The Soul as the True Self
Plato

Alcibiades I

SOCRATES: And is self-knowledge such an easy thing, and was he to be lightly esteemed who inscribed the text on the temple at Delphi? Or is self-knowledge a difficult thing, which few are able to attain?

ALCIBIADES: At times I fancy, Socrates, that anybody can know himself; at other times the task appears to be very difficult.

SOCRATES: But whether easy or difficult, Alcibiades, still there is no other way; knowing what we are, we shall know how to take care of ourselves, and if we are ignorant we shall not know.

ALCIBIADES: That is true.

SOCRATES: Well, then, let us see in what way the self-existent can be discovered by us; that will give us a chance of discovering our own existence, which otherwise we can never know.

ALCIBIADES: You say truly.

SOCRATES: Come, now, I beseech you, tell me with whom you are conversing?

• with whom but with me?

ALCIBIADES: Yes.

SOCRATES: As I am, with you?

ALCIBIADES: Yes.

SOCRATES: That is to say, I, Socrates, am talking?

ALCIBIADES: Yes.

SOCRATES: And Alcibiades is my hearer?

ALCIBIADES: Yes.

SOCRATES: And I in talking use words?

ALCIBIADES: Certainly.

SOCRATES: And talking and using words have, I suppose, the same meaning?

ALCIBIADES: To be sure.

SOCRATES: And the user is not the same as the thing which he uses?

ALCIBIADES: What do you mean?

SOCRATES: I will explain; the shoemaker, for example, uses a square tool, and a circular tool, and other tools for cutting?

ALCIBIADES: Yes.

SOCRATES: But the tool is not the same as the cutter and user of the tool?

ALCIBIADES: Of course not.

SOCRATES: And in the same way the instrument of the harper is to be distinguished from the harper himself?

ALCIBIADES: It is.

SOCRATES: Now the question which I asked was whether you conceive the user to be always different from that which he uses?
ALCIBIADES: I do.
SOCRATES: Then what shall we say of the shoemaker? Does he cut with his tools only or with his hands?
ALCIBIADES: With his hands as well.
SOCRATES: He uses his hands too?
ALCIBIADES: Yes.
SOCRATES: And does he use his eyes in cutting leather?
ALCIBIADES: He does.
SOCRATES: And we admit that the user is not the same with the things which he uses?
ALCIBIADES: Yes.
SOCRATES: Then the shoemaker and the harper are to be distinguished from the hands and feet which they use?
ALCIBIADES: Clearly.
SOCRATES: And does not a man use the whole body?
ALCIBIADES: Certainly.
SOCRATES: And that which uses is different from that which is used?
ALCIBIADES: True.
SOCRATES: Then a man is not the same as his own body?
ALCIBIADES: That is the inference.
SOCRATES: What is he, then?
ALCIBIADES: I cannot say.
SOCRATES: Nay, you can say that he is the user of the body.
ALCIBIADES: Yes.
SOCRATES: And the user of the body is the soul?
ALCIBIADES: Yes, the soul.
SOCRATES: And the soul rules?
ALCIBIADES: Yes.
SOCRATES: Let me make an assertion which will, I think, be universally admitted.
ALCIBIADES: What is it?
SOCRATES: That man is one of three things.
ALCIBIADES: What are they?
SOCRATES: Soul, body, or both together forming a whole.
ALCIBIADES: Certainly.
SOCRATES: But did we not say that the actual ruling principle of the body is man?
ALCIBIADES: Yes, we did.
SOCRATES: And does the body rule over itself?
ALCIBIADES: Certainly not.
SOCRATES: It is subject, as we were saying?
ALCIBIADES: Yes.
SOCRATES: Then that is not the principle which we are seeking?
ALCIBIADES: It would seem not.
SOCRATES: But may we say that the union of the two rules over the body, and consequently that this is man?
ALCIBIADES: Very likely.
SOCRATES: The most unlikely of all things; for if one of the members is subject, the two united cannot possibly rule.
ALCIBIADES: True.
SOCRATES: But since neither the body, nor the union of the two, is man, either man has no real existence, or the soul is man?
ALCIBIADES: Just so.
SOCRATES: Is anything more required to prove that the soul is man?
ALCIBIADES: Certainly not; the proof is, I think, quite sufficient.
SOCRATES: And if the proof, although not perfect, be sufficient, we shall be satisfied;--
more precise proof will be supplied when we have discovered that which we were led to omit, from a fear that the enquiry would be too much protracted.

ALCIBIADES: What was that?

SOCRATES: What I meant, when I said that absolute existence must be first considered; but now, instead of absolute existence, we have been considering the nature of individual existence, and this may, perhaps, be sufficient; for surely there is nothing which may be called more properly ourselves than the soul?

ALCIBIADES: There is nothing.

SOCRATES: Then we may truly conceive that you and I are conversing with one another, soul to soul?

ALCIBIADES: Very true.

SOCRATES: And that is just what I was saying before—that I, Socrates, am not arguing or talking with the face of Alcibiades, but with the real Alcibiades; or in other words, with his soul.