

## Know Thyself – Plato's first exhortation

In the Platonic schools of late antiquity, Plato's dialogue *The First Alcibiades* was considered the best introduction to the study of philosophy. At its heart lies the exhortation to "know thyself" which was said to be inscribed above the entrance to the Sanctuary at Delphi in which the oracle of Apollo was given to those who sought to answer life's questions. Why this instruction is given at the outset of philosophic enquiry, we will discuss during our study session.

The dialogue begins with Socrates saying to Alcibiades, "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..." He then explains that he is aware that Alcibiades plans for the first time to appear and speak in the assembly in which the citizens of Athens made their deliberations and took their democratic decisions.

What, he asks of this young man, does he intend to speak about? After some discussion it appears that Alcibiades might be addressing his fellow citizens about justice – but, he objects, the assembly rarely discuss what is just, but rather what is advantageous. Does he make this distinction because he thinks that what is advantageous differs from what is just? He first asserts that it often is so (113d). Earlier in the dialogue there had been a lengthy discussion in which Socrates explores how Alcibiades knows what justice is, since he is so confident in his knowledge that he plans to address the Athenian assembly on it: but now we see a demonstration of Socratic questioning designed to show Alcibiades himself how lacking he is in the knowledge of justice.

(In this passage it's worth noting that the word translated as "beautiful" (*kalos*) is indicative not merely of an aesthetic character, but also carries with it an overtone of morality – one might equally translate it as "noble" or "fine".)

115a

Soc. Tell me, then: Do you say that some just actions are advantageous to the man who performs them, and that some are not so?

Alc. I do.

Soc. And do you say also, that some just actions are beautiful, and that some are not so?

Alc. What mean you by this question?

Soc. Whether did you even think that a man acted basely and yet justly at the same time?

Alc. I never thought so.

Soc. You think then that all actions which are just are also beautiful?

b Alc. I do.

Soc. But what, as to actions which are beautiful? Whether do you think that all of these are good to the performer, or that some of them are so, and some not so?

Alc. For my part, Socrates, I think that some beautiful actions are evil to the performer of them.

Soc. And that some base actions are good to the performer?

Alc. I do.

Soc. Do you mean such actions as these? - Many men by aiding in battle some friend or near relation have been wounded mortally; whilst others, by withholding their aid when they ought to have given it, have come off safe and sound.

Alc. A just instance of what I mean.

Soc. That aid then of theirs you call beautiful with respect to their endeavouring to save those whom they ought to defend. Now such an action proceeds from fortitude, does it not?

Alc. It does.

Soc. But evil you call it also with respect to the wounds and death which it procured them, do you not?

Alc. I do.

c Soc. And are not fortitude and death two different things?

Alc. Certainly.

Soc. To aid a friend, therefore, is not both beautiful and evil in the same respect?

Alc. It appears that it is not.

Soc. Consider now whether it be not good in the same respect in which it is beautiful; as in this particular which we mentioned. For, with respect to fortitude, you agreed with me that it was beautiful and handsome to give such aid. This very thing then, fortitude, consider whether it be a good or an evil. And consider it in this way; - which kind of things would you choose to have your own, whether good things or evil things?

Alc. Good things.

d Soc. And would you not choose the best things too?

Alc. Most of all things.

Soc. And would you not choose to part with them least of all?

Alc. Undoubtedly.

Soc. What say you then of fortitude? at what price would you choose to part with it?

Alc. I would not accept of life, not I, to live a coward.

Soc. You think, then, that cowardice is evil in the utmost degree?

Alc. That do I.

Soc. On a par, as it seems, with death.

Alc. It is so.

Soc. Are not life and fortitude the most of all things opposite to death and cowardice?

Alc. They are.

e Soc. And would you choose to have those most of all things, and these least of all things?

Alc. Certainly.

Soc. Is it because you deem those the best of all things, and these the worst?

Alc. For this very reason.

Soc. Viewing then the giving of aid in battle to such as are dear to us in that light in which it appears beautiful - viewing it with regard to the practice of that virtue which you acknowledge to be one of the best of things, you gave it the epithet of beautiful?

Alc. It appears I did so.

Soc. But with regard to its operating evil, the evil of death, you gave it the epithet of evil?

Alc. True.

116a Soc. Is it not then just and right to denominate every action thus? If, with regard to the evil which it operates, you call it evil, ought it not, with regard to the good which it operates, to be also called good?

Alc. I think it ought.

Soc. In the same respect, then, in which it is good, is it not beautiful? and in the same respect in which it is evil, is it not base?

Alc. It is.

Soc. In saying, then, that the aiding of our friends in battle is an action beautiful indeed, but that yet it is evil, you say exactly the same things as if you called it an action, good indeed, but yet evil.

Alc. I think you are in the right, Socrates.

Soc. Nothing therefore which is beautiful, so far as it is beautiful, is evil; nor is anything which is base, so far as it is base, good.

b Alc. Evidently it is not.

Soc. Further now consider it in this way: - whoever acts beautifully, does he not act well too?

Alc. He does.

Soc. And those who act well, are they not happy?

Alc. Without doubt.

Soc. And are they not happy by being possessed of good things?

Alc. Most certainly.

Soc. And are they not possessed of these good things by acting well and beautifully?

Alc. They are.

Soc. To act well, therefore, is in the rank of good things?

Alc. Beyond a doubt.

Soc. And is not acting well a beautiful thing also?

Alc. It is.

c Soc. Again therefore we have found, that one and the same thing is both beautiful and good?

Alc. We have.

Soc. Whatever then we should find to be a beautiful thing, we shall find it to be a good thing too, according to this reasoning?

Alc. It must be so.

Soc. And what? are good things advantageous? or are they not?

Alc. They are.

Soc. Do you remember, now, what we agreed in concerning things which are just?

Alc. I imagine that you mean this, - that those persons who do things which are just must of necessity do things which at the same time are beautiful.

Soc. And did we not agree in this too, - that those who do things which are beautiful do things which are also good?

Alc. We did.

d Soc. And good things, you say, are advantageous?

Alc. True.

Soc. Things therefore which are just, O Alcibiades! are things which are advantageous.

Alc. It seems they are.

Soc. Well now; are not you the person who asserts these things? and am not I the questioner concerning them?

Alc. So it appears.

Soc. Whoever then rises up to speak in any council, whether it be of Athenians or Peperethians, imagining that he discerns what is just and what is unjust, if he should say that he knows justice to be sometimes evil and detrimental, would you not laugh at his pretensions to knowledge? since you yourself are found to be the  
e very person who asserts that the same things are both just and advantageous?

Alc. Now, by the Gods, Socrates, for my part, I know not what to say to it; but am quite like a man distracted. For sometimes I am of one opinion, just while you are putting your questions to me, and presently after am of another.

Soc. Are you ignorant now, my friend, what condition you are in?

Alc. Entirely ignorant.

Soc. Do you imagine, then, that if any person were to ask you, how many eyes you had, whether two or three, - or how many hands, whether two or four, - or any other such question, - you would sometimes answer one thing, and at other times another? or would you always give the same answer?

117a Alc. I confess that I am now doubtful of myself; but I do believe that I should always give the same answer.

Soc. And is not your knowledge of the subject the cause of that consistency there would be in your answers?

Alc. I believe it is.

Soc. When therefore you give contrary answers to one and the same question, without choosing to prevaricate, it is evident that you have no knowledge of the subject.

Alc. Probably so.

Soc. Now you say that, to questions concerning things just or unjust, beautiful or base, good or evil, advantageous or otherwise, you should answer sometimes one

thing and sometimes another. Is it not then evident, that your ignorance in these subjects is the cause of this inconsistency of yours?

b Alc. It appears so to me myself.

Soc. Is not this then the true state of the case? On every subject which a man has not the knowledge of, must not his soul be wavering in her opinions?

Alc. Most undoubtedly.

Soc. Well now. Do you know by what means you may mount up to heaven?

Alc. By Zeus, not I.

Soc. Is your opinion doubtful and wavering on this subject?

Alc. Not at all.

Soc. Do you know the reason why it is not? or shall I tell it you?

Alc. Do you tell me.

Soc. It is this, my friend: it is because you neither know nor imagine that you know the way up to heaven.

c Alc. How is that the reason? Explain yourself.

Soc. Let you and I consider it together. Concerning any affairs which you are ignorant of, and are at the same time convinced that you are so, do you waver in your opinions? For instance, in the affair of dressing meats and making sauces, you are, I presume, well acquainted with your ignorance.

Alc. Perfectly well.

Soc. Do you form any opinions then yourself on these affairs of cookery, and waver in those opinions? or do you leave those matters to such as are skilled in them?

Alc. I do as you mentioned last.

d Soc. And what if you were in a ship under sail, would you form any opinion, whether the rudder ought to be turned toward the ship or from it, and be unsettled in that opinion for want of knowledge in the affair? or would you leave it to the pilot, and not trouble yourself about it?

Alc. To the pilot I should leave it.

Soc. Concerning affairs then which you are ignorant of, and are no stranger to your own ignorance in those respects, you are not wavering in your opinions?

Alc. I believe I am not.

Soc. Do you perceive that errors, committed in the doing of any thing, are all to be ascribed to this kind of ignorance in a man, - his imagining that he knows what he knows not?

Alc. How do you mean?

Soc. Whenever we undertake to act in any affair, it is only when we imagine we know what to do.

Alc. Certainly.

e Soc. And such as have no opinion of their own knowledge in the affair resign it up to others to act for them.

Alc. How should they do otherwise?

Soc. Ignorant persons of this kind live therefore without committing errors, because they give up the management of those affairs in which they are ignorant into the hands of others.

Alc. True.

Soc. What kind of persons, then, are those who err and act amiss? for certainly they are not such as know how to act.

Alc. By no means.

118a Soc. Since then they are neither the knowing, nor those of the ignorant who know that they are ignorant, are any other persons left than of that kind who are ignorant, but imagine themselves knowing?

Alc. None other than these.

Soc. This kind of ignorance, therefore, is the cause of wrong doings, and is the only kind which is culpable.

Alc. Very true.

Soc. And where it concerns things of greatest moment, is it not in these cases the most of any mischievous and shameful?

Alc. By far the most so.

Soc. Well then. Can you name any things of greater moment than those which are honest, and beautiful, and good, and advantageous?

Alc. Certainly none.

Soc. Is it not on these subjects that you acknowledge yourself to waver in your opinions?

Alc. It is.

b Soc. And, if you are thus wavering, is it not evident from our past conclusions, not only that you are ignorant in subjects of the greatest moment, but that amidst this ignorance you imagine that you know them?

Alc. I fear it is so.

Soc. Fie upon it, Alcibiades! What a condition then are you in! a condition which I am loath to name: but however, since we are alone, it must be spoken out. You are involved, my good sir, in that kind of ignorance which is the most shameful, according to the result of our joint reasoning, and according to your own confession. From this kind of ignorance it is, that you are eager to engage in politics before you have learnt the elements of that science.

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Later on in the dialogue Socrates will bring to the fore the Delphic exhortation to "know thyself" – what does this mean?

Can we know ourselves but not know what it is that we know and what we do not?

In what respect is our knowledge of other things conditioned by the nature of the self?

What kind of *self* is it that considers "things just or unjust, beautiful or base, good or evil, advantageous or otherwise" or as Socrates puts it, "subjects of the greatest moment."?