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CORRUPTING THE YOUTH: XENOPHON AND PLATO ON SOCRATES AND ALCIBIADES

Introduction

Socrates' most famous student is undoubtedly Plato, but such was likely not the case during Socrates' lifetime, or at least in the time around his death. His most famous students then – or rather his most infamous students – were likely those with unpopular, even criminal, political careers, namely, Critias and Alcibiades. Critias was a member of the Thirty Tyrants who ruled oligarchically after the overthrow of the democracy, while Alcibiades was an Athenian general who turned traitor to Athens' two principal enemies during the Peloponnesian War, Sparta and Persia¹. Alcibiades' treacherous counsel to Sparta was instrumental in defeating Athens' Sicilian expedition, and was consequentially a major blow to Athens' efforts in the Peloponnesian War generally². Socrates' relationship to both men was no doubt responsible for his besmirched reputation as well as the accusations that ultimately led to his trial and execution. Since these nefarious characters were undeniably prominent students of Socrates, both Plato and Xenophon sought to defend Socrates' association with these men in their writings. While Plato and Xenophon offer similar accounts of Critias' connection with Socrates, they curiously offer different, not to say contradictory, accounts of Alcibiades' relationship with him. Plato, to begin with, acknowledges that Socrates had some sort of pedagogical relationship with Alcibiades, and he even "emphasizes [the relationship's] length and intimacy"³. Two Platonic dialogues are named for Alcibiades (*Alcibiades Major* and *Minor*⁴), and he appears in two others (the *Protagoras* and the *Symposium*). Xenophon, by contrast,

1. Isocrates credits Polycrates with connecting Alcibiades and Socrates in his *Accusation of Socrates* (*Busiris* 4-6).

2. Th.VI.89-VII.9.

3. Balbus 2009, 396.

4. Of course, the *Alcibiades Minor* is widely regarded as a spurious dialogue.

downplays almost to the point of denial that such a relationship ever existed – or, if it did exist, it was early on in Alcibiades’ adult life and short-lived. Indeed, apart from one reference to Socrates’ relationship with Alcibiades in the *Memorabilia*, a reference in which we do not see the two men together, Xenophon “seems to bend over backwards to avoid reference to Alcibiades elsewhere in his Socratic works”⁵. Plato, alternatively, presents Socrates as a lover of Alcibiades while Xenophon, “who takes it upon himself explicitly to defend Socrates against the charges of the city, does his best to distance Alcibiades from Socrates”⁶. Plato and Xenophon had similar goals: rehabilitating the reputation of Socrates, but with respect to Alcibiades, they pursued radically different strategies to achieve that end⁷. This paper will explore the competing strategies of Plato and Xenophon with respect to Socrates’ pedagogical relationship with Alcibiades – what differences and similarities are there in their respective accounts, are their accounts in fact contradictory or can they be reconciled somehow, and what, after all, was Socrates’ relationship with Alcibiades?

Understanding Alcibiades’ relationship with Socrates is central to understanding Socrates’ role as a teacher, as well as to understanding philosophy’s public or political face. Socrates was convicted and sentenced to death, after all, on accusations of impiety and of corrupting the youth⁸. To the degree then, that the corruption charge is important for understanding Socrates’ way of life, one should turn to a prime example of Socratic corruption: Alcibiades.

Both Xenophon and Plato were guided by the same consideration, namely protecting or ennobling the reputation of Socrates and thereby of philosophy. Where they differ, however, is in their appraisal of Alcibiades, and this, I will argue, is responsible for their different presentations of his relationship to their teacher, Socrates. Plato presents an unimpressive, impetuous Athenian youth, and this presentation may or may not reflect Plato’s true tastes. Xenophon, by contrast, presents, in subtle and understated ways, a most impressive general and statesman, one who may have benefited greatly from a Socratic education. There are indications in Xenophon, then, that Socrates was in some way responsible for cultivating Alcibiades’ talents.

5. Johnson 2003, xiii.

6. Forde 1987, 223.

7. The same can be said with respect to Xenophon and Plato’s respective accounts of Socrates behavior in court. See Danzig 2003.

8. Plato, *Apology of Socrates* 24b. Cf. Diogenes Laertius II. 40: “The affidavit in the case, which is still preserved, says Favorinus, in the *Metron*, ran as follows: ‘This indictment and affidavit is sworn by Meletus, the son of Meletus of Pitthos, against Socrates, the son of Sophroniscus of Alopecce: Socrates is guilty of refusing to recognize the gods recognized by the state, and of introducing other new divinities. He is also guilty of corrupting the youth. The penalty demanded is death’”.

Alcibiades in Xenophon

Xenophon devotes very little attention to Alcibiades; he discusses him in only two of his works, and only one of these works is Socratic, the *Memorabilia*. Alcibiades is absent from Xenophon's other three works on Socrates, and his only other appearance is in the *Hellenika*, a work in which Socrates makes only the briefest of appearances. In fact, Xenophon never presents Alcibiades and Socrates together – conversing or sharing in some common activity. Despite the centrality of the relationship to Socrates' fate, a fact Xenophon highlights, Xenophon does his best to distance his teacher from this notorious student. Xenophon downplays the relationship despite his keen awareness that Alcibiades is particularly problematic for one who wants to defend or rehabilitate Socrates.

Alcibiades' relative absence is curious, for Xenophon makes clear that the accusers had in mind, above all, Alcibiades and Critias when they accused Socrates of corrupting the youth (*Mem.* I.2.12). Xenophon devotes merely slightly over half of one chapter to these two most problematic of Socrates' students in the only chapter specifically devoted to defending Socrates against the charges of corrupting the youths (*Mem.* I.2). The subsequent three chapters apparently continue the theme, though indirectly, by showing how Socrates benefited his friends.

Critias and Alcibiades are singled out among Socrates' associates, Xenophon reports, because they are the ones who harmed the city the most: "Critias was the most thievish, violent, and murderous of all in the oligarchy, and Alcibiades the most incontinent, insolent, and violent of all in the democracy" (*Mem.* I.2.12). If, Xenophon says, these two harmed the city, he will not defend them. By his use of a conditional clause, Xenophon leaves open the possibility that these two did *not* harm the city (or perhaps one of them did, but the other did not). He will only describe, ostensibly to defend, Socrates' companionship with them. The gist of Xenophon's defense of Socrates relative to these two amounts to the following: Socrates showed himself to them to be a gentleman and, at least while they kept company with him, Alcibiades and Critias were able to overpower their ignoble desires. Socrates should be praised for keeping the two troubled adolescents in check for as long as he did instead of being blamed for the harm they may have caused to the city after their relationships with Socrates ended. Then Xenophon turns to discuss Critias and Alcibiades individually; he begins with a discussion focusing on Critias before turning to Alcibiades. To show that Socrates and Critias were on bad terms, Xenophon relates a story about a thinly veiled threat that Critias and his associates made to Socrates when he was a member of the ruling oligarchy known as the Thirty. The Thirty, of which Critias was a member, were performing purges and killing citizens, and Socrates wondered aloud whether a good herdsman would thin his herd in this manner. This remark was reported to

Critias and his comrade Charicles, and Charicles threatens to cull Socrates from the herd. While the remark is made by Charicles, Xenophon does not report that Critias rose in defense of his teacher. Although this story is not without problems, Xenophon has fairly persuasively shown that Socrates and Critias were not on favorable terms.

The same cannot be said of Xenophon's direct account of Alcibiades. Xenophon avoids presenting the two men together at all and instead relates a conversation that Alcibiades is said to have had with his uncle Pericles – strikingly, this is the only conversation in the *Memorabilia* in which Socrates does not participate. Socrates never criticizes Alcibiades, and Alcibiades, in turn, never threatens Socrates. Indeed, neither speaks to or about the other at all. The reported conversation between Alcibiades and Pericles took place when Alcibiades was about twenty years old, roughly the age when Socrates approached Alcibiades⁹. The dialogue begins in Socratic fashion, with a “what is?” question, but it is a very un-Socratic “what is?” question – one perhaps too delicate for Socrates to raise himself directly¹⁰. Alcibiades asks his uncle, a leading Athenian politician, “What is law?” Alcibiades then proceeds to refute the definitions, in straightforward mimicry of Socratic dialectics, that Pericles offers. One can forget, if one loses one's place, the purpose of this story. It is meant to show that Socrates did not corrupt Alcibiades and Critias, and Xenophon insisted that while they were with Socrates the two behaved well. But this story shows precisely the opposite, albeit perhaps somewhat delicately. This conversation shows that Socrates taught Alcibiades rhetoric, or rather dialectic – at the very least the conversation shows that Alcibiades picked up Socrates' manner of speech. Moreover, it shows that Alcibiades, at a very young age and quite obviously under the tutelage of Socrates, looked down upon the law (convention, *nomos*). Alcibiades does not address his de facto father with respect, and here we are reminded that the charge of corrupting the youth was tantamount to making the youth of Athens love Socrates more than their fathers (*Mem.* I.2.49). This conversation highlights the possible attendant problems associated with a Socratic education in a passage meant to defend Socrates against the charges of corruption:

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9. Consider the beginning of *Alcibiades 1*, as well as the beginning of *Protagoras*.
10. To ask, “What is law?” strikes at the very heart of political or ancestral authority by raising the possibility that law is not divinely inspired but merely conventional. Such questioning regarding the status of the laws could be regarded as highly impious. In the *Laws*, for example, the Athenian Stranger praises laws that forbid the young from inquiring in the laws (I.634e) and proposes instituting a similar law in the new Cretan colony of Magnesia. However, the *Minos* opens with Socrates asking “What is our law?” or probably better “What is law to us?” There is a question regarding how to translate *hemin*, but, regardless, Socrates qualifies his question and does not simply ask “What is law?”.

The conversation is problematic both for the behavior that Alcibiades displays and for the contents of his argument. Alcibiades demonstrates disrespect for the political and familial authority that Pericles represents, and argues forcefully against treating the democratic laws of Athens with respect. As a whole, the scene appears to show that Socrates taught his students political skills that are easily abused and attitudes that are anathema¹¹.

This is the last mention of Alcibiades in the *Memorabilia*, and Xenophon does not point to a falling out between him and Socrates like he did in the case of Critias. Xenophon presents an Alcibiades who was clearly affected by Socratic philosophy. More important is the quiet indication that Alcibiades did in fact learn from Socrates, not only dialectics, but potentially political affairs as well (*Mem.* I.2.17).

The *Memorabilia* is otherwise quite sparing in presenting Xenophon's judgment of Alcibiades, and it also withholds evidence that Alcibiades learned about politics from Socrates. For these matters, one must turn to the *Hellenika*, which, admittedly, expresses Xenophon's judgment only in a concealed or subdued manner. It also presents Alcibiades' political career as wildly successful without directly saying so – or, rather, Xenophon leaves it to the reader to judge Alcibiades' abilities. The tenor of this work changes markedly in the third chapter of the second book, with the closing of the war, most obviously, but also with the final mention of Alcibiades having just occurred as well¹². Alcibiades features prominently up until this point. Without explicitly praising Alcibiades in his own name, Xenophon relates instance after instance of Alcibiades' political and military acumen. When Alcibiades first arrives on the scene of a battle in the opening lines of Xenophon's work, the Spartans flee (*HG* I.1.6). One might suppose that Alcibiades' arrival simply gave the Athenians numerical superiority, but, as G. Proietti points out, "every other aspect of this battle contrasts sharply with the combination of speed, daring, and mastery of Alcibiades' command in the next battle, near Cyzicus"¹³. Alcibiades quickly changes the tactics of the Athenian fleet, enforcing a greater degree of secrecy regarding both the navy's maneuvers and its size – going so far as to proclaim death for anyone caught sailing to the other side (*HG* I.1.15). In addition to the victory at Cyzicus (*HG* I.1), Alcibiades is also responsible for victories in Abydos (*HG* I.2), and Chalcedon (*HG* I.3). The victory in Abydos unites the Athenian forces, and the victory in Chalcedon was a significant victory over the Spartans. Alcibiades accomplishes these early, routing

11. Danzig 2014, 7-8.

12. The shift or break is well recognized in the secondary literature on the *Hellenika*. See Thomas 2009a, esp. pp. xxxii-xxxvi, as well as Thomas 2009b, 418: "There is a clear break in the structure of the *Hellenika* at this point [the end of Book II] [...]". The break has led to great scholarly dispute over the composition of the work. See also Gray 1991 and MacLaren 1934.

13. Proietti 1987, 1.

victories despite being without resources (*HG I.1.14*). After these initial victories, he turns to procure funding from the Bithynians by simply threatening attack, from the Greeks in Hellespont (which leads to an agreement with Chalcedon as well as Pharnabazos), and he obtains a hundred talents from the Kerameios region. He leverages an oath out of the Persian satrap Pharnabazos, which, if nothing else, raises the costs of reneging on his promises. Indeed, Alcibiades so outshines his contemporaries in military matters that he is unprecedentedly elected supreme commander over all the other generals (*hapantōn hēgemōn autokratōr* [*HG I.4.20*]). As D. Gish points out:

For the first and perhaps only time in the history of democracy, the fate of Athens had been placed formally into the hands of a single Athenian – a feat never achieved even by Themistocles, Cimon, and Pericles¹⁴.

The only battle that Athens loses under his generalship is undertaken by Alcibiades' subordinate in direct opposition to Alcibiades' direct orders (*HG I.5*). Indeed, this blunder costs Alcibiades his supreme command.

Most importantly, for our purposes, is Alcibiades' role in the final defeat of the Athenians in the Peloponnesian War, the defeat of the navy at Aegospotami. Alcibiades happened to be observing the Athenian navy from his castle in the build-up to the battle and saw that the Athenians were poorly situated for battle. Seeing this:

[he] went down and told the Athenians that they were not anchored in a good place and urged them to move their camp to Sestos, where there was a harbor and a city. 'For if you are there,' he said, 'you can fight a sea battle at any time of your own choosing.' But the Athenian generals, especially Tydeus and Menandros, ordered him to depart, for they said they were generals now, not he. So he left (*HG II.1.25-26*).

Indeed, the Athenians are camped at a disadvantage, and this proves to be decisive in their defeat. The implicit blame of the generals praises, in a subdued manner, the advice of Alcibiades. "This subdued praise of Alcibiades, this implicit suggestion that if Alcibiades had been in command, Lysander would not have won his decisive victory, was the utmost that a man in circumstances such as the author of *Memorabilia* I 2.12-13 could do"¹⁵. Had the generals who were in charge listened to Alcibiades, or, better, had Alcibiades been in charge, the navy would not have made so critical a mistake. "Xenophon thus prepares his answer to the question concerning the proximate cause (and not only the proximate cause) of Athens'

14. Gish 2012, 167.

15. Strauss 1968, 662.

final defeat: Lysander's decisive victory over the Athenians was rendered possible by the Athenian generals' contemptuous rejection of Alcibiades' advice"¹⁶. The general impression one is left with in the first two books is that with Alcibiades at the helm, the Athenians obtained victories, and that, without him, Athens suffered defeats. Indeed, in this final case, Athens suffered its ultimate defeat. Here, rather unceremoniously, Alcibiades exits the stage; Xenophon makes no further remarks about Alcibiades. Even this is curious, as Xenophon will often discuss how political leaders met their end to convey his judgment on their lives¹⁷. Xenophon fails to mention Alcibiades' likely ungracious end¹⁸.

In any event, earlier, in the midst of recounting Alcibiades' successes, Xenophon tells the reader that there were two prevailing opinions in Athens regarding Alcibiades at the time of his return to the city in 407. Very simply, there were those who supported Alcibiades and those who opposed him. Those who supported him said, among other things, "that he was the only one defended (*apologeomai*) as having been exiled unjustly" (*HG* I.4.13). The presence of this all-important term for Socratic philosophers, defense or apology, should alert the attentive reader to the seriousness of this account. Xenophon relates in great detail the opinion of those who supported Alcibiades and recognized his successful defense, while giving Alcibiades' opponents' views very brief remarks. The opponents, Xenophon reports, feared that Alcibiades alone would be the cause of every evil that would befall Athens (*HG* I.4.17). By going through Alcibiades' successes, and showing, above all, that not following Alcibiades' advice is what led to Athens' ultimate downfall, we can see that Xenophon is clearly not in the camp of Alcibiades' opponents who attribute to him the source of every evil that Athens suffered. As Xenophon has stated the terms of the debate, we can begin to see that he likely sympathizes with Alcibiades' proponents. Xenophon gives many indications that Alcibiades is a capable general and politician, and he indicates elsewhere his agreement with the proponents' view that men like Alcibiades do not want a change in the political order or a revolution (*HG* I.4.16). In this context it is useful to recall that Xenophon identifies Alcibiades as a partisan of democratic Athens, in contrast to the other student of Socrates, Critias, who was a partisan of the oligarchy (*Mem.* I.2.12).

The proponents also raise the issue of Alcibiades' alleged impiety, and this is not the only mention of prosecuting capable generals on the grounds of impiety in the *Hellenika*. The trial of the generals responsible for the Arginousai affair is similar, and it shows the folly of allowing religious zealotry to guide military and political

16. *Ibid.*

17. Consider *An.* II.6, *Cyr.* VIII.7.

18. For possible accounts of Alcibiades' death, see Plutarch, *Alc.* 38-39.

concerns¹⁹. The details of the event are well-known (*HG* I.6): Athens achieved an important naval victory at Arginousai, but the navy is not in great shape after the battle. One group of generals was sent out to recover the bodies of the dead, but a great storm swept in and prevented the retrieval of the fallen (*HG* I.6.35). Upon the generals' return to Athens, they were immediately deposed and subsequently tried on a charge of failing to fulfill their duties – leaving behind the bodies of their fallen comrades was considered an act of gross impiety.

Instead of trying the generals individually, as the law provided, the assembly met to decide whether to try the generals *en masse*. This deliberation is the only debate of the Athenian assembly recorded in the *Hellenika*. Moreover, the debate includes the only appearance in the work of Xenophon's teacher, Socrates. Socrates, Xenophon relates, was the only member of the presiding committee to refuse to bring the matter to a vote, saying he would do nothing contrary to the law (*HG* I.7.15). While the legality of the case is certainly a legitimate reason to dissent from the extremely democratic assembly, one wonders whether the philosopher convicted of disbelieving in the gods of the city also recognized the folly of disallowing generals to depart, on occasion and when necessity demanded it, from traditional acts of piety. Regardless, it is clear that Socrates did not favor sentencing to death the generals.

Apart from the likely illegality of trying the generals all together, there is the sheer imprudence of executing so many capable generals when the city is in desperate need of generals. Recall, after all, that these generals had just achieved a naval victory. Executing them deprives the city of generals who are capable of achieving such victories, but it also deters other capable military men from pursuing careers in the military. Or, at least, it deters generals from making daring decisions that might skirt the rules of ordinary propriety or piety, decisions that might often be necessary in military matters.

We can perhaps draw an analogy between the case of the generals at Arginousai and Alcibiades. Alcibiades may or may not have committed an act of gross impiety, but his skills as a military leader are undeniable. It would seem to be senseless to deprive the city of such an excellent commander, unless the gods are involved in human affairs. While it is beyond the scope of the present paper to show that Socrates did not believe in gods who reward the just and punish the wicked in this world, let it suffice to suggest that he did not. If my suggestion is correct,

19. For an alternative account of the trial of the generals at Arginousai, see Gish 2012. Gish argues that the assembly is defending the democratic character of the Athenian regime by prosecuting the generals, whose abandonment of many lower class citizens, dead and alive, reveals a treasonous indifference to the fate of the *dēmos*.

Socrates would not have supported the attempt to deprive Athens of Alcibiades' most capable leadership²⁰.

Putting all of this together leads to the tentative suggestion that Xenophon thought highly of Alcibiades' political skills, and he puts himself, ever so carefully, in the camp of Alcibiades' supporters. Moreover, Xenophon further indicates that the skills that Alcibiades possesses are at least partially the result of a Socratic education, and Xenophon's presentation of Alcibiades is part of a grand strategy to show, admittedly in ambiguous terms, that Socrates did possess the political skill and that he taught it to others. While the clearest example is in rhetoric (*Mem.* I.2.40-46), one should not overlook quiet indications that Socrates taught other political skills as well, including the need for deceit (*Mem.* IV.2, and consider *Mem.* IV.6.13 and ff.), and the recognition of the limits of reason (speech), or, to say the same thing, the recognition of the need for force (*Mem.* I.2.58)²¹. He also discussed military strategy (*Mem.* III.2; III.3-5) as well as how to command a cavalry (*Mem.* III.3)²². Much of Alcibiades' success can be attributed to his daring use of force and fraud, tactics Socrates encouraged, at least with a view to enemies. This conclusion stands, admittedly, in contrast to the common view that Xenophon is a fairly traditional supporter of traditional conceptions of morality. But as G. Danzig reminds us:

The widespread view of Xenophon as a simple-minded defender of conventional attitudes blinds us to the places where he speaks with a different, more radical voice. But we should not be surprised to find that the enthusiastic student of Socrates, one of the most radical and unconventional thinkers of ancient Greece, has some radical thoughts of his own²³.

Lastly, of course, is Xenophon's near explicit admission that Socrates taught politics (*ta politika* [*Mem.* I.2.17]), and Socrates' contention that by teaching others to be competent in politics, he participates more in politics than if he directly participated himself alone (*Mem.* I.6.15).

Xenophon presents Alcibiades as a largely successful general, one who benefited from and demonstrated the benefits of a Socratic education in politics. The presentation, however, is admittedly muted; one must connect the dots. Xenophon, the

20. While the generals' act of impiety was directly linked to a prudential concern of safety, Alcibiades' alleged defamation of the Hermes was surely not. The point of similarity is that in both cases Athens put pious concerns above military ones.

21. Xenophon's own political success was largely the result of Socratic, as opposed especially to a sophistic, education. Xenophon the student of Socrates possessed much greater political skill than did Proxenos or Meno, students of Gorgias. See Buzzetti 2014, 104-108.

22. One should compare Socrates' discussion of strategy with the younger Pericles here with Cambyse's discussion of the same topic with Cyrus (*Cyr.* I.6).

23. Danzig 2014, 7.

student of Socrates, does not openly praise someone who was viewed as one of the chief criminals in Socrates' circle without doing damage to Socrates' reputation. The muted praise, which hides Xenophon's high opinion of Alcibiades, explains why Xenophon goes to such lengths to distance Alcibiades from his teacher Socrates. Only with difficulty can one see the reach of Socrates' influence.

Alcibiades in Plato

Plato presents Socrates and Alcibiades together in four dialogues. In what dramatically must be the first meeting between the two men, Socrates presents himself as Alcibiades' lover (*Alc. 1*, 103a). Socrates is unusually eager to talk to Alcibiades; he initiates the conversation and does his best to capture Alcibiades' attention. Socrates' attempt to converse with Alcibiades is unrivaled in the Platonic corpus; of those conversations initiated by Socrates, this is by far his most aggressive effort. It is relatively clear that Socrates attempts to seduce, so to speak, Alcibiades – to exhort him to become Socrates' student. Socrates comes on strong, appearing very strange and making all sorts of promises. He raises Alcibiades' ambitions (*Alc. 1*, 105a-d), and asserts that Alcibiades will never get anywhere in politics without his help. He says, "it will be impossible for you to accomplish all these things you have in mind without me" (*Alc. 1*, 105d). One suspects that Socrates comes on so strong because he presumes that Alcibiades is a very talented youth, perhaps even capable of becoming a philosopher if he is not corrupted by that great sophist, the many (*Republic*, 493a-c).

Socrates uses many fallacious arguments with Alcibiades, trying simultaneously to capture his interest and to test his abilities, and Alcibiades consistently fails the tests²⁴. Alcibiades, moreover, does not seem bothered by his ignorance or confusion, a sign of his perfect self-satisfaction and further unsuitability for philosophy (*Alc. 1*, 119b). Socrates becomes so disappointed – or perhaps it is all a part of the ploy –, that he calls Alcibiades "wedded to stupidity" (*Alc. 1*, 118b). While Plato's Socrates calls Alcibiades stupid, Xenophon "gives no example of Socrates rebuking Alcibiades [...]"²⁵. In response to Alcibiades' self-satisfaction, Socrates steps up the game, further raising the stakes by insisting that Alcibiades' true competitors are the Persians and the Spartans. Finally, Socrates has captured Alcibiades' attention, and Alcibiades is willing to become Socrates' student.

24. See the argument about who should advise at 108b and following. Alcibiades' acceptance of the conclusion that he does not know justice that begins from the premise that he does know it at 110b, Socrates' argument at 115a-116d that all just things are good is also flawed.

25. Strauss 1998, 14.

I would like to suggest that Socrates gradually loses interest in Alcibiades over the course of the first dialogue, as Alcibiades reveals himself not to be too serious of a human being. But whatever one makes of this suggestion, *Alcibiades Minor* confirms that things have soured between Socrates and Alcibiades. “Among other things”, as commentator J. Howland says, “*Alcibiades II* contains Socrates’ interpretation of the failure of his philosophic liaison with Alcibiades [...]”²⁶. Alcibiades is not living up to his promise, at the end of the previous dialogue, to tend to Socrates from this day forth (*Alc.* 2, 135e). Again Socrates initiates the dialogue, but this time the reason is not to win Alcibiades over as a student. Rather, Socrates seems concerned about Alcibiades, and appears to harbor a suspicion that Alcibiades intends to do something sinister. Ostensibly, the second *Alcibiades* concerns how one ought to pray, but Socrates seems above all interested in slowing Alcibiades down. What, after all, would a man as confident as Alcibiades be so dour about, and what would he be so unsure of that he would first consult the gods? Howland offers a shocking possibility: Alcibiades is contemplating murdering his uncle, Pericles, in an effort to grasp political power for himself. Alcibiades reveals himself to be foolish in this dialogue, and Socrates’ efforts aim to prevent Alcibiades from doing something foolish. Socrates, no longer the pursuer, expresses a fear that Alcibiades will become quite corrupt, and the dialogue ends with an ill omen of stormy seas ahead for Socrates (*Alc.* 2, 151c).

By the time of the *Protagoras*, which takes place within a year of the *Alcibiades Major*²⁷, Socrates has given up on Alcibiades as a student. Although Alcibiades comes to the rescue at key points in this dialogue, he is largely absent from the conversation. Socrates’ interlocutor throughout the entire narrative frame, an unnamed comrade, certainly holds the opinion that Socrates is still Alcibiades’ lover – indeed he chastises Socrates for still being attracted to as old of a youth as Alcibiades (*Prt.* 309a) – but there appears to be little evidence that this is still in fact the case. Indeed, Socrates admits to the unnamed comrade at the outset that he forgot Alcibiades was even present (*Prt.* 309b), and, if anything, it appears as though Socrates is no longer well-disposed to the lad at all – Socrates is certainly no longer the pursuer that he was in *Alcibiades*. Socrates even declares to the comrade that Protagoras is more beautiful, because he is wiser, than Alcibiades. Since Protagoras will reveal himself to be confused regarding the very thing he professes to know, Socrates’ praise of Protagoras can be seen as ironic. So if Socrates holds a low opinion of Protagoras,

26. Howland 1990, 63.

27. Zuckert 2012 and Nails 2002, however, posit the *Protagoras* first; nevertheless, each has these dialogues cluster around the same time. The order, as I understand it, is *Alcibiades I*, then *Alcibiades II*, and finally *Protagoras*. It seems possible, however, that the *Protagoras* comes between the two dialogues named for Alcibiades.

this only further diminishes Alcibiades in his eyes. Alcibiades, for his part, rises on behalf of Socrates twice (*Prt.* 336b, 347b), indicating some affection for his would-be teacher, but the two do not interact directly.

The lack of dialogue between the two is telling, but not decisive. The chief evidence that Socrates has given up on Alcibiades by the time of the *Protagoras* is, I believe, Socrates' willingness to state repeatedly and in his own name his opinion that virtue is not teachable (*Prt.* 319a, 361c and ff.)²⁸. For if Socrates is still interested in capturing Alcibiades as a student, it would be foolish to deny that virtue or excellence is teachable, when the hook he uses to capture Alcibiades' attention in the *Alcibiades Major* would seem to depend upon virtue's being teachable (*Alc.* 1, 105c-d). For if virtue is not teachable, Alcibiades has no need for Socrates and can indeed rely on his natural capacities to achieve his grandest dreams, as he had already suggested (*Alc.* 1, 119b-c).

Plato's clearest presentation of the break between Socrates and Alcibiades occurs in the *Symposium*, in a speech he puts in the mouth of Alcibiades. At a party in celebration of Agathon's poetic victory, a subdued party in which the revelers have decided to drink moderately and make encomia in honor of *eros* – the phenomenon or the god – Alcibiades bursts onto the scene in a drunken euphoria, being carried by his own band of revellers (*Smp.* 212d). The atmosphere immediately changes, and the air of equality that has permeated the assembled cast of moderate drinkers quickly gives way to a quasi-tyrannical mandate to imbibe excessively issued by the new leader of the party – none other than Alcibiades himself. Not only does Alcibiades alter the manner of drinking, he also alters the manner of speaking. For while the previous speakers have each spoken in praise of love (*eros*), Alcibiades decides, with some prodding from Eryximachus, that he will speak in praise instead of Socrates (*Smp.* 214d-e).

Alcibiades' speech in praise of Socrates presents Alcibiades' version of the failed character of their relationship. Alcibiades admits that he has little to no interest in what Socrates teaches; he does not wish to sit around talking and growing old with Socrates, despite the fact that he recognizes that Socrates correctly sees Alcibiades' deficiencies (*Smp.* 216a). Alcibiades admits that Socrates' erotic approach was a ruse, and that he was not interested at all in Alcibiades' beautiful body – in fact, Socrates has no interest in beautiful bodies at all (*Smp.* 216d and ff.). At some point, the character of their relationship changed from what it was in the *Alcibiades Major*: Socrates went from pursuer to pursued, and Alcibiades' pursuit of Socrates was a complete and utter – but comical and steamy – failure. Although Alcibiades clearly admires Socrates, his admiration is mixed with enough disdain that he never

28. Socrates is clearly sensitive to the impact that the conversation with Protagoras will have on the prospects of attracting students for both Protagoras and himself (*Prt.* 316b-d).

seriously considered imitating his way of life. He initially saw in Socrates the path to achieve political greatness, and the Platonic Alcibiades explains that this hope was unfounded: Socrates discouraged Alcibiades' from entering politics and handling the affairs of the Athenians, and, by implication, refrained from teaching Alcibiades politics (*Smp.* 216a). While Alcibiades may indeed have hoped to become "the best possible" (*Smp.* 218d), it is clear that he never abandoned his early opinion that he already knew sufficiently of what that excellence consisted, namely rule over others (*Alc.* 1, 124e). Socrates, in Plato's presentation, is interested in Alcibiades because he holds out hope that the lad possesses the requisite abilities to become a philosopher, and he loses interest in Alcibiades once he discovers that he is unfit for such a life. This does not mean that Socrates has given up on Alcibiades entirely; Socrates sometimes speaks to human beings for reasons other than converting them to the life of philosophy. Sometimes, he converses with someone to prevent that person from doing something vicious²⁹. Alcibiades, on this account, is unfit for philosophy due to a lack of many of the requisite virtues. Moreover, given his enormous natural talent, Plato presents an Alcibiades that is particularly prone to be corrupted by that great sophist, the many³⁰, and Socrates voices such a concern (*Alc.* 1, 135e).

Comparison and Conclusion

Plato presents an Alcibiades that is young, impetuous, and intellectually lazy (*Alc.* 1); foolish and potentially a perpetrator of the most vicious of acts (*Alc.* 2); and a drunken, silly man, who is unfit for philosophy, and who is oblivious to the gravity of his eminent undertaking in Sicily (*Smp.*). Plato admits that there was a relationship between Socrates and Alcibiades, putting it front and center in his account of Socrates, but he presents that relationship as an unequivocal failure, with the blame lying squarely at the feet of Alcibiades. Alcibiades simply was not suited for a Socratic education and fled Socrates' company much to his own harm. The implication is fairly clear: Socrates cannot be blamed for such a failed student; he did the best he could have with such a nature.

Xenophon, by contrast, paints a picture of an outstanding, not to say excellent, general, one who achieves victories by force and fraud, fair means and foul. Alcibiades was a most capable general who single-handedly began to turn the tide in Athens' favor toward the end of the Peloponnesian War when things were looking grim. With his departure from the scene, Athens once again floundered about and ultimately lost. Its final defeat, to repeat, was a direct consequence of avoiding Alcibiades' tactical

29. Consider the *Euthyphro*.

30. *Republic* VI.492a.

advice. Xenophon's picture of Alcibiades' military career is certainly flattering, to say the least. This can be seen as high praise, but this praise would ultimately have to be judged in the light of how seriously Xenophon took political and military matters, how seriously he took the serious deeds of gentlemen. Xenophon distances Alcibiades from Socrates, giving him the breathing room to praise the former's military and political acumen without risking harm to Socrates' reputation. Xenophon gives very little indication at all that Socrates may have in fact been partly responsible for Alcibiades' political success.

While Plato denigrates Alcibiades and Xenophon lauds him, the reverse could be said about their respective depictions of Socrates. Plato presents Socrates as the model philosopher, a martyr, and a paragon of the virtues. Xenophon seems to go out of his way to suppress Socrates' excellence, to hide it from sight, or only to point to it indirectly. The goal seems to be to make Socrates boring, to make him sound like a moralizing old geezer who exhorts his companions almost literally to eat their greens (*Mem.* III.14). It is perhaps only with a little exaggeration to say that if Plato attempts to make Socrates "beautiful and new"³¹, Xenophon attempts to make him rather ugly and old.

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31. Plato, *Ep.* 2, 314c.

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