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OLYMPIODORUS ON PHILOSOPHICAL EDUCATION: AN UNDOGMATIC APPROACH?

ABSTRACT. Umsu-Seifert, Cagla, Olympiodorus on Philosophical Education: An Undogmatic Approach? (*Olympiodorus na temat edukacji filozoficznej: podejście niedogmatyczne?*).

Plato and the Platonists presented different positions on philosophical education. This paper explores the views of Olympiodorus, a 6th-century AD Platonist, on education and the role of a teacher. Olympiodorus' approach to the conception of philosophical authority provides a new perspective for re-evaluating the significance of his philosophy.

Keywords: Socrates; Plato; Alcibiades; Olympiodorus; philosophy; method; teacher; education

In his review of Olympiodorus' *Commentary on the Alcibiades*,¹ Dodds states that the text offers “almost nothing that appears to be original.”² This view is also shared by Westerink, who concludes that in Olympiodorus' case “it might be more correct to speak of a teaching routine than of a philosophy.”³ By contrast, many studies and translations have appeared in recent decades regarding Olympiodorus as an acknowledged philosopher of late antiquity.⁴ However, since he is considered a follower of Proclus and Damascius, few

¹ I am grateful to Monika Miazek-Męczyńska, the anonymous peer reviewers, and the editors of *Symbolae Philologorum Posnaniensium* for their valuable suggestions.

² Dodds 1957: 356. This review referred to the 1956 edition of Westerink, *Olympiodorus' Commentary on the First Alcibiades of Plato*.

³ Westerink 1976: 23.

⁴ A significant contribution to the research on Olympiodorus' philosophical approach has been made by Tarrant 1997, 2007 and 2021. Griffin (2014: 3) argues that although Olympiodorus draws on previous philosophers, his choices and the ways in which he presents their arguments constitute his own philosophy. According to Griffin (2016: 2), Olympiodorus' contribution lies in his attempts to reconcile the views of Proclus and Damascius. Several other scholars, such as Gertz (2011: 9), consider Olympiodorus' interpretation a simplification of Proclus' theory.

interpret his approach as original.⁵ The significance of Olympiodorus' philosophy thus remains disputed.

A central aspect of this debate concerns the possibility of an individual or original approach under the authority of Plato and the Platonist tradition.⁶ The influence of a teacher in later Platonism has been examined by Tarrant (2000), though his thesis is centred on Olympiodorus' views on Plato's *Gorgias*. Other studies emphasise the nature of Olympiodorus' philosophy as a teaching concept and his interpretation of Alcibiades and Plato in this context.⁷ However, there is still a need to connect his description of education with the question of his philosophy's originality.

The present paper aims to serve this purpose by outlining Olympiodorus' understanding of Socrates' philosophical investigation and Plato's teaching. In his *commentary on the Alcibiades*, Olympiodorus examines the characters of the dialogue, as well as Plato's life, in detail. This commentary highlights Olympiodorus' differences with the previous Platonists, since a direct comparison with Proclus' interpretation of the same dialogue is possible.⁸ A fundamental challenge in these commentaries was to explain the reason for Socrates' conversation with Alcibiades.⁹ Considering Alcibiades' later political career, his dialogue with Socrates on self-knowledge was regarded as problematic. Olympiodorus solves this issue by describing Alcibiades' positive character traits, as well as by emphasising the role of a teacher as a mutual investigator.

⁵Griffin (2014: 3) argues that although Olympiodorus draws on previous philosophers, his choices and the ways in which he presents their arguments constitute his own philosophy. According to Griffin (2016: 2), Olympiodorus' contribution lies in his attempts to reconcile the views of Proclus and Damascius. Several other scholars, such as Gertz (2011: 9), consider Olympiodorus' interpretation a simplification of Proclus' theory.

⁶Recent research shows the relevance of the paradigm of authority in Platonism. Sedley 2021 points to the invention of a dogmatic authority after Plato's death, while in the Early Academy a diverse group of intellectuals came together around a concept of Socratic inquiry rather than a transmission of doctrines. See also Petrucci 2021 and Baltzly 2014 on elements of Plato's authority. These contributions set out the views on philosophical authority on the basis of which Olympiodorus' position can be considered.

⁷Griffin (2015: 45–46) mentions the roles of Alcibiades and Plato to be those of the beginner student and the perfect philosopher, respectively.

⁸Olympiodorus refers to both Proclus and Damascius as his sources (Olymp. *in Alc.* 5, 16–6, 1). Proclus' commentary is dated to AD 440–480 (Tarrant and Renaud 2015: 178). Based on historical references, Olympiodorus' commentary is dated to around AD 560 (Opsomer 2010: 698). Thus, there is a gap of almost 1,000 years between Olympiodorus' commentary and Plato's dialogue, the latter being dated to 433–432 BC (Tarrant and Renaud 2015: 19).

⁹For a discussion of Socrates' justification as a common pattern in later Platonism, see Roskam 2012: 86–87.

ALCIBIADES AS SOCRATES' PUPIL

Although Plato does not mention Alcibiades' later failures in his dialogue, the contradiction between the details of Alcibiades' political career and his representation as Socrates' interlocutor was recognised by Plato's contemporaries. According to Xenophon, for example, it was not Socrates who chose Alcibiades; rather, Alcibiades wanted to benefit from Socrates' power of argumentation (*X. Mem.* I 2, 12–16). This implies, however, that Socrates was unaware of the fact that the young man had no interest in philosophy. Xenophon also suggests that Alcibiades may have been prudent when he was with the philosopher and that his errors may have only begun after he left him.¹⁰ That Socrates could not be blamed for Alcibiades' faults was an established interpretation among the Platonists such as Plutarch.¹¹

The philosophers of late antiquity approached this issue from a different perspective. First, they emphasised Socrates' statement at the beginning of the dialogue that he was drawn to Alcibiades by a "guiding spirit" (δαιμόνιον, *Pl. Alc.* I 103 a). Xenophon's interpretation that Socrates was an object of ambition for Alcibiades was therefore judged inappropriate. Instead, it was Socrates who deliberately chose to talk to Alcibiades. Further, the fact that Alcibiades was to later cause much trouble for Athenians implied that Socratic philosophy could not achieve its aim and that the 'guiding spirit' had led Socrates into a pointless conversation.

Like other Platonists of late antiquity, Olympiodorus addresses this discrepancy by referring to some historical accounts of Alcibiades. He suggests that one should investigate (ζητητέον) why the guiding spirit did not prevent Socrates from approaching Alcibiades despite the latter making many mistakes: Alcibiades deserted the Athenians for Sparta, caused the Peloponnesian War by urging Pericles to issue a decree against Megarians and – worst of all – initiated a parody of the Mysteries in the house of Polytion (*Olymp. in Alc.* 26, 22–27, 3).

Possible sources for this account of Alcibiades' life are Plutarch and Thucydides.¹² Proclus too raises the issue of Alcibiades' career in his commentary,

¹⁰ *X. Mem.* I 2, 18. This suggestion was also considered by Proclus and Olympiodorus. However, Proclus criticised it, claiming that it was not possible that the guiding spirit did not know about Alcibiades' character, since Alcibiades was inferior to the spirit (*Procl. in Alc.* 86–88). A further explanation by Xenophon is also in Olympiodorus' view rhetorical, namely that Alcibiades would have been an even worse person if he had not spent time with Socrates (*Olymp. in Alc.* 27, 10–15).

¹¹ Plutarch argued, for example, that Socrates actually knew that the Sicilian Expedition would not be successful, but Alcibiades urged Athenians to war, since he wanted to obtain the post of a commander (*Plu. Alc.* 17, 4).

¹² Plutarch was likely also Proclus' source (Roskam 2012: 90–96). Furthermore, Proclus referred directly to Thucydides in his commentary (*Procl. in Alc.* 115, 1–2). The name of Polytion in the context of mystery cults is absent from both Plutarch's and Thucydides' accounts, although

noting that history was full of great misfortunes caused by him (Procl. *in Alc.* 85, 17–86, 7). The references to historical reports on Alcibiades in the commentaries of Proclus and Olympiodorus show that they did not ignore his political actions. Nonetheless, their solution to the contradiction of Alcibiades' life with his representation in Plato's dialogue does not derive from historical sources.

Regarding Alcibiades' political career, neither Proclus nor Olympiodorus accepts that Socrates achieved nothing through his dialogue with Alcibiades. They prefer to downplay the significance of what really happened and focus instead on the metaphysical aspects of the dialogue. Based on Iamblichus' interpretation, Proclus maintains that the reason for the spirit's consent to this conversation was to benefit Alcibiades' soul; the effects of the dialogue may not be observed in Alcibiades' present life, but rather the exchange would help him in another life (Procl. *in Alc.* 90, 1–9).¹³ Olympiodorus elaborates on Proclus' argument, asserting that Alcibiades' soul benefitted from his dialogue with Socrates and justifying the view that their interaction was not completely in vain (Olymp. *in Alc.* 27, 10–12).

Emphasising the good character traits of Alcibiades, Olympiodorus further supports this interpretation. According to both Proclus and Olympiodorus, Alcibiades was an appropriate pupil for Socrates. First, his contempt for all his other lovers¹⁴ posed an interesting challenge for the philosopher. Furthermore, the four reasons for Alcibiades' pride – his beauty, his noble birth, his friends and his guardian, Pericles (Olymp. *in Alc.* 28, 15–20) – were not enough for the young man, as he appeared to attach no value to either lovers or possessions (Olymp. *in Alc.* 38, 12–18) and was not satisfied with what he had. He also wondered about Socrates' approach, which indicated his inclination towards philosophy, since wonder is the beginning of philosophical thinking. Proclus and Olympiodorus thus argue similarly in favour of Alcibiades' philosophical aptitude (ἐπιτηδειότης, Procl. *in Alc.* 39; Olymp. *in Alc.* 28, 15–16). However, their interpretations of Socrates' response are slightly different. Whereas Olympiodorus concludes that Alcibiades' behaviour such as contempt for money caused Socrates' love for him, Proclus regards these character traits as the grounds for Socrates' decision to be Alcibiades' magistrate, arbiter, and judge (ἄρχοντα...κριτὴν καὶ δικαστὴν, Procl. *in Alc.* 59, 11–12). This distinction is also expressed in their interpretation of Socrates' philosophical practice.

it is present in Proclus' account (Procl. *in Alc.* 86, 2). By contrast, Olympiodorus suggests rather that the parody of the mystery cults was *caused* by Alcibiades (αἰτίαν ἔσχεν). His phrasing is ambiguous, as he neither directly accuses Alcibiades nor presents the case as a political conspiracy, as several authors do.

¹³This position goes back to Iamblichus, to whom Proclus refers. For an explanation of the Iamblichean core in this passage and its transmission by Proclus, see the commentary by Dillon 1973: 233–34.

¹⁴Pl. *Alc.* I 104 a 1; Procl. *in Alc.* 98; Olymp. *in Alc.* 28, 15.

THE SOCRATIC METHOD

In Olympiodorus' view, Socrates appears to be more a midwife than an instructor who pours knowledge into the minds of youth as into lifeless vessels (Olymp. *in Alc.* 12, 10–14).¹⁵ Socrates preferred to conduct investigations in his role as the lover–educator, by removing the distance between the teacher and the pupil. The philosopher helped Alcibiades (Olymp. *in Alc.* 4, 5–6) using mutual examination (κοινή βουλή) as his method (Olymp. *in Alc.* 24, 11–20). To this end, Socrates pretended to be ignorant since it was fitting for a lover to do so in order to lead his beloved to knowledge (Olymp. *in Alc.* 175, 7–10). His feigned ignorance was in accordance with his role as a lover (ἐρωτικός), whereas he was in fact a “knowledgeable person” (ἐπιστήμων) as a teacher (διδάσκαλος, Olymp. *in Alc.* 88, 4–10).

Moreover, Socrates indicated that both he and Alcibiades lacked self-knowledge, which Olympiodorus considers to be true because self-knowledge is attained to different degrees. Socrates knew himself to a degree that Alcibiades did not match. However, at a higher level (that is, ‘as an inspired person’), his knowledge was deficient (Olymp. *in Alc.* 172, 1–2).¹⁶ Thus, it was possible that the philosopher too benefitted from his dialogue with Alcibiades and advanced his knowledge. This is demonstrated by his assertion that he too would reach a better state through their investigation (Olymp. *in Alc.* 192, 7–8). Emphasising that Socrates sometimes taught and at other times pondered (Olymp. *in Alc.* 74, 13), Olympiodorus concludes that the Socratic method is more fruitful than teaching (πλουσιωτέρα τῆς διδασκαλίας ἢ μαιεία, Olymp. *in Alc.* 75, 3–4). Consequently, he claims that the Socratic method should be applied in philosophical education, that is, Socratic philosophy should be learnt in the Socratic way (δεῖ Σωκρατικῶς τὰ Σωκράτους μανθάνειν, Olymp. *in Alc.* 11, 1–2).

Proclus' view of Socrates clearly differs in this respect. In his interpretation, Socrates had explicitly superior knowledge, and his ignorance was only methodical.¹⁷ Socrates aimed to help and elevate the young Alcibiades to his own level.¹⁸ Therefore, Proclus regards Socrates' love for Alcibiades as the

¹⁵ Plato argued using this metaphor that wisdom could not be transmitted from one person to another (Pl. *Smp.* 175 d–e).

¹⁶ Olympiodorus describes the inspired person (ἐνθουσιαστικός) as one knowing oneself to be united with one's proper god and acting out of inspiration. Socrates in the *Alcibiades* can therefore be regarded as undergoing a transition from theological self-knowledge (knowing oneself according to the paradigmatic form) to inspired self-knowledge.

¹⁷ Proclus interprets Socrates' expression “I think” (Pl. *Alc.* 1 103 a) as a methodical device (Procl. *in Alc.* 23) since he has some knowledge but pretends to be ignorant. Olympiodorus provides the same view on this point (Olymp. *in Alc.* 24, 10–20).

¹⁸ Procl. *in Alc.* 152, 11–12. In Proclus' description, Socrates “lifts the young man up” (Procl. *in Alc.* 60–61) or “descends like Hercules to lead his beloved from Hades” (Procl. *in Alc.* 133–34).

providential love of a superior being for an inferior one.¹⁹ He identifies Socrates' aim as attaching Alcibiades to himself, in order that the latter may become a lover of knowledge (Procl. *in Alc.* 157). Further, Proclus mentions Socrates' admiration for the beautiful and that Socrates approached Alcibiades because of his beauty (Procl. *in Alc.* 92). However, in this approach, Socrates behaved rather like a guiding spirit (δαίμων) to Alcibiades who should help the young man reach knowledge (Procl. *in Alc.* 40, 11–42, 4). Proclus does not indicate that the philosopher benefitted from the dialogue with Alcibiades. He suggests that Socrates acted “in a loving manner” (Procl. *in Alc.* 28), although clearly identifying Socrates and Alcibiades as the educator and the educated, respectively (παιδεύων and παιδευόμενος, Procl. *in Alc.* 151, 16–152, 1). In addition, he underlines the ontological difference between them (Procl. *in Alc.* 145–146) and refers explicitly to Socrates' superior position regarding his knowledge (Procl. *in Alc.* 160). There is no indication in Proclus' commentary that Socrates' knowledge might be deficient.

The contradiction between Olympiodorus' and Proclus' characterisations of Socrates is based on the status of his knowledge and his identity as a ‘teacher’. Olympiodorus questions Socrates' position as a teacher by considering his lack of knowledge. He regards Socrates' critical approach to even his own opinions as the most important feature of his philosophical investigation. Pointing to Socrates' claim that he was not teaching anything (ὁ λέγων ἀεὶ μηδὲν εἰδέναι, μηδὲνα διδάσκειν, Olymp. *in Alc.* 53, 1–2), Olympiodorus suggests that the philosopher rather aimed to make Alcibiades his own teacher (ὥστε αὐτὸν ἑαυτοῦ διδάσκαλον εἶναι, Olymp. *in Alc.* 12, 6–7).

In the case that disciples must discover their knowledge themselves, the teacher's authority might be challenged. Olympiodorus confirms Socrates' power (δύναμις), which is the real power that only he can give (περιποιεῖν, Olymp. *in Alc.* 55, 15–17). However, he identifies this power as knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) in the sense of a method of examination and proof (ἀπόδειξις, Olymp. *in Alc.* 55, 19) which would make Alcibiades self-sufficient. Paradoxically, The disciple would ironically become free by admitting the providence of the Socratic method and the authority of knowledge.

Olympiodorus therefore elucidates that the source of authority was not Socrates, the person, but his method for reaching knowledge. In contrast to Proclus, he does not insist on Socrates' role as a teacher. His presentation of the Socratic method focusses strongly on undertaking an interactive philosophical investigation and adopting a critical approach. Thus, the authority of the

¹⁹This providence manifests for its own sake and without any interest from the lover in perfecting the beloved, which means that the lover does not need the beloved. Proclus attributes to Socrates such providence for Alcibiades (Procl. *in Alc.* 54) and portrays the two as superior and inferior, respectively (Procl. *in Alc.* 56). For a detailed examination of this view, see Vasilakis 2020: 123–150.

teacher is not undermined since the emphasis on critical inquiry strengthens the influence of the philosopher. This line of thought can be elaborated through another teacher figure – Plato himself.

PLATO AS A TEACHER

At the beginning of his *Commentary on the Alcibiades*, Olympiodorus outlines some details of Plato's life. After reviewing Plato's travels, he describes the establishment of the Academy thus (Olymp. *in Alc.* 2, 145–155):

When he reached Athens he established a school in the Garden of Academus, marking off a certain portion of this gymnasium as a sanctuary for the Muses. And the misanthrope Timon would keep company only with Plato there. And Plato attracted very many to learning, both men and women, preparing [the latter] to attend his lectures looking like men (*andreiôi skhêmati*), and demonstrating that his love of wisdom was superior to any love of work. For he dissociated himself from Socratic irony, from frequenting the Agora and the workshops and from pursuing the young to engage them in conversation: and he also dissociated himself from the solemn dignity of the Pythagoreans – keeping the doors closed, and 'Himself said so' – by conducting himself more sociably towards everyone.

(transl. by Griffin)

This account shows that Plato's teaching was peculiar in some respects. First, Olympiodorus suggests that Plato 'attracted' many to learning instead of 'pursuing' them for conversations. Second, among these people were both women and men, and even a misanthrope: the school, unlike that of the Pythagoreans, was open to everyone. The most surprising of Olympiodorus' remarks is, however, that Plato acted against the 'love of work' by distancing himself from Socratic irony: he did not prefer to spend time in the agora – instead, people came to his school.

At first glance, this comment appears to show a contrast between Socratic and Platonic teaching. However, Olympiodorus refers not to Socrates' methodical ignorance but to the fact that he had conversations with young people. Plato fell between the Pythagoreans and Socrates, neither keeping his doors closed nor seeking dialogue. This distinction is also supported by Socrates' rather personal relation with Alcibiades, while Plato preferred to be a teacher for all. Plato proved to be paradoxically sociable by staying away from public life, whereas Socrates was despised for disturbing people with his questions.

Olympiodorus' interpretation of Platonic teaching serves several purposes. That Plato attracted students from all classes and social backgrounds paints an ideal picture of the Platonic school. While disapproving the Pythagoreans for invariably acknowledging the teacher's authority, Olympiodorus describes Platonic education as a model for critical thinking. Since Platonic philosophy

fostered a culture of discussion, bringing people with different views together did not constitute a problem.

According to Olympiodorus, Socrates' conversations did not determine Plato's philosophy, since the source of philosophical authority was not the philosopher as a person. Plato himself did not conduct dialogues but rather preferred to teach the method of philosophical enquiry. In this way, he evolved from practising Socratic irony himself to understanding and explaining his method to his students. Of course, there are also "Platonic doctrines" (δόγματα) – rules and facts demonstrated through proper argumentation.²⁰ However, Olympiodorus repeatedly states that the dogmatic authority of a master did not coincide with Platonic philosophy, which he describes as welcoming different views.²¹ Rather, the status of a philosopher was grounded on the method of investigation promoted by Platonic education.

OLYMPIODORUS' UNDOGMATIC TEACHING

Olympiodorus expresses his own view of education through the figures of Alcibiades, Socrates, and Plato. He portrays Alcibiades as a student pursuing a political career who also approached philosophy. The description of Plato's teaching as attracting many people and being open to everyone aims at this kind of student. Furthermore, Olympiodorus demonstrates the necessity of a philosophical education for a higher position in the state. The method of philosophy is represented by the figure of Socrates, strategically shifting the authority from the philosopher's person to the philosophical investigation. Finally, Plato appears as the ideal teacher of the Platonic school who supports critical thought and discussion.

In his interpretation of the *Alcibiades*, Olympiodorus attempts to find an explanation for the relationship between the protagonists of the dialogue. He identifies love with the Socratic method of philosophical inquiry, as Socrates eradicated any hierarchical distance between the teacher and the pupil, rather considering the two as mutual investigators. While admitting that Socrates' pretence of ignorance was a methodical strategy, Olympiodorus also acknowledges that Socrates' knowledge might have been deficient. In this regard,

²⁰As an example, he presents the thesis that the responder is the person who makes the statements in the conversation (Olymp. *in Alc.* 12, 7–8). This is a conclusion from the structure of the dialogue. The phrase "Platonic doctrine" (Πλατωνικὸν δόγμα) is also used in the proposition that no conclusion is possible from false premises (89, 19–20). Likewise, in this case the 'doctrine' consists of the method of investigation.

²¹As Tarrant (2000: 57–58) points out, Olympiodorus denounced Socrates and Plato as authorities on any subject without the proof of a demonstrative argument (Olymp. *in Gorg.* 41, 9).

his view differs from that of Proclus, who identifies Socrates as the educator and emphasises his knowledge.

Olympiodorus' notion of philosophical teaching shows that he develops a distinct view on Platonic philosophy. While he constructs the Socratic method as a paradigm for his own concept of philosophical practice, the ideal teacher is modelled on the figure of Plato. Olympiodorus' portrayal of Socrates and Plato as educators at first seems contradictory. However, the two had at least a couple of things in common. They possessed neither absolute knowledge nor unquestioned authority but supported critical questioning and argumentation. Both philosophers engaged with the opinions of different people, such as Alcibiades or the misanthrope Timon. Olympiodorus was aware that authority did not necessarily emerge from a doctrine itself but from its representation as proven by philosophical examination. Accordingly, he presents the Platonic philosophy as undogmatic and even critical of Plato and Socrates themselves.

In the context of late ancient Alexandria, an undogmatic philosophical education might have answered a need: Olympiodorus' approach renders philosophy an academic discipline released from any strict doctrine, even with respect to Plato. The Platonic philosophy gains greater influence precisely because it is described as undogmatic. Through his interpretation of the Socratic method, Olympiodorus reduces the emphasis on the authority of the philosopher as a teacher and suggests that a proper discussion requires an independent analysis of arguments. His views on doctrinal authorities demonstrate that in his own educational concept he aimed to convey a less determinative and more 'tolerant' image of Platonic philosophy. Moreover, people pursuing a political career can easily identify his portrayal of Alcibiades as a student with themselves. This representation of Platonism implies that a philosophical education is the key to success in the state, thus reinforcing the status of Olympiodorus' teaching.

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OLYMPIODORUS ON PHILOSOPHICAL EDUCATION:
AN UNDOGMATIC APPROACH?

Summary

The later Platonists saw a contrast between Platonic philosophy and Socrates' dialogue with a much-disputed politician such as Alcibiades. This paper explores the views of Olympiodorus,

a 6th-century AD Platonist, on this incongruity and outlines his arguments concerning philosophical education. In addition, new insights will be gained in the scholarly debate on whether Olympiodorus can be considered a philosopher with a distinct approach. Assuming a connection between a certain philosophical approach and the philosopher's view of doctrinal authorities, Olympiodorus' portrayal of Socrates and Plato has been analysed. This analysis demonstrates that Olympiodorus' main arguments regarding Socratic method are slightly different than those of Proclus. By presenting Platonic education as undogmatic, Olympiodorus asserts his own authority as a philosopher and teacher. His philosophical contribution therefore derives precisely from his teaching concept.