

Alcibiades as a “Hub” for Exploring Psychopathic Leadership across Academic Disciplines

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*I play to people's fantasies. People may not always think big themselves, but they can still get very excited by those who do. That's why a little hyperbole never hurts. People want to believe that something is the biggest and the greatest and the most spectacular.--Donald J. Trump, *The Art of the Deal* (1987)*

ABSTRACT

In the 5th edition of his seminal work on the study of psychopathy Hervey Cleckley attempts, with thoughtful caution, to diagnose a number of historical and literary figures. Alcibiades receives special attention: “Though it would hardly be convincing to claim that we can establish a medical diagnosis, or a full psychiatric explanation, of this public figure who lived almost two and a half thousand years ago, there are many points in the incomplete records of his life available to us that strongly suggest Alcibiades may have been a spectacular example of what during recent decades we have, in bewilderment and amazement, come to designate as the psychopath” (Cleckley, *Mask of Sanity*, 1988:335).

More recently, Cleckley's assessment of Alcibiades has been used to help make the case that psychopathy has been a cross-cultural disorder since ancient times (*Handbook of Psychopathy* 2007:437). Genetic studies and fMRI analyses of the paralimbic regions of the brain further bolster the claim that psychopathy, in addition to being a pervasive social construct, is a biological phenomenon (Glenn and Raine, *Psychopathy: An Introduction to Biological Findings and Their Implications*, 2014).

Though Cleckley did not distinguish the historical Alcibiades from Alcibiades as the more malleable construct of historians, philosophers, and moralists, and though we have learned much more about psychopathy in the past thirty years, I argue that Alcibiades is still an important “hub” for us to understand psychopathy. In particular he helps us to explore two related questions: (1) how does the “psychopath” differ from related constructs across different fields, e.g., the trickster figure (folklore), the alpha male (psychology), the free-rider (economics), and the tyrant (politics); and (2) to what extent do such figures make good leaders? By paying specific attention to Plutarch's *Life*, we can see how ambivalent Athenians (and by extension we ourselves today) were toward such a leader.

MY CLAIM

The study of **psychopathy** is important to those in the prison system because a diagnosis of psychopathy may impact *how* a convicted criminal is sentenced and *whether* that convicted criminal later makes parole. Psychopaths do a lot of damage and it's important to make sure they don't do more (Kiehl and Sinnott-Armstrong 2013:1), just as it is important to accord anyone a fair chance at redemption. Increasingly, the study of psychopathy has come to include those who get away with it, namely people in business and politics who are never convicted for their psychopathic behavior and may in fact be seen as "successful." Hare and Babiak's 2006 book *Snakes in Suits: When Psychopaths Go to Work* is a harbinger of this trend in research. And when we pair this book with Kevin Dutton's *The Wisdom of Psychopaths* (2013), we have good examples of what I have come to refer to as our *ancient* ambivalence toward the psychopathic leader (See my four-part essay series on Medium.com in the bibliography).

In my presentation today I'm going to defend the claim that the character of Alcibiades in Plutarch's *Life* of him has a very strong resemblance to what contemporary psychologists and neuroscientists refer to as the **psychopath**. Additionally, Alcibiades bears strong resemblance to constructs from other disciplines: the **trickster** (folklore, myth), the **tyrant** (politics), and the **free-rider** (economics), so much so that I believe it would be helpful to use the term "**Alcibiades Complex**" for exploring these overlapping forms of human behavior, especially in leadership contexts.

Before I defend this claim, however, I want to do two things. I want to address some of the assumptions that people make about the term "psychopath." Then I want to explain why we would even be interested in trying to diagnose an ancient figure as psychopathic.

CLARIFYING WHAT PSYCHOPATHY MEANS

Psychopathic vs. Psychotic

In popular discourse we often confuse the term "psychopathic" with "psychotic," but in a clinical setting these are quite distinct. The psychotic person is detached from reality in a number of obvious ways. According to the DSM-5 they may experience delusions, hallucinations, disorganized thought, abnormal motor behavior, or other negative symptoms like diminished emotional expression and loss of purposeful behavior (87-88). The psychopathic person, by contrast, is in many ways the exact opposite: he or she presents as perfectly rational, in control, and calculating. As part of their skill at impression management, psychopaths tend to be good at reading the emotions of others and projecting the emotions that a given situation calls for. It was long thought that psychopaths had greater intelligence than the normal population, but now this is not the consensus. There are even categories for the so-called unsuccessful psychopath, whose life is characterized by constant recidivism, while the "successful" psychopath can live an entire life in comfort and prosperity while leaving a wake of destruction.

Psychopathic vs. Sociopathic

Much of what we think about psychopathy often comes from popular culture. So-called psychopaths are pervasive in television and film, whether we think of the serial killer, the politician, the businessman or the femme fatale from Film Noire (see Skeem et al 2011:96-97). Joe MacMillan from one of my new favorite shows, *Halt and Catch Fire*, is referred to by other characters as a psychopath for the callous, self-serving ways he manipulates others. Characters with artificial intelligence like HAL from Stanley Kubrik's *2001* (1968) or, more recently, Ava from Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* (2015) may be seen as psychopathic. There is a helpful distinction we may draw from these examples of AI and the other human examples in art, that of the psychopath versus the sociopath. Sociopathy is the less precise term for a person who exhibits the behavior of the psychopath (diminished emotional experience, manipulation, criminal versatility) but who is thought to do so in a neurotic way, with a neurosis brought on by early and unresolved trauma (Kiehl 40-41). So a character like Frank Underwood in *House of Cards* can be seen as sociopathic from the fact that the show makes frequent reference to a childhood characterized by an abusive father, an impoverished and humiliating upbringing, and frustrations with homosexuality or bisexuality. What makes such characters so compelling is their moral ambiguity. As an audience we are led to hope that under the right circumstances, with the proper compassion and understanding, the sociopath's trauma might be exorcised and he or she might then return to the "good side." Darth Vader's (or Anakin Skywalker's) redemption in *Star Wars: Return of the Jedi* is probably the most famous example.

Unlike the traumatized sociopath, the psychopath just *is*, or is at least much more set in his or her behavior than the sociopath. Thus AI characters like HAL and Ava may be seen as more psychopathic than, say, Frank Underwood, because they have no programming for traditional human attachment or sympathy. (In the British version of *House of Cards*, Francis Urquhart, played by Ian Richardson, is more like a traditional psychopath in the sense that the show makes no attempt to link his behavior to an unusual early trauma.) Accordingly, one of the contemporary criteria used to diagnose psychopathy on the 20-point Hare Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R) is antisocial behavior in early youth (Kiehl 126-150). This is not to say that psychopathy is entirely genetic, but that genes and the circuitry of the brain are central to the study of psychopathy (Glenn and Raine 19-64).

Psychopathic vs. homicidal

The word psychopath often conjures up images of violence and murder, the sadistic killer coolly standing over his victim as he monologues and tortures, someone like Alex in *A Clockwork Orange*. The potential correlation between violent behavior and other psychopathic traits (e.g., low affect, pathological lying, manipulation, promiscuity) has long been studied (see Skeem 126-131, Patrick 481-489). Increasingly there is an acknowledgement that non-violent psychopaths are a common phenomenon in their own right, and this may be the more "successful" type. James Fallon, a neuroscientist and self-described "prosocial" psychopath or "psychopath lite," regularly dismisses violent behavior in favor of good old fashioned manipulation and revenge plots: "It's more fun to manipulate people without violence" (159); "I have no interest in physically harming anyone" (201); "I don't want to kill anybody or hurt

anybody. And I don't like to steal things or lie. That's for losers. Violence is crude and it destroys the fun" (224). Thus, while our subject for this talk, Alcibiades, engages in a litany of violent and abusive behavior throughout his life, we need not argue that he is a sadistic serial murderer to argue that he is psychopathic (see Plutarch's *Life of Alcibiades* 2.2, 3, 7.1, 8.1, 8.4-5, 9).

CHALLENGES TO OUR STUDY OF "ANCIENT PSYCHOPATHY"

Having attempted to clarify the use of the term psychopathy, I want to identify two main challenges we face in trying to diagnose a historical or literary figure as psychopathic. First, it is worth pointing out that diagnosing historical and literary figures as psychopathic has become quite common. Lilienfeld et al. studied psychopathy in the forty-two US presidents up to and including George W. Bush. Kiehl in his recent book compares two presidential assassins, John Wilkes Booth (not a psychopath) and the assassin of James Garfield, Charles Guiteau (major psychopath). Jonason et al. attempt a diagnosis of James Bond using the "Dark Triad," one side of which is psychopathy. Kevin Dutton regards the Saint Paul as a psychopath (Dutton 189-192), and Paul Lawrence deems as many as 30%(!) of leaders in his survey of human history to be "leaders w/o conscience," his term for the psychopath (Lawrence 83-87). Finally, for classicists Theophrastus' "Man of Shamelessness (*ἀναισχυντία*)" is sometimes cited as an example of an ancient psychopath (Millon 3).

For the diagnosis of our subject, Alcibiades, we must turn to one psychiatrist from Augusta, Georgia named Hervey Cleckley. His seminal work, *The Mask of Sanity*, first published in 1941, saw six editions. Cleckley's approach to diagnosing psychopathy was one that would appeal to many humanists. He advocated a comprehensive study of the subject's life across time and in multiple domains, supplemented by many interviews with associates of the would-be psychopath. Whereas today the study of psychopathy is more and more dominated by brain-scans and DNA analysis, for Cleckley it was important to "read" the subject slowly in different contexts because psychopaths were so good at concealing their disorder, hence their "mask of sanity."

Because his approach was much like that of a literary critic, Cleckley liked to diagnose *literary* and *historical* figures according to the traits of psychopathy he identified in real-life subjects. In the fifth edition of *Mask of Sanity*, he devotes nearly ten pages to the fifth-century Athenian statesman, Alcibiades (1988:327-336). Cleckley does not distinguish the *historical* Alcibiades from the Alcibiades that is presented in various ancient sources, including Thucydides, Plato, and Plutarch. One of his main sources is the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Nevertheless, he identifies a number of psychopathic traits such as impulsiveness, lawlessness, violence, and irresponsibility. He concludes:

"When we look back upon what has been recorded of Alcibiades we are led to suspect that he had the gift of every talent except that of using them consistently to achieve any sensible aim or in behalf of any discernible cause. Though it would hardly be convincing to claim that we establish a medical

diagnosis, or a full psychiatric explanation, of this public figure who lived almost two and a half thousand years ago, there are many points in the incomplete records of his life available to use that strongly suggest Alcibiades may have been a spectacular example of what during recent decades we have, in bewilderment and amazement, come to designate as the psychopath” (335).

Though Cleckley is cautious to diagnose Alcibiades as a psychopath, this has not prevented other researchers from using his work to argue that psychopathy is a phenomenon common to cultures across time. Incorporating the work of Robert Hare, whose revised psychopathy checklist has replaced the work of Cleckley and now serves as the standard for psychopathic diagnoses, Sullivan and Kosson conclude that “the majority of findings provide compelling evidence that the construct of psychopathy as indexed by the PCL-R [Robert Hare’s Psychopathy Checklist Revised] is valid across cultures” (Patrick 2006:448).

I want to show in a moment that Alcibiades, as he is depicted by Plutarch, has even more psychopathic traits than Cleckley identified. But first I want to highlight two methodological challenges that anyone faces when trying to diagnose a historical or literary figure as psychopathic. The first, which Cleckley himself concedes, is a limit to the data. In its present form a diagnosis of psychopathy according to the Hare Checklist typically requires at least a two and half hour interview with the subject and the demonstrated presence of psychopathic behavior across multiple domains, such as family life, work life, romantic life, and social life, preferably throughout many phases of life. You cannot, for example, diagnose your boss as psychopathic just because he behaves that way in the office. The same is true for the cold-hearted surgeon or the ruthless lawyer who cross-examines a witness to tears. Such persons may *behaving* psychopathically without *being* psychopathic, that is, they may be perfectly normal in other contexts, whereas a true psychopath does not have the option of turning his or her psychopathic behavior on and off. This limitation to our diagnosis is worth emphasizing, pace Lawrence above, because we need to be mindful of how situations may require a leader, for example, to behave psychopathically even though the leader may not actually be psychopathic. In Alcibiades’ case psychopathy was a two-way street; he both possessed it (as I will argue) and it seems to have been something at least some Athenians were attracted to (cf. Plutarch *Life of Alcibiades* 16.6). The leadership position may of course also attract true psychopaths. Additionally, when we examine a figure from the past, or a figure from fiction, we are also missing two of the most important tools of psychopathic diagnosis, namely, the fMRI, which allows us to examine the regions of the brain that deal with emotional functioning, and DNA analysis, which may explain why the brain developed this way.

The second major challenge we face to diagnosing an ancient figure is with the construct of psychopathy itself. Since the end of the 18th century the term psychopath (literally a “suffering mind”) has been used to explain mental illness (for a survey of the history of this term see Millon 1998:3-31 and much briefer Kiehl 2014:35-49). In the 20th century Cleckley’s criteria were dominant but later replaced by the Hare Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R) in 1991. This checklist is the most commonly used tool for assessing people in the penal system and is sometimes referred to as the “gold standard” of diagnosis. It is a 20-item list upon which subjects

may score between 0-2 on each item for a max score of 40. Thirty or higher is typically sufficient for a diagnosis of psychopathy in the prison population, though thirty is arguably an arbitrary cut-off. More recently, this 20-item list has been challenged by a range of new ways of conceiving the disorder, even to the point of questioning whether it is a disorder at all since some psychopaths may “succeed” in life according to modern definitions of success (Skeem et al 2003; note: the DSM does not currently treat psychopathy as a disorder along the lines of the antisocial personality disorder). There is much at stake in these debates, especially for convicted criminals awaiting sentence and those who have served their time and hope to make parole. The challenge lies in trying to figure out how all of the so-called psychopathic traits fit together. How are they correlated? Can the correlation be explained in terms of social adaptivity, brain circuitry, and/or DNA? Given these contemporary challenges to figuring out if the construct of psychopathy corresponds to something real--or is it more of a cultural artifact like “the devil”?--it is of course worth asking why we should bother trying to figure out if an ancient Athenian leader like Alcibiades is actually a psychopath.

WHY BOTHER TRYING TO DIAGNOSE ALCIBIADES?

Here I will offer an attempt at an answer. First of all, I don't think it is worth trying to figure out if the *historical* Alcibiades was a psychopath. I don't think we can ever know enough about this figure to make an interesting determination, even if some clues might point in that direction. Instead, I want to focus on the depiction of Alcibiades in Plutarch's *Life*. Here, I think we can see many traits of psychopathy that agree with what a lot of the researchers of this construct would say, however much they may disagree with one another. Ultimately, we may decide that there is no such thing as psychopathy in present terms, that instead what we call psychopathy is really a host of different personality types, some worse than others. But what I think we can show is that Plutarch's conception of Alcibiades is remarkably consistent with our current conception of psychopathy, such that, whether we want to believe that psychopathy is a cross-cultural *phenomenon*, we can say that it is a cross-cultural *construct*. In other words Plutarch has a lot in common with Cleckley, Hare, and others in terms of their understanding of a certain character type.

In addition to the opportunity to explore interesting constructs across cultures, Plutarch's Alcibiades gives us an opportunity to understand what I have called our “ambivalence toward the psychopathic leader” (see my essays on Medium.com in the bibliography). What I mean is that while we have a visceral and probably evolutionarily-honed revulsion to the traits of the psychopath (see Dutton 13-16 on this ability), we also seem to want our leaders to have these traits, at least in certain circumstances.

I will now proceed to try to illustrate that Alcibiades has many psychopathic traits and that these are traits we, and his fellow Athenians (according to Plutarch), were ambivalent about. Finally, I will remind us that Plutarch's Alcibiades is more than a psychopath and that his additional traits make him a valuable hub for talking about how several constructs from different fields may be viewed together.

ALCIBIADES' PSYCHOPATHIC TRAITS

Below in Table 1 are the twenty traits of psychopathy from the Hare Psychopathy Checklist-Revised, as well as other traits that are often associated with psychopathy. While we do not have enough data from the *Life* to make a true diagnosis of Alcibiades, the range of traits that are available is striking. Not all of these traits by themselves would point toward psychopathy (for example, how many Athenian elite males of the day were not thought to have a “need for stimulation”?), but what is important for a diagnosis is that Alcibiades possessed many of these traits to an extraordinary degree even for his own time. So, for example, one of his psychopathic traits, the use of “instrumental aggression” on one of his dogs (he cut off the dog’s tail to distract from the other bad things he was doing), might not strike us as odd for a culture that regularly used instrumental aggression when it tortured slaves to ensure accurate testimony at court. Yet his own comrades chided him for doing it (9). Note that I have tried not to use too many duplicate examples, though plenty of scenes in the *Life* exhibit more than one psychopathic trait, as I will explain.

TABLE 1: Examples of Psychopathy from Plutarch’s *Life of Alcibiades*

Items on the Hare Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R) (from Kiehl 2014:46-47)	Examples from Plutarch’s <i>Life of Alcibiades</i>
glibness/superficial charm	charming beauty (1.3); clever lisp (1.4); no one could resist his charm (24.4)
grandiose sense of self-worth	“I will show [Athens] that I’m alive!” (22.2); tyrannical aspirations (16.2, 16.5)
need for stimulation	constant partying; wanton drunkenness (16.1-2)
pathological lying	lying to the Spartan embassy (14.6-9)
conning/manipulation	tricking the Spartan embassy to embarrass Nicias (14.6-9)
lack of remorse or guilt	supporting the Melian Decree to execute the adult men and sell the women and children into slavery (16.5)
shallow affect	cheating his friend Diomedes (12.2-3)
callous/lack of empathy	striking Hipponicus as a joke (7.1)
parasitic lifestyle	taking half the dishes of Anytus (4.5)
poor behavioral controls	bad behavior away from Socrates, lawlessness

	(<i>paranomia</i>) (6)
promiscuous sexual behavior	many mistresses who off-putting to his wife Hipparete (8.3); a mistress from Melos (16.4-5); Timaea, wife of Agis, king of Sparta (23.7); Timandra (39.4)
early behavioral problems	examples of bad behavior from his boyhood (2)
lack of realistic, long-term goals	inability to sustain interest in philosophy, reckless pursuit of empire for Athens in Sicily, Carthage, and Libya (17.3)
impulsivity	throwing himself in front of a wagon while playing kucklebones (2.3)
irresponsibility	constant switching of loyalties from Athens to Sparta to Persia and back to Athens
failure to accept responsibility for own actions	fleeing for Sparta after being charged with mutilating the Herms and profaning the Mysteries (23.1-2)
many short-term marital relationships	
juvenile delinquency	running away from home to a lover Democrates (3; though Plutarch doubts the truth of this story)
revocation of conditional release	N/A
criminal versatility	“wily” Alcibiades <i>polutropos</i> (24.4)
Other aspects of psychopathy (outside of but related to the Hare PCL-R)	
instrumental (as opposed to reactive) aggression	cutting the tail off his dog (9), biting his opponent in the wrestling arena (2.2)
chameleon-like behavior, impression management	assuming, for predatory advantage, the cultural habits of Sparta, Thraces, Ionia, Persia but not changing his real behavior (22.3-6)
a drive to dominate others	Alcibiades’ compulsion to win (<i>to philonikon</i>) and drive to be “first” (<i>to philoproton</i>)(2.1)
boldness, risk-taking	<i>tolme, philokundos</i> on the eve of the Sicilian Expedition (18.1-2)

A good instance of multiple psychopathic traits in one scene is Alcibiades' behavior in the wrestling ring as a young man:

ἐν μὲν γὰρ τῷ παλαίειν πιεζόμενος, ὑπὲρ τοῦ μὴ πεσεῖν ἀναγαγὼν πρὸς τὸ στόμα τὰ ἄμματα τοῦ πιεζοῦντος, οἷος ἦν διαφαγεῖν τὰς χεῖρας. ἀφέντος δὲ τὴν λαβὴν ἐκείνου καὶ εἰπόντος: 'δάκνεις, ὧ Ἀλκιβιάδη, καθάπερ αἱ γυναῖκες,' 'οὐκ ἔγωγε,' εἶπεν, 'ἀλλ' ὡς οἱ λέοντες.'

“He was once hard pressed in wrestling, and to save himself from getting a fall, set his teeth in his opponent's arms, where they clutched him, and was like to have bitten through them. His adversary, letting go his hold, cried: "You bite, Alcibiades, as women do!" "Not I," said Alcibiades, "but as lions do."”
[Plutarch's Life of Alcibiades 2.2, translation Bernadotte Perrin]

The first thing to note is that when Alcibiades bites his opponent he is not doing it impulsively, but with calculation: “to save himself from getting a fall.” This, like cutting off the tail of his dog, is an instance of “**instrumental aggression**,” as opposed to what is called “*reactive aggression*,” (reactive aggression is what most of us exhibit when we are threatened or frustrated). One of the main researchers on the association between “instrumental aggression” and psychopathy is James Blair at NIMH. For Blair and others what explains instrumental aggression is the psychopath's emotional deficiencies, namely, a lack of guilt or lack of concern for the feelings of others. For the psychopath, the suffering of others functions as a *tool* for accomplishing a goal, in the same way that a hammer puts a nail into wood. In our example Alcibiades' goal is to avoid losing the wrestling match and ultimately assert victory, even if it is not an athletic but a social one: Alcibiades dominates his opponent with his willingness to break the rules and assert his status as a “lion,” a move that demonstrates another of his psychopathic traits, grandiosity.

Grandiosity is often associated with narcissism (think Donald Trump) but it is a feature of psychopathy as well. It includes an overestimation of one's talents like intelligence or knowledge of a subject. It also may assume a sense of destiny or uniqueness on the part of the grandiose person, as well as the idea that only a few people can understand you. The common refrain of the reality TV contestant that “I didn't come here to make friends.” or “You don't know me” are the hallmarks of the grandiose personality. Plutarch says that when Alcibiades behaved in this way in the wrestling ring, it was a result of two strong passions, *philonikia* and to *philoproton*, usually translated as a “love of victory” and a “love of being first.” Probably the best way to say it is that Alcibiades *had* to win, he *had* to be first. It's just how he conceived of himself. Those who are familiar with Plutarch's *Life* know that the image of the lion pervades his portrait of Alcibiades, even down to the description of Alcibiades as a “chameleon” or “chamai leon” which means a “lion on the ground. The chameleon image also captures Alcibiades' psychopathic ability to change forms to capture his prey. His ability to read the situation socially and to devise a **glib response** (“I bite like a lion”) to what would otherwise be an embarrassing defeat demonstrates Alcibiades' skill at **impression management**.

Finally, Alcibiades’ psychopathy is on display in the wrestling arena because it takes place in his *boyhood*. Early delinquency is now seen as one of the predictors of psychopathy, though certainly not a guarantee. The fact that we even have any anecdotes from Alcibiades’ youth is interesting because, as Christopher Pelling has pointed out, Plutarch does not tend to treat a the youth of a character in the *Lives* except to highlight his education or *paideia*. But as Timothy Duff notes, “the childhood anecdotes of Alcibiades set out imagery and metaphors which define Alcibiades’ character: wrestling, biting, the lion, dice, his mouth, scenes of popular adulation, lovers, violence. As so often in Plutarch, character is created as much through imagery as through authorial statement or through action” (Duff 112). Indeed, the story of Alcibiades biting like a lion in the wrestling area may be a complete fabrication because it was so thematic of his (psychopathic) character (see Verdegem 125 for an argument of fabrication).

EVIDENCE OF OUR AMBIVALENCE TOWARD PSYCHOPATHIC LEADERS

So far I have attempted to explain the connection between Alcibiades and psychopathy. Let me now turn to our *ambivalence* toward the psychopathic leader. As I noted above the term psychopath is negatively charged. Few people would admit that they *want* a “psychopathic leader.” Arguably, the opposite of the psychopathic leader, namely, the emotionally intelligent leader, has never been more celebrated than in our own time (see the work of Daniel Goleman and Peter Salovey). These researchers of emotional intelligence emphasize such qualities as self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, and perspective-taking as the keys to good leadership. Work on emotional intelligence is super-popular with management consulting firms. So, how is it that psychopathic leaders still seem to be climbing the ranks of the leadership ladder? In one study by Hare and Babiak, for example, psychopathic leaders were three and a half times more common in pools of high-power business executives than in the general population (Hare and Babiak 2006).

Consider, then, the same list of psychopathic traits I showed for Alcibiades in Table 1. In the righthand column of Table 2 we see some rationale for favoring many of the traits that psychopathic leaders possess. Some of these rationales may be found in Fallon’s chapter on Why Do Psychopaths Exist? (2013:213-227).

TABLE 2: Our ambivalence toward the psychopathic leader.

Items on the Hare Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R) (from Kiehl 2014:46-47)	Ways in which some might see these traits as positive or at least necessary leadership traits
glibness/superficial charm	We like a leader who appears to have a ready answer in a time of crisis. We like to be charmed (just not superficially so, though we might be hard-pressed to explain the difference).
grandiose sense of self-worth	Grandiosity may guard the leader from an

	abundance of negative criticism. People may be inspired by those who can get them to think beyond what now seems possible (see Watts et al. 2013 on grandiosity as a “double-edged sword”).
need for stimulation	
pathological lying	Leaders are sometimes expected to protect sensitive information (though pathological lying typically means that the person cannot control whether to tell the truth or not).
conning/manipulation	Leaders may need to mislead others, build them up, or trick them in order to carry out a plan.
lack of remorse or guilt	Leaders may need to move on after making a difficult decision. We, their followers, may want leaders to do cruel things that we ourselves are unwilling to do.
shallow affect	Leaders may be expected to make very difficult decisions without falling prey to anxiety, fear, or strong attachment to others.
callous/lack of empathy	Leaders may not have the advantage of becoming too attached to others. One way this trait is often tested is with the “would you kill the baby Hitler?” question, to which leaders are expected to say ‘yes’ unflinchingly (Jeb Bush is the most recent example). Some research shows that holding power may cause a leader to dehumanize others and thus treat them more callously (Lammers and Stapel 2010; but see Christoff 2014).
parasitic lifestyle	Leaders may need to take more than they give back in order to succeed, whether in the form of donations, attention, or support.
poor behavioral controls	
promiscuous sexual behavior	The leadership role may cause the leader to feel more sexually desirable than he/she actually is. Male (primate) leaders in particular may be motivated to lead by a desire to have access to reproduction.

early behavioral problems	
lack of realistic, long-term goals	
impulsivity	Leaders may be expected to know how to seize the right moment.
irresponsibility	Leaders may need to switch loyalty from one side to another in order to advance their (or others') interests.
failure to accept responsibility for own actions	Leaders may need to know how to divert and avoid blame. When necessary, psychopathic leaders are excellent at feigning remorse and pretending to have turned over a new leaf.
many short-term marital relationships	Leaders may find it necessary to project an image of eternal youth (via younger spouses), marry for wealth and prestige, or merely to gratify their enormous egos. See Ludwig 2002:50-78 on the higher frequency of marriages and greater promiscuity among 20th century world leaders.
juvenile delinquency	
revocation of conditional release	
criminal versatility	
Other aspects of psychopathy (outside of but related to the Hare PCL-R)	
instrumental (as opposed to reactive) aggression	Politicians on campaign may find it necessary to "go negative" against a rival. The rival's suffering thus becomes a tool for the leader's advantage.
chameleon-like behavior, impression management	Leaders are expected to adopt contrary moods often in short intervals as the situation dictates: serious/humorous, dignified/common, angry/forgiving.
a drive to dominate others	Leaders may find it necessary to intimidate their rivals in order to hold onto power.
boldness, risk-taking	For reasons I only partially understand we tend to celebrate the leader who takes a risk or crosses a

	boundary (“Fortune favors the bold!”) when such a person is successful and forget about it when the leader is not successful (or we blame the leader for some other flaw than being daring). Holding power may cause a leader to feel more optimistic about a given risk (Anderson and Galinsky 2006).
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Human beings are deeply ambivalent about whether they want the emotional lives of their leaders to be significantly diminished, as in the case of the psychopathic leader, or normal and even enhanced, as in the case of the emotionally intelligent leader. Probably most of us would like a leader who can behave both psychopathically and compassionately as a matter of choice, according to the needs of the situation, though I think that to search for such a chimera may be unrealistic.

WHY ARE WE SO AMBIVALENT?

If this ambivalence toward psychopathic leadership is as real as I think it is, we should do our best to try to explain it and perhaps overcome it, however possible. One explanation is that psychopaths just trick us into believing that they are the sensitive, emotionally intelligent person we say we want. Think of “honest Iago” in *Othello*. Nevertheless, it’s also possible that we *know* we are getting a psychopathic leader. And there are at least three interconnected ways to understand our ambivalence. One is the functioning of the human brain. It is now fairly certain that a lot of a psychopath’s behavior may be explained by the fact that the emotional centers of the brain (the so-called paralimbic regions) do not function as well as in non-psychopathic brains (Kiehl’s 2014 book is an attempt to explain these two brains). The neuroscientist James Fallon I mentioned earlier accidentally discovered his psychopathy by looking at a scan of his own brain. And just as the psychopath’s brain enables the psychopath to be emotionally detached, I believe that psychopathic leaders enable our own brains to be emotionally detached and thus allow us to commit acts through the agency of our leaders that we might not want to do ourselves (for more on this explanation see my Medium essay entitled “The Psychopathic Trolley Switch: Instrumental Aggression and Dehumanization in Leadership”).

Another explanation for our ambivalence toward psychopathic leaders I believe has to do with the size of human communities we have come to treat as normal. For the long 200,000 years that humans have been on the planet in their current anatomical form, our societies tended to be very, very small, say 100-200 members, engaged in hunting and gathering. It is well documented that in such contexts psychopaths cannot survive (Lawrence 101-121). How long would a small group of people on a desert island tolerate someone like Donald Trump? There is just much less opportunity for sustained manipulation, impression management, and pathological lying. As we can tell from even modern hunter-gatherer societies, such psychopaths quickly moderate their behavior or are punished with exile or death (for examples of this in ancient and modern societies see Flannery and Marcus 2012).

The third explanation is the one that may be of most interest to the humanists here. It's what I call the "trickster narrative of human progress." It's the idea that by engaging in psychopathic behavior a so-called trickster figure may transform a society into something greater than it was, even inadvertently. Think of Prometheus stealing fire from Zeus to give it to humankind. Or Hermes stealing the cattle of Apollo to fashion the first lyre. Those familiar with the story of Puss in Boots will also have a good example in mind. Perhaps this narrative is best captured in the trickster Odysseus' advice to Neoptolemus on stealing the bow of Philoctetes: "for one day of shamelessness you can win eternal glory" (Sophocles *Philoctetes* 83-85).

This is not just a narrative we buy into with our mythologies of the past. It is very much alive in the stories today of tech geniuses like Steve Jobs, Elon Musk, or Jeff Bezos. I'm not saying they are actually psychopaths, but their behavior at times matches that of the trickster/psychopath and they they are celebrated for all of the amazing innovations that supposedly contribute to the next level of human evolution.

Those who know the story of Alcibiades know that he, too, offered to his city-state of Athens 2,500 years ago the prospect of a new empire to encompass much of the known world. This ambition, whether or not it was true of the historical Athens or the historical Alcibiades, is described by Plutarch in his account of the expedition to Sicily.

"On Sicily the Athenians had cast longing eyes even while Pericles was living; and after his death they actually tried to lay hands upon it...But the man who finally fanned this desire of theirs into flame, and persuaded them not to attempt the island any more in part and little by little, but to sail thither with a great armament and subdue it utterly, was Alcibiades; he persuaded the people to have great hopes, and he himself had greater aspirations still. Such were his hopes that he regarded Sicily as a mere beginning, and not, like the rest, as an end of the expedition...Alcibiades was dreaming of Carthage and Libya, and, after winning these, of at once encompassing Italy and Peloponnesus... The young men were at once carried away on the wings of such hopes, and their elders kept recounting in their ears many wonderful things about the projected expedition. Many were they who sat in the palaestras and lounging-places mapping out in the sand the shape of Sicily and the position of Libya and Carthage" (17.1-2 translation, Perrin).

As I say, we do not know if the historical Alcibiades really set his sights so high, but if this grand endeavor had been achieved, Athenian history and surely world history would have been significantly altered up to the present. Athens would have had a true multi-national empire three generations before Alexander conquered Egypt and the Persian empire. A Greek conquest of western Europe and Northern Africa would have altered the rise of the Roman Empire, still several centuries in the offing.

But, as it was, Athens did not succeed in the Sicilian Expedition, and Alcibiades did not

participate in it because he was recalled for sacrilegious vandalism in line with the boldness of his psychopathy. He fled Athens and would not be reunited with his city-state until it was too late to save it from historic defeat at the hands of Sparta.

CONCLUSION: NOT JUST A PSYCHOPATH

Of course, Plutarch's Alcibiades is not just a psychopath. As we noted above, he has some of the traits of the mythical **trickster** figure, getting himself into and out of trouble, promising revolution, violating the law and cultural convention (see Hyde 1998:52-53). Those in his own time also suspected him of being a cruel and lawless **tyrant**, bent on hoarding all of Greece's glory for himself and subjecting others to his capricious will. We could also see him as a "**free-rider**," hoarding the resources of his community and never giving back, making a profit from the efforts of others, promising great things and leaving his city-state in desperation.

These different constructs are the product of years of research from researchers in many fields--psychology, mythology and folklore, political science, economics, business--fields that often don't talk to each other. Alcibiades, however, creates the opportunity for these different fields to have conversations with one another as *humanists*. How much is the tyrant like the psychopath? How much is the psychopath like a trickster?

I will take up this last question using the example of Alcibiades and building on my discussion above. Lewis Hyde, in his book on tricksters, *Trickster Makes the World*, acknowledges that tricksters have perhaps all of the same characteristics as the psychopath. But he argues that the converse is not true: tricksters are distinct from psychopaths in that they are "culture heroes."

"For all his failings and all the grief he authors, trickster is also a culture hero, inventor of fish traps, bringer of fire, the one who turned his own intestines into foodstuffs for the New People...Trickster is among other things the gatekeeper who opens the door into the next world; those who mistake him for a psychopath never know such a door exists" (Hyde 158-159).

I believe that Hyde is correct that certain psychopaths, like the serial killer Ted Bundy, are characterized solely by a path of domination and destruction. The psychopathic *leader*, however, may be indistinguishable from the trickster. Alcibiades, too, saw himself as a culture hero in several different ways, whether insisting that Athenians not play the flute (2.6), beating his school teachers for not keeping the works of Homer (7.1), or entering seven chariots into the Olympic games (11). As we noted above, Alcibiades also sought to bring revolution to the Mediterranean by conquering Sicily, then Carthage and Libya.

Again this kind of aspiration to cultural transformation is not limited to Alcibiades or to the ancient world. It finds its way into other modern leaders in technology, business, and politics, whether their plan is to "put a dent in the universe" (Steve Jobs), construct "The Everything Store" (Jeff Bezos), renew the American auto-industry, revolutionize solar energy, and send a human to Mars (Elon Musk), or simply "Make America Great Again" (Donald Trump).

Note how the neuroscientist James Fallon argues for *not* ridding the human population of psychopaths:

“I don’t think we should remove the psychopathy-related traits and genes from society. It would lead to passivity and wipe us out. We just need to identify those people with the traits early in their lives and keep them out of trouble. Individuals with low empathy and high aggression, if they’re treated well, can have a positive impact. Of course, they put stress on their families and friends, as I do, but *on a macro level* they’re beneficial to society. Maybe this is my own narcissism speaking, but I believe there’s a sweet spot on the psychopathy spectrum. People who are twenty-five or thirty on the Hare scale are dangerous, but *we need a lot of twenties around--people with the chutzpah and brio and outrageousness to keep humanity vibrant and adaptable--and alive. People like me*” (Fallon 226-227, with my italics).

I do not have room here to go into the biographies of all of these figures, but I will conclude here with a definition of a construct that is helpful to critique them all by, what I am calling the “Alcibiades Complex.” My hope is that a citizenry better informed about Alcibiades could use this term to evaluate its own leaders. At a minimum I think it is a term that we could adopt when explaining to our students the relevance of this ancient figure.

The Alcibiades Complex is a collection of constructs and associated behaviors--the psychopath, the tyrant, the trickster, the free-rider--found in the depiction of Plutarch’s Alcibiades in his *Life* (this depiction may or may not correspond to the historical Alcibiades). Salient features of such a complex are a low emotional affect, aspirations to dominance/autocracy, a willingness to cross boundaries and break laws, clever impression management, and a grandiosity that promises a new stage of human civilization and also takes credit for the contributions of others. Human beings are deeply ambivalent about the Alcibiades-figure because on the one hand such a figure will do the cruel things that we don’t want to, will offer us the comfort of feeling that everything is under control, while offering a new world order; yet at the same time such a figure fills us with great unease, treats us with disrespect, and may lead us to reckless ruin.

In future research I plan to test the applicability of the “Alcibiades Complex” to contemporary leaders, and I hope that others may be persuaded to do so as well.

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