. He therefore uses also these.

Alc. He does.

Soc. And does he not use his eyes also when he is cutting the leather?

Alc. He does.

Soc. And we are agreed, that the person who makes use of any things is different from the things which he makes use of.

Alc. We are.

Soc. The shoemaker then, and the musician, are different from the hands and eyes with which they perform their operations.

Alc. It is apparent.

Soc. And does not a man use also his whole body?

Alc. Most certainly.

Soc. Now the user is different from the thing used.

Alc. True.

Soc. A man therefore is a being different from his body.

Alc. It seems so.

Soc. What sort of being then is man?

Alc. I know not.

Soc. But you know that man is some being who makes use of the body.

Alc. True.

130a Soc. Does any being make use of the body other than the soul?

Alc. None other.

Soc. And does it not so do by governing the body?

Alc. It does.

Soc. Further, I suppose that no man would ever think otherwise than this.

Alc. Than what?

Soc. That a man himself was one of these three things.

Alc. What three things?

Soc. Soul, or body, or a mixture of them both, constituting one whole.

Alc. What besides could be imagined?

b Soc. Now we agreed that the being which governs the body is the man.

Alc. We did.

Soc. What being then is the man? Does the body itself govern itself?

Alc. By no means.

Soc. For the body we said was governed.

Alc. True.

Soc. The body then cannot be that being which we are in search of.

Alc. It seems not.

Soc. But does the mixed being govern the body? and is this the man?

Alc. Perhaps it is.

Soc. Least of any of the three can this be so. For of two parties, one of which is the party governed, there is no possibility that both of them should govern jointly.

Alc. Right.

c Soc. Since then neither the body, nor the mixture of soul and body together, is the man, it remains, I think, either that a man's self is nothing at all, or, if it be anything, it must be concluded that the man is no other thing than soul.

Alc. Clearly so.

Soc. Needs it then to be proved to you still more clearly, that the soul is the very man?

Alc. It needs not, by Zeus: for the proofs already brought seem to me sufficient.

d Soc. If it be proved tolerably well, though not accurately, 'tis sufficient for us. For we shall then perhaps, and not before, have an accurate knowledge of man's self, when we shall have discovered what we just now passed by as a matter which required much consideration.

Alc. What is that?

Soc. That of which was said some such thing as this, - that in the first place we should consider what is *self itself*: whereas, instead of this, we have been considering what is the proper self of every man. And this indeed for our purpose will perhaps suffice. For we could by no means ever say that anything was more peculiarly and properly oneself, than is the soul.

Alc. Certainly, we could not.

Soc. May we not then fairly thus determine, - that we are conversing one with another, by means of reason, you and I, soul with soul?

e Alc. Quite fairly.

Soc. This therefore was our meaning when we said a little before, that Socrates discoursed with Alcibiades, making use of reason: we meant, it seems, that he directed his words and arguments, not to your outward person, but to Alcibiades himself, that is to the soul.

Alc. It seems so to me too.

Soc. He therefore enjoins a man to recognise the soul, he who gives him this injunction, - to know himself.

131a Alc. That is probably his meaning.

Soc. Whoever then has a knowledge only of his body, has indeed attained the knowledge of what is his, but not the knowledge of himself.

Alc. Just so.

Soc. None therefore of the physicians, so far as he is only a physician, knows himself: neither does any master of the exercises, so far as he is such a master and nothing more.

Alc. It seems they do not.

Soc. Far from knowing themselves then are farmers, and other craftworkers generally. For such men as these are ignorant it seems of the things which are theirs, and knowing only in subjects still more remote, the mere auxiliaries to those things which are theirs, so far as their several arts lead them. For they are acquainted only with things auxiliary to the body, to the culture and service of which body these things administer.

b

Alc. What you say is true.

Soc. If therefore wisdom consist in the knowledge of oneself, none of these artificers are wise men by their skill in their respective arts.

Alc. I think they are not.

Soc. On this account it is that these arts seem mechanical and mean, and not the learning fit for a man of a virtuous merit.

Alc. Entirely true.

Soc. To return to our subject whoever then employs his care in the service of his body, takes care indeed of what is his, but not of himself.

Alc. There is danger of its being found so.

Soc. And whoever is attentive to the improvement of his wealth, is not taking care either of himself or of what is his, but of things still more remote, the mere auxiliaries to what is his.

c

Alc. It seems so to me too.

Soc. The man therefore who is intent on getting money, is so far not acting for his own advantage.

Alc. Rightly concluded.

Soc. It follows also, that whoever was an admirer of the outward person of Alcibiades, did not admire Alcibiades, but something which belongs to Alcibiades.

Alc. You say what is true.

Soc. But whoever is your admirer is the admirer of your soul.

Alc. It appears to follow of necessity from our reasoning.

Soc. And hence it is, that the admirer of your outward person, when the flower of it is all fallen, departs and forsakes you.

Alc. So it appears.

d Soc. But the admirer of a soul departs not, so long as that soul goes on to improve itself.

Alc. Probably so.

Soc. I am he then who forsakes you not, but abides by you, when, the flower of youth having left you, the rest of your followers have left you and are gone.

Alc. It is kindly done of you, Socrates: and never do you forsake me.

Soc. Exert all your endeavours then to be as excellent a man as possible.

Alc. I will do my best.

e Soc. For the state of your case is this:- Alcibiades, the son of Clinias, never it seems had any admirer, neither has he now, besides one only, and therefore to be cherished, this Socrates here, the son of Sophroniscus and Phænarete.

Alc. 'Tis true.

Soc. Did you not say that I had been a little beforehand with you when I approached you; for that you had it in your mind to address me first; as you wanted to ask me, why of all your admirers I was the only one who forsook you not?

Alc. I did say so: and that was the very case.

132a Soc. This then was the reason: 'twas because I was the only person who admired you; the others admired that which is yours. That which is yours has already dropped its flower; and the spring-season of it is past: whereas you yourself are but beginning to flourish. If therefore the Athenian populace corrupt you not, and make you less fair, I never shall forsake you. But this is what I chiefly fear, that you may come to admire and court the populace, and be corrupted by them, and we should lose you: since many of the Athenians, men of virtuous merit too, have been thus corrupted before now.