

The Self-Knowledge Necessity
Opening Remarks

(Pr. 1.1–18.10, Ol. 1.1–13.8)

Both Proclus (Pr.) and Olympiodorus (Ol.) begin their respective commentaries by emphasizing self-knowledge as the ground of human perfection, completion, or fulfilment (τελειότης), the journey toward which begins with reversion, the attentive turn back upon the self that carries the soul beyond the natural and ethical virtues and begets pursuit of the ultimate desideratum.¹ Neoplatonic students begin their study of Plato with the *Alcibiades* for this reason: it chronicles how the philosophical life emerges from knowing oneself. It should come as no surprise therefore that the commentators begin with reflections on the love at the core of the love of wisdom.

For Olympiodorus, philosophy in its highest sense is equivalent to Platonic philosophy, which he distinguishes from Aristotelian philosophy. His first lines remind the student that, whereas (Ol. 1.1–9) Aristotle begins his *Metaphysics* with the claim that all human beings naturally reach out (ὀρέγονται) for knowledge – evidence of which is their love (ἀγάπησις) of the senses – ‘I’ (ἐγώ)² would say that human

¹ For Olympiodorus I have used the recent two-volume English translation of Griffin (Olympiodorus, 2015 and 2016). The Greek is that of Westerink (Olympiodorus, 1956, rev. 1982). For Proclus, the translation is that of O’Neill (Proclus, 1965) based on the Greek of Westerink (Proclus, 1954). When citing the commentators (as Pr. and Ol.), I often slightly modify the English translations. Cf. also the French translation of Proclus by Segonds (Proclus, 1985 and 1986). The Platonic Greek of the *Alcibiades* is that of Denyer (Plato, 2001).

² Single quotation marks (“) are deployed throughout the book to emphasize the commentators’ direct, personal guidance of their student’s attention.

beings most truly reach for Plato's philosophy (φιλοσοφίας).³ The opening of the commentary thus effects a shift from desiring a particular kind of knowledge to wanting a particular kind of love: that is, Platonic love of wisdom. Love of the senses does not suffice for the soul's perfection; its longing must be redirected. Specifically (Ol. 2.1–13), it is for the sake of Plato's inspirations (ἐνθουσιασμῶν) that everyone reaches for his philosophy. Two of these inspirations, concerning eros and contemplation, are especially fundamental for the philosophical initiate: the soul that truly knows itself reaches out for a love that will lift it from its mortal condition and project it toward a totalizing grasp of the divine.⁴

Immediately a particular methodology becomes clear in Olympiodorus' commentary: in the first person, he speaks directly to his students about their previous pedagogical experience, thereby framing his lecture within the boundaries of what they already know. At the same time, he suggests that their development requires reorientation. Such transformation is the pedagogical task of the commentators, who in the *Alcibiades* commentaries are concerned less with particular points of doctrine than with a peculiar way of loving that arises from self-knowledge. Olympiodorus insists from the beginning that his students zealously strive to approach Plato with the same goal of those magi of whom the Anonymous Commentator speaks: they should be eager to learn Plato's love of wisdom.

³ See Arist. *Meta.* I.980a21–2. Griffin (2015, n2) following Mansfeld (1994, 92) claims that the previous, Aristotelian section of the Alexandrian curriculum likely ended with Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. Cf. Olympiodorus' introduction to Aristotelian philosophy: "Because we wish to benefit from the fount of goodness there is an eagerness among us to cleave to Aristotle's philosophy, which endows life with the source of goodness" (*Prol. Log.* 1.3–4). As Hadot (1991, 181–186) has argued, the Neoplatonic commentators went so far as to argue that the end of Aristotle's philosophy was identical to that of Plato, i.e., the return to the One, and thus his *Metaphysics* is a kind of midpoint between the studies of natural principles and natural causes and the true theology developed by Plato in the *Parmenides*.

⁴ Olympiodorus gleans the inspiration of τὸν θεωρητικόν, the contemplative, from *Tht.* 173c–177b, and that of eros from *Phdr.* 238d–241d. The other two inspirations are from *Ti.* 41a–d (possession by the divine) and *R.* VIII.5467a–547c (possession by the Muses). The use of the word "inspiration" is important, given that it also describes the highest kind of virtue. See Tarrant (2021, 214–218) for the argument that Olympiodorus speaks of inspirations to indicate that some higher voice speaks through Platonic characters. Whatever the peculiarities of these four kinds of inspiration, the general point here is that human beings reach for Plato's love of wisdom in order to access a presence superior to the merely human.

Proclus' student⁵ finds something similar (Pr. 1.1–5):⁶ 'we think' that discerning 'our own being' is not merely the most valid and surest starting point (ἀρχὴν κυριωτάτην καὶ βεβαιωτάτην) for the dialogues of Plato, but for the whole of philosophical contemplation (τῆς φιλοσόφου θεωρίας).⁷ Familiarity with being human is the beginning of the student's erotic journey. Human beings (Pr. 4.3–5) must ascertain their being prior to their perfection, for perfection is not of itself but of the being by which it is participated. Specifically, if (Pr. 4.5–18) 'we contemplate' each being, 'we shall be able' to apprehend whatever good its nature happens to be. Grasping one's own being begins the passage to fulfilment in the contemplative life, the pinnacle of which is ascent to the Good. The soul that falls short of this fulfilment will not merely be a soul that does not know intelligible reality – it will be a soul that, without knowing itself, does not even desire it in the first place. An example of such a figure, the student will soon find, is none other than Alcibiades himself.

Like Olympiodorus, Proclus speaks in the first person. His use of words like 'we' and 'our' are not trivial throwaway lines or stylistic idiosyncrasies, but psychagogic interjections intentionally aimed at guiding the reading of the Neoplatonic student. Specifically, they alert the student to the intimate bond between the themes of the text and what is happening in the student's own soul. Even in the opening pages of his commentary, Proclus purposefully writes to guide the philosophical initiate's attention back to the initiate

⁵ Olympiodorus' commentary is a compilation of notes taken by students during lectures; it is thus an ἐπὶ φωνῆς commentary, on which see the seminal article by Richard (1950). On taking notes as a pedagogical practice see *Vit. Proc.* XII–XIII. Proclus, on the other hand, composes his own commentary, which is nonetheless a fundamentally pedagogical treatise. As Griffin (Olympiodorus, 2015, 30) notes, "Proclus identifies us . . . as a 'student' embarking on the Platonic curriculum, who is, like Alcibiades in the dialogue, chiefly the rational soul still subject to *pathēmata*". I shall therefore also refer to Proclus' reader as a "student". Generally, as Wear (2006, 15) has argued, "the commentaries as we have them are actually the product of lectures and discussions. The purpose of the commentaries, moreover, was the instruction of pupils at the school". See also Taki (2012, 185), who suggests that Proclus deploys a respondent-centred reading method in interpreting the dialogues, and that this entails that "Plato's readers in general can, by joining the inquiry into the truth, proceed towards perfection step by step with a single idealised interlocutor". Cf. Taormina (2018, 608), who argues that commentaries, as privileged modes of philosophical teaching, were tailored to specific audiences, and displayed varying degrees of complexity depending on whether they were addressed to elementary or advanced students.

⁶ Proclus also distinguishes Plato from Aristotle (Pr. 1.7–2.8) on the grounds that the good of things has come from a source higher and more holy than the source of their being. Cf. *Nic. Eth.* I.6.1096a23, in which "good" has as many senses as "being." See further Pr. 2.8–4.2.

⁷ The soul, Socrates later remarks in the *Alcibiades* (130d6–7), is the most authoritative (κυριώτερόν) dimension of a human being. Cf. *R.* II.382a–b, in which beings, τὰ ὄντα, are described as τὰ κυριώτατα, what is most authoritative. Cf. also *R.* VII.533d1, in which doing away with hypotheses and ascending to a first principle is undertaken to make the soul more secure (βεβαιώσηται).

himself, the first step in conversion to the wisdom-loving life. Thus, the student hears, once we know ourselves (Pr. 1.5–7), ‘we shall be able’ to understand the good ‘appropriate to us’. The path forward for the student is thus directly and transparently announced prior to its being witnessed with the reading of the Platonic text: it is the passage, by way of self-knowledge, to intelligible reality, and ultimately to the first principle.

Both commentators, then, attempt nothing less than a transfiguration of the human soul and its reorientation toward the desiderative longing characteristic of the contemplative life, the consequence of which is the student’s ascent through the hierarchy of virtues that Neoplatonic pedagogy coordinates with the reading of particular Platonic dialogues. Olympiodorus’ seemingly arbitrary placement of his hagiographic biography of Plato – after his introductory remarks but prior to his discussion of the text of the *Alcibiades* – is not a random choice when viewed from this perspective: its purpose is to guide students to the love of wisdom by way of the archetypal exemplar of Plato himself.⁸

The Life begins with an invitation to the student (Ol. 2.14–15): ‘let us describe’ the life of the philosopher to benefit and prepare those who approach him. The presentation of the story is thus pedagogical from its opening, and it both tells of Plato’s life and attests to the soul’s progression through the virtues – Plato’s birth (Ol. 2.17–31) accounts for the natural virtues; his typically Athenian education (Ol. 2.32–93) for the ethical virtues; in Sicily (Ol. 2.94–133), he exhibits the constitutional virtues; in Egypt and Phoenecia (Ol. 2.134–144), he acquires the purificatory virtues; his establishment of the Academy (Ol. 2.145–155) depicts the contemplative virtues; and the later parts of his life (Ol. 2.155–3.2) show the paradigmatic and hieratic virtues.⁹

Of special interest for the student is that Plato (Ol. 2.16–17) is an ἐπίστροφος, “one who reverts human beings”,¹⁰ a role that he had to learn from his own teacher. That is, Plato’s birth and the pedestrian education of his youth proved to be merely propaedeutic to the psychotransformative experience of meeting Socrates. The student hears of Plato’s conversion by

⁸ As Motta (2021, 36–37) argues, Plato is depicted as the perfect paradigm for the philosophical life – in which one achieves harmony between words and actions – for the purpose of eliciting mimesis.

⁹ For detailed treatment of these correspondences, see Griffin’s analysis (Olympiodorus, 2015, 43–46). See also Riginos (1976) for a collection of stories and anecdotes about Plato’s life generally. Cf. Marinus’ *Vit. Proc.* and its interpretation in Blumenthal (1984) for a similar accounting of the virtues, only with Proclus as the protagonist. See Edwards (2001) for a broad study of Neoplatonist hagiography.

¹⁰ On reversion cf. *Enn.* VI.5.7.11–13. See also VI.9.7 and VI.10.4.

way of the story of Socrates' dream (Ol. 2.83–86), in which a wingless (ἄπτερος) swan is seated on his knees and, upon growing wings, flies up into the air. The description matches that of winged Eros, and the swan's ascent mirrors the uplifting power of divine love.¹¹ Next, in the subsequent episode of the *Life*, Plato travels to Sicily, during which he exhibits the constitutional virtues, achievement of which is only possible after the soul has started to turn toward itself. His encounter with Socrates must therefore have elicited from the young Plato the same result intended for the Neoplatonic student reading the *Alcibiades*: it awakened him to his own being, sparked an erotic metamorphosis, and marked the beginning of his rebirth as a lover of wisdom.

That Socrates at the end of the dialogue (135e1–3) speaks of his hatching in *Alcibiades* a reciprocal winged love (ἔρωτα ὑπόπτερον) will later conclude for the student what the *Life* of Plato reveals here at the beginning of Olympiodorus' commentary: self-knowledge is the gestational womb out of which is born the anagogical eros that lies at the heart of philosophy. As the historical Socrates turned Plato into a lover of wisdom, the character Socrates performs the same psychotherapeutic service for *Alcibiades* in the dialogue bearing the young man's name. The commentators themselves follow in this tradition and deploy the *Alcibiades* to turn their students toward themselves, psychagogically directing them inward so that they may ascend through the virtues.¹²

The apogee of this psychic journey is none other than the contemplative virtues – the highest virtues philosophy can achieve – which Plato himself exhibited in the founding of the Academy. It is here (Ol. 2.147–150) that Plato attracted many students, one of whom was Timon the misanthrope. This detail is of more than mere historical significance, for *Alcibiades* emerges in the dialogue's Proem as a philotimos, a passionate lover of honour, not wisdom. Timon's presence in the *Life* is a psychagogic marker, intentionally placed with pedagogical purpose, for his name, Τίμων, echoes the Greek τιμή, "honour", the very desideratum that *Alcibiades* cherishes most dearly and from which Socrates discourages him. Plato's attraction of Timon thus adumbrates for the student what the conversation of the *Alcibiades* enacts: the seduction of a philotimos

¹¹ See *Phdr.* 252b8–9.

¹² As Motta (2021, 42) suggests, the *Life* of Plato establishes a link between Plato and later Platonists, who qualify as masters for their students because they lead a life that mimics Socrates and Plato, a life that prioritizes guidance along an exegetical path rather than hunting for doctrine.

away from his lust for reputation.¹³ For Olympiodorus to call Timon a misanthrope is therefore to allege that what Timon embodies is harmful to human beings: it is a life in pursuit of a desideratum of dubious worth, cherished by those who do not know themselves.

Olympiodorus' Life concludes with the claim that Apollo brought forth Asclepius to keep our bodies healthy, Plato to keep our souls healthy.¹⁴ The reference to Apollo, whose oracle spoke at Delphi, points unmistakably to the dialogue's *skopos* – it enjoins the student to know himself. Hence he is told (Pr. 4.19–5.1), 'we should think' that the most valid starting point for all of philosophy and for the work of Plato is pure and clear 'knowledge of ourselves'. Platonic love of wisdom emerges as a response to the Delphic imperative. Specifically (Pr. 5.1–12), self-knowledge is the beginning of one's purification and perfection, akin to the cleansing rituals undertaken by those participating in religious rites, and just as there was a warning to those who would partake of the Eleusinian mysteries not to pass to the inner shrine if they were profane and uninitiated, so the Delphic inscription indicates the manner of ascent to the divine and the path toward purification.¹⁵ The erotic pursuit of divine wisdom, therefore, cannot flourish without a wholly revelatory exposition and thorough purification of the one who is to engage in the loving search.

In the Neoplatonic curriculum, the purificatory virtues are, strictly speaking, the subject of the *Phaedo*. More broadly, however, a student's purification may be said to begin with the *Alcibiades* because self-knowledge itself is a kind of catharsis, a psychotherapeutic cleansing that discloses our true being. The student thus hears (Pr. 5.13–14): 'let this be' the start of the teaching of Plato and of the love of wisdom. By structuring the curriculum as they do, the commentators lay bare a pedagogical trajectory that begins (Pr. 5.14–6.3) with the perfection of the imperfect, following Socrates, who himself began philosophy from the Delphic inscription, and who (Ol. 4.4–7) strives to lead Alcibiades upward via the same path. The beginning of the Neoplatonic curriculum instantiates this very Socratic pattern.

It is for this reason that Proclus tells his student (Pr. 6.3–11), 'we must begin' with self-knowledge as well, and 'we must inquire' which dialogue

¹³ Olympiodorus also claims that at the Academy, Plato demonstrated his love of wisdom (*φιλοσοφίαν*) as superior to any love of work (*φιλοπονίας*). The language anticipates the Protreptic section of the dialogue, in which Socrates exhorts Alcibiades to pursue something other than the hardship (*φιλοπονίαν*) pursued by the honour-loving Spartans (122c).

¹⁴ Cf. DL 3.45.

¹⁵ On the status of the Eleusinian Mysteries in late antiquity, see Bremmer (2017, 120–124).

has as its target the ‘contemplation of our being’ in order that ‘we may make’ our start on the works of Plato; ‘we can name’ no other dialogue than the *Alcibiades* in which ‘we shall say’ that the nature of our being is demonstrated.¹⁶ While the contemplative virtues properly speaking begin with the *Cratylus*, contemplation is thus, in one sense, already occurring, for insofar as contemplation is marked by yearning to become one with the object of knowledge, so here the philosophical initiate is invited to desideratively seek out himself by turning inward in an effort to make self-aware, unifying contact with his own being, a haptic encounter of intellectual intimacy in which the distinction between knower and known is overcome. The commentator, by unfolding the text dialogically, creates the very conditions under which this contemplative self-knowing can occur, fostering the initial self-cognizance that begins the journey to contemplation proper.¹⁷

Both commentators thus deploy the *Alcibiades* as the anagogic springboard for their student’s elevation to the intelligible. In Olympiodorus’ *Life*, Apollo led Socrates, who, in turn, led Plato. Plato himself leads his readers via the dialogue featuring Socrates and Alcibiades. Proclus and Olympiodorus, for their part, lead via their commentaries on the *Alcibiades*, which (Ol. 10.18–11.6), ‘one must mention’, is the gateway (προπολαίσις) on the way to the inner shrine (ἁδύτοις) of philosophy – that is, the *Parmenides*.¹⁸ The language of ancient Greek religion and temple architecture leaves little doubt that what is at stake is nothing less than a psychospiritual conversion that leads its would-be supplicant to an encounter with the divine. Hence, the student hears (Pr. 9.2–7), just as in a mystic rite there are preliminary cleansings, so too philosophical perfection, ‘it seems to me’, purges and prepares those on the way to self-knowledge, understood as the ‘intuitive contemplation of our being’. The *Alcibiades*, with the commentator’s direction, is the doorway through

¹⁶ See also Pr. 6.15–17: ‘nothing is nearer to us than ourselves’, so if we do not perceive what is nearest, what means is there of ascertaining the more remote, and ‘what is naturally known through us?’ Cf. Ol. 3.1–4.7.

¹⁷ Cf. Riggs (2015, 191): “In order to contemplate and unfold the soul’s objective, self-determined content . . . the individual must first recreate the conditions of this self-movement and self-determination in his embodied life.” It is precisely those conditions – that develop interior alertness – that the commentator fosters in the lecture hall.

¹⁸ This dialogue, the subject of which is theology, is the second of the two “perfect” dialogues. Olympiodorus here also references *Phdr.* 229e–230a, in which Socrates claims it is ridiculous to try to know other things before he knows himself. See also Pr. 6.11–15: how could ‘we examine’ anything before ourselves? Cf. *In Phdr.* 33.11–34; it is clear that the person who knows himself knows all things, for he will see all things in himself.

which an initiate must pass, enduring a cleansing that shepherds him toward the sanctum of the real.

Accordingly, the student is told (Pr. 6.17–7.1), ‘if you reflect’ that Socrates himself says that the beginnings of perfection depend on ‘contemplation of ourselves’, ‘you will no longer doubt’ that all who are eager for perfection must begin with the conversation between Socrates and Alcibiades. An analogical equivalence between Alcibiades and the Neoplatonic student, developed more concretely in the next chapter, is thus established: as the young man in the Platonic dialogue is guided to know himself, so too is the student correlatively directed by the commentator. Lest any student object that not every human being is akin to Alcibiades – born with his privileges and advantages – he is met with the insistence that (Pr. 7.1–8) ‘each one of us’ is more or less subject to his sufferings; ‘we do not know ourselves’, and therefore ‘we need help’ so that ‘we happen upon the care appropriate to us’.

Whatever else transpires in the dialogue, Socrates’ love for Alcibiades leads him back to himself, because (Pr. 9.14–15) ‘the contemplation of our being’ is the dialogue’s principal target (σκοπιμώτατον ἔστι).¹⁹ In the Neoplatonic lecture hall, the student’s own psychoerotic metamorphosis is similarly emphasized: the target (Pr. 10.14–17) is knowledge of ‘our being’, and ‘we are lovers’ of this knowledge in order that ‘we may attain our perfection’. The more the soul knows itself, the more it yearns to know itself, and this yearning, cultivated through psychagogic direction, is transfigured into a longing for the whole of the intelligible.²⁰ The subsequent two dialogues in the Neoplatonic curriculum are placed to ensure the completion of this process – the *Gorgias* establishes the priority of reason over spirit and appetite through examination of desiderata that fail to satisfy the soul, and the *Phaedo* treats the reversion of reason within itself – that is, the psychic revolution that terminates in the soul’s desire to be intellect.

The *Alcibiades*, then (Pr. 11.1–4), is the beginning of all love of wisdom. Proclus reminds his student that Iamblichus (Pr. 11.4–17) placed it first in

¹⁹ Cf. Pr. 7.9–9.1 on whether someone might ‘reproach us’ for making this the skopos. See further Pr. 9.7–14. See also Anon. *Proleg.* 21.1–23.28 for rules on establishing the skopos, or the dialogue’s main target. Cf. Mansfeld (1994, 10–11). The Neoplatonic assumption of a unitary skopos is, of course, not without controversy. See Baltzly (2017, especially 185–194), in which the unitary skopos is said to create a shared experience of the student’s reading of the text with his teacher. The skopos, in other words, is another psychagogic element in Neoplatonic pedagogy.

²⁰ On care of the soul as consequent to self-knowledge, see Pr. 9.16–10.14: care of the soul ‘accrues to us’ as an end and benefit from self-knowledge. See further Pr. 10.17–19.

the curriculum because it is like a seed that contains the whole of Plato's philosophy, revealed through 'our turning toward ourselves'.²¹ Olympiodorus, for his part, delineates the soul's anagogic passage with a preliminary discussion (Ol. 4.8–14) of the differences between self (αὐτό) and the self itself (αὐτὸ τὸ αὐτό).²² The distinction, which arises at the end of the *Alcibiades* (129b1ff), discloses the wisdom-loving path by intimating what will become fully manifest only at the dialogue's conclusion: that the levels of virtue – and the differing layers of reality itself – are attained by the soul in direct proportion to the degree that it knows itself. For instance, the identification in the *Alcibiades* of the human being with the rational soul – not the body or the composite – anticipates acquisition of the constitutional virtues, in which the rational soul (Ol. 4.17–21) uses the body as an instrument, in need of spirit and appetite.²³ The student is thus already being prepared for his reading of the *Gorgias*, in which constitutional well-being is defined not merely in terms of the statesman's ordering the city but his practising the virtues of justice and moderation within the tripartition of his own soul.²⁴

²¹ Fr.1 (Dillon, 1973).

²² The difference (Ol. 4.15–17) between how Proclus and Damascius read the distinction between self and self itself is replicated in their divergent views about the skopos: for Proclus, the skopos is self-knowledge unqualifiedly (ἀπλῶς), whereas for Damascius, it is constitutional self-knowledge (τοῦ πολιτικῶς γινῶναι ἑαυτόν). Segonds (Proclus, 1985, lvi) cites Hadot's translation of Olympiodorus' reference to Damascius: "Dans ce dialogue, l'homme est définie comme une âme rationnelle se servant du corps comme d'un instrument: or, seul l'homme qui vit une vie de citoyen se sert du corps comme d'un instrument." Olympiodorus (Ol. 5.17–6.1) effects a compromise that is 'necessary for us' – Damascius' reading is more precise, although his view that the dialogue is about constitutional self-knowledge primarily leaves open the possibility that Proclus' position also has a place. Renaud (2009, 373) argues that Olympiodorus thus situates the conversation between Socrates and Alcibiades on multiple planes simultaneously, for one can know oneself in different ways: "πολιτικῶς, c'est-à-dire selon les parties constitutives de l'âme usant du corps (πολιτικῶς donc, dans le sens de la constitution, πολιτεία, de l'âme tripartite et de la modération des passions); καθαρτικῶς, dans le processus de se libérer des passions liées au corps, lorsque l'âme est tournée vers soi (ἐπιστροφουσα πρὸς ἑαυτήν); et θεωρητικῶς, lorsque l'âme, une fois libérée du corps, est rationnelle et entièrement tournée vers les choses supérieures, en dernière instance le bien, vers ce qui est supérieur." There is no extant commentary from Damascius on the *Alcibiades*, though Griffin (Olympiodorus, 2015, n77) speculates that Olympiodorus may have had access to one.

²³ As Griffin (Olympiodorus, 2015, n79) notes, the traditional Neoplatonic position here is that the lower parts of the soul – that is, spirit and appetite – require the body for their expression. Chlup (2009, 45–46), citing Proclus' *In Remp.* I 38.15–22, states: "Human soul acts as a bridge between the psychic level (i.e., the rational soul) and the bodily world, the irrational parts of the soul being inserted as an indispensable mean term between the two extremes."

²⁴ On these two virtues and their role as constitutional virtues, see *In Gor.* 0.5, 0.7, 10.5, 17.2, 17.6, 17.9, 18.2, 19.2, 20.2, 22.2, 22.4, 23.1, 23.3, 23.5, 23.7, 24.1, 26.4, 26.7, 29.1, 32.1, 34.2, 35.1, 35.3, 35.6, 36.5, 37.1–2, 37.11, 41.1, 43.7, 45.2, 45.5, 47.7, and 50.4. Olympiodorus is keenly aware that the student of the *Gorgias* has already read the *Alcibiades*, for he insists in his commentary (3.10) that justice is not a matter of convention but of nature, 'as has been more fully stated in the *Alcibiades*'.

By including the distinction between the self and the self itself at the beginning of his commentary, Olympiodorus also looks forward to the purificatory virtues of the *Phaedo* and the contemplative virtues of the dialogues subsequent to it. Hence the student hears that the need (Ol. 4.21–5.1) for the body – and the lower parts of the soul – is left behind by both the purificatory and contemplative persons. The purificatory person (Ol. 5.1–6) is the soul freeing itself (ἀπολυομένη) from the body, released from its chains through sympathy by which it transcends its love of the body, whereas the contemplative (Ol. 5.6–13) has been released (ἀπολελυμένη) from the body, active in accordance with what is most divine within. That is, the purificatory person is *freeing* himself from the body, while the contemplative has already been *freed*. Both persons are characterized, generally, by apatheia or freedom from the passions (ἀπάθεια), and also by sympathy (συμπάθεια), or psychic contact with the intelligible realm.²⁵ But whereas neither the purificatory person nor the contemplative are body-lovers, it is the contemplative alone who is also not a soul-lover. Because he is active in accordance with what is most divine, he longs to move beyond the soul and to become intellect, and loves the intelligible so as to assimilate himself to it.²⁶ The contemplative, in other words, is a perfected lover of wisdom.

The psychagogic objective of the entire curriculum is therefore presented before commentary on the text of the *Alcibiades* even begins. The goal of the student's conversion is freedom from the passions, identical to freedom for contemplation. Ἀπάθεια, thus understood, is not indifference or carelessness as the English translation “apathy” might suggest, for the soul at the level of purificatory virtue is wholly epimeletic. Indeed, insofar as it is freeing itself from the cares of the body, psychic perfection is its exclusive concern, and as it progresses toward contemplative virtue, it

²⁵ Cf. *El. Theo.* 29 and 31 on similarity between higher causes and lower effects that makes sympathy possible in the whole cosmos. Cf. *Enn.* IV.4.32 and *De Myst.* 3.27, 5.7.

²⁶ On becoming intellect see *Enn.* VI.9.3.22–27. This analysis is slightly complicated by Olympiodorus' claim that (Ol. 5.13–16) the purificatory person is distinguished by metripathia, moderation of the passions (μετριπάθεια), and the contemplative by apatheia, freedom from passions (ἀπάθεια). Strictly speaking, moderation of the passions is characteristic of the soul at the level of constitutional virtue, not purificatory. The tension is eased by recalling that, at the beginning of the *Phaedo*, the student is supposed to have just completed the *Gorgias*, and therefore would indeed be characterized by metripathia as he begins the process of freeing himself entirely. Similarly, the student having just completed the *Phaedo* would be characterized by apatheia, his sympathetic contact with the intelligible ready to emerge over the course of the remainder of the curriculum. See Ol. *In Phd.* 4.3 (cf. 3.6 and 4.11) in which the statesman, using his body as an instrument, exhibits not freedom from the passions but moderation of them (οὐχ ἡ ἀπάθεια ἀλλ' ἡ μετριπάθεια).

discovers that its fulfilment requires reversion upon intellect. It thus purifies itself from any and all παθήματα, “passions” or “sufferings”, that stand in the way of this revertive movement. It sheds, in other words, anything that obstructs its complete love of wisdom.

Olympiodorus’ subsequent description of Plato’s surpassing other ancient schools of philosophy is therefore a statement about the very nature of philosophy itself: loving wisdom is a way of life that requires a psychotherapeutic purgation initiated by an educator that attends to an initiate’s soul in its present state, however marred or fractured. Socrates, for instance (Ol. 6.1–5), knew that Alcibiades would not tolerate questioning (ἀνέξεταί) about self-knowledge unless Socrates discussed his present appetite: his love of honour.²⁷ It is not, in other words, merely epistemic ignorance that obstructs Alcibiades’ conversion to the philosophical life, but his passionate philotimia, which Socrates seeks to purge through admonishments that (Ol. 6.5–7) are like painless purifications. Far from simply providing his interlocutor with a definition in the face of his mistaken answers, Socrates targets the young man’s peculiar desideratum and transfigures his love for it. If someone (Ol. 7.4–8) is a lover, Socrates will teach him what love of beautiful things is; if a lover of wealth, what self-sufficiency is; if a lover of pleasure, what the easy life truly is. Socrates is thus presented as a psychagogue who heals his student, not by dictating answers or corrections but by leading him to transformation so that he no longer desires what he wanted in the first place. Platonic philosophy exceeds other schools for precisely this reason; it begets the love peculiar to the love of wisdom.²⁸

That this love is rooted in self-knowledge and thus connected to the hierarchy of virtues is clear by way of another set of comments from Olympiodorus that might seem out of place: his sketch of the dialogue’s climax (132d–133c), in which Socrates tells Alcibiades to look away from himself and see in him intellect and god. In this intensely intimate moment, Socrates (Ol. 7.9–8.5) converses with Alcibiades about constitutional self-knowledge – because Alcibiades is an aspiring politician – but also about purificatory and contemplative self-knowledge – because Alcibiades has given himself over (ἐκδοῦς σεαυτὸν) to non-rational activities. The Platonic text’s (Ol. 8.5–10) “look away to me” indicates constitutional self-knowledge; to look at “not any random part” indicates

²⁷ Cf. *Ap.* 38a5–6: the unexamined (ἀνεξέταστος) life is not worth living for human beings.

²⁸ Cf. Ol. 6.7–7.4 on the deficiencies of methods of purification in Hippocrates, Aristotle, and the Pythagoreans. This theme is taken up again in detail at Ol. 54.15–55.14.

purificatory self-knowledge; and “you shall see in me intellect” indicates contemplative self-knowledge, for engaging (τὸ . . . ὁμιλεῖν) with realities in accordance with intellect befits the contemplative.²⁹ Because this entire exchange occurs in the highly erotic context of lovers gazing into each other’s eyes, the student finds not only that the three ways of knowing oneself track the kinds of excellence inculcated in the curriculum, but that it is love that first turns the soul inside itself and then carries it upward on its journey to the intelligible.

Ἐκδίδωμι, “to surrender”, and ὁμιλέω, “to consort with”, bookend the transformative path travelled by the philosophical initiate, beginning with a relinquishing of what is alien – the desiderata correlative to the lower parts of the soul – to associating with what is by nature familiar – the intelligible, in zealous pursuit of which the self-knowing soul freely gives itself. Taking the first step of that journey reveals the essence of the human soul and its natural connection to the Delphic imperative, for *know* (Ol. 9.1–4) is addressed to a soul with the capacity for knowledge, and (Ol. 9.4–8) *thysself* indicates a rational soul, because a non-rational soul cannot revert upon itself.³⁰ The student is thus called to a uniquely human self-activation, a knowing that, moreover, amounts to a kind of conversion, for the imperative (Ol. 9.8–11) concerns being transformed (μεταβεβλήσθαι) from ignorance to knowledge, which is a process of psychic fulfilment. Knowing oneself as a rational soul is therefore a metamorphosis of the whole self, a sort of becoming what one already is, which culminates with the soul’s noetic ascent to its superior.³¹

Olympiodorus’ subsequent exhortation – (Ol. 9.20–10.1) ‘let us get into the detail’ about the usefulness of the *Alcibiades* – emphasizes this archaeological starting point in a way that reveals how it unfolds through the entire Neoplatonic curriculum. First, if (Ol. 10.11–15) a human being were identical to his body, he would pursue size and beauty; if to appetite, he would love pleasure (τὸ φιλήδονον); if to spirit, he would love honour (τὸ φιλότιμον); but as a rational soul, virtue alone is sufficient for well-being (εὐδαιμονίαν). The mistaken desiderata enumerated here await the student’s considered reflection with the reading of the *Gorgias*. Next, the

²⁹ Olympiodorus (Ol. 8.10–14) adds that Socrates’ mention of “god” accounts for ascent even beyond contemplative self-knowledge, to inspirational self-knowledge. On the theme of mirroring – so important to the dialogue’s climax in the Maieutic section – see Ol. 9.11–16.

³⁰ Cf. Ol. 8.15–9.1: And since ‘we have mentioned’ the Delphic inscription, ‘one must see’ that it was not inscribed without purpose.

³¹ The *Alcibiades*, then, because (Ol. 9.16–19) it emphasizes that the human being is soul, occupies a place in the order of Plato’s dialogues similar to that of Plotinus’ first treatise (I.1) in the *Enneads*.

student hears also that the *Alcibiades* (Ol. 10.1–7) is useful ‘for us’ in grasping the soul’s immortality, for it is by reverting to ourselves that ‘we know ourselves’, and since anything that reverts upon itself is immortal, ‘we shall know’ that the soul is immortal. The themes of the *Phaedo* are thus introduced long before the dialogue is read.³² Finally, the *Alcibiades* looks forward to the contemplative dialogues – (Ol. 10.7–11) it contributes ‘for us’ knowledge of all beings, for if ‘we know’ the soul, ‘we will also know’ the formulas it holds within itself. Because the soul is an image of intelligible reality, in contemplating it, we contemplate all that is.³³

Beyond the topical content of the *Alcibiades*, its very structure also illuminates the pedagogical unfolding of the curriculum in terms of self-knowledge and love. The dialogue (Ol. 11.7–8), ‘one must see’, is divided into three. Such is (Pr. 13.16–14.1) ‘how . . . we say’ it is divided, and the secondary and instrumental parts must harmonize with the primary and principal ones. The three main sections – the Elenctic (106c3–119a7), the Protreptic (119a8–124a8), and the Maieutic (124a8–135e8) – are preceded by a treatment of eros in the Proem (103a1–106c2), and the final lines of Olympiodorus’ commentary also feature remarks on eros (Ol. 232.8ff). This exegetical framing mirrors the dialogue itself, which begins with Socrates’ proclamation of love and concludes with Alcibiades’ erotic reciprocation. The larger three divisions are thus bracketed by love on both sides, signalling philosophy’s birth out of love and continuation through love.

The three principal divisions may be aligned with the thematic targets of the three dialogues that constitute the first third of the Platonic curriculum, thereby illustrating that passage to the contemplative life is already implicit in this first dialogue.³⁴ In the refutation or Elenctic section (ἐλεγκτικόν), Socrates (Pr. 14.8–11) takes away ignorance from reason

³² Olympiodorus’ claim (Ol. 10.15–17) that the soul passes into the next world only with its virtue and vice also anticipates the end of both the *Gorgias* (523c–e, 524c–d) and the *Phaedo* (107c–d). Cf. *In Gor.* 48–50, Dam. *In Phd.* I.466–551, and II.81–148. Note especially the link between Plato’s afterworldly myths in the *Gorgias*, *Phaedo*, and *Republic* (I.471 and II.85).

³³ Cf. *El. Theo.* 195: “Every soul is all things, the things of sense after the manner of an exemplar and the intelligible things after the manner of an image.”

³⁴ Proclus rejects other philosophers (Pr. 11.18–13.15) – of which nonetheless ‘one must speak’, and some of whom ‘we shall praise’, even though ‘we shall say’ they do not make a substantial division – who divide the dialogue on the basis of forms of expression (τὸ λεκτικόν) or on the basis of syllogisms and demonstrations (συλλογιστικόν . . . καὶ ἀποδεικτικόν) because they grasp only the means and do not adequately capture the true subject matter. He does, however, insist that (Pr. 14.16–23) each syllogism ‘leads us up’ to ‘contemplation of our substance’ and knowledge of ourselves. He therefore comments on each of the ten syllogisms in their relation to the skopos (Pr. 15.1–18.10). These syllogisms serve as subdivisions in the forthcoming chapters of this book.

and removes obstacles to knowledge. This purgation is essential to the psychagogic project of the commentators, for (Pr. 14.2–8) the purpose of the *Alcibiades* is ‘to turn each one of us toward ourselves’, which requires ‘cleansing our reason’ from what interrupts its return upon itself. Proclus’ language foreshadows the *Phaedo*, in which the rational soul is purified of obstructions that block reason’s reversion to images of Forms within itself.³⁵ So too the Elenctic section demonstrates the human need for self-cultivation, for Socrates shows that Alcibiades is doubly ignorant of justice (Ol. 11.8–23) because he has neither learned from a teacher nor inquired into it for himself. This refutation, the student shall see, concerns far more than what Alcibiades knows. Socrates calls his entire honour-loving life into question, and the section concludes with his encouraging Alcibiades to care for himself (119a9). Once more, it thematically aligns with the *Phaedo*, which treats the care of the soul.³⁶

Next, in the exhortation or Protreptic section (προτρεπτικόν), Socrates encourages Alcibiades (Pr. 14.11–14) not to be content with his physical advantages and fall short of practices that accord with perfect virtue, but instead (Ol. 12.1–4) to conquer his antagonists by wisdom. Alcibiades, basing his claim to rule on the natural and ethical virtues and aspiring to triumph on the battlefield, is directed to victory of a wholly different sort. Such virtues are shown to be insufficient for well-being, for they are the virtues attainable without self-knowledge, and thus do not cultivate to the truest human longing. Whereas the Elenctic section therefore undermines Alcibiades’ conception of *how* to live, the Protreptic section shows he does not know *what* he really wants. At stake is not just caring for oneself – *how*

³⁵ On purification and the purificatory virtues in the *Phaedo*, see Ol. *In Phd.* 1.2, 1.4, 1.13, 2.8, 2.14, 3.3, 4.11, 7.2, 7.11, Dam *In Phd.* 1.7, 11, 41, 51, 53, 67–70, 90, 93–99, 100, 102, 114, 116, 126, 130, 132, 152, 156, 158, 161–164, 168, 171, 179–181, 301, 348, 360, 415 483, 500, 544, 551, 11.86, 112, 145, 148, and 150. Note especially the connection between the constitutional, purificatory, and contemplative virtues at Ol. *In Phd.* 4.2, 4.15, 5.4, 6.3, 6.11, 7.9, 7.10, Dam. *In Phd.* 1.74–77, 119–124, and 167. Olympiodorus (Lecture 8) and Damascius (1.138–151) also discuss each type of virtue, already cited above in the Introduction. On Forms within the soul see Ol. *In Phd.* 12.1, Dam. *In Phd.* 1.274, and 11.15.

³⁶ That is, the rational soul in the process of purifying itself. On the theme of care in the dialogue see Ol. *In Phd.* 1.7, 3.5, Dam. *In Phd.* 1.17–19, 29–30, 126–137, 165–172, 472–476, 480, 486, 500, 553, 561, 11.86–93, 97, 112, and 117. Reading *Phd.* 64e6, Damascius (1.71) wonders why Socrates does not directly declare that the philosopher is inaccessible to greed or philotimia. One of the possibilities Damascius advances is especially relevant for Alcibiades: that the denial of greed and the love of honour are implied in Socrates’ denial of care of the body and in what he calls “directing the soul toward itself”. For the student, the rational soul’s inward turn, completed in the *Phaedo*, begins with the reading of the Elenctic section of the *Alcibiades*, in which Socrates attempts to extirpate the passion of philotimia and interrogate Alcibiades’ obsession with his physical appearance and conventional notions of beauty more broadly.

to live well – but *what* self-cultivation assumes as its ultimate desideratum. Socrates undercuts the purported worth of any desideratum other than wisdom, the pursuit of which, he suggests, should be the fulcrum around which Alcibiades orders himself and arrays his activities. Socrates proposes, in other words, that Alcibiades discipline himself and live the philosophical life. The Protreptic section of the dialogue therefore aligns with the *Gorgias*, in which proper self-constitution, the organizing node of which is not honour but wisdom, is taken up in detail.³⁷

Finally, the section on midwifery or the Maieutic section (μαϊευτικόν) provides for (Pr. 14.14–16) recollection of ‘our being’ and discovery of correct care. Having led Alcibiades throughout the dialogue, Socrates now reveals (Ol. 12.5–16) that Alcibiades is his own teacher, and Socrates acts as a midwife for the birth of formulas already within his soul. It is here that the *Alcibiades* coincides, so to speak, with itself. Just as the dialogue is the hinge between the student’s previous education and the forthcoming reading of the Platonic curriculum, the Maieutic section serves the same purpose within the *Alcibiades* itself, appropriating the material of the previous two sections and looking forward to Alcibiades’ commitment to live the philosophical life. By disclosing what it is to be human, it answers the question that looms unanswered in first two divisions: *who* is the one who will undergo self-constitution and purification? Alcibiades is most truly his soul, recognition of which must precede both the discipline and purgation that enable fulfilment in the contemplative life. The arguments and analyses of the *Gorgias* and the *Phaedo*, prior to the student’s arrival at the *Cratylus*, all assume that the human being is the soul. But this identification and the way in which it foregrounds the lessons of the curriculum must be initially demonstrated. It is not enough that self-knowledge is said to be foundational; it must be shown *why* this is the case. That the care of the self and pursuit of its ultimate desideratum assume the identity of self with the soul cannot be taken for granted. For the commentators to train their students in the constitutional and purificatory virtues without first showing that the human being is the soul would, in other words, be begging the question.

While it might seem strange to think that the tripartite division of the *Alcibiades* actually moves backward from the curriculum’s third dialogue to its first, the interpretation is justified when seen as psychagogic, for the

³⁷ On constitutional virtue and constitutional well-being, see *In Gor.* 0.4–0.7, 1.6, 1.9, 1.13, 4.1, 11.1, 12.3, 13.2, 15.1, 15.5, 18.1, 18.9, 22.2, 23.3, 23.6, 24.1, 30.2, 32.2, 32.14, 34.2, 35.1, 37.2, 37.3, 38.1, 39.2, 40.3, 42.3, 44.7, 45.1, 47.5–47.6, 48.1, 48.4, 50.1–2, and 50.13.

student is called upon not merely to know himself, but to comprehend that self-knowledge is the foundation for the entirety of the wisdom-loving life. He must therefore be shown not only what self-knowledge is, but that the fundamental questions of the philosophical life cannot be addressed without an inquiry into the very *I* presupposed in their asking. The student must understand why Alcibiades proffers the erroneous answers he does, for only when his mistakes – wrongheaded versions of how to live and what to pursue – are shown to be mistakes entailed by self-ignorance can the student grasp the necessity of responding to the Delphic imperative. That the structure of the *Alcibiades*, when seen in light of the reading order of the dialogues and their correlative virtues, reveals a Socrates who works in reverse, as it were, speaks not just to the exegetical acumen of the commentators, but is a testament to the pedagogical profundity of their curriculum.

To summarize: Socrates proposes that Alcibiades change *how* he lives only to undermine *what* he wants and finally concludes that Alcibiades is misguided about both because he assumes a mistaken conception of *who* he is. This progression is itself framed on both sides by eros. It ends with eros, for (Ol. 12.17–13.8) Socrates turns Alcibiades into a lover by the end of the dialogue; he accomplishes the goal of the art of love – its reciprocation.³⁸ But it also begins with eros, for Socrates' first words are not those of concepts but courtship. The young man's pending metamorphosis is begun by means of love. The Neoplatonic reading of the dialogue's Proem, therefore, is not just a reflection on Socrates' pederastic obsession with a beautiful young man and his attempt to seduce him away from his other lovers – it is a prolonged meditation on the nature of love and its ultimate expression in the philosophical life.

³⁸ Cf. *Phdr.* 255c–e. For the “art of love” in Plato and specifically the *Alcibiades*, see Dillon (1994).