

Socrates and Alcibiades: Plato's Drama of Political Ambition and Philosophy.
By Ariel Helfer. Philadelphia PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017.
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Although determination, perseverance, and high expectations appear to be laudable characteristics within our society, ambition seems to carry a hint of selfishness or self-promotion (perhaps especially at the cost of others). One can speak of the goals or aims of a team or group, but it seems more characteristic to ascribe ambition to a single individual. Etymologically, ambition derives from the Latin word *ambire*, which can mean to strive or go around (*ambo + ire*), but the term also characterizes one who canvasses for votes. It may also be telling that the Latin noun for canvassing (*ambitio*) is only two letters removed for the Latin term for election fraud (*ambitus*).

It is thus welcome that in his *Socrates and Alcibiades* Ariel Helfer seeks to examine the notion of political ambition through a study of Plato's dialogues concerning that most ambitious of Athenians, Alcibiades, an Athenian general who seems to have epitomized both the German word *Wunderkind* and the French phrase *enfant terrible* in his short life. It was one that included leading, betraying, and then leading again the Athenian army and navy during the Peloponnesian Wars. Helfer examines the three dialogues of Plato that include Alcibiades as an interlocutor: *First Alcibiades*, *Second Alcibiades*, and the *Symposium*. He does so (in his words) "to gain a fuller understanding of the constellation of desires that gives political ambition its force, including the desire to be devoted to a noble cause, and to determine whether, in Plato's understanding, these desires necessarily find their fullest expression in political life" (p. 7).

The result is a very detailed study (in places a line-by-line paraphrase of the text with commentary and even diagrams) of the dialogues *First Alcibiades* (two chapters) and *Second Alcibiades* (one chapter), plus a chapter-length analysis of Alcibiades's speech in the *Symposium*. An introductory chapter and a conclusion frame the whole. Both are written primarily for an audience of political theorists or philosophers rather than for classicists or philologists. Thus, for instance, Helfer largely side-steps the philological challenges to the authenticity of the *First* and *Second Alcibiades*, although it is hard to imagine one devoting a doctoral dissertation, which is the original form of this book, to them unless one were convinced of their authenticity.

Hermeneutically Helfer is sensitive to the dramatic side of Plato's work, although (thankfully) he does not feel the need for a strenuous defense of his methodology. Scholarly engagement is largely consigned to endnotes. His main interlocutors appear to be Straussian scholars such as Robert Faulkner and Christopher Bruell, but that may be a function of the fact that it is largely "political" interpreters who have focused on the *First* and *Second Alcibiades* (although such is less the case for the *Symposium*).

Helfer's focus on individual trees (if not individual branches and leaves) within the forest of Plato's Alcibiades dialogues makes it difficult to identify general conclusions of his analysis since one of the strengths of the volume is the light that it sheds on the interpretation of specific passages and arguments within those dialogues. In his conclusion Helfer notes that "the difficulties in clarifying the Platonic understanding of political ambition are exacerbated by the fact that there is no explicit treatment of *philotimia* or any other word that might be translated as *ambition* in the discussions between Socrates and Alcibiades" (p. 177).

Instead, Helfer surveys the various strands that have emerged in his analyses—namely, desire for renown, love of power, love of honor, desire for being a benefactor or possessing the

greatest goods. Taken together, he thinks, they constitute Plato's view of political ambition. The book remains focused on interpreting those components based on the various passages already analyzed, but it fails to rise from interpreting political ambition in Plato's dialogues to an analysis of the phenomenon of political ambition itself. Indeed, although the book began by lamenting the lack of serious analysis of political ambition in our modern world, I do not see that the book succeeds in passing from an analysis of dialogues concerned with political ambition to a reflection on the nature of ambition itself.

Such a result has its pros and cons. Those interested in interpreting Plato's dialogues may applaud the book's resolute focus. Although the book gestures towards the differences between ambition within the Socratic cosmos and in our own, it spends very little time analyzing the latter case, aside from occasional references to how a Hobbes or Locke might view political honor.

I am struck by one apparently lost opportunity of Helfer's analysis. When Socrates considers (in the *First Alcibiades*) why he remains a suitor of Alcibiades, he asks him "what then is your hope in life (ποτε ἐλπίδι ζῆς [*Alcibiades* 105a6–7])?" Socrates goes on to tell the teenager Alcibiades that his "hope" lies not only in eclipsing the likes of Pericles in Athens but also in eclipsing the accomplishments of a Cyrus and Xerxes in the world beyond Athens. Socrates reiterates: "I'm not guessing that this is your hope (τὴν ἐλπίδα [105c6, cf. 105e2])—I'm sure of it." Plato's Greek term here is ἐλπίς, a word usually rendered by "hope" or "expectation," and its reiteration three times within a single Stephanus page suggests that it is an important facet of the character Alcibiades. It is also the word for what Hesiod famously claimed Pandora never released from her jar (*Works and Days* 96) and what Aeschylus has Prometheus claim that he has implanted within humans as perhaps more important than fire (*Prometheus Bound* 250). ἐλπίς is also what Thucydides has the Melians claim to be the basis of their refusal to join the Delian League during their debate with the Athenians (*History of the Peloponnesian War* 5.104–05). Although Helfer retains the term "hope" in his paraphrase of these passages (e.g., pp. 28, 29), in the same breath he also seems to describe it as ambition. Although Helfer concedes that Plato never explicitly thematizes political ambition in the *First Alcibiades* (as noted, he points out that one possible Greek term for ambition [φιλοτιμία] occurs only once in the dialogue [p. 58; cf. 177]), I think it is a lost opportunity to consider whether our word for ambition even maps on to what Plato analyzes in the *Alcibiades* dialogues. To me, the word "ambition" captures the drive of one who proverbially will crawl over broken glass (or others) to get what he or she wants. As I noted at the outset of my review, the Latin word *ambitio* captures this insofar as it construes ambition as the quality of one who canvasses and electioneers on his or her own behalf.

But is "ambition" in this sense really an accurate description of Alcibiades? Although Plato and Thucydides clearly depict Alcibiades as someone with extraordinary expectations about what he hopes to accomplish, he also seems to be one who thinks that he does not have to work too hard to achieve such accomplishments. Indeed, Socrates repeatedly criticizes him in *First Alcibiades* for underestimating how much work, self-care, and education is necessary for him to reach his goals. No doubt, our English term "ambition" includes the notions of high expectations, but I think that it includes a notion of self-promotion and selfish work on one's own behalf that seems lacking from the character of Alcibiades (and certainly is missing from the Greek term ἐλπίς). I do not think that this point undermines Helfer's able analysis of the Platonic texts dealing with Alcibiades, but it seems a lost opportunity that his book fails to reflect on the range of possible Greek terms for the English word that provides both the subject and the title for his book.