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Self-Knowledge in the *First Alcibiades* and in the commentary of Olympiodorus¹

The *First Alcibiades* (henceforth *Alcibiades*)² contains one of the rare discussions of self-knowledge in the Platonic *corpus*. In connection to the Delphic precept "Know Thyself" γνῶθι σαυτόν), self-knowledge is identified in that dialogue with the knowledge of the soul. While this link between "the true self" and the soul is found in other Platonic dialogues, the *Alcibiades* formulates it most clearly: "The soul is the human being" (ἡ ψυχὴ ἐστὶν ἄνθρωπος, 130 C 6)³. The idea that the true self is the intellect enjoyed a great fortune in Antiquity, as has been admirably shown by Jean Pépin, to whose memory I would like to pay tribute here⁴. Self-knowledge conceived as the knowledge of the divinity of the intellect constitutes, moreover, the most positive interpretation of the Delphic precept, in comparison to traditional interpretations which underline human finitude in opposition to divine permanence and perfection⁵.

The unusual approach adopted in this study requires a clarification. Olympiodorus' *Alcibiades* commentary remains largely unknown even to many specialists of Late Antiquity (there exists no translation in any modern language)⁶ and deserves systematic treatment, which I shall present in another context. This is not intended here - I propose rather to examine in what way this forgotten commentary can shed light on a few specific exegetical issues in Plato. While the combined study of Plato's text and its later interpretation in Antiquity, as opposed to their separate treatment, remains a novel practice, I consider it to be of value especially for Platonic studies. Recent publications by Harold Tarrant have already provided a few rich examples of this kind of work⁷. It was gratifying to discover, after completion of the present study, that the principal thesis of a recent

¹ I heartily thank the audience at the Como conference, *Psychè in Platone* (February 2006) and that of the Institut d'études anciennes of the Université Laval, Québec (October 2006) as well as Michel Narcy for his judicious remarks (and Jeremy Hayhoe for his kind proof-reading of the English). This study, which is part of a larger project on Olympiodorus as Plato interpreter, was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, which I would also like to thank.

² I will refer to the edition of Burnet (1901); I have also consulted that of Croiset (1920), Carlini (1964) and Denyer (2001).

³ Still better and perhaps more accurate is a slightly different formula from the same passage: μὴδὲν ἄλλο τὸν ἄνθρωπον συμβαίνειν ἢ ψυχὴν, "the human being is nothing other than (his) soul" (130 C 3).

⁴ Cf. esp. Pépin 1971.

⁵ Cf. According to a third interpretation, the precept constitutes a warning against the overestimation of individual capabilities (cf. Aristotle, *Rhetorica*, 1395 a 18). For an overview of the interpretations to which the Delphic precept gave rise in Antiquity, see e.g. Tränkle 1985.

⁶ An English translation by Michael Griffin is in preparation for publication in Robert Sorabji's *Ancient Commentators on Aristotle Series*, Duckworth, London.

⁷ E.g. Tarrant 2005; cf. Annas 1999; Sedley 2002.

article by Tarrant on the same subject⁸ is in substantial agreement with mine. According to our two studies, which start from very different concerns, the importance of the interpretation of the *Alcibiades* by Olympiodorus lies in the ability to reconcile and to unite the “erotic” (more generally anthropological) and the “demonic” (more largely theological) dimensions of Socrates’ activities⁹.

1. The reception of the *Alcibiades*

1.1. The uncertain status of the *Alcibiades* today

The *Alcibiades* is in many respects an enigmatic dialogue. Its place in the Platonic corpus is difficult to determine and its very authenticity has repeatedly been called into question since the nineteenth century. The enigmatic character of the *Alcibiades* lies principally in the fact that it contains, or so it would seem, an idiosyncratic mix of Socratism and Platonism. The first section of the dialogue (106 C-116 E) is essentially refutative and clearly appears to be Socratic. The second includes a long discourse (121 A-124 B) reminiscent of some of the “middle dialogues”. The last section has a metaphysical and didactic content (128 A-130 C, 132 C-133 C) in the style of the “late dialogues”, or in the style of Middle Platonism according to some¹⁰. Stylistic studies note a few *hapax*, but above all confirm the curious fact that the dialogue displays linguistic characteristics common to all three periods of the traditional chronology (early, middle and late). Moreover it is recognized that the dialogue contains a good summary (according to some, too good, and therefore artificial) of Socratic ethics. Indeed the main theme of self-care and self-knowledge as well as the repeated evocations of Socrates’ personal god makes it similar to the so-called Socratic or early dialogues (τὸ δαιμόνιον: 103 A; (ὁ) θεός: 105 B-E, 124 C, 127 E, 135 D)¹¹.

Are we then dealing here with an authentic work or not? If it is authentic, from what period is it? Given the “hybrid” character of this dialogue, from both a stylistic and thematic point of view, none of the various hypotheses of periodization are wholly satisfying. Perhaps the question itself is misleading, for it rests on the traditional chronology and more specifically on the developmental theory. This hermeneutical approach, although widespread, has been seriously criticized in the last few years in favour of adopting a more unifying or less linear approach to the dialogues¹². Whatever the case, to take

⁸ Tarrant 2007, esp. pp. 9-12.

⁹ Harold Tarrant and I have begun co-authoring a book to be entitled *The Platonic Alcibiades I: The Dialogue and its Ancient Reception* (under contract with Cambridge University Press).

¹⁰ Against the authenticity, see e.g. Bluck 1953, Clark 1955 and more recently Smith 2004.

¹¹ For a defense of the authenticity (and of the unity) of the dialogue, but not necessarily as “Socratic dialogue” (or “early dialogue”), see e.g. Croiset (1963, p. 50), Annas (1985, p. 118), Pradeau (1999, pp. 21-22) and Denyer (2001, pp. 5-11). The conclusion of Ledger’s stylometric study on the *Alcibiades* is likely to surprise some: «It seems astonishing that, if this work is spurious, the author should have had such success in matching the Platonic style as to be closer in many instances to genuine works than they are to each other» (1989, p. 218).

¹² Cf. Annas 1999; Denyer 2001, pp. 20-26; Gill 2006, pp. 140-147; for a general discussion on the current methodological debates, see e.g. Vegetti 2003, 66-85.

the *Alcibiades* seriously as a *possibly* authentic work, as this study proposes, forces us to rethink the traditional classification and thereby the relationship between Socratism and Platonism¹³. The commentary of Olympiodorus can help us better to understand some of the issues involved in this re-examination. It is fitting to recall briefly the dialogue’s privileged status in Antiquity first.

1.2. The privileged status of the *Alcibiades* in Antiquity and in Olympiodorus

In Antiquity the authenticity and place of the *Alcibiades* in the Platonic corpus were considered to be wholly unproblematic. Indeed, for more than three centuries of Neoplatonism, the dialogue was read and commented as the very basis for teaching Plato’s entire philosophy. Considering the corpus as a unity and not in terms of chronology or development, the Ancients explained the apparent discrepancies between the dialogues in the light of what they considered to be Plato’s pedagogical and didactic intentions. The only complete ancient commentary of the dialogue that has survived is that of Olympiodorus of Alexandria (= *In Alcibiadem*, ed. Westerink 1956, 144 pages)¹⁴. Proclus’ commentary in its present state is incomplete; it covers the first third of the dialogue only (103 A-116 A) and thus loses some of its usefulness for the present study, although it will occasionally be referred to in the notes.

Olympiodorus (before 505 – after 565) generally follows the hermeneutical and pedagogical principles of his predecessors, principles that date from at least as far back as Jamblichus’ *curriculum*. This approach seeks to determine notably the goal or unifying subject (σκοπός) of each dialogue¹⁵. The *Alcibiades* is then the first dialogue to be read (as ἀρχή of philosophy simply)¹⁶ since it is viewed as the most apt to teach us the knowledge of our own true nature, namely our rational soul¹⁷. This is why the dialogue is clas-

¹³ Cf. Weil 1964, p. 84. My intention here is not so much to defend the authenticity of the dialogue as to explore direct and indirect *implications* of this hypothesis. The uncertain status of the dialogue nowadays is such that few Plato commentators “dare” to refer to it, which has as additional consequence that such implications for our understanding of Plato are insufficiently discussed.

¹⁴ The complete title is: ΣΧΟΛΙΑ ΕΙΣ ΤΟΝ ΠΛΑΤΩΝΟΣ ΑΛΚΙΒΙΑΔΗΝ ΑΠΟ ΦΩΝΗΣ ΟΛΥΜΠΙΟΔΩΡΟΥ ΤΟΥ ΜΕΓΑΛΟΥ ΦΙΛΟΣΟΦΟΥ. Olympiodorus’ commentary, like all the others by him that have come down to us, consists of lecture notes taken by a student (cf. Richard 1950; for an introduction to Olympiodorus see e.g. Tarrant 1998). His commentaries are divided into lectures, subdivided in turn into general and detailed analysis (θεωρία; λέξεις). On Olympiodorus’ teaching methods, see Festugière 1963, pp. 77-80; Renaud (2009). The dating of the *Alcibiades* commentary is uncertain; Westerink (1976, p. 21) proposes 560.

¹⁵ According to Jamblichus, the *Alcibiades* contains “the whole philosophy of Plato [...] as it were in seminal form [ὅσπερ ἐν σπέρματι]” (fr. 1, edition and translation Dillon 1973, pp. 72-73 = Proclus, *In Alcibiadem Proimion*, 11, 15-17, ed. Segonds 1985); Olympiodorus, *In Alcibiadem*, 10, 17-11, 6. For a detailed study of the Introductions (προλεγόμενα) to the Neoplatonic commentaries in which these questions are discussed, see I. Hadot 1987, esp. p. 109.

¹⁶ Cf. Proclus, *In Alcibiadem*, 1-11.

¹⁷ Cf. Anonymous *Prolegomena to Platonic philosophy* (26, 24-26): “One must therefore explain the *Alcibiades* first, because in this dialogue we learn who we are; it is fitting before knowing the external objects [τὰ ἔξω] to know ourselves [ἐαυτοὺς γινῶναι]” (ed. Westerink 1990).

sified among the maieutic dialogues¹⁸. The principal latent truth that Socrates is to reveal maieutically to Alcibiades concerns precisely the soul as the true self (*In Alcibiadem*, 12, 6-7)¹⁹. According to an underlying hermeneutical principle implicit in this approach, there exists a concordance between the interlocutors' dispositions presented in the dialogue and those of the readers to whom the work is supposedly addressed²⁰.

Olympiodorus accounts for the mixed character of the *Alcibiades* mentioned earlier by considering the three main sections of the dialogue as perfectly integrated: the first section (106 C-119 A) refutative, the second (119 A-124 A) protreptic, the third (124 A-135 D) maieutic. It is with the third part that I shall be concerned here (127 B-133 C, in particular 132 C-133 C). While in the first two sections Socrates endeavours to refute Alcibiades' false pretence to knowledge and persuade him to mend his ways by self-care, in the third he evokes the Delphic precept (124 A 7-8) and maieutically reveals to him his (or: the) true self. In other words, the *Alcibiades* begins in refutation and protreptic and ends in maieutics. Olympiodorus does not consider the dialogue's heterogeneity to be problematical; or, in positive terms, he defends the harmony between refutation and maieutic²¹. I shall draw on Olympiodorus' commentary mostly in the second half of this study. Let us first examine the dramatic context, which is decisive to the interpretation of the passage on self-knowledge, a fact also underlined by Olympiodorus.

2. Self-Knowledge

2.1. The dramatic context: Socrates as Lover-educator

Young, attractive, rich, confident in his talents and his supporters, Alcibiades is about to launch his career in politics, but without possessing the necessary qualifications. In love with the young man, Socrates approaches him with the – hidden – desire of liberat-

¹⁸ Albinus, *Prologos* 3, 36 (ed. Nüsser 1991); Diogenes Laertius 3, 51. The latent ideas which a maieutic dialogue brings to light are called natural notions (φυσικὰς ἐννοίας, e.g. Albinus, *Prologos* 6, 33) or common notions (κοινὰ ἐννοιαί, e.g. Olympiodorus, *passim*).

¹⁹ According to Olympiodorus (*In Alcibiadem*, 92, 4-9) consensus is a sign – but by no means a proof – of truth. Demonstrations rest ultimately on common notions (*In Alcibiadem*, 18, 2-5).

²⁰ According to Albinus, the *Alcibiades* is the best introduction to philosophy on the ground that the reader introduced to philosophy should possess characteristics matching those of Alcibiades as the ideal interlocutor: natural abilities (κατὰ φύσιν), age (κατὰ τὴν ἡλικίαν), motivation (κατὰ προαίρεσιν), disposition (κατὰ ἔξιν), and material conditions for leisure (κατὰ τὴν ὕλην, *Prologue* 5, 1-37). On the place of the *Alcibiades* among the Middle Platonists and Neoplatonists, see Segonds 1985, vii-xx; Tarrant 2000, pp. 119-121.

²¹ On the alliance of refutation and maieutic especially in his *Gorgias* commentary, see Renaud 2006. Denyer's defence of the rationale for a variety of styles and approaches deployed in a single dialogue is worth quoting: «Why should Plato have wished to mix in the *Alcibiades* elements of all three different literary manners? There is a simple and obvious answer. Plato wished to show Socrates taking Alcibiades from his original and quite unphilosophical condition to a condition in which he is prepared, at least for the moment, to do some fairly serious philosophizing. These changes in Alcibiades, and the sorts of conversation he is able to cope with, are reflected in the changes of literary manner, from 'early', through 'middle', to 'late'» (Denyer 2001, p. 24). Denyer considers the *Alcibiades* to be a late dialogue and proposes the beginning of the 350s as the date of composition.

ing him from his political ambitions, so as to draw Alcibiades to himself and thus to philosophy. Socrates' erotic strategy can be summarised as follows. He first flatters Alcibiades's vanity, which is not small. Socrates explains the reason why he has waited so long before speaking to him: Alcibiades is at last ready to listen to what Socrates, his most faithful lover, has to tell him. This is why the god (τὶ δαίμονιον: 103 A; ὁ θεός: 105 B-C, E) had not let him speak to him until then in order that the dialogue (διαλέγεσθαι) be not in vain. Alcibiades must take to heart what Socrates, the only one in a position to help him realize his ambitions, wants to tell him. After playing to the vanity and ambition of Alcibiades, Socrates destroys this vanity by refuting Alcibiades's most cherished opinions. In order to be able to give advice in the Assembly concerning war and peace, Alcibiades must possess knowledge of justice and injustice, which knowledge he has neither sought by himself nor learned from someone else, and which he consequently cannot possess. Therefore Socrates must first free Alcibiades from his self-satisfaction by revealing to him his double ignorance.

This refutation is followed by a protreptic discourse: Socrates exhorts Alcibiades to work at mending himself, that is, at taking care of himself. But since it is impossible to take care of anything without knowing its nature, Alcibiades must first of all know himself. In order to save their love, Socrates adds, Alcibiades will have to choose between Pericles and Socrates (124 C). In the end, Socrates restores his pride by revealing to him his true power (δύναμιν, 105 E 5), namely his soul, more precisely the divine part in him, reason.

2.2. Theocentric and anthropocentric interpretations (127 E-133 C)

Let us first summarize the argumentation that precedes the key passage (127 E-132 C). Socrates has Alcibiades admit that the human being cannot be his body. What does it mean to take care of something (ἐπιμελεῖσθαι)? It does not mean taking care of the things that belong to it, but taking care of the thing itself (128 D). In order to be able to take care of ourselves, it is necessary that we know who we are. In order in turn to know this, it is necessary to distinguish between an instrument (ὄργανον) and the person using it. The human being uses (χρῆται) the body as an instrument (129 B-E). Moreover, the human being cannot be a composite of body and soul, as the body cannot govern (ἄρχει), and what is sought here is what governs, not what is governed. The human being's true self must therefore be the soul and the soul alone (130 C 1-3). To know ourselves is therefore to know our soul.

Here begins the passage that interests us particularly (132 C-133 C). Socrates uses the paradigm of sight and of a mirror in order to explain the meaning of the Delphic inscription about our true nature to Alcibiades. In order to be able to see itself, the eye must look in a mirror (ἐν κατόπτρῳ), likewise the soul that wants to know itself "must look at a [or: another] soul, and especially at that part in which the soul's excellence resides, wisdom [σοφία], and other things which are similar to it". Socrates asks Alcibiades:

Can we call anything in the soul more divine [θειότερον] than the part in which knowledge and thinking [τὸ εἰδέναι τε καὶ φρονεῖν] reside?

Alcibiades agrees. Socrates continues:

Then this part of it is similar [ἔοικεν] to the divine [τῷ θεῷ]²², and someone who looked at it and is able to grasp everything divine [πᾶν τὸ θεῖον γνούς], god and intelligence [θεόν τε καὶ φρόνησιν], would have the best grasp of himself as well (my translation).

This self-knowledge is σωφροσύνη, moral and intellectual wisdom (133 B-C, translation Hutchinson mod.)²³.

Most interpretations of this difficult passage fit into two seemingly opposed yet - as I shall try to show - compatible readings, namely theocentric and anthropocentric. The *theocentric* interpretation underlines the fact that the passage is not solely concerned with the divine (τὸ θεῖον) in us, but also and more fundamentally with God (or: a god) (θεόν, 133 C 5). Since the intellectual part of the soul is divine, the knowledge of the soul is directly linked to God; this knowledge even coincides with that of God. According to some commentators, this very reference to God (or: to the god) proves the inauthenticity of the *Alcibiades* or at least of this passage, on the ground that the idea of an inner god illuminating the soul is Neoplatonic rather than Platonic, or at the very least unsocratic²⁴. Even advocates of the passage's authenticity admit that the phrase θεόν τε καὶ φρόνησιν ("god and intelligence") is strange and difficult to interpret, especially since it is in apposition to the preceding words (πᾶν τὸ θεῖον γνούς: "knowing the divine in its entirety"), without any verbs or explicit logical connections between the two groups of words²⁵.

Far from being deductive, the style is allusive, even elliptical. This phrase, θεόν τε καὶ φρόνησιν, is nevertheless to be found in *all* of the manuscripts²⁶. And these words are there for a good reason: they are indispensable in explaining or specifying the meaning of the preceding words, πᾶν τὸ θεῖον γνούς (litt. "knowing all the divine"). Moreover, since the soul is said to be akin to God (to the god), it is therefore not god (133 A 8-10: ἄλλο, ὅμοιον; 133 C 4: ἔοικεν). God (the god) is not simply "the divine in us", it is other, and must be understood as superior to us, namely as transcendent²⁷. As for the ap-

²² Here I do not follow Burnet (τῷ θεῷ) but, as several modern commentators and translators, one of the main manuscripts (T = cod. Venetus).

²³ I have omitted the ten suspect lines (133 C 8-17) considered by virtually all scholars as a late extrapolation.

²⁴ Cf. Havet (1921, p. 88) proposes to alter the text of Burnet and of the manuscript tradition in reading θέον ("vision") instead of θεόν, a proposal followed by Clark (1955, p. 237). Puliga for his part (in Arighetti 1995, p. 149, n. 42) adopts Ast's modification: νοῦν τε καὶ φρόνησιν, and translates as follows: "intelletto e pensiero". However several editors, translators and commentators accept the reading found in the manuscripts and do not alter the text (e. g. Annas, Brunschwig, Croiset, Desclos, Denyer, Friedländer, Gatti, Johnson, Pradeau). I shall come back to this question below.

²⁵ Cf. Friedländer 1923, p. 15.

²⁶ See Carlini (1964) for a detailed exposition of the six medieval manuscripts (9th-12th century), which do seem to be independent from each other.

²⁷ Cf. Krämer 1964, pp. 136-138; Brunschwig 1996, pp. 77-80; Johnson 1999, pp. 8-17. We read in Alcinoüs, *The Handbook of Platonism*: "it is the soul's nature to rule [ἡγεμονεύει ἡ ψυχὴ φύσει]. But that whose nature it is to rule is akin to the divine [τῷ θεῷ ἔοικεν]. So the soul, being akin to the divine, would be imperishable [ἀνώλεθρος] and indestructible" (177, 33-35, translation Dillon 1993). Moreover, according to Olympiodorus "he who knows the essence [οὐσίαν] of the human being dis-

parent affinities of that passage with Middle Platonism and Neoplatonism, these may perhaps be explained inversely by the influence the dialogue came to exert on these schools as testified by the commentaries composed during those periods²⁸.

The *anthropocentric* interpretation, by contrast, argues that the imageries of the eye and mirror imply the impossibility of solitary self-knowledge, and the necessity of dialogue with others; direct introspection, immediate consciousness of oneself would clearly be excluded. Socrates twice uses the example of dialogue (διαλέγεσθαι) in order to illustrate the idea that the soul uses the body as an instrument and that the soul must consequently be the true self: to speak is to use language (τὸ λόγῳ χρῆσθαι, 129 C 2; cf. 130 D-E). According to this reading then, self-knowledge is not immediate but only possible via an object which has the function of a mirror. This object, or the other, is a soul similar to our own. Self-knowledge thus depends on the knowledge of others, which leads to the contemplation of the divine in us (or: of/of the god). The anthropology implicit in this passage, according to this interpretation, would therefore be similar to that of a well-known passage in *Magna moralia* (1213 a 10-26), where it is said that self-knowledge is only attainable through the intermediary of a friend, one's *alter ego*, with whose help we can see ourselves objectively as in a mirror²⁹. According to this reading, the only difference between these two texts would be the type of human relationship that is privileged: an erotic one in the case of the Platonic dialogue and friendship (or φιλία) in the *Magna moralia*³⁰.

Which interpretation is the right one? Or can they be reconciled, and if so, how? It is true that, according to the passage, self-knowledge can best be achieved through the mirror of a kindred object, as in the reflection of the eye in another's eye. Nevertheless it is equally true, as the theocentric interpretation claims, that the intellect, which is divine, is the soul's essence. Consequently the knowledge of the soul is directly linked to God (or god), and in grasping (the) god, this being distinct from me, intellectually, the soul indirectly grasps itself³¹. In highlighting the dialogical context, the anthropocentric or dialectical

covers that it is the soul; he who knows the soul also knows the principles [λόγοι] contained in it [...], and knows all beings [τὰ ὄντα πάντα]" (*In Alcibiadem*, 198, 21-23).

²⁸ Cf. Pépin 1971, p. 107, n. 1.

²⁹ Cf. e.g. Soulez-Luccioni 1974, pp. 219-221; Linguisti 1983. In a general remark Sorabji (2005, p. 161) argues for the same interpretation: «There is a theme in Plato's *Alcibiades I* which is opposite to Descartes' assurance that one knows oneself, but can only make inferences to the minds of others. According to *Alcibiades I*, the eye sees itself by seeing its reflection in the eye of another, 132 C-133 C. This discussion seems to have influenced Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 9, 9, 1169 b 33-1170 a 4; pseudo-Aristotle, *Magna Moralia*, 2, 5, 1213 a 10-26, and possibly *Eudemian Ethics*, 7, 12, in their accounts of the value of friendship».

³⁰ For an in-depth discussion of the two types of interpretation, see Brunschwig 1996, pp. 72-80.

³¹ This passage has parallels in the *Timaeus* (51 E 5-6) and *Philebus* (28 C 7-8). The similarity between the conception of reason as the human essence (cf. αὐτὸ ταῦτόν) in the *Alcibiades* and that of reason (νοῦς) as divine in Aristotle (cf. *Protr.*, *Metaphysica* A; *De anima* 3, 5; *Nicomachean Ethics*, 10, 1177 b 26-1078 a 7) has aroused suspicion among some commentators, who find in it an additional argument against the dialogue's authenticity (e. g. Bluck 1953; Krämer 1964, p. 137). However, this similarity is not necessarily to be linked with the question of dating: the allusive doctrine of νοῦς in the *Alcibiades*

tic interpretation has the undeniable merit of giving an answer to an important question that arises from our allusive passage and which the theocentric interpretation ignores: are all human souls equally capable of offering to the person in need of it, like Alcibiades, the reflection of the true self, or are we to suppose instead that - as appears to be the case - only certain individuals, such as Socrates, are capable of it? This human or intersubjective aspect is implied in the dramatic, more precisely erotic, dimension of the dialogue. Indeed the *Alcibiades* as a whole is dominated from beginning to end by the theme of seduction in the person of Socrates the educator who strives to persuade Alcibiades to give heed to his words and who presents himself as his most faithful lover and the only person capable of helping the young man realize his ambitions.

The dramatic dimension is moreover inseparable from two thorny philosophical queries underlying our passage and its two diverging (anthropocentric and theocentric) interpretations. Firstly, is the unitary conception of the soul found in the *Alcibiades* compatible with the tripartite conception as expounded in the *Republic* (cf. λογιστικόν, θυμοειδές, ἐπιθυμητικόν)? Secondly, what is the relationship between the god-intellect of the key passage (θεόν, 133 C 5) and Socrates' personal god many times referred to in the dialogue (τι δαίμονιον: 103 A; (ὁ) θεός: 105 B, 124 C, 127 E, 135 D)? The following analysis will tackle only some aspects of these textual and philosophical issues, and propose two hypotheses in the light of Olympiodorus' commentary and the dramatic action.

3. The soul and (the) god: Dramatic action and doctrinal content

3.1. Unitary and tripartite conceptions of the soul

Most commentators, whether advocates of the theocentric or the anthropocentric interpretation, agree that the true self discussed in the *Alcibiades* is impersonal rather than individual. Socrates himself explicitly states (130 C-D) that he initially wanted to inquire into the essence of what we are, taken by itself ("the same in itself", αὐτὸ ταυτό, 129 B 1), but had until then examined the individual (αὐτοῦ ἑκάστου, 128 D 3). After this first stage of the discussion the question will no longer be each person's soul but that which is most divine, objective and universal in every human being, namely reason³². In the context of the care of the soul, this analysis is only possible after discovering "who we are ourselves" (τί ποτ' ἐσμὲν αὐτοί, 128 E 11). The αὐτὸ of αὐτὸ ταυτό refers to *that which* we are, our essence. This is why the αὐτὸ ταυτό is to be interpreted as referring to the rational and impersonal element in us, rather than to the individual, personal or subjective self³³. We must therefore understand by the individual self the self Socrates de-

may perhaps be understood as an embryonic prefiguration of that of Aristotle (cf. Friedländer 1923, p. 16). For a comparative study on the relationship between the human and the divine in Plato and Aristotle, see e. g. Migliori 2006.

³² Johnson 1999, p. 16, and *in finis*.

³³ With a few exceptions (e. g. Tsouna 2001), all of the commentators argue that this remark by Socrates indicates that the remainder of the discussion will be on the true self understood as the true, disincarnate and impersonal self. According to Tsouna (2001, pp. 50-56) however, individuality is partially preserved in this conception of the true self; the dialectical process in particular, within which this discovery takes place, presupposes individual otherness. Johnson (1999, pp. 14-17) defends the extreme

fined as "the soul using a body", whose incarnation constitutes individualisation, in contradistinction to our nature taken by itself (αὐτὸ ταυτό), or that which we could call, albeit imperfectly, "the true self", which is the soul without the body³⁴.

This is also Olympiodorus' reading. According to him, the true self is the common and rational self (ψυχὴ λογικὴ)³⁵. This definition may seem at first sight to correspond to the intellectualist conception of the self associated with the historical Socrates, a conception according to which human nature, that is the human soul, is essentially simple and entirely rational, in contrast to the tripartite conception of the soul in Book IV in the *Republic* (436 A-441 C). This brings us to the first difficulty formulated above: is unitary conception of the soul in the *Alcibiades* incompatible with tripartite conception of the *Republic*? One of the chief merits of Olympiodorus is that he seeks to reconcile these two conceptions of the soul.

Following Damascius, and against Proclus, Olympiodorus claims that the goal (σκοπός) of the dialogue is not simply self-knowledge, but knowledge of the true self:

the goal of the dialogue does not concern simply [οὐχ ἀπλῶς] self-knowledge, but self-knowledge with regard to political life [πολιτικῶς]; [...] indeed in that dialogue, the human being is defined as a rational soul [ψυχὴν λογικὴν], using the body as an instrument (*In Alcibiadem*, 4, 15-22, cf. 203, 20-205, 7)³⁶.

By "political" knowledge Olympiodorus understands that which pertains to the political virtues or that which befits a citizen, understood as the rational soul using a body, including the passions, as an instrument.

The dialogical encounter in the *Alcibiades* is situated, according to Olympiodorus, *simultaneously* on the political (or moral) and the contemplative planes. More precisely, he distinguishes between various forms of self-knowledge presented in the *Alcibiades*. In addition to the knowledge of external goods and that of the body, one can know oneself in different ways: πολιτικῶς, according to the constitutive parts of the soul using the body (thus πολιτικῶς in the sense of the constitution, πολιτεία, of the tripartite soul and therewith with reference to the moderation of the passions); καθαρτικῶς, in the process

version of the opposite interpretation, that of a depersonalized and universal self: αὐτὸ ταυτό, the true self would be pure Mind, that is God. For an analysis of the concept of objective self in Greek thought, especially in Aristotle, as opposed to the modern concept of self as subjective and individual, see Gill 1991.

³⁴ For a criticism of the frequent translation of the expression αὐτὸ ταυτό by "the (true) self", see Gill 2007; beyond the question of translation, however, Gill defends, from a conceptual point of view, the interpretation here put forward of a non-individual or impersonal conception of self. Moreover, because of its unusual character the expression αὐτὸ ταυτό has also been considered by some as Middle Platonic or Neoplatonic rather than Platonic (cf. Dönt 1964, pp. 40-44, 50-51). However the expression does not seem to take on a technical sense, in accordance with Plato's well-known tendency to look down on excessive terminological concerns. Still the expression is admittedly unusual in the standard Greek of the time.

³⁵ Cf. Annas' defence (1985, p. 131): «I incline to think that the Neoplatonists were more on the right lines in finding here [cf. αὐτὸ ταυτό] a reference to a 'rational soul' which is the true self and is not individual to each person». Dönt (1964, p. 42) agrees, although she is otherwise against the dialogue's authenticity.

³⁶ On the controversy between Damascius and Olympiodorus on the one hand and Proclus on the other, see Segonds 1985, pp. LIII-LXIX.

of liberating oneself from the passions linked to the body, when the soul is turned towards itself (ἐπιστρέφουσα πρὸς ἑαυτήν); and θεωρητικῶς, when the soul, once freed from the body, is rational and entirely turned toward the higher things, ultimately the good (ἐπιστρέφουσιν πρὸς τὰ κρείττονα; *In Alcibiadem*, 224, 3-10)³⁷. In the *Alcibiades*, including in the dramatic action, Olympiodorus discovers the tripartite division of the soul understood as the imperfect soul: in proving that that which knows itself is neither the body nor the composite of body and soul, Socrates shows that he speaks to

the rational soul, rational and yet not always perfect, still occasionally unconscious of itself [λογική, καὶ λογική οὐκ ἀεὶ τελεία, ἀλλὰ ποτὲ καὶ ἀγνοοῦσα] (*In Alcibiadem*, 171, 16-17).

Indeed Socrates blames Alcibiades for being fascinated with politics when he should first strive to know himself. The task of the philosopher is to hold out the mirror to him. In himself, Alcibiades sees only his own craving for power and wealth, and he is therefore incapable of seeing the pure, autonomous (αὐτοκίνητον), rational part of his soul. He must look into Socrates' soul, in which he discovers intelligence (φρόνησις, νοῦς) and the divine (*In Alcibiadem*, 7, 9-10)³⁸. The central question of the *Alcibiades* (Who are we?) pertains primarily to knowledge of the rational soul (αὐτὸ τὸ αὐτό), common to all human beings, but also includes the individual soul (αὐτὸ τὸ αὐτό ἕκαστου; τὸ ἄτομον; τὸν πολιτικὸν ἄνθρωπον; *In Alcibiadem*, 204, 2-205, 5). Olympiodorus thus insists on the moral dimension of self-knowledge as a condition to its intellectual dimension, the highest form of self-knowledge.

In defense of Olympiodorus' reading it should be pointed out that certain passages in the *Republic* (Book X) do seem to minimize the doctrine of the tripartition of the soul (Book IV) and to claim that the rational part (λογιστικόν) alone constitutes the true self: the seeming tripartite nature of the soul springs from the fact that the soul is (temporarily) held within a body. The soul, the true self, would thus be fundamentally uniform, that is rational. Indeed in *Republic* Book X (611 A-E) Socrates claims that if one considers the soul's true nature (τῇ ἀληθεστάτῃ φύσει), in its purity (καθαρόν), that is in its love for

³⁷ Cf. Gerson 2004, pp. 162-164. Olympiodorus elsewhere (*In Alcibiadem*, 172, 1-14) completes this list of fundamental kinds of self-knowledge: one's possessions (κατὰ τὰ ἐκτός), one's body (κατὰ σῶμα), one's composite nature, i.e. the "political" and emotional parts of the soul (κατὰ τὴν τριμέρειαν τῆς ψυχῆς), one's self purified of all emotions (ἀπολυόμενον τῶν παθῶν), the contemplative self (ἀπολελυμένον ἑαυτὸν τις θεάσθαι), the theological or ideal self (κατὰ τὴν ἰδέαν τὴν ἑαυτοῦ), and finally the mystical union with the one, that is ἐνθουσιαστικῶς (κατὰ τὸ ἓν).

³⁸ It must be pointed out that in his commentary Olympiodorus does not cite the expression discussed above, θεόν τε καὶ φρόνησιν. This fact is not in itself, however, a convincing argument against the authenticity of the passage. As indicated earlier, although Carlini proposes to replace θεόν by νοῦν, he nevertheless defends the authenticity of the key passage as a whole: «Il Wilamowitz [sic] (*Platon II*, Berlin, 1920, 2. Aufl., p. 327 f.) credeva di poter trovare nel silenzio di Olimpiodoro una conferma della sua conclusione circa la non autenticità di queste due parole. Ma Olimpiodoro, contrariamente a quello che pensava il Wilamowitz e come ha fatto notare il Friedländer (*Platon II*, p. 320, n. 13), commenta diffusamente anche questo passo (*In Alcib.*, 217, 4 ff.), per cui si deve ben credere che lo leggesse come leggiamo noi» (Carlini 1963, p. 176, n. 3).

wisdom (φιλοσοφίαν), one discovers that it is simple, not composite, although it appears to us such on account of its attachment to the body and to the emotions that derive from it³⁹. Moreover it is not impossible that Plato, even in the *Republic*, has some hesitations between the unitary conception and the tripartition (or bipartition) of the soul. In any case, even if Plato finally did subscribe to the tripartite conception, he always held that insofar as it is rational every soul desires the good, as in Book VI of the *Republic*, where Socrates says that the good is

that which every soul pursues and in view of which it does everything it does [τοῦτου ἕνεκα πάντα πράττει] (*Republic* 505 D 11-E 1);

in reality we always desire that which is (truly) good (for us)⁴⁰.

The discussion about the soul and self-knowledge in the *Alcibiades* is undeniably part of a moral and emphatically *Socratic* context, namely that of the care of the soul in the *Apology*, or the striving to become the best possible (ὡς βελτίστη)⁴¹. In the *Alcibiades*, to know oneself means also to become self-controlled (σώφρων, 131 B 5; cf. σωφροσύνη, 133 C 18 [C 8]). Moreover, since the best "part" of the self is the soul, and the best in the soul is the intellect, self-knowledge coincides with the soul's excellence, that is wisdom, in the moral as well as intellectual sense of the term⁴². Finally, the idea according to which the human being is his soul (rational and disincarnate) constitutes the very basis of the Socratic paradox of virtue-knowledge: since knowledge is located in the soul and virtue is the excellence of the soul, there cannot be any conflict, in the well-constituted soul, between reason and non-reason. The soul's excellence lies in intelligence, which is therefore the distinctive feature of the human being (or of the divine) in comparison with the animals⁴³. However, the divine character of the human being is at once a given and a task to be accomplished: there is a natural affinity (συγγένεια) to the divine, but the assimilation (ὁμοίωσις) to it remains a task necessitating self-exertion. In other words, simplicity is something to be achieved: the soul must strive to purify itself in becoming one. In that sense the essentially unitary anthropology of the *Alcibiades* is, according to Olympiodorus, perfectly compatible with the tripartite conception of the *Republic* and other dialogues.

3.2. The divine intellect and the divine guardian

Olympiodorus' conciliating interpretation thus allows us to harmonize the intellectualist conception usually attributed to the historical Socrates with the Platonic tripartite conception. This conciliation also makes it possible to understand better the link between Socratic rhetoric and the tripartite psychology. Indeed Olympiodorus brings together Book IV of the *Republic*, where the tripartition is expounded, and the philosophical rhetoric sketched in the *Phaedrus*⁴⁴. More specifically, the link between tripartition and

³⁹ Cf. *Phaedo*, 79 D 1-7; cf. Szlezák 2005, p. 67, 85-86.

⁴⁰ On this decisive aspect and its connexion with the developmental hypothesis, see Rowe 2004.

⁴¹ Cf. *Apology*, 29 E 2, 36 C 7; *Crito*, 47 D 4-5; cf. *Symposium*, 216 A 4-6.

⁴² Cf. Gerson 1997, p. 5.

⁴³ Cf. *Republic*, 508 B 3, 509 A 2.

⁴⁴ Cf. *Phaedrus*, 270 C 9-D 7, 271 C 10-D 8.

rhetoric allows us to formulate an interpretation of the enigmatic god of the *Alcibiades* (τι δαίμόνιον; (ὁ) θεός):⁴⁵

The paradigm of sight in a mirror can be interpreted as part of a clever device of the rhetoric of seduction emphasized by Olympiodorus⁴⁶. As we have seen, Socrates seeks above all to convince Alcibiades that he must see in Socrates the individual capable of helping him to realize his ambitions, although of course Socrates understands this aid ironically, namely as a means of overturning Alcibiades' opinions and desires⁴⁷. This erotic education requires that the argumentation be adapted to the interlocutor. Socrates does say explicitly that his discourse on self-knowledge is directly addressed to Alcibiades's soul (πρὸς τὴν ψυχὴν, 130 D 9-10; cf. *In Alcibiadem*, 7, 5-9). Socrates thus adapts to the prejudices of his young interlocutor in appealing to the values of the latter, such as fame and power, in order to refute the opinions linked to these values, that is to liberate him from his double ignorance⁴⁸.

Concerning the question of the enigmatic god, at the beginning of the last section of the dialogue (124 C 5-D 2) Socrates says that Alcibiades will have to choose between Pericles and him, more exactly between Pericles and Socrates' superior guardian, the god (or God). The passage is worth citing:

SOCRATES - My guardian [ἐπίτροπος] is better and wiser than Pericles, your guardian.

ALCIBADES - Who is that, Socrates?

SOCRATES - God (a god) [θεός], Alcibiades, the one who did not allow me up until now to speak with you. Having faith in him [ᾧ καὶ πιστεύων], I say that the revelation [ἐπιφάνεια] of who you are will happen by no one other but me.

ALCIBADES - You are teasing me [παίσεις], Socrates.

SOCRATES - Maybe [ἴσως] (translation F. R.).

What is this divinity referred to in this passage? And what is his relationship with the god (θεός) evoked in the passage on self-knowledge? Let us first recall some well-known aspects of Socrates' "god" and then raise a question and propose an hypothesis. In the Platonic dialogues Socrates alludes to his god as something divine (τι δαίμόνιον), as a voice (φωνή), and more frequently as a divine sign (σημεῖον). Socrates' god does not seem to be a daemon (τὸ δαίμόνιον in the substantive form), but rather a sign (in the adjectival sense, as in τὸ δαίμόνιον [σημεῖον]) through which a divinity is made mani-

⁴⁵ Here is the list of all occurrences of the word θεός (in addition to the passage on self-knowledge): 105 B 8, 105 D 5, 105 E 5, E 7, 124 C 8, 127 E 6, 135 C 5, 135 D 6 (and 103 A 5: τι δαίμόνιον).

⁴⁶ Cf. *Pheadrus*, 255 D, where the love of the beloved is reflected in the lover's soul (cf. Pépin 1971, p. 80; Halperin 1986, p. 69).

⁴⁷ This reversal implies another one, that of the erotic relationship: Alcibiades who is at first the loved one (ἐρώμενος) is to become the lover (ἐραστής) of Socrates, as it is the case in the *Symposium* (217 A-219 D); cf. Neuhausen 2005, p. 178.

⁴⁸ Cf. Brunschwig 1996, p. 64. From this observation on the importance of the interlocutor, it is possible to put forth an argument of general scope against the theory of development: «We can allow that what Plato makes his characters say depends also or instead on who is being made to speak, to which audience; and with what motives: and we can attempt to explain in these terms the similarities and differences between his various works» (Denyer 2001, p. 25).

fest⁴⁹. Plato explicitly links the sign with the impiety charge, that of introducing new divinities (δαίμονια καινά), and sees in Socrates' references to the sign the principal cause of conviction (*Apology* 26 B 5; 27 C 8). This indicates clearly enough the importance the sign has in Plato's eyes. Moreover the opprobrium the historical Alcibiades had brought upon himself and his well-known association with Socrates are also part of the background of the *Alcibiades*' apologetic intention.

In Plato's *Apology* Socrates never refers by name to the god who has invested him with the mission to philosophize and whose servant he regards himself to be. He speaks of the god in Delphi, but without linking him explicitly to the divine sign⁵⁰. Why does Socrates never mention the name of the god, either in the *Apology* or anywhere else in Plato, and why does he say so little about the divine sign? This vagueness can be explained, according to some, by the fact that Socrates does not himself know who this god is. It is possible, however, that the laconism of Socrates and Plato may be better explained by an apologetic strategy, given Socrates' unorthodox religious convictions. In this case the silence would be a deliberate imprecision on an overly-sensitive subject. At any rate it is perfectly possible and defensible to consider Socrates' private god and the god of the passage on self-knowledge (or the god of the *Apology*) as virtually one and the same divinity (cf. *In Alcibiadem*, 217, 16-17)⁵¹.

At the very end of the dialogue, Socrates makes a final reference to the god (θεός), as the one who will determine the success or failure of Alcibiades' education, as if indeed everything depended on the god's will ("God willing", ἐὰν θεὸς ἐθέλῃ; 135 D, 127 E; if the god "permits", εἴα: 105 E, 124 C)⁵². Socrates' god has thus substituted himself for Pericles as Alcibiades's new guardian (ἐπίτροπος). Given the occurrences of the word θεός, understood as Socrates' private god, as well as their context, it is possible and consistent to identify him with the god of self-knowledge. The identity of the two divinities can further be corroborated by the dramatic action. In his seduction strategy, Socrates presents himself as a mere mediator between Alcibiades and the divine guardian⁵³. This rhetoric of seduction aims at the reversal of Alcibiades' desires towards the object of his Great desire, unknown to him, the divine or eternal⁵⁴. Such is at least the hope of Socras-

⁴⁹ Cf. Destrée 2005a, a collection of essays on this question (and other related ones) concerning Socrates' divine sign; cf. Dorion 2003 for a comparative study of Plato and Xenophon. According to Dorion τὸ δαίμόνιον always refers to "the divinity" (οἱ θεοὶ or ὁ θεός). This does indeed seem to be the case in Xenophon, but perhaps not always in Plato; cf. e. g. *Euthyphro*. 3 B, *Theaetetus*, 151 A.

⁵⁰ Cf. e. g. *Apology*, 30 A, 31 A, 33 C; for the story on the Delphic oracle: *Apology*, 21 A-23 E; cf. Xenophon, *Apology*, 14.

⁵¹ Cf. Tarrant 2007, p. 11; Destrée 2005b, pp. 74-79.

⁵² Given among other things the unconditional confidence Socrates grants to the divine sign, the god from whom it springs appears as a benevolent and omniscient god.

⁵³ Cf. Soulez-Luccioni 1974, p. 219.

⁵⁴ This desire, ἔπος, is at heart the desire for the good, the desire to possess the good forever (*Symposium*, 206 A); the true self and the Great desire ("Ἐπος) are inseparable (cf. *Symposium*, 202 D-E: "Ἐπος as a great δαίμων). Cf. Szlezák 2005, p. 86.

tes the educator⁵⁵. This hope is, however, accompanied by graves doubts, as revealed by Socrates' very last remarks (135 E 6-8)⁵⁶. Driven by political thirst and turned exclusively toward the city for recognition of his own worth, Alcibiades is incapable of discovering in himself that which constitutes his soul's excellence, namely reflection or thought. In looking into himself, he discovers only his passions. This is why he needs to look at someone who "reflects". The personal god of Socrates would thus assume in the analogy of sight and mirror its pure and authentic form, namely in constituting the divine part of the soul, the divinity of the intellect, as visible nevertheless in the person of Socrates⁵⁷.

This brief study on self-knowledge in the *Alcibiades* aimed at proposing, in the light of the dramatic context and Olympiodorus' commentary, the outline of a solution to the vast and vexed issue of the relationship between the human and the divine in Plato. If these considerations have some merit, it is hoped that they may contribute to clarifying the question of the authenticity of the dialogue and thereby to re-examining the relationship between the dialogues, notably the relation between Socratism and Platonism in a less antinomic manner than most scholars have presented them – a task for which Olympiodorus' commentary also offers avenues which still deserve careful study.

⁵⁵ Alcibiades proposes to Socrates that they exchange their respective roles of beloved and lover, to which Socrates replies approvingly: "Then my love [ὁ ἐμὸς ἐρως] for you, my excellent Alcibiades, will be just like a stork: after hatching a winged love [ἐρωτα] in you, it will be cared for by it in return" (135 E 1-3, translation Hutchinson 1997).

⁵⁶ "I should like to believe that you will persevere, but I'm afraid – not because I distrust your nature, but because I know how powerful the city is [τὴν τῆς πόλεως ὁρῶν ῥώμην] – I'm afraid it might get the better of both me and you [ἐμοῦ τε καὶ σοῦ]" (translation Hutchinson 1997). This is tragic and double irony, since Plato and his reader know that Alcibiades will not be able to resist the flatteries of the Athenian people (cf. *Republic*, 494 A–495 C, 517 A) and that this failure will contribute to the conviction of Socrates (cf. Arrighetti 1995, p. 27). Plato in the *Alcibiades*, as in so many other dialogues, makes use of an apologetic practice in many respects opposed to that of Xenophon: while Xenophon defends Socrates' innocence in exhibiting exclusively his pedagogical successes, Plato depicts many of Socrates' pedagogical failures so as to suggest that these are due to his disciples and in the final analysis to the Athenian people!

⁵⁷ Cf. Pradeau 1999, p. 78, n. 2. This is also, so it seems, Epictetus' view, for whom self-knowledge consists in deliberation with oneself, that is with one's δαμόνιον (here substantiated as synonymous to θεός); to know oneself means also to discover in oneself that which one by nature has in common with the other human beings, similarly to chorists mindful of the symphony of which they are a part (*Discourses* III, 22, 53; fr. 1, ed. Schenkl 1894, p. 456; cf. Courcelle 1974, p. 61). Since human rationality is for Socrates of divine origin it constitutes both a kind of communion that binds all human beings (anthropological dimension) and a kind of obedience to that which is superior to them (theological dimension).

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Lecturae Platonis 7

A cura di Maurizio Migliori

Volume 7

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Psychē in Plato

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