

François Renaud and Harold Tarrant, *The Platonic Alcibiades I: The Dialogue and Its Ancient Reception*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. Pp. xii + 292. ISBN 978-0-521-19912-4.

Renaud and Tarrant's *tour de force* volume on the *Alcibiades I* is a welcome addition to the libraries of those interested in the appropriation of ancient texts in the philosophical traditions that follow the death of Plato and terminate in late antiquity. Readers who come to this volume with knowledge of the controversies surrounding the dialogue's authenticity may be disappointed to learn that the authors argue only that, as their title indicates, it is 'Platonic,' and do not take a side on the question of authenticity one way or another. This issue notwithstanding, the book demonstrates the clear impact of the dialogue on the philosophers of late antiquity and gives reason to suspect its influence in earlier traditions where little written evidence can be found.

In the Introduction the authors offer a defense of their interpretive method, itself a highlight of the book. They argue that their study of ancient commentators contributes to contemporary scholarship on Plato (7) insofar as it offers us opportunity to reflect on our own hermeneutical theories and practices (9). The 'otherness' of their fundamental assumptions calls upon us to reconsider our conception of what philosophy is (11). A compelling instance of this, which receives detailed analysis in the book, is the conception of philosophy as commentary, which implies that truth has already been discovered and that philosophy is a matter of rediscovering truth through the study of classic texts (13).

The first chapter provides an overview of the *Alcibiades* and its issues, the most famous of which are the mirror motif and self-knowledge (129b–133c). The authors illustrate the way in which self-knowledge is more than just an acknowledgment of human finitude but knowledge of the divinity of intellect (57). In the scholarship one finds both theocentric and anthropocentric interpretations of the text (64–71). Renaud and Tarrant persuasively contend that both interpretations are tenable and argue for a compromise: while the anthropocentric interpretation argues that the imageries of the eye and mirror imply the impossibility of solitary self-knowledge and the necessity of dialogue with others, it is nevertheless true that the intellect, which is divine, is represented as the essence of the soul. While this topic has garnered the most attention in secondary literature on the dialogue, the authors are right to insist that the emphasis on self-knowledge is present throughout the dialogue and extends outward from its pages to the reader himself, who resembles Alcibiades in having certainty about issues like fairness or justice without being able to offer explanation about how this knowledge came about (38–39).

Renaud and Tarrant turn in Chapter Two to the early reception of the *Alcibiades*. The authors find no strong evidence for the dialogue's influence on Xenophon (93) and also argue that Aristotle cannot be regarded as playing a significant role in its reception (97). They claim that the most important influence the dialogue had during

Hellenistic times was under the Academy of Polemo, the real importance of which becomes clearer in the final section of the book. The reader who notes that such a connection is referred to as a ‘likelihood’ (109) may wish for more demonstrative evidence of its truth than the presence of idealized love in the Academy, though such evidence is not truly obvious in any consistent way for several hundred more years. As it stands, Renaud and Tarrant rely on arguments that appeal to the dialogue’s probable influence on authors like Cicero who identifies the human being as the soul and particularly the intellect (111). They nonetheless humbly admit that their approach does not exclude the possibility that the dialogue’s possible influence might have been mediated through one or several intermediary sources (119). The case is similar with Plutarch. The authors argue that his *Life of Alcibiades* is intelligible without reference to the *Alcibiades* though it is hard to believe he was not thinking of the dialogue while writing it (129). The later Middle Platonist Albinus provides more concrete evidence, for his *Prologus* places the *Alcibiades* first in a reading order for the ideal student of Plato (140). The late second century Platonist Harpocration wrote an entire commentary on the dialogue, though unfortunately only one fragment of it survives (146). As for Alcinous, he refers in the *Didascalicus* to the *Alcibiades* in his discussion of the basics of logic (147).

Chapter Three begins with a discussion of Plotinus, whose *Enneads* contains no reference to Alcibiades or the dialogue bearing his name (154), but whom the authors nevertheless contend allowed the range of distinctions and issues in the *Alcibiades* to influence his thinking on what it really is that makes us (158). The *Alcibiades* is thus for Plotinus a text upon which to meditate for one’s own thinking. Porphyry too makes no direct reference to the dialogue (161). The case for its influence is more obvious in Iamblichus, who placed the *Alcibiades* first in his pedagogical curriculum for students, and from whom we have eight extant fragments of what is purported to be a *Commentarium in Alcibiadem* (164–167). We have no extant commentary from Syrianus, the successor to Plutarch, though his lectures on the *Phaedrus*, which are preserved in the commentary of his student Hermias, explicitly mention the *Alcibiades* four times and stress the philosophical art of love (173–177). The most important focus in the chapter is, unsurprisingly, Proclus, whose commentary, 36 percent longer than that of Olympiodorus, unfortunately breaks off at Stephanus page 116b. Proclus reads the *Alcibiades* as a fundamental and foundational contribution to one’s philosophical education, and sees the dialogue as both erotic and scientific (186). The reader here may be puzzled as to why Proclus does not receive more space in the book given both his philosophical importance in late antiquity and the length of the extant portion of his commentary. The chapter concludes with short reflections on both Damascius (186–187) and the ‘Christian’ *Alcibiades* as seen through the eyes of authors like Eusebius and Stobaeus (187–189).

The entirety of Chapter Four is devoted to Olympiodorus, the only ancient commentator from whom we possess full and complete commentaries on Plato. He divides the dialogue into three main sections—elenctic (106c–119a), protreptic

(119a–124a), maieutic (124a–135d)—and argues that these sections, in turn, free Alcibiades from excessive self-confidence, stir his political ambitions through exhortation, and finally reveal to him the genuine power of his true, rational self (200–201). While Proclus believes that the *skopos* or aim of the dialogue is knowledge of the true self *qua* rational soul, Olympiodorus tends to follow Damascius in averring that there are two aspects of the self at play: the self with regard to political life—that is, the rational soul making use of the body as instrument—and the so called self itself—the superior part of the soul, rational and impersonal (230–231). Generally, the discussion of Olympiodorus is quite comprehensive in comparison to that of Proclus, the justification for which is that the former’s commentary is more sober, less theological, and less tied to a detailed metaphysical system postulated by the commentator (190–191). Though the authors acknowledge that Olympiodorus draws on much material already in Proclus, they argue that their treatment of these issues in the chapter on Olympiodorus aims to offer substantial insights into the totality of a Neoplatonic commentary. As such, the idea seems to be that Proclus receives less analysis in the previous chapter because many of his ideas are preserved in Olympiodorus.

In the fifth and final chapter Renaud and Tarrant present the reader with ancient lessons for the modern interpreter, chief among which are that there is a greater underlying unity to the Platonic dialogues than is typically admitted today (249), and that philosophy itself was once understood simultaneously as a moral, intellectual, and spiritual exercise (256). In the end, the authors make no definite claim about authorship but orient the reader toward a possible conclusion: since it is gradually becoming clear that the date of the writing of a Platonic dialogue need not correspond exactly with its date of publication (261), there is reason to admit the possibility that the dialogue could have been written early in Plato’s career without being circulated until later (263). Such a possibility would account for the seemingly ‘early’ or ‘middle’ style of the dialogue while also accounting for the various occurrences of later vocabulary (265). The authors conclude that, regardless of its origins, the Academy of Polemo (d. 270/69) is the *terminus ante quem* for the *Alcibiades* in its final form (267).

In the end, this volume is a font of wisdom not just about the *Alcibiades* but also the hundreds of years of philosophy that follow the death of Plato. It is exhaustively researched and thoroughly informative. Some readers will be left with hesitations about the presence of the dialogue’s systematic and significant influence before Iamblichus, and while many may wish for a more definitive statement about authenticity, none will be left without the impression that this book will remain integral to an understanding of a much underappreciated Platonic dialogue and a little acknowledged period in the history of philosophy.

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