

A Neo-Platonic Dialogue on the Ethics of Love^{*}

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Abstract: In his classic paper on “The Individual as an Object of Love in Plato” Gregory Vlastos denied that according to Plato’s Diotima in the *Symposium* a human individual can ever be the proper object of one’s erotic desire, because what one (should) be enamoured with is the Form of Beauty. For the true Platonic lover, the beauty of an individual is only the starting-point for one to understand that beauty can reside also in more abstract levels. Hence, Vlastos argues that the beloved individual is for his lover only a means to an end, so that the lover recollects and attains to true Beauty, and that this is morally objectionable. The systematic Neoplatonic philosopher Proclus (412–485 AD) had already given an answer to this accusation. I will first present the altruistic side of Eros as an ontological entity in Proclus’s metaphysical system. My guide in this will be Socrates, as well as the Platonic Demiurge from the *Timaeus* and *Republic*’s philosopher-king. It will be shown that, according to Proclus’s interpretation of various Platonic texts, Vlastos was wrong to accuse Plato of the abovementioned “instrumentality” on the erotic field. However, my paper will close with a critical engagement with Proclus too, since I discern that in his view of Platonic love another sort of instrumentality, one which is akin to Stoic ethics, arises. Vlastos was wrong, but we do not need to be wholeheartedly sympathetic to Proclus.

Keywords: affection, disinterested, *eros*, instrumentality, love, providence

* The present contribution draws on sections from my PhD thesis (Vasilakis, 2014), which, in an updated, augmented and revised form has been published as Vasilakis, 2021. It has affinities with papers I read at the first regional Meeting of the International Plato Society (on Plato’s moral psychology: University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Oct. 2012), the XXIII World Congress of Philosophy (Athens, August 2013; cf. Vasilakis, 2018) and at the Conference “ARXAI: Proclus Diadochus of Constantinople and his Abrahamic Interpreters” (Istanbul, Dec. 2012), which appeared as Vasilakis, 2017. I am thankful to the organizers of the Metochi-Seminar on Love for their invitation, fruitful discussions and constructive criticism. I also thank the editors (especially Henny Fiskå Hägg) and the proofreader of the volume for making my prose smoother and more easily accessible.

Introduction

As with Plato's whole philosophy,¹ so too with his theories of love, as exposed in his erotic dialogues² and especially the *Symposium*:³ they are full of penetrating problems, suspicious lacunae and enticing stimuli for further explorations on the topic of love (*erōs*). As a response to these challenges, subsequent generations, whether ancient or modern, pagan or Christian, classic or romantic, Western or Eastern, general public or professional scholars, philosophers or artists, have attempted to give their own answers, make up new theories or go into broader syntheses. A famous puzzle, arising in part from an "(in)famous" episode between Socrates (470/469–399 BC) and the young Alcibiades (450–404 BC), narrated in the *Symposium*,⁴ is the following: can what people in everyday life (throughout history) have called "Platonic eros" involve corporeal affection and sexual contact? Other perennial questions connected with this dialogue are the following: what is the relation of all the narrated monologues (e.g. the myths by Aristophanes

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- 1 There are many good book-length introductions to Plato (427–347 BC). The collective volume of Fine, 2008 is indeed fine. The complete works of Plato (even the spurious ones) can be found in Cooper, 1997. From this volume stem the translations of Platonic passages used here, except for those of the *Phaedrus*.
 - 2 The *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*. The *Lysis* is an aporetic (i.e. with no definite solution at its end) dialogue on friendship that has many affinities with the *Symposium*. The *Alcibiades I*, whose author is perhaps not Plato (cf. Smith, 2004), was taken by the Neoplatonists, due to its Introduction, as a dialogue on love, among much else, and appropriate to be the starting point of the late Neoplatonic Curriculum. For a background on the Platonic *Alcibiades I* and its readings in Antiquity, see Johnson-Tarrant, 2012.
 - 3 "*Symposium*" is literally a drinking party. In this case, however, its participants decided, at least for the beginning, not to get drunk, but to praise Eros, the god of Love. Hence, we have many speeches, given by: Phaedrus (Socrates's interlocutor in the homonymous Platonic dialogue on eros and rhetoric), Pausanias (the lover of Agathon), Eryximachus (the doctor), Aristophanes (the comic poet), Agathon (the tragic poet; in honour of his win in the dramatic competition in Athens he has organized this party at his home), Diotima (a priestess, whose speech is narrated by Socrates) and (the already drunken) Alcibiades (Socrates's old friend and student, who, however, praises Socrates, not Eros; see Sykoutris, 1949, e.g., pp. 145*–146*). For a guide to this philosophical and literary masterpiece, see Sheffield, 2006, as well as Lesher-Nails-Sheffield, 2006, Horn, 2012, and Destrée-Giannopoulou, 2017.
 - 4 See *Symp.*, 217c4ff. Whether this is fiction or not is difficult to determine and is not the point. For the morality of Doric origin that approved of the erotic relation between a mature male and a young boy in the bloom of his age (when starting to grow a beard) see Dover, 1989, esp. pp. 189–196, and the relevant section from the Introduction to the monumental Modern Greek edition of the *Symposium* by Sykoutris, 1949, pp. 39*–65*.

and Diotima)? Is the core of Plato's view to be found in the teaching of Diotima (which is narrated by Socrates)? Is so-called Platonic love egoistic?⁵ Is it related only to Forms, and especially that of the Beautiful?

In a paper of this length I cannot deal with all of these problems. Instead I will focus on a particular objection raised by a famous Platonic scholar of the 20th century, Gregory Vlastos (1907–1991), who was born in Constantinople but spent most of his life in the USA. In his classic paper on “The Individual as an Object of Love in Plato” (Vlastos, 1973),⁶ he denied that, according to Diotima (who for him has views identical to those of Plato), a human individual can ever be the proper object of one's erotic desire, because what one can and should be enamoured with is the Form of Beauty, and not the particular beauty which is the faint image of the Form and only resides in a beautiful individual.⁷ That being Vlastos's framework, I am interested in the following accusation: for the true Platonic lover, i.e., the philosopher, the beauty (first of the body and then of the soul) of an individual is only the starting-point for one to understand that beauty can reside also in many bodies and persons, as well as customs, activities, like legislation, and sciences. In the end of this journey of abstraction one can suddenly grasp the summit,⁸ the Form of Beauty itself, which, by being eternally and objectively beautiful, is responsible for the beauty envisaged in all other things material and immaterial. In this picture, so Vlastos argues, the beloved individual is for his lover only a means to an end,⁹ the mere spring-board for the lover to recollect¹⁰

5 Apart from Vlastos, about whom more later, the idea that Platonic love is egoistic was also promoted by W. J. Verdenius and most notably A. Nygren, 1953: *passim*, and especially pp. 166–181. I will not be discussing Nygren, whose rigid and opposing categorization of Pagan *eros* and Christian *agape* is criticized even by Vlastos himself (cf. Vlastos, 1973, p. 6, n. 13; p. 20, n. 56; p. 30). For a thoughtful criticism of Nygren on the grounds of his methodology, see Tollefsen's and Kaufman's contributions in this volume.

6 This paper generated a host of articles and books by other scholars, in response.

7 For a recent response, see Woolf, 2017, a draft of which had appeared as Woolf, 2009.

8 This is the famous “ladder of love” in the end of Diotima's teaching: *Symp.*, 209e6–212a9, with a synopsis in *Symp.*, 211b9–c10.

9 See esp. *Symp.*, 211b9–c4: “This is what it is to go aright, or be led by another, into the mystery of Love: one goes always upwards for the sake of this Beauty, starting out from beautiful things and *using them like rising stairs (hosper epanvasmois chromenon)*; from one body to two ...” (my italics).

10 Using the term from the theory of “Recollection” put forward in the *Phaedo*, the *Meno* and, associated with love, in the *Phaedrus*.

and attain to true Beauty, and this is or should be morally objectionable (Vlastos, 1973, p. 32).

The response to this objection that will follow antedates Vlastos by more than a millennium, since it is a Neoplatonic¹¹ one which stems from a (pagan) systematizer of (Neo-)Platonic philosophy, Proclus (412–485 AD), who is called also Platonic Successor, because he had been one of the last Heads of the Platonic Academy in Athens.¹² More specifically, I will be focusing on his *Commentary on the First Alcibiades*.¹³ My turning to him is interesting, because the Neoplatonists have frequently been criticized for giving forced interpretations of Plato. However, can this verdict justify modern Plato commentators not paying attention to Neoplatonic views on central problems of Platonic philosophy, such as the accusation of “moral egoism”? So, in what follows I will first present the altruistic side of Eros as an ontological entity in Proclus’s metaphysical system. Our guide in this will be Socrates, who instantiates the erotic activity of divine Eros in the best possible way. Our understanding of the “what” and “how” of this altruistic side will be deepened by considering the Platonic Demiurge from Plato’s cosmological dialogue *Timaeus*, and the philosopher-king from Plato’s *Republic*. The result will be that, according to Proclus’s interpretation of Platonic texts, Vlastos was wrong to accuse Plato of the abovementioned “instrumentality” in the context of the erotic field. However, my paper will close with a critical engagement with Proclus, too, since I discern that in his view of Platonic love another sort of instrumentality, one which is akin to Stoic ethics, emerges. Vlastos was wrong, but we do not need to be unreservedly sympathetic to Proclus.

11 Neoplatonism is one of the most important traditions in the history of philosophy and culture. Its official founder is Plotinus (204/5–270 AD), while other prominent figures are his pupil and editor Porphyry (ca. 232–304 AD) and Proclus (412–485 AD). (Note the persisting initial “P” in the names of this tradition! “Neo-Platonism” is actually a label attached to this brand of philosophy by scholars on the verge of the 19th century (cf. Dillon-Gerson, 2004, p. xiii). For a succinct introduction to Neoplatonism, see Remes, 2008.

12 For a good introduction to Proclus, see Chlup, 2012.

13 The edition/translation (sometimes modified) I will be using is that of Westerink-O’Neill, 2011 (henceforth: *In Alc.*). In relation to several of my following points, the reader can find relevant articles in Layne-Tarrant, 2014.

Socrates as Eros and Vice Versa

Let us take as our starting point the following characteristic Proclean passage:

[I]t is the property of divine lovers to turn, recall and rally the beloved to himself; since, positively instituting a middle rank between divine beauty and those who have need of their forethought, these persons, inasmuch as they model themselves on the divine love, gather unto and unite with themselves the lives of their loved ones, and lead them up with themselves to intelligible beauty, pouring, as Socrates in the Phaedrus [by Plato: *Phdr.*, 253a6–7] says “into their souls” whatever they “draw” from that source. If, then, the lover is inspired (*katochos*) by love, he would be the sort of person who turns back and recalls noble natures to the good, like love itself. (*In Alc.*, p. 26, line 10 - p. 27, line 3)

As becomes clear from the continuation of the excerpt, the “divine lover” described here is Socrates. What is more, he is said to be possessed by the god of Love, i.e., a higher entity in the ontological realm (fact that explains why in such cases I capitalize the initial of Eros/Love). Further, it is assumed that Socrates patterns himself upon the characteristic activity of that deity, which is to elevate the inferior beings of its rank towards the divine beauty. Consequently, a first conclusion one could draw from this comparison is that that – for Proclus – Socrates’s relationship to Alcibiades constitutes an allegory for the relation between the higher and the lower entities of the ontological realm (Whittaker, 1928, p. 243). By examining aspects of the way Socrates is associated with Alcibiades, we actually witness the way the ontological hierarchy is structured, as reflected in our intra-mundane reality, and vice versa.

But the connection between ethics and metaphysics is deeper than that.¹⁴ Indeed, Proclus holds that Socrates’s relationship to Alcibiades is no mere accidental reflection or “analogical” mirroring of the intelligible world’s hierarchy. He states that Socrates, passing on what his own guardian spirit has conferred on *him*, actually bestows divine providence on the young boy.¹⁵ Consequently, Socrates’s relation to Alcibiades is

¹⁴ See also Terezis 2002, p. 64, p. 66 and Baltzly, 2016, p. 258.

¹⁵ See for instance *In Alc.*, 63,12–67,18 (in conjunction with e.g., 28,18–29,1 and 50,22–52,2).

actually an expression of the divine within our intra-mundane reality. The passage cited above also suggests that there is a specific ontological relation between the divine lover and Eros, since the lover receives bestowals which are ultimately derived from Eros itself.

We will be able to appreciate better what Proclus says about love if we try to locate Eros within the ontological scheme and try to understand its function.¹⁶ Here we may confine ourselves to the following rough sketch:¹⁷ as in the *Symposium* (201e3–203a10, esp. 202b6), Eros is a medium/mediator between the beloved, which is the Beautiful, and those who love it. Love, due to its aspiration, is the first to try to unite itself with Beauty (we may term this “reversive” in the sense of “upwards”/“ascending” love, because the object of desire, Beauty, lies on the top of this metaphysical scheme), and constitutes the bond for the lower entities to arrive at that divine level (this can be termed “providential” qua “downward”/“descending” love, because the recipients of Eros’s activity lie below him in the metaphysical scheme). What Eros actually does is to bestow on the inferior members of its rank its characteristic property, which is erotic aspiration. In that way Proclus combines the two notions of ascending and descending love into one: it is insofar as Eros has an ascending love that enables the inferiors to be elevated, too. And if we insist on asking why Eros ever has this descending attitude at all, then the ultimate answer is that he is providential.¹⁸ In other words, Alcibiades can have reversive-ascending eros for Socrates, and Socrates can have providential-descending eros for Alcibiades, while also having reversive eros for higher entities, like his guardian-spirit (*daimonion*).

Thus, it is an essential feature of the Proclean divine lover, i.e., Socrates, who patterns himself upon the god Eros, to elevate along with himself his beloved towards the intelligible Beauty. The lover’s reversive eros does not seem to be incompatible with his providential love.¹⁹ To the contrary,

16 Martijn, 2010 does the same thing with nature in Proclus’s system, focusing on his *Commentary on the Timaeus*.

17 See *In Alc.*, 30,14–31,2; 50,22–51,6; 52,10–12; 53,4–10; 63,12ff. A more extensive treatment is given in Vasilakis, 2021, esp. pp. 99–102. See also Chlup, 2012, pp. 242–243 and Riggs, 2010, passim.

18 See proposition 120 of Proclus’s *Elements of Theology* for which see the magisterial edition of Dodds, 1963 (henceforth: *Elements*). See also an approach in Butler, 2014, pp. 211–235.

19 Cf. also Terezis, 2002, pp. 56–57.

in so far as the lover has a reversive eros, i.e., in so far as he is directed towards the intelligible realm, where Eros, Beauty and the Good lie, he is also providential towards his beloved. There is no doubt that Proclus follows the path of the *Phaedrus*, where among other things it is stated that

[t]hose who belong to ... each of the ... gods proceed ... in accordance with their god and seek that their boy should be of the same nature, and when they acquire him, imitating the god themselves and persuading and disciplining their beloved they draw him into the way of life and pattern of the god, to the extent that each is able, without showing jealousy or mean ill-will towards their beloved; rather they act as they do because they are trying as much as they can, in every way, to draw him into complete resemblance to themselves and to whichever god they honour.²⁰

Indeed, the divine lover's providential attitude, with respect to both the intelligible and the intra-mundane realm, is a recurrent theme in the *Alcibiades's Commentary*. It is worth giving some further illustrations of it:

[T]he souls that have chosen the life of love are moved by the god who is the “guardian of beautiful youths” to the care of noble natures, and from apparent beauty they are elevated to the divine, taking up with them their darlings, and turning both themselves and their beloved towards beauty itself. This is just what divine love primarily accomplishes in the intelligible world ... “kindling a light” for less perfect souls they [i.e., the souls possessed by love] elevate these also to the divine and dance with them about the one source of all beauty. (*In Alc.*, 33,3–16)²¹

There could hardly be a better expression of the way Proclus views, on the one hand, the combination of upwards and downwards eros, and, on the other, the intimate relation between the intelligible erotic pattern and its worldly instantiations.²² This special and complex relationship is illustrated also by the fact that when “men's souls receive a share of such [i.e., erotic]

20 *Phaedrus*, 253b3–c2; cf. also Armstrong, 1961, p. 108 and p. 117 (while in p. 109 he suggests the conformity of the *Phaedrus* with Diotima's account of “procreation” in the *Symposium*; cf. below, n. 44), and Dillon, 1994, p. 392. The translation of the *Phaedrus* is taken from Rowe, 1988.

21 For the Platonic quotations, see the apparatus of Westerink, 2011 ad loc.

22 Cf. also *In Alc.*, 53,3–10.

inspiration, through intimacy with the god [i.e., Eros], [they] are moved with regard to the beautiful, and descend to the region of coming-to-be for the benefit of less perfect souls and out of forethought for those in need of salvation.”²³ Note again the “self-sufficiency” of the lover.²⁴ It is true that the *Symposium*, and perhaps the *Phaedrus* too, in some passages, give us the impression that the lover needs his beloved, because the latter constitutes the means/instrument for the former to recollect the source of real beauty and, thus, ascend to the intelligible,²⁵ a claim that led modern Platonic scholars to find “egocentric” characteristics in Plato’s account, as has already been mentioned.²⁶ The Neoplatonic scholar, however, definitely rejects such an interpretation: the beloved cannot constitute – at least such a kind of – a means to an end, since the divine lover already has communication with the higher realm.²⁷ It is precisely this bond with the intelligible world that enables the lover to take providential care of his beloved – or any potential beloved – i.e., of a person fitted for that special care,²⁸ and hence elevate, or try to elevate, the latter, too, to the former’s object of desire.

From Eros to the Statesman through the Demiurge

My above analysis can be illustrated and assisted by the examination of analogues to Eros that can be found in the Platonic corpus, granting the strong unitarian Neoplatonic reading of Plato.²⁹ These are the Demiurge

23 *In Alc.*, 32,9–13.

24 Adkins, 1963, e.g. 44–45 and 40 stresses, however, that the Homeric ideal of self-sufficiency survives, obscures and undermines both Plato’s and Aristotle’s treatment of friendship.

25 Either on its own, which is the picture illustrated in the *Symposium*, or along with his beloved, as appears in the *Phaedrus*; cf. also Armstrong, 1964, p. 202.

26 With respect to Proclus’s relation to his Platonic past, Nygren, 1953, p. 574 notes that “the idea of Eros has undergone a very radical transformation”.

27 Proclus is quite explicit about that; cf. *In Alc.*, 43,7–8: “Socrates, as being an inspired lover and elevated to intelligible beauty itself. ...” It is clear from the text that Socrates’s position is independent from his relation to Alcibiades. The same holds for the Stoic sage (although he does not have access to a transcendent realm), whose love is only pedagogical. Cf. Collette-Dučić, 2014, p. 88 and pp. 99–101 and Dillon, 1994, pp. 390–391.

28 We should not forget that, as is repeated many times throughout the Commentary (see *In Alc.*, 29,15; 98,13; 133, 17 and 20; 135,1; 137,2; 138,7; 139,6), Alcibiades is «*axierastos*», i.e., worthy of love.

29 According to the unitarian reading, Plato has a solid body of doctrine, parts of which one can find in the various dialogues. Neoplatonists, as well as many scholars of the 20th century, were

from the *Timaeus* and the philosopher-kings from the *Republic*. We may start with the *Timaeus*, a work on cosmology and philosophy of nature. There the generation of the physical world is depicted as the result of decoration of a pre-existing material by a divine craftsman. This Demiurge envisages the World of Forms and sets to instantiate them upon an indefinite entity who serves as basis, the so-called Receptacle. We should not be surprised if, for Proclus, the relationship of the divine lover with his beloved, both in the *Symposium* and in the *Phaedrus*, is the exact analogue of the Demiurge's relation to the Receptacle. Here, too, the *Timaeus* Demiurge mediates – like Eros – between the most beautiful intelligible living being (the World of Forms) and the Receptacle. We could never think that he is assisted in grasping the former due to the existence of the latter. Contrariwise, it is in so far as he contemplates the intelligible, and is also aware of the “disorderly moving” Receptacle, that he projects the Forms into the latter, in order to set it in order, decorate it and fashion it as the best possible image of the intelligible.³⁰ Now, if one presses the question further, and asks why the contemplation of Forms is not sufficient for the Demiurge, for he goes on to instantiate them in the Receptacle, *Timaeus's* answer is that the former “was good (*agathos*), and one who is good can never become jealous of anything”,³¹ whereby it is implied that the Receptacle was fitted for the Demiurge's action towards it.

Actually, the analogy between the divine lover and the divine craftsman is made explicit by Proclus himself. Towards the end of the following passage Proclus makes the receptacle speak to the Demiurge, as a beloved would to its lover. Since I count this instance as the most moving and poetical moment of the whole Commentary,³² and because we have the opportunity to see another remarkable instance of the ontological analogy

unitarians (e.g., P. Shorey). An opposite way to read Plato is “developmentalism”. For a history of the Plato-interpretation and other strategies of reading him, see Rasmussen, 2008, pp. 49–110.

30 Hence, we could assume that the Demiurge is confronted with two instances of necessity. See also Adamson, 2011.

31 Plato, *Timaeus*, 29e1–2. Cf. Proclus's Commentary ad loc.: in *Timaeum*, I. 359, 20–365,3 (Diehl), and Dodds, 1963, p. 213, note on prop. 25 of the *Elements*, with parallels in Plotinus, too. See also Baltzly, 2016, p. 271.

32 For another example of Proclus's moving and poetical images (although not mere metaphors), see his fragment from *De sacrificio et magia*, 149, 12–18 (Bidez). I follow Kalligas, 2009, p. 16 and p. 31, n. 1 in deleting the “according to the Greeks” of the title.

between Socrates and the intelligible entities with respect to the issue of goodness and providence, it is worth citing the whole passage:

[T]he young man seems to me to admire above all these two qualities in Socrates, his goodness of will and his power of provision; which qualities indeed are conspicuous in the most primary causes of reality, ... “For god,” he [i.e., Plato] says [in the *Timaeus*, 30a2–3], “having willed all things to be good, according to his³³ power set the world in order”, ... Socrates, therefore, faithfully reproducing these characteristics,³⁴ set an ungrudging will and power over his perfection of inferiors, everywhere present to his beloved and leading him from disorder to order. Now the young man wonders at this, “what on earth is its meaning”³⁵. ... If what “was in discordant and disorderly movement” [with *Timaeus*, 30a4–5] could say something to the creator, it would have uttered these same words: “in truth I wonder at your beneficent will and power that have reached as far as my level, are everywhere present to me and from all sides arrange me in orderly fashion.” This ... similarity with the realities that have filled all things with themselves, he ascribes to Socrates, viz: the leaving of no suitable time or place void of provision for the beloved. (*In Alc.*, 125,2–126,3)³⁶

We may now proceed to the political sphere and specifically to the *Republic*. We can assume that the Receptacle’s above-mentioned grateful speech for its decorator could be reiterated by the “political receptacle”, the body of the *polis*, if all classes were united to express with one mouth their gratitude towards their own decorator, the philosopher-king.³⁷ We can assume this, because in the Commentary Proclus offers us, apart from the already mentioned analogies, many others about the relation of the

33 O’Neill, 2011 translates the «*kata dunamin*» of the Greek text as referring to the Demiurge’s capacity to fashion his subject-matter in keeping with the paradigm. Zeyl’s neutral rendering (in Cooper, 1997, ad loc.): “so far as that was possible”, where it is not obvious whether this is ascribed to the Demiurge or what lies beneath him, is preferable. However, Segonds, 1985, p. 197, n. 5 sees in the background the Proclean triad “will-power (*dunamis*)-providence” (with further references in the literature), and in this sense O’Neill’s rendering might be more appropriate.

34 Hence, we could also suggest that here Socrates is an analogue for divine providence, in so far as he allows us to come to know it.

35 Cf. *Alcibiades I*, 104d2–5; cf. *In Alc.*, 120,10–13.

36 Cf. also *In Alc.*, 134,16–135,1 and Baltzly, 2016, p. 271 and p. 273.

37 Plato himself gives us plenty of evidence, e.g., in Socrates’s introduction to the *Timaeus* and in *Republic*, VI. 506a9–b1 and VII. 540a8–b1, about the intimate relation between the *Timaeus* and the *Republic*, without that implying that there might not also be differences between them.

lover with his beloved and that of the philosopher-statesman with his (beloved) state. Further, Proclus's language, even in these political contexts, clearly echoes the wording used for the demiurgic functions of the *Timaeus*.³⁸

These interconnections allow us to give a Proclean answer to the thorny question of the *Republic*: "why does the philosopher have to become a ruler of the city?" Or, in other words: "why does the philosopher have to return to the cave?"³⁹ Plato (or, rather, Plato's Socrates) has always puzzled the commentators with his response that "we'll be giving just orders to just people",⁴⁰ since in the previous books justice has been defined in the "internal" terms of the orderly relation of the parts of the soul within the individual.⁴¹ Proclus might well have responded that Socrates just did not do justice to his readers by not presenting them with the whole picture;⁴² in fact, it is the goodness in which the philosopher participates which makes him, like the Demiurge, good, "and one who is good can never become jealous of anything".⁴³ As is evident from the passages cited above, there is an organic relation between goodness and providence. The "better" an entity is, i.e., higher in the ontological hierarchy, the more providential it is, i.e., its bestowals reach further down the scale, and hence it has a wider scope. As with the Proclean divine lover, it is in so far as the

38 The following is a characteristic example; *In Alc.*, 95,14–19: "For the lover must begin with knowledge and so end in making provision for the beloved; he is like the statesman, and it is abundantly clear that the latter too starts with consideration and examination, and then in this way arranges (*diakosmei*) the whole constitution, manifesting the conclusions in his works." Cf. also Baltzly, 2016, pp. 271–272.

39 Glaucon puts it succinctly when he asks in *Republic*, VII. 519d8–9: "Then are we to do them [i.e., the philosopher-rulers] an injustice by making them live a worse life when they could live a better one?" For the Neoplatonic answer to this challenge, see also O'Meara, 2003, pp. 73–83, esp. pp. 76–77. O'Meara includes references to Proclus's *Alcibiades* and *Republic* Commentaries.

40 *Republic*, 520e1–2.

41 This difficulty must be more evidence for the circularity of Plato's argumentation, as Williams, 1999, pp. 255–264, e.g., p. 258, has sharply remarked.

42 One could claim that the same holds with respect to Socrates's response to another notoriously thorny question, namely that of Cebes in the initial pages of the *Phaedo*, 61d3–5. My main point is that the true Platonic self, i.e., our intelligent soul's relation to its body, is homologous to the relation of the Demiurge with the Receptacle and the cosmos, of the philosopher-king with the state, and of the lover with his beloved, or, in other words, of the (Neo-Platonic) teacher with his student(s).

43 Cited above, n. 31.

statesman participates in the intelligible that he goes on to set into order⁴⁴ its own “disorderly moving” receptacle. Thus, Proclus is in line with the Platonic *Alcibiades*’s parallel between the relations of lover and beloved, on the one hand, and that of the statesman and the city, on the other. The way the lover educates and fashions his beloved must be the paradigm of the philosopher-politician’s attitude towards the body politic.⁴⁵

And in any case, there is no question about the mature philosopher-king needing the state in order to help him grasp the Forms, just as in the case of Proclus’s divine lover. Now, whether this scheme of universal correspondence between the Demiurge, the philosopher-king and the divine lover⁴⁶ exists in Plato is an open question.⁴⁷ We might also question the ontological elaborations with which Proclus has invested Plato. However, Proclus’s insight gives us a Neoplatonic justification not to view Plato as an “egoist” with respect to erotic matters. If this is so, then Proclus has already given a brave and articulate answer to Plato’s modern critics and the idea of “instrumentality”. Let me add that in this *Commentary* Proclus spends a considerable amount of time attempting to prove that it was not in vain that the *daimonion* let the Silenus try to elevate the son of Cleinias.⁴⁸ Unlike Socrates with Alcibiades, I do not suggest that we should necessarily be persuaded by Proclus. Nonetheless, I hope that the present reflections may at least reveal a reason why it would be fruitful for Platonic scholars,⁴⁹ like Vlastos, and readers in general to consider in their discussions Neoplatonic perspectives, as well.

44 This is also consonant with the view of Diotima, right at the end of the speech, according to which the vision of the Form of Beauty will make the lover generate “true virtue” (so that he also becomes “beloved by the gods”-«*theofiles*»); cf. 212a2–9 and above, n. 20.

45 In this way we see how the *Alcibiades* provides a viable starting point for the transmutation of the existing political system into the ideal state.

46 In both *Symposium*’s and *Phaedrus*’s versions.

47 What is more, I am acutely aware that the primary objective of current scholars, such as M. M. McCabe (see e.g., McCabe, 2008), is not to draw general schemes or doctrines out of the whole Platonic corpus, but rather to engage in lively dialogues with individual works, as Plato himself urges us to do.

48 See *In Alc.*, 85,17–92,2. The son of Cleinias is Alcibiades, while Silenus is an encomiastic (!) description of Socrates that Alcibiades gives in the *Symposium*, 216c5–217a3, esp. 216d7. The problem Proclus faces is that the guardian-spirit could foresee the quite unsuccessful end of this relationship; hence, why did it allow Socrates to associate with Alcibiades?

49 See for instance approaches that in some respects are (unwittingly) akin to Proclus: Kraut, 1973; Kraut, 1992, especially pp. 328–329; Miller, 2007, especially pp. 338–339 and n. 28; Mahoney, 1996.

Some Erotic Disappointments

I want, however, to conclude this presentation of the Neoplatonic exoneration of Plato, regarding the beloved's being instrumental to his lover, with a caveat. I will turn to a questionable aspect of Proclus's ideal lover. This problem springs from certain ontological presuppositions (for instance the Neoplatonic notion of hierarchy) and has foundations in Platonic texts.⁵⁰ For instance, the infamous episode of the *Symposium*, mentioned in my introduction,⁵¹ where Socrates abstained from having any sexual contact with Alcibiades, must have been of paramount importance to Proclus and is in line with other Platonic enunciations, such as that the Form of Beauty, the end of the philosopher-lover's journey, is "pure (*katharon*), unmixed (*ameikton*), not polluted by human flesh".⁵² How does this fit into our discussion?

In the context of the above-mentioned discussion as to why Socrates's guardian spirit allowed him to associate with Alcibiades, although it could foresee that the young man would not finally derive benefit from the Athenian gadfly,⁵³ and having invoked several arguments⁵⁴ and examples,⁵⁵ Proclus concludes his discussion thus: "So Socrates also achieved what was fitting;⁵⁶ for all the actions of the noble man have reference

Even Vlastos, 1973, p. 33, making a contrast with Aristotle's god (the Unmoved Mover), acknowledges the providential attitude of *Timaeus's* Demiurge; still, contra Rist, 1964, pp. 30–31 (and p. 28 with Rist, 1970, pp. 165–166, despite the correct qualification of Vogel, 1981, pp. 65–66 and p. 78, n. 28) and Armstrong, 1961, p. 110, Vlastos does not seem to imagine that this could entail anything (positive or not) regarding Plato's views on inter-personal love.

50 I treat this Platonic legacy of Proclus extensively in ch. 2.1.5. of Vasilakis, 2021, pp. 84–90. There I give ample references not only to Platonic texts, but also Proclean ones (*In Alc.* and the *Elements*). Characteristic, in order to understand what divine "undefiled" and "unmixed" providence is, is prop. 122 of the *Elements*.

51 See above, n. 4.

52 Cf. the whole characterization in *Symp.*, 211e1–3; cf. also *Symp.*, 203a1–2: "Gods do not mix with men."

53 My characterization of Socrates stems from the *Apology*, 30e5.

54 For example, the classic one by which the failure to receive the divine and good bestowals is attributed to the receiver's inability. See Proclus's related simile of the sun and what can share in its light in *In Alc.*, 90,22–91,6 (with O'Neill's n. 213).

55 See another classic example of Laius, father of Oedipus, and the renowned Delphic oracle, in *In Alc.*, 91,10–15, with O'Neill's n. 214.

56 The content of the angle-brackets (except for "also") is supplied in Greek by Westerink; see his apparatus ad loc.

to this:⁵⁷ if he has acted, then, beneficently and in a divine manner, he achieves his end in his activity, even if that in him⁵⁸ which admits of external activity also has not been perfected.”⁵⁹ Although the text is not fully clear, it seems safe to say that it is not for the sake of the recipient that providence (i.e. “external activity”) takes place, but rather the other way round: it is for the sake of its taking place that a (fitting) recipient must be found, since providence is necessarily an intentional activity. This seems to suggest that Socrates might not be so interested in Alcibiades’s perfection for the sake of Alcibiades, but only to the extent that the latter is expedient as a receptacle for Socrates’s external and overflowing activity. In that way, Socrates’s or his divine analogue’s “affection” must be qualified. All the more so, since Alcibiades’s, or his cosmic equivalent’s, failure of perfection does not seem to imply anything about Socrates’s complete status. After all, as I have repeatedly noted, Socrates does not need Alcibiades in order to recollect the intelligible.⁶⁰

My suggestion can be supported by another excerpt, where Proclus comments on a short phrase abstracted from Socrates’s initial exchanges with Alcibiades:⁶¹ “The phrase ‘so I persuade myself’ seems to me to show clearly that the divinely-inspired lover, if he sees the beloved suited for conversion to intellect, helps him, in so far as he is able; but if he finds him small-minded and ignoble and concerned with things below, he [i.e., the lover] turns back to himself and looks towards himself alone, taking refuge in the proverbial ‘I saved myself.’⁶² For the persuasion and self-directed activity are an indication of this

57 For an issue regarding manuscript reading and translation, see O’Neill’s justification in n. 216*.

58 For some difficulties in the Greek here, see Vasilakis, 2021, p. 131, n. 206.

59 *In Alc.*, 91,15–92,1.

60 In other words, Alcibiades assumes the place of a preferred “indifferent” (*adiaforon*) for the Stoic-like sage Socrates. The Neoplatonic sage seems wholeheartedly sympathetic (so to speak, since his own ideal is identified with the Stoic impassivity) to the view expressed in the Stoic archer analogy (see e.g., Cicero, *De Finibus*, III. §22, with n. 12 of Annas, 2001, p. 72, ad loc.): the preferred indifferent forms only a target so that the sage can perform a virtuous action, no matter whether the target is accomplished (e.g., the preservation of his health), the actual target lying within the virtuous activity itself. This is also the gist of Collette-Dučić, 2014, pp. 101–109, (despite p. 94), esp. pp. 103–105.

61 See *Alc. I*, 104e8–105a1.

62 Cf. Archilochus, frgm. 6 (Diehl) with O’Neill’s n. 286 ad loc.

knowledge [i.e., the erotic].”⁶³ From this description it turns out not only that the divine lover is not in need of his beloved, but also that he is not very much troubled about the other person and his/her final perfection either (and an analogous point would hold in the cosmic context).⁶⁴ Of course, we should not put too much weight on the slightly surprising use of the proverbial “I saved myself”, because the lover is in any case, and regardless of the beloved’s fate, already saved. We can exclude the egoistic accusation that the lover has used the beloved for the former’s ascent, and then stopped caring about his “ladder”: the lover did not need the beloved right from the beginning. The beloved’s failure to keep pace with him – or, in the words of the previous citation, the fact that “even if that in him which admits of external activity also has not been perfected” does not seem to have any impact on the tranquility⁶⁵ of the lover’s internal and self-directed activity.

Conclusion

Perhaps, then, the lover was not much interested in being providential for the sake of the beloved, but rather for the activity’s sake, since providence is necessarily an intentional activity. In this case, although the beloved is not a necessary requirement for the divine lover’s self-realization, he is reduced to a means for the manifestation of the lover’s self-realization. Moreover, in our passage the lesser importance of this “instrumentality” is evident in that the divine lover can presumably perfectly well get by alone, too. Thus, even if there were affection between the lover and his beloved (in both cases), this must have surely been disinterested, on the lover’s behalf. Of course, it is natural enough to turn one’s back on someone who does not or cannot follow. Nonetheless, it is a question whether we would like to posit that as an ethical ideal.

63 *In Alc.*, 139,18–140,2. For a full explication of various detailed interpretive issues regarding this passage, see Vasilakis, 2021, p. 132, nn. 211–214.

64 Imagine a very good teacher or lecturer who delivers talks without being interested in whether his audience understands or benefits from him/her. See further another aspect in Vasilakis, 2021, pp. 132–133, n. 218.

65 Cf. the Hellenistic ideal of «*ataraxia*». See also Vasilakis, 2021, p. 132, n. 217, commenting on another view expressed by D. A. Layne.

To recap, in this paper I have presented a dialogue between readers of Plato on an issue touching on the ethics of love. Is Platonic eros, according to Proclus, altruistic (to use modern jargon)? The answer is yes and no: Vlastos accused the Platonic lover of a certain instrumentality as regards the beloved. The Platonic lover needs the beloved, Vlastos maintained, because the former needs to apprehend beautiful particulars (like the beloved) in order to make progress in his / her getting to know the Form of Beauty. We saw how Proclus, painstakingly interpreting a variety of Platonic texts, can acquit Plato from accusations of such an instrumentality. If Eros's function is equivalent to that of Socrates, the Demiurge and the philosopher-king, then only someone who is already wise and perfect can do good to a person who has no knowledge of Forms. Nonetheless, I also showed how a different kind of instrumentality might also arise in Proclus's framework, too. The Proclean lover is perfect with or without a beloved person. This means that the failures of the beloved do not have any serious consequences for the lover; the beloved has a value in so far as he becomes the vehicle for the manifestation of his lover's perfection. Hence, it is up to us to take part in, and give our answers to, this dialogue with Plato and the Neoplatonists, not only on the basis of interpreting texts, but also as a matter of choosing a way of life, i.e., an erotic *modus vivendi*.

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