

# The Blurred Multiverse, or Whether Plato's *Alcibiades-1* Provides Clues for Reasoning on Morality

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*Plato's Alcibiades-1 is being researched in order to illustrate the difficulty of defining good and just actions, especially in the context of existence of ideal and real worlds. The concept of common moral values is questioned, as decision-making often involves ethical dilemmas. The principle of double effect (allowing base consequence for good purpose) is discussed and questioned in more complex situations. The aforementioned problems are discussed in their interaction. The article challenges simplistic justifications for war and emphasizes the need for critical reflection on the morality of conflict. Philosophers like Heraclitus saw war as a necessary part of progress. Hobbes viewed a state of nature as constant war of all against all, driven by self-interest. Hegel considered war a necessary evil and a catalyst for change. In a result, the text acknowledges the positive outcomes of some wars, like the Paralympics emerging from World War II. This is presented as a rare example of positive outcomes from war. However, current armed conflicts underscore the moral complexities and human costs of wars. The article concludes by referencing Plato's view that knowledge of good resides within us, questioning how AI can be programmed with the values we have not fully grasped ourselves. The text argues that any conflict, even internal and emotional, is a complex ethical issue with no straightforward solutions. It highlights the ambiguity of ethical conflicts and immense human costs associated with war, prompting reflection on the true purpose of moral values and existence of multiverse within us.*

Keywords: moral values, necessary evil, artificial intelligence, multiverse problem, ethical cognition.

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## **Introduction.**

### **Whether There Is Any Justification of Base Things**

Heraclitus claimed that conflict, being a state of flux, was essential to the overall progress and development of humankind. For him, life was a process of constant change. Later, in the course of centuries, Thomas Hobbes was one of the most ardent proponents of essential place of war in social interactions. He famously described the *state of nature* as a condition of constant war, where life is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short. However, Hobbes's understanding of war was not restricted to traditional armed conflict. He defines it as a state of constant fear and uncertainty, where individuals are driven by their own self-interest and lack of trust in others.

In further development, Hegel, one of the greatest and most obscure thinkers, was notoriously aware of the intrinsic role of war in historical development as well as in the formation of national identity. Having examined the Holy Roman Empire and French incursion into German territory, Hegel, as a continuation of the aforementioned view, evolved a dialectical understanding of conflict as a presumably necessary stage in the progress of states and in the progression of history (Tyler, 2004). Hegel saw war as a *necessary evil*, a dialectical contradiction inherent in the nature of states. Hegel saw war as a tragic but necessary part of the dialectical process of history that can serve as a catalyst for change, forcing nations to confront their limitations and weaknesses, leading to self-reflection and eventual progress. Although Hegel's philosophy of war offers a complex and provocative perspective on the nature of conflict and its role in human history, war is rarely considered to be a justified phenomenon. Consequently, the idea of moral war is rejected by some scholars.

However, as it can be seen from historic evidence, the Second World War contributed significantly to the Paralympic sports. In its own turn, this evolved in the growing importance of the concept of inclusivity in general. Such are the premises on war of the greatest thinkers to start with the discussion on moral values that are intrinsic to human's nature. This is sometimes represented by the *multiverse problem* (Leslie, 1996). The book shows a "doomsday" scenario in which humanity is imminently extinguished. According to this interpretation, our universe is one among a vast number of alternative universes, all of them either interacting in a certain way or not (in the quantum multiverse different universes don't communicate, in the inflationary multiverse they do (Susskind, 2005: 317)). In fact, this was the difference between view of Socrates and that of Alcibiades, and they *do* communicate. On the other hand, many people live in their rabbit's holes, only the bravest ones face the reality, and they *do not* communicate. From the perspective of the quantum multiverse as a whole, the mind is a pervasive ordering principle, and common moral values might be one of its aspects. But multiverse, conceived in physical terms, leaves unresolved a fundamental question of why there are common moral values.

Eloquent all that may sound but the first Ukrainian translation of Plato's *Alcibiades'1* as well as Proclus' *Commentary* on it would have been already published had Russia not started the full-scale war with Ukraine. It is more than evident that this very fact can hardly be ascribed to any other kind of progress that is not related to the development of a variety of warfare tools. This is why, seen in a broader perspective, it has become a more complex task to find appropriate justification to the act of war in general unless an attacking side intends to induce erroneous conjectures regarding its true intentions. A more profound look at the history of thought might help us go deeper into the controversial issue of the relation

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between good and evil and find the application of the ideas of Plato to modern developments in technology.

## 1. Origins of Moral Values

It is rather questionable whether discerning of what is correct and wrong can be ascribed to any sort of empiric knowledge exclusively. This is why so-called *ethical values* help us provide more or less feasible answer to the dilemma. These and alike questions have been puzzling prominent thinkers since the beginnings of European civilization. Heraclitus' opponent, Parmenides, denied the concept of movement in general, i.e. the role of war in the process of development of the society. Such polarized opinions contributed to triggering Plato's attempt at clarifying the controversy. The issue has been addressed and vividly represented in his *Alcibiades I*. There are questions on the authenticity of the dialogue (Bos, 1992), but it seems impossible to separate the genuine writings of Plato from spurious by any exact line (Westerink, 1956).

However, regardless of the significant age of the question, the final answer has not yet been provided. Plato, as usually in his works, never gives the answer. It seems to be particularly logical in this question, since there is no one definite answer for each particular case. Rather, it is essential to apply critical thinking for each particular situation. Astonishingly, this uncertainty evolves into unresolved issues in today's development of self-driving vehicles, and not only. But let the matter be discussed from the very beginning, lest something essential should escape our attention. To start with, Plato's reasoning proceeds as follows.

(110c)

**Socrates**

So you thought you knew, even as a child, it seems, what was just and unjust.

**Alcibiades**

I did; and I knew too.

**Socrates**

At what sort of time did you discover it? For surely it was not while you thought you knew.

**Alcibiades**

No, indeed.

**Socrates**

Then when did you think you were ignorant? Consider; I believe you will fail to find such a time.

**Alcibiades**

Upon my word, Socrates, I really cannot say.

**Socrates**

So you do not know it by discovery.

**Alcibiades**

Not at all, apparently.

**Socrates**

But you said just now that you did not know it by learning either; and if you neither discovered nor learnt it, how do you come to know it, and whence?

**Alcibiades**

Well, perhaps that answer I gave you was not correct, that I knew it by my own discovery.

**Socrates**

Then how was it done?

### **Alcibiades**

I learnt it, I suppose, in the same way as everyone else.

### **Socrates**

Back we come to the same argument. From whom? Please tell me.

(110 d)

The text is quoted by Benjamin Jowett's translation (Plato, 2008). This is how Socrates employs his well-known method of inquiry to progressively refine the definition of goodness, ultimately demonstrating the equivalence of virtue and knowledge. This method exposes not the presence of sin but rather the extent of one's ignorance. This is why the initial step towards enlightenment is the acknowledgment of one's limitations, even in the most mundane matters. Recognizing one's ignorance is a prerequisite for attaining virtue and wisdom, as it necessitates a prior confrontation with error. Similarly, the initial step to fixing the problem is recognizing it.

Alcibiades, a young man with an inflated self-image and grandiose ambitions, is on the cusp of entering public life. Socrates, a perceptive observer of human nature, exposes the flaws in Alcibiades' aspirations. The crux of the issue lies in Alcibiades' intention to persuade the Athenians on matters of war and peace. However, such decisions necessitate a profound understanding of justice and injustice. This is why Socrates challenges Alcibiades to explain the source of his knowledge, namely whether he acquired it through formal education or through independent inquiry. Alcibiades admits to neither, claiming instead to have learned from the multitude. Socrates counters this assertion, arguing that while the multitude can teach language, they cannot impart knowledge of complex moral concepts like justice. By his own admission, Alcibiades is thus exposed as lacking the requisite understanding to effectively guide the Athenian people.

As it can be seen, Alcibiades is unable to provide any sustainable answer to the question. Neither learning, nor discovery can supply any feasible explanation. The statement that such things can be learned *from many*, such as language, is rejected by Socrates since many are unable to be competent teachers. To some extent, the just and unjust things they speak about, can be referred to as so-called "common values", i.e. beliefs or principles that are widely shared within a particular group or society. They are often considered important and guide people's behavior, decisions, and interactions. Common values, as we mutually recognize, are by definition shared by all humans in the context of development of European so-called *Four ages of understanding* (Deely, 2001). Despite the fact that these values can vary depending on factors such as culture, religion, education, and personal experiences, they are shared by humans, and *justice* is listed among them. Generally speaking, these are the things, the origins of which Alcibiades is unsure of. Socrates, as portrayed in his dialogues, is depicted as a figure who, despite professing ignorance, can discern the false pretense of knowledge in others.

Consequently, he posits that the concept of goodness can be refined through a series of interrogative processes, ultimately revealing virtue as synonymous with knowledge. In this and other philosophical inquiries, Socrates seeks to illuminate ignorance rather than sin. Acknowledging one's ignorance is the initial step towards acquiring knowledge, even of the most mundane matters. Individuals are often unaware of the extent of their ignorance, and true virtue and wisdom can only be attained through the recognition of one's errors.

Surprisingly, the problem of the origin of knowledge has become even more exacerbated in the age of artificial intelligence. So-called "Black box" problem points at the inability to explain the AI's process of decision-making. Deciding is easy, while explaining is not,

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since it is not known where it was learned, when or how. “It’s not that you forgot. It’s that you’ve lost track of which inputs taught you what and all you’re left with the judgments”, says associate professor of Electrical and Computer Engineering, Samir Rawashdesh, who specializes in artificial intelligence (Rawashdesh, 2024).

## 2. The Inherent Presence of Moral Values

Plato, being really profound thinker, does not stop on this. Proceeding further, he sets the question in this way:

(115a)

**Socrates**

... Now tell me, do you consider some just things to be expedient, and others not?

**Alcibiades**

Yes.

**Socrates**

And again, some noble, and some not?

**Alcibiades**

What do you mean by that question?

**Socrates**

I would ask whether anyone ever seemed to you to be doing what was base and yet just.

**Alcibiades**

Never.

**Socrates**

Well, are all just things noble?

**Alcibiades**

Yes.

**Socrates**

And what of noble things, in their turn? Are they all good, or some only, while others are not?

**Alcibiades**

In my opinion, Socrates, some noble things are evil.

**Socrates**

And some base things are good?

**Alcibiades**

Yes.

(115 b)

(Plato, 2008)

The controversy that arises here is apparent and goes in accord with the *multiverse problem*. By the anthropic principle, it is to be expected that we find ourselves in a place where those things are favorable to our existence (Tegmark, 2003). As we may see, with things getting more and more complex in real life, the notion of decision-making becomes harder to describe. This is why the boundary between correct versus wrong decision has become even more elusive and difficult to grasp. Sometimes, as Socrates suggests, even base things can be good, as it is proved by the aforementioned example of Paralympic sports. The last reasoning presupposes that there can be an action which is really contradictory in its essence. Intriguing and paradoxical may it sound, the boundary between good and evil things is rather flimsy. Of course, this issue did not escape attention of prominent thinkers of upcoming generations. St. Thomas Aquinas developed doctrine, or principle of so-called *double effect*, in his “*Summa Theologiae*”, II-II, 64, 7.

Thinkers of different ages have been taking attempts at clarifying the difficulty, and here, it would be highly expedient to consider the way of reasoning of Thomas Aquinas (Aquinas, 2019). As Aquinas observes, the permissibility of self-defense is not unconditional: "And yet, though proceeding from a good intention, an act may be rendered unlawful if it is out of proportion to the end. Wherefore, if a man in self-defense uses more than necessary violence, it will be unlawful, whereas, if he repels force with moderation, his defense will be lawful." (Aquinas, 2017) The passage can be interpreted as formulating a prohibition on apportioning one's efforts with killing as the goal guiding one's actions, which would lead one to act with greater viciousness than pursuing the goal of self-defense would require.

*The New Catholic Encyclopedia* provides four conditions for the application of the principle of double effect: 1) The act itself must be morally good or at least indifferent. 2) The agent may not positively will the bad effect but may permit it. If he could attain the good effect without the bad effect he should do so. The bad effect is sometimes said to be indirectly voluntary. 3) The good effect must flow from the action at least as immediately (in the order of causality, though not necessarily in the order of time) as the bad effect. In other words, the good effect must be produced directly by the action, not by the bad effect. Otherwise the agent would be using a bad means to a good end, which is never allowed. 4) The good effect must be sufficiently desirable to compensate for the allowing of the bad effect. However, the definitions, as it can be seen by the vocabulary being used, are rather vague and underdefined.

Sometimes, it is suggested that this principle be explained by individual approach since it might be assumed that such decisions are inherently personal. But some thinkers suggest that there is no such thing as personality. Misinterpreted indeed, it often has been (Wollard, 2023), but the principle of double effect is sometimes represented by the so-called *trolley problem*. It is frequently invoked to explain the permissibility of an action that causes a serious harm, such as the death of a human being, as a side effect of promoting some good (Mc Intyre, 2023). The trolley is running down the railway tracks uncontrollably at lethal speed. On its way down the track there five people tied up and unable to move. The trolley is moving to run over them. You are an accidental onlooker standing beside a railway line. There is a lever next to you. If you pull this lever, the trolley will change the direction of the trolley to a different track. However, there is one person on that track.

While it seems reasonable to sacrifice only one person instead of five, still it seems that this type of thinking tends to resemble so-called *linear* approach, which has little to no application in reality. One of the most prominent war theorists, Carl Clausewitz, writes in his "On War": "Kind-hearted people might think that there was some ingenious way to disarm or defeat an enemy without too much bloodshed and might imagine this is the true goal of the art of war. Pleasant as it sounds, this is a fallacy that must be exposed" (Clausewitz, 1976). All the aforementioned quotations question the basic definition of deontology, namely whether ethical rules are fixed or not. It is rather clear fact that humanity shares so-called *common moral values*, but whether these rules or regulations clearly established, still remains profound question. Achieving justice is not enough, the aftermath of any conflict is also supposed to be sufficiently tolerable if the conflict is to be proportionate, all things considered. It is an open question how far into the future we have to look to assess the morally relevant consequences of different conflicts. As a result, as some scholars argue, killing in war is justified by the *protection* of individual rights (Lazar, 2020). This is how the *trolley problem* has no feasible straightforward solution.

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### 3. The Still-Pending Question

However, the statement might be questioned again by a variety of factors. One of them is the fact that the notion of protection can be understood differently. Basically, it refers to manipulating others in order to shape their opinions and actions, e.g. shaping an adversary with targeted rhetoric and information operations in such a way that the adversary voluntarily takes the actions that are advantageous to the other part of the conflict. This is what Vladimir Lefebvre, a mathematical psychologist at the University of California, defined as the process of transferring the reasons of making a decision to an adversary via provocations, lies and the creation of false objects of any type (Stepanenko, 2024). Lefebvre is famous for creating a mathematical theory of so-called *ethical cognition*. In its simplified overview, the theory considers a three-level structure: the person, the person's perception, and the person's perception of the communication partner. The theory and the approach to understanding the partner was and is still used in negotiations by American officials. Another aspect of the theory presupposes so-called *reflexive control*, which is a key element in manipulating decision-making of the opponent. This is a key element in a hybrid warfare toolkit that relies on shaping an adversary with targeted rhetoric and operations that results in taking advantageous decisions. Such means are clearly seen in the strategy used by Russia in its hybrid warfare against the West. In the further development, Russian officials stated that they have set a goal of involving 500 thousand foreign students to study in Russia every year. This is clearly seen as a one of many goals of its long grinding war of attrition in Ukraine.

It is evident that almost every country in the world either has or had a historical basis to claim rights to at least some or all of the territory of its neighbors. But the world avoids a sort of Hobbesian war of "all against all" by rejecting the validity of such arguments. The pretense on reclaiming the territory of the former Soviet Union is as non-realistic as reclaiming the Holy Roman Empire. However, Russia portrays itself as underdog facing the West, a much larger and more powerful opponent, which potentially enables her to resort to its whole strength, meaning nukes. Such considerations may seem logical but certainly not rational, since they are divorced from actual reality. The West naturally and understandably gravitates toward peace, its default instinct being to seize the first opportunity in any conflict to "stop the fighting." This is how Russia is hijacking and substituting the key concepts, while the West opposes it by sending weaponry to Ukraine. This comes as an example of Alcibiades' puzzle about what is good, and that of some base things being good, as well as the decision of what to sacrifice – either Ukraine or Peace, while subduing to Russia's demands.

### 4. Possible Development

To continue with, it is worth mentioning that Leibniz believed that for every truth, there must be a reason why it is exactly so and not otherwise; and for each and every single thing, there must be a reason for that thing's existence. This is what Leibniz called the "Principle of Sufficient Reason". And if this principle is valid, there must be an explanation for the existence of base things which are still good, despite of their being base (Holt, 2012). Whether it can be justified or not, this might be referred to so-called *justified true belief*, but the question was discussed earlier (Sodomora, 2022).

However, the problem with the scientific explanation of the permissibility of the base things would seem to be as it follows. The nature of the question comprises everything that is related to morality. A scientific explanation must involve some sort of moral background. But any moral background is by definition part of the nature of the question to be explained.

Thus, any purely scientific explanation of the permissibility of the base things is doomed to be circular, i.e. it features no feasible background in order to be explained.

In theory, on the one hand, base things, like in the *trolley problem*, can be justified as well as implemented in practice. On the other hand, the likelihood of success from such means is almost always overestimated, and the unintended consequences of such actions are often overlooked. Controversies of the kind, as it can be exemplified, arise in the discussion on combatants and noncombatants. Individual human beings, to start with, enjoy fundamental rights to life and liberty, which prohibit others from harming them in certain ways. Since fighting wars obviously involves depriving others of life and liberty, it can be permissible only if each of the victims has surrendered or lost his rights to liberty. This is how simply by fighting, all combatants “have lost their title to life and liberty” (Walzer, 2006). By contrast, noncombatants are men and women with rights, and they cannot be used for some military purpose, even if it is a legitimate purpose. But, there are several possible objections to this distinction. First, Napoleonic wars involved significant masses of people into the wars, and since then, sometimes whole communities go to war – whole peoples, and especially civilized ones. Second, combatants do not always give their rights up deliberately, as it is known throughout ancient as well as modern history. However, this question will not be discussed any further here; it has been provided to present one of the many aspects of the apparent controversy.

## 5. Reconsidering Plato's view

Plato posited that some truths transcended mere conditional statements. He envisioned a hypothetical universe, a state superior to one filled with e.g. immense suffering. This implied an ethical imperative for the preservation of emptiness over a universe of infinite pain. However, an opposing ethical imperative might demand the replacement of this emptiness with a good universe, one brimming with happiness and beauty, or ideal, in contrast to the material universe, the one which is rather base one. This is sometimes represented by the *multiverse problem*. Instead of being a physical reality, our world is just an infinitesimal part of an ever-reproducing multiverse (Holt, 2012). The problem of *observability*, i.e. the impossibility of seeing it, was not treated by Plato since he did not consider seeing as a reliable way of perceiving the reality. Plato asserted that the ethical necessity for the existence of a good universe was sufficient to bring it into being. Assuming the world is, on balance, good, the idea that it was created by the need for such goodness gains plausibility. This notion has influenced countless thinkers throughout history, including those who believe in God, offering an explanation for the divine existence based on the ethical need for a perfect being.

This is why the concept that goodness can engender existence has a rich history. While acknowledging the existence of ethical conflicts, proponents of this Platonic view recognize the necessity of a world governed by natural laws. They understand that the absence of miraculous occurrences and the possibility of human error are inherent to a world where free agents make choices. Plato's idea that a thing can exist due to its inherent goodness is not a logical necessity but a fundamental connection, often elusive to human understanding. We tend to associate value with physical mechanisms, but such mechanisms cannot explain the existence of the universe.

The omnipresence of this elusiveness, in fact, is “the most valid and surest starting-point for the dialogues of Plato, and, practically for the whole of philosophical consideration, is, in our opinion, the discerning of our own being. If this is correctly posited, we shall in every

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way, I think, be able more accurately to understand both the good that is appropriate to us and the evil that fights against it”, as Proclus states it in his *Commentary* (O’Neill, 1971).

It is evident from Plato’s *Alcibiades-I* that souls do not acquire knowledge from sensory objects, nor do they derive an understanding of the whole and the unified from the partial and the divided. Rather, they actualize their innate knowledge and correct the imperfections of sensory phenomena. It is not to be supposed that non-existent and non-substantial entities are the primary causes of knowledge within souls. Nor should we esteem ambiguous, contradictory, and devoid-of-innate-notions things above the ever-consistent and self-sufficient knowledge, according to Proclus’ *Commentary*. Likewise, we should not posit changeable and indeterminate things as the source of the unified and determinate intelligence.

## Conclusions

Therefore, according to Plato’s view, we must not derive the truth of eternal matters from the multitude, nor the discernment of universals from sensory objects, nor our judgment of the good from the irrational. Instead, the intuition, or the soul, by its own nature, must seek within itself the true, the good, and the eternal notions of morality. For its essence is imbued with these notions, though obscured by the forgetfulness inherent in generation. However, humans, in their quest for truth, often overlook their own intrinsic knowledge and seek the good in external things, neglecting their own knowledge inherent in their essence.

From this introspection, the beginning of self-knowledge emerges. If we were to focus solely on the multitude of individuals, we would never perceive their unified form, obscured as it is by multiplicity, division, separation, and manifold change. However, by turning inward, we can behold the singular notion and nature of humanity in its pure form. Researchers and technologists concerned about potential existential risks posed by artificial intelligence argue that it is imperative to ensure that superintelligent AI systems are aligned with human values and goals. They emphasize the importance of mitigating risks associated with emergent behavior and advocate for limiting the acquisition of excessive power by such systems. (Fisher, 2023). But can we teach something we have never been learning? In addition, in the aftermath of the digital world, people often struggle with the imperfect nature of human nature (Reed, 2016). According to Plato’s words in his *Alcibiades-I*, even the most renowned Athenian statesmen, such as Pericles, were not immune to the challenges of raising their own children.

This is why the question of the origin of moral values still remains. It is still uncertain whether humans, who struggle to define good and just actions themselves, can instill such values in AI systems. Despite Plato’s view that knowledge of good resides within us, programming AI with common values remains a rather vague task. This is why any conflict, even internal and emotional, is a complex ethical issue with no straightforward solutions. Probably because of the still present impossibility to clearly define the nature of the human *physical system* (Bazaluk, 2024) Plato never provides the answer to the questions settled in his dialogues. Neither does Steve Rosenberg in his articles (Rosenberg, 2024). Neither does Jim Holt in his book (Holt, 2012). Nor does it this article. It just summarizes ancient points of view and links them to those related to contemporary issues. It seems that Leibnitz overestimated the ability of humans to provide answers to any possible questions. Whether the problem, settled in *Alcibiades I*, be a factor in our calculations as we formulate the response to the AI problem of *moral values*, still remains an open question. All that theory can do is to give us points of reference and standards of evaluation in specific areas of action, with the ultimate purpose not of telling how to act but of developing our judgment.

This results in the aforementioned problem of a *multiverse*. As it has been said, our universe sometimes is considered to be only one among a vast number of similar but alternative universes, all of them either interacting in a certain way or not. The problem of communication between *rabbit's holes*. Although Socrates did communicate his ideas to Alcibiades, it is still not clear whether they were perceived by the receiver in their ideal form. While many people still live in their rabbit's holes and *do not* communicate, it is still an open question whether we might share co-called *common moral values* between inhabitants of these rabbit holes, not to mention artificial intelligence. Therefore, it can be assumed, if there is a multiverse consisting of many universes, most of them are hostile to life due to the lack of common *moral values*, and our own world can be reduced to the so-to-say matrix, and there is no reason to expect that it is real.

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