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THE PROOIMION AND THE SKOPOS:
PROCLUS' COMMENTARY OF THE *ALCIBIADES I*

PAULIINA REMES

Proclus on the Role of Prooimia [L1]

Proclus is, one might claim, our main source for the Neoplatonic interpretative principles used in the exegesis for Plato. As becomes immediately apparent, however, he is by no means the first one to have opinions on these issues. Platonists had written commentaries since Crantor, that is, as early as the first generation after Plato's own time (Proclus, *In Ti.* 1.76.2 ff.).¹ Even as regards the significance of the preambles, Proclus' predecessors had drawn attention to possible allegorical interpretations as well as to the impact that Plato's particular choice of persons made to the whole.² In enumerating possible views about the roles that Plato's preambles have, he appeals to the interpretations suggested by his predecessors, classifying them, locating and elaborating his own view of the matter against this background.³ Let us quote one of the main sources as regards the understanding of the preludes of the dialogues, in full:

Ancient commentators have held varying opinions regarding the preludes to Plato's dialogues. Some have not condescended to examine them at all, saying that hearers who are genuinely interested in the doctrines must come with a previous knowledge of these preliminaries. Others do not take them as being random, but see their use in referring to moral attitudes, and take them to teach the structure for the problems addressed in the dialogue. Others demand that the interpreter bring the matter of the prologue into relation with the nature of the dialogue's subject. We agree with the last group and shall begin by showing how the subject of the dialogue relates to the matter in the introduction. Not that we shall neglect the moral stances represented in the dialogue, but in studying any Platonic dialogue we must look especially at the matters that are its subject and see how the details of the prologue prefigure them. In this way we should show that

¹ Dillon (1999) 207. For pre-Proclean views on preambles, see his immediately following pages, 208-210. For commentary tradition in general, the multiple works of Han Baltussen are useful. See e.g. Baltussen (2018).

² It seems that Iamblichus had a vital role in the recognition of their significance, as is testified by Proclus, *In Ti.* 204.24 ff. For his role in the overall development of the hermeneutical principles of the Neoplatonists, see Tarrant (2017) 27-44.

³ For the sources that Proclus may be using, see Sedley (2002) 140-149.

each of them is perfectly worked out, a living being harmonious in all its parts, each of them separate, as Plato says in the *Phaedrus* (264c), and bring into harmony with this also what belongs to the outlining of moral attitudes. When the preludes are completely different from what follows, as in the dialogues of Heraclides of Pontus and Theophrastus, it offends every critical ear (Proclus, *In Prm.* Col. 658.33-659.23; trans. Morrow and Dillon, with some significant modifications).⁴

Proclus thus divides the earlier commentators' views into three main groups:

1) People who have not examined or commented them at all. This group would seem to divide, implicitly, into two groups, into scholars who consider them to contain just any (random) content not in any essential relation to the topic of the dialogue, thus unnecessary to read or comment upon, and into readers that think that the preambles contain mere preliminaries that every serious reader of the dialogue should already be knowledgeable about.

2) Readers who think that the usefulness of preambles lies in presentation or sketching (*hupographeo*) of moral attitudes or duties (*kathekonta*). In Stoicism, where the term derives from, these concern the performance of actions that are appropriate for human beings.⁵ This is a level of good acting below ideal, full intellectual virtue or goodness, and one available to less than perfect people. The idea of this interpretative principle is that the actions and colloquial discussions, persons, and situations presented in the preambles contribute to our understanding of what is morally appropriate. The word is carefully chosen: it is not *katorthoma*, 'right action' 'virtuous action' or 'perfection', but a word that refers to the morality at the level of civic, non perfect virtue – the virtue of embodied, real human beings we witness in the dialogues. These same interpreters, or at least some in the vaguely same

⁴ Ἐπανιτέον δὲ εἰς τὰ προκείμενα, καὶ τοσοῦτον προσθετέον ὅτι τῶν παλαιῶν περὶ τῶν Πλατωνικῶν προοιμίων διαφόρους δόξας ἐχόντων, καὶ τῶν μὲν εἰς τὴν τούτων ἐξέτασιν οὐδ' ὄλως καθιέντων (ἦκειν γὰρ χρῆναι ταῦτα προακηκοότας τοὺς τῶν δογμάτων ἐραστὰς γνησίους), τῶν δὲ οὐδὲ τούτων ὡς ἔτυχεν ἀκροωμένων, ἀλλὰ τὴν χρεῖαν αὐτῶν εἰς καθιόντων ὑπογραφὰς ἀναπεμπόντων καὶ τὴν πρὸς τὰ ζητούμενα ἐν τοῖς διαλόγοις οἰκονομίαν διδασκόντων, τῶν δὲ καὶ ταῦτα πρὸς τὴν τῶν πραγμάτων φύσιν ἀξιούντων τοὺς ἐξηγητὰς ἀνάγειν, ἐπόμενοι καὶ ἡμεῖς τούτοις προηγουμένην ποιησόμεθα τὴν πρὸς τὰ πράγματα τοῦ προοιμίου τὰ προκείμενα φέρουσαν ἀνάπτυξιν. Οὐ μὴν οὐδὲ τῆς τῶν καθιόντων ἀμελήσομεν ἐπιστάσεως. Δεῖ γὰρ ἐπὶ τῶν Πλάτωνος διαλόγων εἰς τὰ πράγματα βλέπειν διαφερόντως τὰ ὑποκείμενα τῷ διαλόγῳ, καὶ σκοπεῖν ὅπως καὶ τὰ προοίμια ταῦτα ἐνεικονίζεται, καὶ ἐν ἀποφαίνειν ζῶον ἐκ πάντων τῶν μερῶν ἑαυτῷ συμφωνοῦν, ἕκαστον ἀπειργασμένον, ὡς αὐτὸς ἐν Φαίδρῳ φησί, καὶ τούτοις συναρμόττειν, καὶ ὅσα τοῦ τύπου τούτου τῶν καθιόντων ἐστὶ τὸ δὲ παντελῶς ἀλλότρια τὰ προοίμια τῶν ἐπομένων εἶναι, καθάπερ τὰ τῶν Ἡρακλείδου τοῦ Ποντικοῦ καὶ Θεοφράστου διαλόγων, πᾶσαν ἀνιᾶ κρίσεως μετέχουσαν ἀκοήν.

⁵ This is well argued for in Sedley's (2002) reading.

group, also seem to think that the preambles are relevant for the arrangement or structure (*oikonomia*) of the dialogue to come.

3) Some readers assess that what, in the dialogue, is inquired into must be related to the 'nature' (*phusis*) of the things discussed. This *phusis*, it seems to me, is contrasted with the arrangement or structure mentioned in the previous suggestion. Where the emphasis there is on the arrangement of the presented things in the dialogue – the structure of the written work – what is underlined here is the nature, character or constitution of the thing discussed, the object, phenomenon or theme written about.

Proclus dismisses the first group: preambles that do not have significance for the whole dialogue are stylistically worthless. What is in use is the principle of benevolence on the part of the commentator. The assumption, as the last lines testify, is that Plato could not possibly have done a stylistic blunder of leaving a part of a dialogue without proper function or role. Of the two remaining alternatives, Proclus contextualizes himself in the last group, by saying that the things in the preamble refer the subject or explanation (*anaptuxis*) of the dialogue. He then adds two important, although perhaps somewhat different ideas about exactly how the preamble relates to the topic of the dialogue.

One way of capturing the relationship is to say that the preamble portrays or represents, (*eneikonizo*)⁶ the content of the rest of the dialogue. This is, while a metaphorical way to approach the issue, nonetheless quite a specific idea: the preamble presents, in another form, the same things that will be properly and directly discussed later in the dialogue. According to this idea, the preamble gives a preview of sorts, and while it may enrich our understanding of the dialogue's subject matter(s), it does not bring in any larger extra component.⁷ The other way of capturing the relationship, one that is also metaphorical, is that the dialogue as a whole is like a living being (*zoon*), the unity of which requires the totality of its parts.⁸ Harmony in a literary composition comes out of a similar structure, a whole with a harmonious collection of all its parts, each of them separate (*hekaston apeirgasmenon*). Both metaphors emphasise the importance of the preamble for the understanding the whole dialogue. Both also employ ideas of holism. A picture, a portrayal or a Gestalt presents simultaneously, in a unitary vision, a complex whole of parts. A living being is a collection of functionally differentiated parts all

⁶ According to Sedley (2002) 134, the word *hupographeo*, 'to sketch', 'to portray', seven lines earlier is already used by the Anonymous commentary on Plato's *Theaetetus*, and with the meaning 'to illustrate' or 'to portray' rather than merely 'to outline' or 'to sketch'.

⁷ Dillon (1999) 213 refers to *In Ti.* 1.29.31 (Diehl), in which Proclus mentions the Pythagorean way of introducing scientific instructions first through images or similitudes.

⁸ As Dillon (1999) points out, this view goes back to Plato's *Phaedrus* 264c.

of which are needed for the structure and actualisation of the living functions of the animal as a unit.

The latter metaphor, however, leaves open the possibility that rather than representing the unity to come in the later parts of the dialogue in a preliminary way – by, as it were, giving a possibility of acquainting oneself with the contents of the dialogue in an introductory manner – the preamble has its own role in the whole dialogue. It would thus not be a synoptic or metaphorical depiction or representation of the whole, but a proper part of that whole. While these two approaches may not be opposite in function, the animal metaphor covers cases where the preamble contains some extra, additional content not discussed elsewhere in the dialogue. By doing so, the animal metaphor allows Proclus, further, to say that in his interpretation, option (2) above is actually included in his interpretative scheme: the preamble can enclose content relevant for moral acting. Such content may be typical, or even exclusive, for preambles rather than the main discussions in the dialogue that follows after it. However, according to his third alternative, and the idea that it can encapsulate even the second alternative, the references to moral attitudes and actions in the every-day life situations introduced in the preambles do not float free of the remaining dialogue, but are connected to, or actually governed by, the real topic of the dialogue. As we shall see, Proclus is elsewhere explicit about the idea that a preamble can have not merely an illustrative, but also a complementary role.

Proclus on the Skopos and its Relationship to Prooimion [L1]

The passage we have carefully considered speaks rather freely of ‘central topics’ of the dialogue, with the terminology of *ta pragmata*, in plural rather than singular. This suggests a liberal stance as to how many issues can be the topic of one dialogue. However, talking about the *nature* of the discussed thing, in singular, possibly already points towards a central interpretative principle of the Neoplatonists expressed elsewhere: that of each dialogue having a single topic, *skopos*. That a dialogue has an aim, a fundamental central thesis or subject is an idea presupposed already in early commentaries (e.g. Anon. *In Thet.* column 2). The Neoplatonists saw it as their task to determine, at the opening of a commentary, the aim, the usefulness, and the structure or division of the dialogue, as well as, finally, its position in the

Platonic corpus.⁹ Let us see the idea of the single aim introduced by Proclus in the beginning of the commentary on the *Parmenides*:

After these preliminaries [the setting of the action, the personages etc.] there remains for us the necessity of finding the subject of the dialogue, and of seeing how all these elements related to that single subject, as revealed by our argument. For all that we have said was said by way of preface to the dialogue and from the perspective of the theory of ideas, from which some of our predecessors, as I have said, have given it its title. For just as we must proceed upwards from sensible appearance to the intelligible cause, so we must ascend from the circumstances presupposed in this dialogue to the single purpose and the single end of the whole treatise, and relate to this, so far as we can, the other details – the persons, the occasion, the setting – that we have previously considered on their own account (Proclus *In Prm.* 630.15-28; trans. Morrow and Dillon).¹⁰

What Proclus has given before this passage is an allegorical interpretation of the elements in the preamble.¹¹ His first interpretation of its contents is already heavily Neoplatonic in tone – or as he himself says in the quote, it is directed to people that want to satisfy their desire for the realm of beings, the Ideas. He does not, then, proceed in a pedagogical way of starting with something easy, like ethical topics, and then advancing to interpret the preamble from a more demanding, metaphysical point of view. Rather, given that a reader interested in *Parmenides* is already a lover of intelligible, true being, Proclus starts with offering an allegorical reading that pleases such a reader. The second reading is thereby not more metaphysical or challenging in tone, but, rather, more disciplined as regards methodology: next one must determine the single aim or subject of the dialogue, and then to approach at the same preamble from the point of view of that topic, rather than with a freely allegorizing mind.

⁹ See also Taki 2012, esp. 183-4, who points out that *Alcibiades I* commentary is particular in so far as Proclus not only argues for it, but seems to apply the *skopos* idea fairly systematically, through for example relating the conclusion of separate arguments within the dialogue to the overall *skopos*.

¹⁰ Ἀλλὰ περὶ μὲν τῆς διασκευῆς τῶν πραγμάτων καὶ τῶν τεττάρων συνουσιῶν καὶ τῆς τῶν προσώπων τάξεως καὶ ἀναλογίας πρὸς τὰ ἐν τῷ παντί, τοῖς ἀπὸ τοῦ περὶ τῶν ἰδεῶν λόγου βουλομένοις θεωρεῖν καὶ δυναμένοις τὰ ὄντα κατὰ τὴν αὐτῶν ἕκαστα τάξιν, ἱκανὰ τὰ εἰρημένα. Τούτων δὲ ἡμῖν προδιατεταγμένων, ἀναγκαῖα λοιπὸν ἐστὶν ἡ τοῦ σκοποῦ ζήτησις καὶ ἡ θεωρία, πῶς ἅπαντα ταῦτα πρὸς τὸν ἕνα συνήρτηται τοῦ διαλόγου σκοπόν, ὃν ἂν φήνη ὁ λόγος· ὅσα γὰρ προείπομεν, εἰς τὰ προοίμια τοῦ διαλόγου βλέποντες εἶπομεν, καὶ τοὺς περὶ τῶν ἰδεῶν λόγους, ἀφ' ὧν καὶ ἐπιγράφειν αὐτὸν τινες, ὡς εἴρηται, τῶν ἔμπροσθεν ἠξίωσαν.

¹¹ On Proclus' literary theory and aesthetics more generally, inclusive of allegorical interpretation and many useful references, see Sheppard (2017) 276-289; Tarrant (2017).

Using such a strict hermeneutical principle, Proclus is bound to end up with a different interpretation of the meaning of the prologue. This combination of two profound but different interpretations is methodologically quite intriguing. As John Dillon points out, it seems that Proclus is fairly liberal as to the number possible interpretations that a preamble can have.¹² This leaves open the perhaps modern idea that given that we cannot know Plato's exact intention for each and every thing in the dialogues, we may offer several, perhaps even several equally good, interpretations of some sections of them. Such liberality need not go against the overall late ancient tendency of being dogmatic about the core of Platonic philosophy, but could concern merely the ways that these central ideas are visible in illustrative, metaphorical or allegorical parts of the dialogue.

Elsewhere, however, Proclus does seem to commit himself to a more rigid methodological idea, one according to which determining the *skopos* of the dialogue is a key to understanding the meaning of the preambles. Let us again look at the main source in full:

The introductions to the dialogues of Plato accord with their overall aims and have not been invented by Plato for the sake of dramatic charm (for this manner of composition is far beneath the exalted mind of the philosopher) nor do they aim at mere accurate narrative, as some have considered; for it is neither plausible nor at all possible that every event or saying in the order in which they happen should be selected with a view to the single end aimed at by the works of Plato; but, as it is the opinion of our guides and has been fairly considered by us elsewhere, these circumstances depend on the general purpose of the dialogues: on the one hand the subject matter in fact or word is adapted to the immediate aim, while on the other hand what is wanting for the completion of the theory proposed is fulfilled; but all together, as in an initiation, have reference to the overall achievement of the objects of enquiry. This, then, in my opinion, is the view which Plato offers us in this dialogue and I think he neatly shows through the very first verbal encounter the whole object of the composition (Proclus *In Alc.* I, 18.13-19.10;¹³ trans. by Westerink and O'Neill)

¹² Dillon (1999) 217.

¹³ Τὰ προοίμια τῶν Πλατωνικῶν διαλόγων συνάδει πρὸς τοὺς ὅλους αὐτῶν σκοπούς, καὶ οὔτε δραματικῆς ἔνεκα ψυχαγωγίας μεμηχάνηται τῷ Πλάτωνι (πόρρω γὰρ ἐστὶν ὁ τρόπος οὗτος τῆς συγγραφῆς τῆς τοῦ φιλοσόφου μεγαλοφροσύνης) οὔτε τῆς ἱστορίας στοχάζεται μόνης, ὥσπερ τινὲς ὑπειλήφασιν· οὔτε γὰρ πιθανόν ἐστὶν οὔθ' ὅλως δυνατόν, ἅπαντα ἐξῆς ἀπὸ τῶν γεγονότων ἢ ῥηθέντων λαμβάνεσθαι πρὸς τὴν (19) μίαν τῶν Πλατωνικῶν συγγραμμάτων τελείωσιν· ἀλλ' ὥσπερ καὶ τοῖς ἡμετέροις δοκεῖ καθηγεμόσι καὶ ἡμῖν ἐν ἄλλοις μετρίως ὑπέμνησται, τῆς ὅλης τῶν διαλόγων ἐξήρηται καὶ ταῦτα προθέσεως, καὶ τὰ μὲν ἐκ τῶν ὑποκειμένων πραγμάτων ἢ λόγων συναρμόζεται πρὸς τὸν παρόντα σκοπόν, τὰ δὲ τελειοῦται τῶν ἐλλειπόντων εἰς τὴν τῆς προκειμένης θεωρίας συμπλήρωσιν, ὁμοῦ δὲ πάντα καθάπερ ἐν τελετῇ πρὸς τὴν ὅλην ἀνάγεται τῶν ζητούμενων τελείωσιν. τοῦτο δὴ οὖν μοι δοκεῖ καὶ ἐν τούτῳ τῷ διαλόγῳ προτείνειν ἡμῖν ὁ Πλάτων τὸ δόγμα, καὶ καλῶς ἐπιδεικνύει δι' αὐτῆς τῆς πρωτίστης ἐπιβολῆς τῶν λόγων τὸν σύμπαντα τοῦ γράμματος σκοπόν.

In this context, Proclus sets out, first, to deny two possible alternative functions of the preambles, in order to establish that they are significant for the main theme of each dialogue. He dismisses two alternatives derived from ancient discussions on literary criticism: It is not conceivable that the preambles are there for a mere dramatic charm, for that kind of composition is not suitable for the philosophical context and audience. The view dismissed is what Eratosthenes said about poetry, according to Strabo (1.2.3).¹⁴ Homeric poems are not about learning, but about charming or leading the soul (*psuchagogia*). Proclus is not fond of the other alternative either, the one that Eratosthenes objected to, namely that preambles could be, like poetry, instructive (*didaskalia*), to contain some facts that were useful to learn. Eratosthenes objected to such facts – *historia* – in Homer, taking up examples that proved that, for instance, in matters of geography, Homer did not always get it right, presumably because he did not consider such correctness to be important for composition of the poems. In the case of Plato's preambles, the analogical facts would be the actual people, in the actual setting and discussion that took place, and the real order in which people spoke. Proclus now puts the principle of one *skopos* governing the content of the preambles into use: given that the preambles are significant or illustrative of the one main *telos* of the dialogue as a whole, it seems impossible that any course of real events or discussions could have served in this role. The possibility of the preambles being selected from within past, real events or histories is overruled by a commitment to the idea that the preambles are governed by the *skopos* of the dialogue. The preambles are carefully structured; they are composed with a view of the *telos* of the whole dialogue. They are not reports of real events that took place that the remaining text would then be forced follow. The order of priority is the main dialogue and its *skopos* first, the construction and content of the preamble following upon it.

Proclus next establishes two ways in which the preamble is related to the *skopos*. First, the things discussed in the preamble, and the words used, are adapted or harmonised (*sunharmozo*) with the *skopos* of the dialogue as a whole. They are artistic inventions, the content and order of exposition of which serves the overall theme of the dialogue. Second, the preambles have a role in making the dialogue full or complete, and its theory or enquiry as complete as possible. The strong vocabulary connected to teleology establishes the *skopos* as not merely an overall theme, but an argumentative-philosophical *aim* (*telos*) that the dialogue serves (see also 10.17-19). It further contrasts, most likely, with the view that Proclus started with, namely the idea of a written work as something that merely charms or entertains: the

¹⁴ As already noted by Dillon (1999) 211.

content of these works, preambles included, are chosen for a philosophical purpose, rather than randomly anything that might please the listener/reader.

It remains to be seen in which way, if any, these principles are visible in the actual commenting on a Platonic dialogue. In the following part we shall examine one example, Proclus' commentary on *Alcibiades I*. Before going to this evidence, a more speculative word.

There are two indications in these programmatic-methodological reflections that suggest that something in the internal *order* of the preamble might be significant for the order or content of the rest of the dialogue. In the very first passage, we saw the word *oikonomia* being used, and I suggested that it refers to the structure of the text, as opposed to the subject matter or nature of the things to be studied. There would, thus, seem to be two preoccupations, one with the nature of the things, the real object of study, and another the order of exposition. In the last quote, Proclus seems to consider the order of the discussions and the actions in the preambles as significant for interpretation. The alternative, that they could have been real events and conversations, is set to aside by appealing to the idea that then the order of really happened events would not have been likely to suite to what is to come inside the dialogue's main parts. This insinuates a belief in quite specific content in the preambles: they do not just convey, in a general or evocative fashion, something missing or related as regards the topic of the dialogue. Whatever it is that they illustrate or add is done carefully. Even the order¹⁵ of the events and the things said in the preambles might matter.

Alcibiades I: Self-knowledge (L1)

In the ears of a contemporary reader, *Alcibiades I*¹⁶ might be said to be a dialogue without a proper preamble: we are not told the context in which the discussion of Socrates and Alcibiades takes place. No houses or outdoor settings mentioned, no festivities or homecomings from battles indicated, and no distancing through relating the dialogue as a second- or third-hand knowledge. In the *Alcibiades*, the discussion begins instantly, through

¹⁵ Dillon (1999) 214 refers to one such relationship, in the *Parmenides* (*In Prm.* 625.36 ff.), where four conversations are mentioned in the prologue, and Proclus finds them a likeness in reality (*he peri pragmata homoiotes*). It is thereby plausible that when he elsewhere in the same commentary systematises different readings (our first text above), he has a similar division in mind: the structure of the work on the one hand and the structure of reality on the other.

¹⁶ This dialogue was for a long thought to be inauthentic, but has recently become a subject of renewed interest. E.g. Denyer (2001); Renault & Tarrant (2015). It should be mentioned that it never occurred to the Neoplatonists to doubt the authenticity of *Alc. I*.

Socrates addressing Alcibiades. Yet the first exchanges between Socrates and Alcibiades do not jump into the topic of the dialogue, self-knowledge, immediately. Rather, Socrates famously asserts himself as the one true lover among all Alcibiades' lovers and, moreover, the only lover who can be genuinely advantageous for Alcibiades and his political ambitions (103a1-105a4). There is, thereby, a kind of introduction, before the proper treatment to follow. Both Proclus and a later commentator, Olympiodorus, divide the dialogue into 3 proper parts (the *diairesis* of the dialogue): refutation (*elenktikon*); exhortation (*protreptikon*); midwifery (*maieutikon*; Proclus *In Alc.* 11.18-14.23, apparently following Iamblichus opinion; Olymp. *In Alc.* 11.5-7 Westerink). The first of these only starts at 106b, and thus we may think of 103a-106b as a preamble. Olympiodorus does not call it a preamble, but in Proclus' commentary it does become explicit that the parts that precede the elenchus are considered to be a *prooimion*.

The preamble of this dialogue, he says, is concise and compressed (131.15). Proclus even argues that the themes of the preamble are picked up by the author in the end of the dialogue, by recalling the discussions about love that the dialogue begins with: 'Therefore both the introduction to the conversation and the conclusion are full of the science of love, and all that lies between, affords very considerable indication of the setting of Socrates' activity according to this genre' (Proclus *In Alc.* 30.1-4.). Given the introductory role of the whole dialogue, as an invitation to, and motivation for, philosophising, Socratic-Platonic type of teaching is highlighted not only in the preamble but throughout the dialogue, to finally bring things together in the last couple of closing lines of Socrates.

To understand how the preamble connects with the main dialogue, we need to know what the dialogue, according to Proclus, is about. The *skopos* is established in the very first sentences of the commentary:

The most valid and surest starting-point for the dialogues of Plato, and, practically for the whole of philosophical consideration, is, in our opinion, the discerning of our own being. If this is correctly posited, we shall in every way, I think, be able more accurately to understand both the good that is appropriate to us and the evil that fights against it (1.3-7).¹⁷

In Proclus' interpretation, the topic of the dialogue is self-knowledge, and self-knowledge in a particular setting. First, Proclus is committed to the idea of levels of being, and brings

¹⁷ Τῶν Πλατωνικῶν διαλόγων καὶ πάσης, ὡς εἰπεῖν, τῆς φιλοσόφου θεωρίας ἀρχὴν κυριωτάτην καὶ βεβαιωτάτην εἶναι νομίζομεν τὴν τῆς ἑαυτῶν οὐσίας διάγνωσιν. ταύτης γὰρ ὀρθῶς ὑποτεθείσης καὶ τὸ ἀγαθὸν τὸ προσήκον ἡμῖν καὶ τὸ τοῦτο μαχόμενον κακὸν πάντως που καταμαθεῖν ἀκριβέστερον δυνασόμεθα.

strongly forward the idea that for beings on each different level, a different kind of perfection must be assigned. For example, the good of the soul is according to intellect, the good of the body according to nature, and the perception of gods is different from that of angels (1.9-4.2, esp. at 3.11-14). Proclus thereby locates the dialogue's concern over the right object of care of the self in his Neoplatonic, wider hierarchy of different things, in which the appropriate perfection of each kind of thing follows upon its nature and ontological status. As we can see, this is indeed first and foremost a theory about *kinds* of beings, and the value hierarchy that these beings form. Perfection is governed by the nature of the type of thing in question.¹⁸ However, according to Proclus the diversity of perfectionism goes even further: he talks about the good of each thing, and each partial soul (*psuchai merikai*; 3.13-14). There may, thus, be individual perfection, in accordance with personal characteristics of individual souls.

Second, from this hierarchy and diversity of the ways that perfection can happen follows therapeutic-epistemic consequences. Care of the self – another potential candidate for the main theme of the dialogue – depends upon recognition of the kind of thing to be cared for. Questions about the proper kind of care cannot be separated from questions about being or essence: knowledge of the nature of the object of care is the key to the right kind of caring. (This is a version of the Socratic commitment to priority of definition: you need to know the thing itself in order to say anything else about it). This has two-fold repercussions for what happens in the dialogue. On the one hand, Socrates has Alcibiades admit that the care for worldly possessions, for example, cannot coincide with care of his self, since these are the possessions that his body uses, and thus nowhere near his own nature. On the other hand, it makes, in the eyes of Neoplatonic commentators, understandable why Socrates starts approaching Alcibiades the way he does. The Socrates of this dialogue is no stingray or gadfly, but a very cautious man. This Socrates recognizes that 'all youth is given to controversy and contention' and must therefore be cautiously approached, through conjectures rather than affirmation (23.14-18). Moreover, the method has to be one that appeals to his personal values and motivations, however flawed: his, even in comparison to his peers, remarkable power hunger and sense of self-contentment. A proper care of the soul of Alcibiades must take into account his particular kind of soul and its present condition, and

¹⁸ It has further been suggested that even Socrates is located in this hierarchy, as the *nous* aiding the *psuchê* of Alcibiades. Griffin 2014, 98-99; Ambury 2014, 111.

adjust the beginning of the discussion to them. (Proclus *In Alc.* 28.10-11; made even more explicit by Olymp. *In Alc.* 24.13-14).¹⁹

In considering just by what means the dialogue accomplishes this, Proclus offers us yet another holistic metaphor, that of cosmos. This produces another kind of division of a dialogue, one not according to parts of the exposition, but a division into explanatory parts. Each dialogue is like a cosmos, possessing the parts that the cosmos possesses: the good, the intellect, the soul, the form (*eidos*), and the underlying substrate or matter (*hupokeimenon*; *hule*). Applied to the case of a literary work, this yields the following: The good is the aim of the dialogue. In *Alcibiades I*, the *telos* is conformity to the divine. Intellect in this dialogue amounts to self-knowledge, and the soul-level is found in the demonstrations and syllogisms leading to that state. Form and substrate are the literary means that act as vehicles for these philosophical goals. By form Proclus wants to capture the literary style and everything connected to stylistic ability, and by matter the persons and moment (*kairos*) chosen as well as plot or ‘play’ (*hupothesis*; 10.4-13)

A couple of things stand out within this description of unity. In Proclus’ system, we do not encounter an opposition between metaphysical and ethical, but a division between the literary work inclusive of its means, and the ethical-metaphysical *telos* for which it is written. The *explanandum* is a real written work, and the *explanans* can be roughly divided into three: its literary features, its content (here demonstrations and the topic of self-knowledge), and the ultimate *telos* that the whole aims at (here godlikeness). These aspects are hierarchically organised according to the general Neoplatonic order of priority, leaving the literary aspects a place on the lower levels of this explanatory scheme. Yet, the kind of holism advocated is inclusive. According to this passage, items that typically feature in preambles, like persons and particularised time of the discussion, are not mere additions or images of the whole, but a necessary part that makes the whole what it is. According to this division, they play a functional part in an explanatory scheme that produces the end result that is the literary work of this kind. Just as form needs matter for its (embodied) actualisation, so stylistic means need a substrate. In the dialogues, this substrate is the persons in the dramatised setting and moment chosen. But this literary composition would not be understandable, nor functional, if it did not serve an end, a purpose for which the dialogue is written. In *Alcibiades I* this is the self-ennobling kind of self-knowledge.

¹⁹ For the neoplatonic commentators on Plato’s person-sensitive method, see Layne (2014); Renauld (2014); Remes (forthcoming).

The preamble, then, is written in order to introduce the real meaning of the Delphic exhortation: to reveal us our nature (*phusis*). The dialogue will proceed doing so by using the demonstrative methods that philosophy enables (19.11-15). In Proclus' view, self-knowledge requires a two-fold reversion: first in and then up; or, towards our existing reality (or substance), and then towards our perfection (*huparxis, teleiosis*; Proclus *In Alc.* 18.4-7), already indicated in the preliminary portions of the dialogue: 'Now, the very introduction turns the youth toward himself, makes him scrutinise his pre-existing notions, and along with the reversion upon himself elevates him to the vantage point of Socratic knowledge' (19.15-18). Proclus restates a similar idea slightly later:

Making this clear, then, from the introduction, the discussion on the one hand leads Alcibiades round from the life that tends outward to the investigation of himself, and on the other calls him up from consideration of himself to the love of Socratic knowledge. For to long to learn the reasons for Socrates' behaviour is to become a lover of the knowledge pre-present in him (21.2-7).²⁰

From the preamble onwards, then, the interlocutor is invited to think about himself. Socrates does not start, immediately, with any doctrine about the nature of our selves, or theoretical discussion on the proper object of self-care, but turns Alcibiades' attention from his political ambitions, his family and its fortunes etc. to himself. It is Socrates' unrelenting love of Alcibiades' soul rather than his perishing looks or fortunes that draws the youth towards his real self. Yet for the purposes of self-improvement, self-reversion understood as an inward turn is not enough. What is needed is also a turn towards the higher principles of goodness and knowledge. It is here that Socrates' person and behaviour, and not merely his pedagogical skills, becomes important. As a phenomenon, his unwavering love, love that flourishes even without recognition and reward, and one not primarily governed by bodily infatuation, is anomalous in the Athenian context. It is through understanding the reasons and intellectual commitments behind this behaviour that Alcibiades will come closer to understanding the object of self-knowledge and the whole hierarchy of being.

In all this, I wish to argue, Proclus is helpful to any reader of *Alcibiades I*. One may always disagree over the details, and complain about the Neoplatonic way of bringing hierarchies of being and value into everything. Yet he draws attention to undeniably interesting aspects of the preamble: the particularities of Socrates' way to appeal to Alcibiades; the Platonic

²⁰ Ταῦτα τοίνυν ἐκ προομιῶν ἐνδεικνύμενος ὁ λόγος ἀπὸ μὲν τῆς ἑαυτοῦ κατανοήσεως εἰς τὸν ἔρωτα τῆς Σωκρατικῆς ἐπιστήμης ἀνακαλεῖται. τὸ γὰρ αἰτίαν ποθῆσαι μαθεῖν ὧν πράττει Σωκράτης, ἐραστὴν ἐστὶ γενέσθαι τῆς ἐν αὐτῷ προὔπαρχούσης ἐπιστήμης.

commitment to priority of definition, as here freely applied to the priority of determining the object of self-knowledge before that of self-care; the gradual movement in discussion from worldly matters and aspirations to appeal to soul and intellect, to mention a few.

What Proclus does next may from our point of view seem less convincing, and certainly imports a lot from other dialogues, themes not directly present in the *Alcibiades I*. While there is no allegorical interpretation suggested – the interpretations of this preamble and dialogue happen fairly close to the text, Proclus sees even more hierarchies rising. Along the ontological and normative hierarchies, he suggests a hierarchical system of types of knowledge and language. In short, the idea is to tease out all the repercussions of Plato's Divided Line (*Resp.* 6.509d-511e), together with some insights from the *Cratylus* (e.g. 397b), to the effect that there are things of which stable knowledge and stable language is possible, and language which must remain conjectural (*eikastikos*), because of the nature of the things discussed. The former revolves around the irrefutable and immutable objects of knowledge, the latter treats the things that come to be and pass away, and are therefore captured by conjectural expressions. (21.9-22.15.) The latter kind of language usage explains, for Proclus, partly the instances where Socrates appears less than secure of what he is saying. This insecurity is not a mark of indeterminate knowledge or ignorance on his part but of choosing the proper level of language to proper kind of things captured with it (22.15-23.7).

Alcibiades I: Love (L2)

Thematically, there is one theme that appears in the preamble that does not feature, really, the dialogue to come, namely love. The dialogue starts with Socrates' announcement that he was the first man to love Alcibiades (103a1), instead of launching, immediately, the main theme of self-care and self-knowledge. In this respect, the preamble does introduce an ethical-therapeutic discussion that is missing from the later parts of the dialogue. This theme is different kinds of love, starting from the contrast of Socrates' own unwavering love for Alcibiades, and that of the suitors that he sent packing and that stopped pursuing him. One might therefore think that this corroborates the second reading in the division above, the one according to which the preambles treat *kathékonta*: what is an appropriate kind of love from an older man towards a youth? What could and should a youth expect from his suitors? How to deal with political ambitions, and what kind of help and guidance to accept?

Proclus devotes a lot of space to discuss love, but it must immediately be recognised that he does not see it separate either from the figure of Socrates and his activities, or from the

skopos of the whole dialogue. As far as Socrates is concerned, Proclus divides his knowledge or science (*episteme*) into three: dialectics, elicitation or maieutic, and erotic. In this dialogue, he both manifests love, and practices philosophical argumentation and elicitation ‘in a loving manner’ (*erotikos*; 27.14-28.10).²¹ Love is the power that takes the soul upwards, and the task of the teacher is to rouse this upward movement in the interlocutor. An exemplification of the particularly loving kind of Socratic care is his person-sensitive method: his argumentation is not unloving, but appeals to each person in a manner suited to that character, perfecting everyone according to his rank (28.10-11; 29.5-7).

Proclus goes then on, in following pages, to build a whole order or ranking of different kinds of love, in accordance to his system of orders of being. While we need not here engage in the details of Neoplatonic systematisation – not much of it seems relevant for the analysis of the original dialogue – it is crucial to note that love is not a phenomenon confined to the level of ordinary moral problems. As we know already from the *Symposium*, it extends to higher levels, and motivates knowledge seeking. It can – and should – be directed to goodness and beauty beyond the bodily. The higher kinds of love, moreover, are explanatorily prior: the lower level phenomena are not truly understandable without the higher levels. This means that any discussion on the level of *kathekonta* is not self-standing: it will remain incomplete without going to the true causes of embodied phenomena.

There is one hierarchical distinction, the details of which Proclus teases out elegantly, and which will ultimately show the connection between moral and political decision-making of ordinary kind, and the deeper metaphysical layers of the dialogue. This is the division into divine and vulgar love, as exemplified by Socrates and the suitors. Vulgar lovers are needy, dependent, and not self-sufficient, while divine lovers are self-sufficient and cause of admiration and amazement. Vulgar lover is interested only in bodily beauty and gratification, and loses interest, while divine lover continues to care, for he cares of the soul, not just of body. The former lover is fickle, the latter stable. One is constantly bothering, the other talking only when needed. The vulgar lover embodies everything that is indeterminate and disintegrated, while the divinely inspired lover stands for unity, goodness and true beauty. (34.11-36.20.) The last suggestion is as close to allegorical interpretation of the persons in the preamble as this commentary comes: Socrates is likened to the Unity and Goodness of the One, the suitors to disintegration of things material.

²¹ See also Ambury 2014,113.

Now, all these contrasts (self-sufficient-dependent, unified-disintegrated, stability-fickleness) feature either explicitly or implicitly in the preamble, and they all point forward or allude to the central ideas forthcoming in the discussion on self-knowledge. The preamble, Proclus says later, embraces the reasons or causes (*aitiai*) of the whole conversation (131.16). It paves the road for the main division in the dialogue. This is the identification of the soul and its best part with the real self, and the body as the belonging of the soul, rather than a symmetric and equally important part of who we are. The main division leaves one step further removed from proper object of self-care for the things that have to do with clothing and looks, as well as other worldly possessions and instruments a place. They are mere belongings of ‘the belonging’ (the body) (*Alc.* I 128 – to which the extant part of Proclus’ commentary does not reach). In the *Alcibiades*, the understanding of this ontological division, and the dependency hierarchy it forms, is the source of right kind of self-care.²² This division lies at the heart of the difference between vulgar and divinely inspired ways of loving, but is not presupposed by them within the literary composition. Proclus states that the hypocrisy of the vulgar lovers, and the way in which their love merely busies with images rather than real things, would be immediately revealed if one proceeded to see how the dialogue determines, later, the true nature of human being (*tis ho alethinos estin anthropos*; 37.1). The message of the preamble, then, is clarified by what is to come, and gets its explanation in the proper parts of the dialogue. But it does not presuppose knowledge of those issues for being compelling. And besides introducing these themes obliquely, it further enforces this distinction by showing its practical repercussions: a misidentified selfhood leads to flawed human relationships. In the explanatory analysis, however, the later introduced metaphysical distinction enjoys priority.

Conclusion (L1)

Proclus’ understanding of what a *prooimion* is relatively wide: it does not have to be a proper frame story in the sense of being clearly detached, by persons and location, from the discussion to follow. Given that he treats the first four Stephanus pages of the *Alcibiades* I as a *prooimion*, we may conclude that a *prooimion* presents a narrative or thematic discussion that sets it apart, by persons and location, but sometimes merely by content, from the following, longer discussion. He considers alternative ways in which this divergent content of

²² I have argued for this elsewhere, see Remes (2013) 270-301.

a preamble is connected to that of the rest of the dialogue, underlying the idea that a dialogue is an organic unity, and the preamble a part of this whole. He is relatively liberal as to the way that preambles balance the whole – either by providing an image of what will come, or by complementing with ethical problems not discussed later in the dialogue. Importantly, both his own methodological remarks and his treatment of the *Alcibiades I* reveals that any complementary element that the preamble provides must not just add. The added element must be governed by the *skopos*, the ultimate aim of the dialogue.

There are at least two reasons for this: first, this is what it means to have a proper literary style. A preamble that discussed an interesting theme, but a theme entirely unconnected from what the rest of the dialogue is preoccupied with, one not governed by its overall purpose, would lack the kind of unity that is demanded of a literary work in this interpretative tradition. A good literary work has functional differentiation that forms a unity. Second, there is a good philosophical reason to connect the theme introduced in the preamble to what will appear later in the dialogue. Any proper treatment of moral problems, while apparently connected to the embodied lives and contingencies of the sensible-material realm, will happen by philosophical study of a deeper sort. A true moral development does not come about by following rules, or by learning by example (even when the example is as glorious as Socrates himself). It requires dialectical exercises, philosophical concept-clarification, and a grasp of some ontological truths, like the distinction between the real self, the belonging, and the belonging of belonging in the *Alcibiades I*. These are the true causes explanatory for the discussed views of love and ambition.

The preambles containing matter pertaining to *kathekonta* are governed by the philosophical aims of the dialogue. A dialogue can be understood through a unified explanatory scheme not unlike Aristotle's four causes, but one that is thoroughly Neoplatonised. In it, literary means as well as persons, settings and the plot are understood through the notions of formal and material causation, whereas the thematic content discussed by Socrates and his interlocutor(s) points to the vertical causes of the Neoplatonic scheme. On the lower level of the latter are argumentative strategies such as syllogisms, which connect to and function at the level of the soul. In the *Alcibiades I*, the purpose of these is to secure true self-knowledge, which connects to the level of Intellect. And the whole is governed by even higher, ultimate *telos* or good: that of godlikeness. These vertical causes take a shape of a real object through being materialised in a literary work with a carefully designed arrangement, and a substrate of real or realistic persons and situations.

In this framework, *prooimion* forms a part of a whole that is both a literary and an explanatory unity.