Booknotes

That Socrates and Alcibiades were close intellectually, emotionally, morally and even physically is well known. Even a cursory reading of *Symposium* assures us of all of that. And lurking in the background is Alcibiades scandalous behaviour – or his 'infinite malleability', if one were being more kind. To what extent was his connexion with Socrates part of the cause of his corruption, if that is what it was? And then, without coming to a conclusion there, surely Alcibiades's behaviour was in the minds of those who later condemned Socrates for corrupting the youth of Athens.

Ariel Helfer in *Socrates and Alcibiades: Plato's Drama of Political Ambition and Philosophy* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017) attempts to probe these questions, the emphasis perhaps being on attempts, because some of them may be unanswerable, certainly on the evidence we have from *Symposium* and also, as Helfer shows, from the two *Alcibiades* dialogues, in which the very young (20 year old?) Alcibiades is represented as being instructed in philosophy and politics by Socrates. Of course, as Helfer admits, these dialogues are often rejected as not being by Plato. However, whether canonical or not, themes do emerge from them which are relevant to our questions.

In particular what emerges from the first *Alcibiades* is a strong sense that the views of the Athenian people or demos are not truly good or noble, while in the second Socrates is diverting Alcibiades from his intention to pray to the gods (the gods of Athens). At the very least, if the dialogues were canonical and did indeed represent the direction of Socrates's teaching in them we would have the basis of a case for Socrates as impious and, from the Athenian point of view, a corrupter of the young. The first of these themes also poses a dilemma for Alcibiades's political ambition. For it, as he surely does, he wants to rule the Athenians and rule comes from persuading the demos and that demos is unwise, to get himself accepted as a leader he will have to use rhetorical devices or arguments that will persuade a people who cannot recognise the truly good. He will, therefore, in his dealings with the demos have to close his own eyes to what he knows is true. This, in turn, means that he will have turn away from the Socratic philosophy, the very philosophy which has shown him the invalidity of the demotic opinions.

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Helfer exonerates Alcibiades from the charge of tyranny and even from the desire to make himself a tyrant, and maybe there are altruistic intentions underpinning his desire to rule. But that desire is there, and in the end it overcomes his commitment to anything like a philosophic life. In *Symposium*, though, Alcibiades has stated that Socrates's speeches moved him to tears, that they convinced him of the paltriness of ordinary life and of the worthlessness of the opinions of the many. Socrates is a siren, there is a Bacchic frenzy about philosophy, being with Socrates is like being bitten by a viper, but in the heart or soul. Socrates is a Marsyas (who, of course, challenged Apollo), but he bewitches not through the flute or aulos, but through his words.

Symposium perhaps leaves open the extent to which we are to take all this talk of divine madness seriously – Alcibiades is drunk when he enters, after all. Also, even more frustrating, Alcibiades never tells us in any detail just what the Socratic teaching was. Helfer, though, constructs an interpretation whereby Socrates, in adopting Alcibiades as a pupil, his favourite pupil indeed, is hoping to see in the eyes of Alcibiades the reflection of himself and his own teaching, and might thus come to know himself and his teaching as the oracle of Apollo commanded. But if this is what he intended, he was doomed to fail. Alcibiades chose the political life over the philosophic, and even if he was not tyrannical, he lacked prudence, a central philosophic virtue.

Reading Helfer's fascinating study of Alcibiades and Socrates, one is left with two troubling questions. Does philosophy, or philosophy conducted in a Socratic spirit, lead to a contempt for the opinions of the demos, of the many? Socrates certainly seems to have succeeded with Alcibiades in convincing him on that point. But, Alcibiades's own protestations notwithstanding, he did not succeed on convincing him that philosophy really is the highest life. So is there in the story of Alcibiades and Socrates an implicit refutation of that thought – if Socrates could not convince his best pupil of its truth?

Socrates was put to death for reasons not unconnected with his philosophical thought and practice. James Tooley was not put to death, but, as he tells us in *Imprisoned in India: Corruption and Extortion in the World's Largest Democracy* (Biteback, 2016) in 2014 he was imprisoned and badly harassed, nearly driven out of his mind, in fact, for reasons not unconnected with his philosophical views. Tooley's name will perhaps not be familiar to many in the philosophical world, which is a pity, because he is a philosopher and, as we will see, he is arguably one of the most influential philosophers in the world.

His particular philosophical niche is in philosophy of education and his philosophy of education tells him that the less the state involves itself in education the better. This is partly because of a deep suspicion of state directed education – a suspicion which finds eloquent expression in J.S. Mill ('a general State education is a mere contrivance for moulding all people to be exactly like one another… (and) in proportion as it is efficient and successful, it establishes a despotism over the mind, leading by natural tendency to one over the body').

Tooley shares Mill's worry about the despotism inherent in anything like a national curriculum or a state monopoly in educational provision, but it would be fair to say that he is even more worried, as things are, by the inefficiency, corruption even at times, of state run systems of education, and the scandalous way they let down the poorest and least advantaged in society. But in pursuing his research into what might be called the applied philosophy of education, he discovered a myriad of little schools in the poorest parts of the world, in India, in Africa, East and West, and in China, schools set up on their own initiative by parents and others despairing of the sheer uselessness and worse of what the state provides for them and their children. Rather than simply acquiescing in the status quo, all over the world groups of parents and teachers have been setting up their own schools for the children so let down by the state.

Tooley has scoured some of the most deprived parts of the world unearthing such independent schools, discovering that they often flourish in the worst of circumstances and outperform their state funded and sponsored competitors. This research has had a considerable and disturbing impact in educational circles, one consequence of which has been to cast doubt on official statistics on education from both state and NGO agencies – which often refuse to count or even admit the existence of these free schools. This is no doubt in part because of the unsettling effect admitting them and their quality would have on the state and NGO bureaucracies whose natural instinct is to dislike genuinely private or 'little platoon' initiatives, and to want to squeeze them out.

Tooley has not only researched into this area of education, he has also encouraged and supported initiatives of the sort he has been studying. And it was as an indirect result of this altruistic activity on his part that in 2014 he found himself in prison in Hyderabad. An educational trust he had helped set up in 2002 had been accused of some technical currency offence. This offence was said to have occurred after he had ceased any direct role in the trust; and he had also had legal advice to the effect that the matter had all

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been cleared up in 2012 in any case. Nevertheless in 2014, when he returned to Hyderabad he was arrested and thrown into prison. He then entered a truly Kafkaesque world of the Indian 'undertrials', that is people in prison who had not been convicted, and in many cases not even charged, but who were there because they had not been able to raise the bail or bribes necessary to extricate themselves from their predicament. For it quickly became clear that what Tooley needed to do to get free and have his passport returned so that he could leave India to return to his Northumberland cottage and Newcastle chair, was to pay a hefty bribe to the investigating police officer. In contrast to the police and lawyers he encountered during this period, Tooley found his fellow undertrial inmates amazingly kind and helpful, especially given the lack of hope many of them had in their situation.

What he had unwittingly stumbled on was a major human rights abuse: 'two out of every three people incarcerated in India (that is, on 2011 figures, 241,200 out of 369,792) have not been convicted of any crime; many will not even have been charged. They are imprisoned while they are under investigation, too poor to furnish bail. Most horribly, many of these people are there because of police corruption itself'. Tooley writes that on 2011 figures over 30,000 people remain in this undertrial situation for more than a year, nearly 8,000 for 3 to five years, and nearly 1500 for more than five years – in many cases for longer periods than the sentences they would be awarded were they found guilty. The police corruption point is particularly striking. It seems that many of the investigating officers have bribed to get where they are in the system, and need bribes themselves from those they can to terrorise to pay off their own debts of status, so to speak. And it seems that consular officials are unwilling to get involved in cases of this sort, because they appear to be following due process. In Tooley's view 'appear'.

After nightmarish dealings with courts, lawyers and police Tooley did manage to extricate himself from his situation, and he is back on his road, investigating and championing free schools all over the world. But, as a result of his Hyderabad experience, he has clearly found a new cause to champion: the fight against corruption and extortion in the world's largest democracy, as the subtitle of his book has it. From a philosophical point of view this new cause is not especially problematic, but Tooley's story as a whole does show that pursuing one's philosophical conclusions fearlessly may put one into far more severe conflict with authority than one might suppose were one's horizons limited to protest in western liberal democracy. He also shows how increasing discretion in a legal system and how a

plethora of incomprehensible and complicated laws both contrive to make corruption on the part of police and officials easy and all too tempting. And his book is a vivid illustration of St Augustine's observation 1600 years ago: 'Remove justice, and what are kingdoms but gangs of criminals on a large scale?'

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