PART I

The dialogue

Introduction

Cassius
Then, Brutus, I have much mistook your passion;
By means whereof this breast of mine hath buried
Thoughts of great value, worthy cogitations.
Tell me, good Brutus, can you see your face?

Brutus
No, Cassius; for the eye sees not itself,
But by reflection, by some other things.

Cassius
'Tis just:
And it is very much lamented, Brutus,
That you have no such mirrors as will turn
Your hidden worthiness into your eye,
That you might see your shadow. I have heard,
Where many of the best respect in Rome, –
Except immortal Caesar, – speaking of Brutus
And groaning underneath this age's yoke,
Have wish'd that noble Brutus had his eyes.

Brutus
Into what dangers would you lead me, Cassius,
That you would have me seek into myself
For that which is not in me?

Cassius
Therefore, good Brutus, be prepar'd to hear:
And since you know you cannot see yourself
So well as by reflection, I, your glass,
Will modestly discover to yourself
That of yourself which you yet know not of. (*Julius Caesar*, I, ii)

1 Uncertain status of the *Alcibiades* today

As Shakespeare's debt can testify, at its climax the *Alcibiades* can be an inspirational dialogue, but yet it is in many respects an enigmatic one. Its place in the Platonic *corpus* is difficult to determine and its very authenticity has been called into question since the nineteenth century.[1] The enigmatic character of the *Alcibiades* lies principally in the fact that it contains, or so it seems, an unusual mix of the Socratic and Platonic. The first section of the dialogue (106c–116e) is essentially refutative and insofar as it applies elenctic techniques appears both 'Socratic' and (in the minds of many) early. The second includes a long discourse (121a–124b) reminiscent of some of the 'middle dialogues', and resembles the *Menexenus* and *Symposium* to the extent that Socrates attempts to give voice to lessons learned from eminent females. The last section, finally, has greater metaphysical and didactic content (128a–130c, 132c–133c) in the manner of the late dialogues, or in that of Middle Platonism according to some. Stylistic studies note a few *hapax legomena*, 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 (variously his δαιμόνιον, ὁ θεός, or just θεός) makes it similar to many so-called 'Socratic' or 'early' dialogues (τι δαιμόνιον: 103a; θεός: 105b–e, 124c, 127e, 135d), if also to *Theaetetus* 150c–151b.[2] 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 is wholly satisfying.

Perhaps the question itself is misleading, for it rests on the traditional chronology and more specifically on a popular but unproven developmental theory. This hermeneutical approach, although widespread, has been seriously called into question in the last few years in favour of a more unifying or less linear approach to the dialogues.[3] Whatever the case, to

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

[2] For a defence of the authenticity (and of the unity) of the dialogue, but not unanimously as 'Socratic dialogue' (or 'early dialogue'), see e.g. Croiset (1920: 50); Annas (1985: 118); Pradeau (1999: 21–22); Denyer (2001: 5–11); Lachance (2012: 112–113, 130–132). 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: 218).

[3] Cf. Annas 1999; Denyer 2001: 20–26; Gill 2006: 140–147.

take the *Alcibiades* seriously as a *possibly* authentic work, as this study proposes, forces us to rethink the traditional classification and thereby the relationship between Socraticism and Platonism.[4] It also forces us to consider exactly what we mean by 'an authentic work of Plato'. To the ancients, the most important question would always have been whether the dialogue was an accurate reflection of Platonic thought, with the secondary requirement that it should have arisen from Plato's own project. These requirements make it clear why those who accept the story about Philip of Opus' involvement with the *Laws* and *Epinomis* should see the former very much as any other work, and the latter as Philip's own contribution.[5] In spite of a general expectation that a received text, even allowing for possible errors in editing and transmission, would also reflect the language of the author concerned, this was much less important.[6] When we examine these issues the ancient tradition, and especially Olympiodorus' commentary, can help us better to understand some of the issues involved in our re-examination.

While it is fitting to recall briefly the dialogue's privileged status in Antiquity first, our intention here is not so much to defend the authenticity of the dialogue as to explore the hypothesis that it may be interpreted along the same lines as any other dialogue of Plato. It is clear that it relates intertextually to other works in the *corpus*, that it attempts to situate itself within the Platonic tradition, and that it explores the legacy of Socrates with the Platonic Socrates primarily in mind. While the uncertain status of the dialogue nowadays is such that few Plato commentators 'dare' to refer to it as an authority, it cannot be better understood against any other background. We shall reflect upon the authenticity and the context of the work in our Part III in the light of our investigations, and consider a wide range of possibilities, several of which we are unable to exclude. During our investigation, however, we propose to treat the *Alcibiades* as a legitimate and influential part of the Platonic tradition, which will ensure that there is a background against which this valuable text may be adequately discussed. Even so, just as many genuine works of Plato also engage from time to time with works of

[4] Cf. Weil 1964: 84. [5] anon. *Proleg.* 24.13–16; Plutarch, *On Isis and Osiris* 370f; D.L. 3.37.

[6] It is clear from Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus* that his master's words required extensive editing, but that did not become an obstacle to regarding them as authentic Plotinus, and later commentaries resulting from a student's notetaking may equally be held to be the work of the lecturer or his notetaker; hence several titles ascribed to Syrianus by the *Suda* also appear in the list of his pupil Proclus' works. Olympiodorus' lectures seem mostly to result from the notetaker, whose fidelity to what he heard is hard to judge.

other authors too, our assumption does not exclude the possibility that it relates also to works of Aeschines, Xenophon and Aristotle, among others.

2 Privileged status of the dialogue in Antiquity

In Antiquity the authenticity and place of the *Alcibiades* in the Platonic *corpus* are wholly unproblematic. Indeed, for more than three centuries of Neoplatonism, the dialogue was read and actually commentated upon 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 ancient complete commentary on the dialogue that has survived is that of Olympiodorus of Alexandria (= *in Alc.*, ed. Westerink 1956, 144 pages).[7] Proclus' commentary in its present state is incomplete; it covers the first third of the dialogue only (103a–116a). This is indeed of great interest in understanding Proclus' overall approach to the dialogue and to Socratic refutation, but the loss of the remainder inevitably reduces its overall interest for the present study, although it will certainly warrant a careful treatment. The introductory parts of the commentary have a bearing upon the whole dialogue, so that it may not be assumed that we know nothing of Proclus' exegesis on the final two-thirds of the work.

Proclus and Olympiodorus generally follow the hermeneutical and pedagogical principles of their predecessors, principles going at least as far back as Iamblichus' *cursus*. This approach seeks to determine notably the goal or unifying subject (σκοπός) of each dialogue.[8] The *Alcibiades* is then the first dialogue to be read (as ἀρχή of philosophy simply)[9] since it is viewed as the most apt to teach us the knowledge of our own true nature,

[7] 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. Jackson *et al.* 1998). His commentaries are divided into lectures, subdivided in turn into general and detailed analysis (θεωρία; λέξις). On Olympiodorus' teaching methods, see Festugière 1963: 77–80; Renaud 2008a. The dating of the *Alcibiades* commentary is uncertain; Westerink (1976: 21) proposes 560.

[8] According to Iamblichus, the *Alcibiades* contains 'the whole philosophy of Plato . . . as it were in seminal form (ὥσπερ ἐν σπέρματι)' (fr. 1, ed. and trans. Dillon 1973: 72–73 = Proclus, *in Alc.* Prooim., 11.15–17, ed. Segonds 1985–1986); Olympiodorus, *in Alc.* 10.17–11, 6. For a detailed study of the Introductions (προλεγόμενα) to the Neoplatonic commentaries in which these questions are discussed, see Hadot 1987: esp. 109.

[9] Cf. Proclus, *in Alc.* 1–11.

namely our rational soul.[10] This is why the dialogue is classified among the maieutic dialogues.[11] The principal latent truth that Socrates is about to reveal maieutically to Alcibiades is precisely the truth about the soul as the true self (*in Alc.* 12.6-7).[12] According to an underlying hermeneutical principle implicit in this approach, there exists a concordance between the interlocutors' dispositions presented in a dialogue and those of the readers to whom it is supposedly addressed.[13]

3 Defence of the general approach

The *conjoint* study of Plato's text and its later interpretation in Antiquity, as opposed to their separate treatment, is by no means a widespread practice in current research, but constitutes a 'new' field of exploration, which we consider of value especially for Platonic studies.

Recent scholarship on the ancient commentators of Plato, and also of Aristotle, tends to exhibit one of two approaches: one concentrates on the doctrines of the commentators, the other on their methodology, notably from an educational point of view. The imposing three-volume anthology edited by Richard Sorabji (*The Philosophy of the Commentators (200–600* AD) 2005) illustrates the first approach; the pioneer study by Jaap Mansfeld (*Prolegomena: Questions to be Settled Before the Study of an Author, or a Text* 1994) illustrates the second. A third type of approach exists, but it is marginal even today: the study of the ancient commentators for their possible contributions to current Plato scholarship.[14] But is this marginal

[10] Cf. anon. *Proleg.* (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 (ἑαυτοὺς γνῶναι)' (ed. Westerink and Trouillard 1990).

[11] Albinus, *Prologos* 3.36 (ed. Nüsser 1991); D.L.3.51. The latent ideas which a maieutic dialogue bring to light are called natural notions (φυσικαί ἔννοιαι, e.g. Albinus, *Prologos* 6.33) or common notions (κοιναὶ ἔννοιαι, e.g. Olympiodorus, *passim*).

[12] According to Olympiodorus (*in Alc.* 92.4–9) consensus is a sign – but by no means a proof – of truth. Demonstrations rest ultimately on common notions (*in Alc.* 18.2–5).

[13] According to Albinus, the reasons for the choice of the *Alcibiades* as the best introduction to philosophy pertain to the dispositions which the reader introduced to philosophy should possess, dispositions matching those of Alcibiades as the ideal interlocutor: natural abilities (κατὰ φύσιν), age (κατὰ τὴν ἡλικίαν), motivation (κατὰ προαίρεσιν), disposition (κατὰ ἕξιν) and leisure (κατὰ τὴν ὕλην: *Prologos* 5.1–37). On the place of the *Alcibiades* among the Middle Platonists and Neoplatonists, see Segonds 1985–6: vii–xx; Tarrant 2000: 119–121.

[14] This third approach is akin to the one proposed by Chiaradonna and Rashed (2010: 256), which they also conceive as a supplement to the exclusively philosophical and methodological approaches. According to them, Aristotelian and Post-Aristotelian studies would profit, from both exegetical and philosophical points of view, by proceeding as follows: (a) selecting important passages of the Aristotelian text which the ancient commentators sought to elucidate, (b) comparing in detail the interpretations proposed by their predecessors, and (c) weighting the respective merits of those readings. The fictive title of this kind of global study (in the manner of the commented anthology by

approach viable given the hermeneutical presuppositions and the strongly speculative, at times even fanciful, bent of many of these commentaries? In what follows, we offer a modest attempt to show that it is a viable approach for Plato scholarship, as long as we acknowledge its limitations.

In her work *Ancient Greek Scholarship* (2007) Eleanor Dickey makes the following remark concerning the Neoplatonic commentators of Plato: 'Precisely because of their originality and philosophical nature ... the commentaries are now considered to be of little use for the study of Plato's own writings, and in consequence only the briefest summary of this body of work can be given here.'[15] This remark summarizes quite well the standard view, which has perhaps been influenced too much by the conviction that Plotinus initiated a substantially new philosophy, and that Proclus and other commentators saw themselves as Plotinus' followers as much as Plato's. Such a view is questionable as regards both Plotinus and Proclus, and demonstrably false in the case of Olympiodorus. Over the last few years, therefore, important studies have challenged this verdict. These include publications by Julia Annas, David Sedley and Lloyd Gerson.[16] We would situate much of our own recent work in a similar tradition, despite the fact that these authors' stated goals partially corresponds to the doctrinal and methodological approaches presented above. Such approaches are still more marginal than we believe they should be, but we remain convinced that questions posed by the study of later Platonism can play an important maieutic role in helping us to clarify and refine our thinking about important issues regarding the original Platonic texts, 'genuine' or others.

4 General arguments in favour of an ancient approach

The main, general arguments that we present here in favour of our approach are as follows:

Sorabji 2005) could for instance be as they suggest: *A Thousand and One Aristotelian Obscurities in the Light of the Commentators*. This approach would indeed be particularly promising and well adapted to the Aristotelian text. The one advocated here differs from theirs mostly by the concern to preserve the specificity and completeness of the Platonic dialogue with respect to the artistic dimension and Platonic (and Neoplatonic) conception of the dialogue as an organic unity (cf. *Phaedrus* 264c). Therefore this approach of ours could hardly take on the form of an annotated anthology. Moreover, it would be fitting to compare the ancient interpretations of Platonic or Aristotelian texts with modern readings of those same texts in order judge better both the former and the latter.

[15] Dickey 2007: 47.

[16] Cf. e.g. Annas 1999; Annas and Rowe 2002; Sedley 1996, 2002; Gerson 2005, 2013; cf. also Tarrant 2000, 2005a. Many of the essays in Layne and Tarrant (2014) also invite reflection upon Plato's Socrates via the examination of later depictions of him in the Neoplatonic commentaries.

(1) The study of the ancient commentators offers a new and enlightening perspective from which to reflect on our own hermeneutical theories and practices.[17] In short, awareness of the distinctive features and limitations of our own perspective on the dialogue is facilitated by affording another age due attention.

(2) More specifically, the historical distance and differences separating us from the ancients help us become more conscious of our own presuppositions, which are nothing less than our axioms, our 'first principles' of interpretation and reflection. Reading a modern study on Plato (or another philosopher from Antiquity) published one or two centuries ago is a good way to realize how far the interests and the debates of even the recent past could differ from those of today. This is at least as true of interpretations that are fifteen or more centuries' old. Even the very concept of 'philosophy' has undergone considerable changes over time, and therefore what rates as a 'philosophical question' must inevitably change too.

(3) The heuristic value of ancient interpretations is amplified by the state of current Plato scholarship, which is characterized by a certain degree of uncertainty about the hermeneutical principles inherited between the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, as well as by lively debates about various methodological issues. These concern especially the theory of development (the traditional threefold division into 'early', 'middle' and 'late' dialogues), the relationship between the dramatic form and doctrinal content, and the issue of whether it is preferable to interpret dialogues in isolation or as a single complex body of literature with a single overarching goal.[18]

(4) The otherness and relevance of ancient commentaries rest on three fundamental hermeneutical principles:

(i) *Unity of the Platonic* corpus. Ancient readers seek to explain the apparent contradictions between the dialogues in the light of what they consider Plato's literary and philosophical intentions (rather than in terms of development of his thought, as is still usually the case nowadays). This is why they feel free to refer to various texts in the *corpus* in order to shed light on obscure passages of a dialogue.

[17] See the relatively recent collection of essays in Achard and Renaud 2008a, 2008b.

[18] The latter approach seems especially important within traditions influenced by Leo Strauss, including the post-Straussian work of Altman (2012). It is perhaps easiest to follow such an approach if one is convinced, as these interpreters usually are, that every work included in the Thrasyllan canon is genuine Plato. Pangle (1987: 3–16) advances some arguments for the authenticity of the whole canon, including the *dubia*, citing many scholars including Grote (1867: 132–169), Müller (1975: 23–26) and Philip (1970: 307).

(ii) *Unity of each dialogue, especially the dramatic form and doctrinal content*. Each dialogue has one simple specific topic or aim (σκοπός) towards which all of the formal and doctrinal elements of the dialogue converge. The principle of internal unity is still regarded today as a valid and important principle, although it is usually not conceived as strictly today.[19] The inseparability of dialogue form and philosophical content is increasingly recognized nowadays, albeit more readily by classicists than philosophers.[20] Finally, while the majority of those today who are interested in the dramatic form defend a non-doctrinal (or sceptical) interpretation, the Neoplatonic readers defend a doctrinal reading, and thereby can offer hermeneutical options often unknown or neglected today.

(iii) *Unity of the Platonic tradition and universality of truth.* Exegesis aims at the discovery, or rather the re-discovery, of truth conceived of as universal and timeless. Plato's authority rests on a tradition of truth that transcends Plato himself. This is why when they interpret Plato, the Neoplatonic commentators sometimes refer to texts that lie outside the Platonic *corpus* to complete their understanding of the dialogues, including texts that were written (or were thought to have been written) well before the birth of Plato. As this study progresses we shall concentrate on the second principle (unity of form and content), while referring to the two others occasionally.

(5) Although the ancient approach, which is intent above all on demonstrating the perfect consistency of the master's thought, does have its share of difficulties and even naïve assumptions (for instance 'the myth of coherence'), it nevertheless makes these commentators *extremely attentive* to aspects of the text we can easily underestimate today[21] and forces them to look for solutions to difficulties that we tend to 'solve' by mere appeal either to chronology or to irony of some kind.

(6) This kind of study can therefore give new impetus to research. Reading the Platonic dialogues in this different, 'new' way can enrich and correct our ways of reading. Of course, we cannot expect a panacea for our doubts and disputes, as the ancient commentators had their own internal disagreements.[22] The ancient debates can nevertheless reveal tensions or difficulties in the Platonic text, and thus nourish in turn our own debates.

[19] Cf. Tarrant 2007a: 11–12. [20] Cf. Annas and Rowe 2002: x.
[21] Cf. Sedley 1996: 79, 2002: 37. [22] Cf. Tarrant 2000: vii.