

Political Ambition and Socratic Philosophy: Plato's Drama of Socrates and Alcibiades

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Political Ambition and Socratic Philosophy provides a complete interpretation of Plato's three major presentations of the infamous Athenian general, in the *Alcibiades*, the *Second Alcibiades*, and the *Symposium*. This monograph takes a novel approach to the Platonic triptych, treating it for the first time as a coherent narrative, spanning nearly two decades, of the relationship between Socrates and his most notorious pupil, and revealing a dynamic Platonic portrait of Alcibiades' changing disposition toward democracy, law, virtue, and piety. In my detailed interpretive account of this portrait, I follow Alcibiades' dramatic transformation from a surprisingly naïve Athenian youth, through a dark phase of pessimism and flirtation with tyranny, to the charismatic, larger-than-life personality known from ancient history and biography, all the while tracing the connection between these extraordinary developments and Alcibiades' exposure to Socratic philosophy. I argue that Plato does not simply deny the allegation that Alcibiades was corrupted by his Socratic education, but rather weaves together a nuanced account through his dialogues from which we can glean insight into important questions in political theory: How is the civic-spirited side of political ambition related to its self-serving or glory-seeking dimensions? How can education be expected to strengthen or weaken the devotion to one's fellow citizens characteristic of noble ambition? And what does Socratic philosophy reveal about the place of political hopes in a spiritually and intellectually healthy human life? The book thus aims to recover a valuable classical teaching on the nature and corruptibility of political ambition, illuminating from an unfamiliar and thought-provoking perspective our own political situation as citizens of liberal democracy and heirs to its tradition of distrust of the politically ambitious. Moreover, it advances the study of Platonic philosophy by explaining the importance of Alcibiades' education for Socrates' own enigmatic philosophic project.

Key Themes and Arguments

Political ambition in the ancient polis was a double-edged sword, a tension-ridden combination of the desire for personal glory on one hand and deep-seated public-spiritedness on the other. The Athenians fostered both in their most promising young in hopes of producing brilliant and capable statesmen, and in Alcibiades the tremendous danger inherent in this practice was finally realized—most notably in his decision to defect to enemy Sparta rather than return home to face trial on capital charges. The volatility that is thus evident in the political life of the ancient polis—which helped to inspire the strategy of making ambition counteract ambition in the age of constitutional liberal democracy—is partly fuelled by the city's encouragement of its citizens to seek their greatest fulfillment in the honor and power accorded to whoever can best promote the city's splendor and prosperity. The danger arises when the statesman's intense desire

for personal reward becomes unmoored from the desire to obtain that reward through honorable service to the community. How, then, to draw the distinction between ambition that is safely yoked to the good of one's fellow-citizens and ambition that threatens to become tyrannical?

Ancient political philosophy helps us to understand the complexity of ambition as an active force in political life by exposing the psychological complexity of the phenomenon in the individual. For example, it is tempting at first blush to suggest that the key difference between noble and corrupt ambition is simply that one is fundamentally selfless and the other selfish. But the Platonic depiction of Alcibiades makes it clear that his political ambition was always characterized by the intertwined desires to benefit his fellow-citizens, and to obtain honor, fame, and power. Even when Alcibiades has begun to consider pursuing tyrannical rule, Socrates is able to show that his deepest motivation is not to tyrannize the Athenians, but to serve them more effectively by circumventing the democratic need to teach and persuade them. Indeed, it takes only a moment's reflection to see how often tyrants believe that they are selflessly promoting the interests of their subjects—and moreover, how often even great leaders, revered for their noble ambition and devoted sacrifice, are nonetheless motivated in part by the prospect of their immortal fame.

In my exegesis of Plato's treatment of political ambition, I point to the ambitious politician's disposition toward the rule of law as the determinative factor in distinguishing between stable, constructive ambition and its dangerously unstable counterpart. Tyrannical rulers, whether or not they believe they are serving the best interests of their peoples, insist on the superiority of their own supreme rule over every alternative, while the nobly ambitious recognize the need to establish and work within an independent, perhaps democratic rule of law. Plato conveys this lesson by having Alcibiades' turn toward tyranny coincide with a dramatic loss of faith in the prudence of the Athenian *demos*, and therefore in the wisdom of Athenian democratic law. This change in Alcibiades, which Socrates' refutations help to bring about, is a reaction against democracy and not against Athens, as Alcibiades himself famously attempts to explain to the Lacedaemonian assembly in Thucydides (vi.88-91). Plato's presentation is therefore a valuable exploration of the complex relationship between patriotism, faith in democracy or democratic law, and the politically ambitious pursuit of honor, glory, fame, and power.

Through careful textual analysis, my book presents Alcibiades' transformation under Socratic education as a Platonic case study in the corruption and eventual rehabilitation of political ambition, and thus attempts to recover Plato's understanding of the psychology of great ambition. Equally important to this Platonic drama, however, is the question of Socrates' own philosophic procedure. Why should Socrates have desired to associate with the likes of Alcibiades in the first place, and why would he risk turning the youth's powerful ambition in such a dangerous direction? One strain of my interpretation of these texts is the exploration of Socrates' own procedure in pursuing certain crucial questions through his conversations with the young ambitious Athenian.

Chapter Summaries

Introduction

Aside from laying out in greater detail the arguments for studying political ambition in Plato sketched above, the introduction takes up an important methodological question. In the last two hundred years, the *Alcibiades* dialogues have often been rejected as spurious. I address this challenge to my project by discussing the seminal work of Friedrich Schleiermacher, and then by surveying the arguments (insufficient in my estimation) on the basis of which the *Alcibiades* and *Second Alcibiades* have been atheized. I ultimately contend that, according to Schleiermacher's own thorough account of how critically to approach a Platonic text, some attempt to interpret the *Alcibiades* dialogues as authentic must be undertaken.

Chapter One: Socrates' Promise and Alcibiades' Failure (*Alcibiades* 103-116)

In the first of two chapters I devote to the *Alcibiades*, I draw attention to the shocking character of Socrates' opening speeches—the first words he ever speaks to Alcibiades, according to the dialogue itself—to suggest that the theme of Socrates' alleged corruption of Alcibiades is at the forefront of Plato's presentation. This suggestion is reinforced by my exposition of Alcibiades' naiveté concerning democratic politics. Whereas some scholars have gone so far as to consider Alcibiades' fecklessness in response to Socrates' questioning as evidence against the dialogue's authenticity, my analysis is the first to suggest that Plato's portrayal of the young Alcibiades as rather conventionally attached to the Athenian democracy is meant to highlight the possibility that Socratic education was a source of his corruption. I show that, at the end of this first portion of the dialogue, the force of Alcibiades' ambition leads him knowingly to reject Socratic education in favor of an unexamined life in Athenian politics.

Chapter Two: The Exaltation of Virtue (*Alcibiades* 116-135)

In this portion of the dialogue, Socrates' apparently straightforward defense of virtue and condemnation of tyranny suggests that he now thinks better of the attempt to provide a Socratic education to someone with as volatile a streak of political ambition as Alcibiades. Although this might suggest that Plato's Socrates considers great political ambition to be better off if left uncorrupted by exposure to unfettered questioning, I go on to argue that the conclusion of the dialogue does not simply exonerate Socrates. For example, he refutes Alcibiades' understanding of the common good in the city and undermines the youth's naïve but attractive vision of a perfectly harmonious political community. On the basis of this complicating evidence, I contend that we must judge from Plato's other depictions of Alcibiades as to whether or not Socrates ultimately had a corrupting influence on the statesman. I also review the various possibilities, intimated by Socrates over the course of the *Alcibiades*, regarding the reasons for which Socrates might wish to educate someone like Alcibiades.

Chapter Three: Rescuing Alcibiades (*Second Alcibiades*)

Having come to look down upon the *demos* as ignorant, Alcibiades reveals that he would with pleasure accept the divine gift of universal tyranny as the answer to his prayers—incriminating evidence against his teacher. Socrates attempts to rehabilitate Alcibiades' democratic sensibilities by praising the orator's capacity to persuade the city to pursue its own interest, and by warning against angering the gods by acting in ignorance of what is just and pious. Plato here shows how even the most overweening political ambition, which looks down upon the ruled as ignorant or imprudent, can be restrained from the pursuit of absolute despotic power. Alcibiades' enduring desire to be the benefactor of his fellow-citizens, along with his abiding albeit malleable sense of piety, provides a foothold for Socrates to reanimate his belief in persuasive democratic oratory over tyrannical compulsion—even if both should be aimed, however misguidedly, at the good of the Athenians. In the process of portraying this conversion, however, Plato invites speculation as to whether intense political ambition, however improved or distorted by exposure to philosophic questioning, must always reflect a fundamental lack of Socratic self-critique.

Chapter Four: A Puzzling Retrospective (*Symposium* 211-222)

Alcibiades' famous drunken speech in Plato's *Symposium* offers a sharply differing account of the relationship between Socrates and Alcibiades than the *Alcibiades* dialogues themselves. For example, the drunken Alcibiades—now at the height of his fame and power in Athens—never once mentions the Socratic refutations, or the questions concerning nobility and virtue that Socrates so powerfully raised in their first conversation. I contend that Alcibiades must have learned more from Socrates than he lets on in the *Symposium*, and argue against the majority of existing scholarship, which generally concludes that the drunken Alcibiades here only reveals the depth of his misunderstanding. I argue that Alcibiades must eventually have been forced to acknowledge Socrates' deeper critique of his political ambition, and yet continued to reject the Socratic education in favor of the political power that he now knew to be ephemeral and superficial. Plato thus allows us to see that philosophic questioning may partially undermine the motivation of political ambition, but not necessarily to so great a degree as to derail it.

Conclusion

In my concluding chapter, I distinguish and discuss three of the most important facets of political ambition: love of honor, desire to be a benefactor, and desire for power. I show how Plato's careful portrait reveals the various ways in which these three strains of ambition are related. The desire for honor somehow sets in motion both the desire to be nobly devoted and the desire to rule. Socrates may have succeeded in persuading Alcibiades of the confusion inherent in pursuing honor and the benefit of the city—and yet, the simple but overwhelming desire for power is too great to be overcome. Plato thus suggests that the taming of ambition is a dangerous and questionable endeavor. However, I conclude by suggesting that Plato does not in fact deny the possibility of curbing political ambition through education as such, but rather of the possibility of doing

so through a genuine *Socratic* education, since such an education appears to require an indefinite departure from political life.

Audience and Contribution to Literature

My book is addressed to two overlapping but distinct fields of inquiry: classical political theory and Platonic studies. As a work of classical political theory, it follows the example of scholars such as Martha Nussbaum, Arlene Saxonhouse, Peter Euben, and Paul Woodruff, in their insistence that close study of the Greek classics must have a place in contemporary philosophy and political theory. The book contributes to Platonic scholarship in two important ways: by presenting a new and complete interpretation of Plato's account of Socrates and Alcibiades, and by taking up the question of the authenticity of *Alcibiades* and *Second Alcibiades*. The book will therefore be of interest to scholars interested in the theme of political ambition in the ancient polis, in the corruption charge for which Socrates was executed, or in the question of how to approach texts that have had their place in the Platonic canon questioned.

I conclude by noting the distinction between my work and the two most similar scholarly offerings: Steven Forde's *The Ambition to Rule: Alcibiades and the Politics of Imperialism in Thucydides* (Cornell, 1989) and Robert Faulkner's more recent work, *The Case for Greatness: Honorable Ambition and its Critics* (Yale, 2008). Forde touches on some of what my own work also reveals, e.g., Alcibiades' complex but enduring concern for the public good of Athens (177), and the relationship between his love of honor and his apparently tyrannical disposition (180-3). But Forde interprets Thucydides' portrait of Alcibiades rather than Plato's, and thus examines only the mature statesman without considering the psychological development of Alcibiades' political ambition masterfully depicted in Plato's evolving portraits. My book will therefore be partly complementary to Forde's, providing a different perspective on the same historical figure and including a thematic focus on the relationship of ambition to philosophy famously absent from Thucydides' presentation.

Faulkner does take up an exploration of some of the same texts as my own, but provides only a single, chapter-length, thematic treatment of the *Alcibiades* and *Second Alcibiades* (not the *Symposium*), weaving back and forth between the two dialogues so as to make them answer the questions about ambition he has prepared in his previous chapters. My book will therefore stand to Faulkner's chapter on Plato's Alcibiades in much the same relation as Forde's does toward Faulkner's chapter on Thucydides' Alcibiades, i.e., as the more thorough and detailed textual analysis demanded by the complexity and scope of the texts themselves.