

Andre Archie

Politics in Socrates' Alcibiades: A Philosophical Account of Plato's Dialogue Alcibiades Major. Cham: Springer, 2015. xii + 144 pp. \$54.99. ISBN 9783319152684 (pbk).

Andre Archie claims to argue that 'Socrates redirects Alcibiades' political ambition to rule over the Athenian people by generalizing the notion of argument' (p. 3).¹ The change of ambition is most probably the case since the dialogue ends with Alcibiades' proclaimed determination to 'cultivate justice (or righteousness)' (*Alc. I.*, 135e4-5). However, Alcibiades proclamation is immediately followed by Socrates' scepticism which is the last rejoinder of the text. The ending of the *Alcibiades* thus exhibits one instantiation of a serious problem Plato – the philosopher – had to face: did Socrates fail in making his associates better people? And if he did (cf. Alcibiades, Critias, Charmides and others), why? Did he do anything wrong?²

Archie does not address these question which necessarily invite broad investigation outside the *Alcibiades* itself and most probably outside the Platonic corpus as well. In several aspects he treats the *Alcibiades* as a complete text which can be interpreted in itself. Compared to most recent scholarship on the *Alcibiades*, this approach is a novelty. However, it is understandable since most of the interpretations so far felt the need to address the authenticity of the dialogue and thus compared it in one way or another with other dialogues in the corpus or even with some historical events in lives of its protagonists.³ Archie is not much interested in discussion concerning the authorship (he sides with those arguing for the authenticity of the dialogue) and focuses on the form of the arguments within the dialogue and preconditions of the dialogical argument.

In the Introduction Archie explains his main methodological approaches which enable him to produce a new interpretation of the dialogue: his focus on the similarities with decision making theory and the concept of frames (p. 5). However, these new interpretative strategies bring only limited results, since Archie's interpretation of the dialogue differs from the older accounts in only a few important points.⁴

1 The simple references by page numbers are to the reviewed book; unless specified otherwise the title *Alcibiades* refers to the dialogue *Alcibiades Major*.

2 Cf. B. Williams, 'Plato: Invention of Philosophy', in *The Sense of the Past* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 149.

3 I have tried to make a summary of this discussion in J. Jirsa, 'Authenticity of the *Alcibiades* I: Some Reflections', *Listy filologické*, 132, 3-4 (2009), pp. 236-241.

4 Archie himself actually says that his purpose is to show how his 'reading of *Alcibiades Major* is in line with modern commentators' (pp. 6-7).

The second chapter provides the reader with a criticism of three different selective understandings of Plato's dialogue. Archie rightly criticizes methods of interpretation which are one-sided concerning the importance of Socrates on the one hand and his interlocutors on the other. According to him both approaches forget another important person, namely the reader: 'the dialogues are provocative precisely because they are designed to force readers to consider their own solutions to the subject matter under discussion' (p. 16).⁵ Further, he criticizes Hintikka's understanding of Socrates according to whom *elenchus* does not require any substantive knowledge and presuppositions. Archie nicely shows how Socrates skilfully uses his knowledge of the interlocutors during the confutation of his partners (pp. 26-27).

The third chapter brings out two modern themes anticipated in the dialogue: feminism and multiculturalism (p. 35 ff.). This is a bold claim and I am afraid that Archie actually properly addresses only the first of these two topics. After yet another recapitulation of older interpretations, Archie uses Steven Forde's text as a bridge to the topic of women in the so-called Spartan and Persian speech in the dialogue (*Alc. I.*, 121a-124b).⁶ He argues that the presence of women shows their civilizing role and feminine moral sense rooted in intimacy and caring (p. 47).

The fourth chapter further develops the feminist interpretation of the dialogue and investigates the role of women in the dialogue (p. 55 ff.). This chapter is a welcome contribution to literature on gender aspects in Plato's dialogues which so far focused mainly on women in the *Republic*, Diotima in the *Symposium*, and Aspasia in the *Menexenus*. When reading the Spartan and Persian speeches one cannot resist to link the increased occurrence of feminine topics with ancient tradition of Alcibiades' own femininity so that the remarks concerning fashion and expenditures are appeals on Alcibiades's vanity.⁷ Moreover, these mentioned women, mothers, are introduced as only caring and worrying about their sons. Archie is definitely right that the gender issue is a very important feature of these speeches, but I am just not sure whether to call it a 'feminist mode of thought' (p. 46).

5 Archie is right to emphasize the importance of the reader, however I think he fails to recognize the importance of the author. His interpretation does not focus on the possible intentions of the author, which might be justified (if explained and discussed). Yet, treating the dialogue as a dramatic whole without considering that this dramatic whole was written by someone who most probably holds some ideas of his own seems to be problematic. One interesting exception is Archie's remark that 'Plato typically manages to have the interaction of the interlocutors in the dialogues somehow mirror the very topic under discussion' (p. 20).

6 S. Forde, 'On the Alcibiades Major', in T. Pangle, ed., *The Roots of Political Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), pp. 222-39.

7 Cf. D. Gribble, *Alcibiades and Athens* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 69-82.