



SOURCE READING 5

Xenophon's *Memorabilia*

The ancient Greek writers often favored dialogues when discussing political or philosophical issues of the day. The word *dialogue* comes from a Greek word meaning "to converse," which is exactly what the two or more characters in Greek dialogues do. Socrates figures prominently in the following excerpt from the historian Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, in which Xenophon describes the political education of one of Socrates's foremost accusers, Alcibiades.

Guided Reading *In this selection, read to learn how ancient Greeks defined the legitimacy of the law.*

For my part, I [Xenophon] would say that no one receives any education from someone who does not please him. Critias and Alcibiades did not associate with Socrates—for as long as they did associate with him—because he pleased the two of them. But right from the start the two of them had set out to preside over the city. For even while they were still companions of Socrates they did not attempt to converse with any others more than with those most deeply engaged in political affairs.

For it is said that before Alcibiades was twenty years of age he had the following sort of conversation about laws with Pericles, who was his guardian as well as the one presiding over the city.

"Tell me, Pericles," he said, "would you be able to teach me what law is?"

"By all means," said Pericles.

"By the gods, teach it then," said Alcibiades, "for when I hear certain ones praised as law-abiding men, I think that someone who does not know what law is would not justly obtain this praise."

"But you do not desire anything hard, Alcibiades, in wishing to know what law is," said Pericles. "For all things are laws that the assembled multitude has approved and written, pointing out what should and should not be done."

"Do they hold that one should do good things or bad things?"

"The good, by Zeus, lad," he said, "and not the bad."

"What if it is not the multitude, but the assembled few who write what one should do, as is the case wherever there is oligarchy? What

is this?"

"Everything," he said, "is called law that the overpowering part of the city, upon deliberation, writes that one should do."

"So even if a tyrant who overpowers the city writes for the citizens what they should do—this too is law?"

"Even what the ruling tyrant writes," he said, "this too is called law."

"But what is violence and lawlessness, Pericles?" he said. "Is it not when one who is stronger compels one who is weaker—not by persuasion but by the use of violence—to do whatever is in his opinion best?"

"In my opinion at least," said Pericles.

"And whatever the tyrant writes and compels the citizens to do without persuading them—this is lawlessness?"

"In my opinion," said Pericles. "For I take back what I said about what the tyrant writes without persuasion being law."

"And what the few write, without persuading the many but overpowering them, shall we say that this is violence or shall we not say it?"

"Everything, in my opinion," said Pericles, "that one compels someone to do without persuading him, whether he writes it or not, is violence rather than law."

"And whatever the whole multitude writes without persuasion, when it overpowers those having wealth, would be violence rather than law?"

"Alcibiades," said Pericles, "we too were quite clever indeed at things of this sort when we were your age. For we too practiced such things and made precisely the sort of sophisticated arguments that you, in my opinion, are now



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practicing.”

And Alcibiades said, “Would that I could have been your companion at that time, Pericles, when you were at your cleverest.”

As soon as they supposed themselves to be superior to the other citizens, they no longer

came to Socrates. For he did not please them anyway; and if they did come to him they were annoyed by being refuted regarding their errors. Rather, they became engaged in the city’s affairs, which was why they had in fact come to Socrates.

INTERPRETING THE READING

Directions Use information from the reading to answer the following questions. If necessary, use a separate sheet of paper.

1. Why does Alcibiades speak to Pericles in the first place?

2. What is Pericles’s criterion for distinguishing “violence” from “law”?

3. Does Alcibiades ever get an answer to his original question from Pericles? Explain your answer.

Critical Thinking

4. **Synthesizing information** Xenophon states that “no one receives any education from someone who does not please him” and that Socrates did not please Alcibiades. However, the conversation above shows that Alcibiades learned at least one thing from Socrates. What did he learn? Review Chapter 5 in your textbook.
