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Olympiodorus' View of Civic Self-Knowledge

Albert Joosse

In his *Alcibiades* commentary, Olympiodorus uses the notion of a civic mode of knowing oneself. Many philosophers have thought about self-knowledge, but not many distinguish a civic mode of it. So what does Olympiodorus mean by knowing oneself civically? From his use of it, the notion appears to be something complex. It seems to involve such philosophically crucial aspects as our knowledge of ourselves as beings at the juncture of intellection and action. It also encompasses features that we nowadays often associate with self-knowledge, such as knowing oneself as an embodied being, as the author of our actions, as an individual. Examining this notion will therefore help us understand Olympiodorus' view of our place as human beings in this world.

1 Self-Knowledge as a Soul Using the Body

When Olympiodorus speaks of a civic mode of self-knowledge, it is in direct relation to other modes of self-knowledge: the mode of purification and that of contemplation. This is the case from early on in the *Alcibiades* commentary. Civic self-knowledge is introduced when Olympiodorus raises the question of the dialogue's target (*σκοπός*). This is one of the preliminary questions to be considered about the dialogue before studying its contents.¹ Having reported Proclus' answer, he cites and agrees with the following modification made by Damascius (4.15–17):

Damascius conveys its goal (*σκοπός*) more exactly and more truly when he says that it is not about knowing oneself unqualifiedly (*ἀπλῶς*), but about knowing oneself civically (*πολιτικῶς*).

in Alc. 4.15–17, tr. GRIFFIN, modified

¹ See Mansfeld 1994.

For Damascius and Olympiodorus, Proclus' answer in terms of self-knowledge is a rough answer that fails to make necessary qualifications.² There are many modes of self-knowledge, and the target of the *Alcibiades* is only the civic mode. But what is it to know oneself in a civic mode? Olympiodorus furnishes a core answer when he goes on to report Damascius' reason for this specification and to distinguish the civic mode from the purificatory and contemplative modes of self-knowledge.

And he establishes this from the definition of the human being in this dialogue as a rational soul that uses the body as an instrument. Only the civic person (ὁ πολιτικός) uses the body as an instrument, since he is sometimes in need of spirited emotion (θυμός), for example in defence of his country, but also of an appetite (ἐπιθυμία) for doing his citizens good. But neither the purificatory person (ὁ καθαρτικός) nor the theoretical person (ὁ θεωρητικός) need the body.

in Alc. 4.15–5.1; tr. GRIFFIN, mod.

Damascius' reason appeals to the course of Socrates' conversation with Alcibiades in the Platonic dialogue itself. Socrates makes Alcibiades see that the human being is his soul. He does so by arguing first that the human being is whatever it is that uses the body, and second that nothing else uses the body but the soul. Although the Socrates of the *Alcibiades* nowhere explicitly defines the human being as the rational soul using the body, this is a common interpretation of the upshot of the dialogue in the Platonic tradition. In the Neoplatonic scheme of the modes of life, the purificatory and contemplative modes are defined in terms of the process and the result of liberation from the body, respectively. Damascius' reasoning makes perfect sense from that perspective, if we take the *Alcibiades* to be about knowing oneself as a soul using a body.

This is a core answer to the question of what it is to know oneself civically: it is to know oneself as a soul using a body. What this involves becomes clear when we consider other aspects of civic self-knowledge that Olympiodorus describes, and that are related to the soul's use of the body as consequences or aspects of it.

This applies, in the text just cited, to the second argument Olympiodorus adduces: to know oneself civically also means to know oneself as a tripartite

2 This itself is a rough characterization of the disagreement between Proclus and Damascius, which is not easy to reconstruct. My focus here is on the nature of civic self-knowledge. For discussion of the disagreement, see Segonds 1985, lv–lxi, lxxx–lxxxii.

soul. This argument is not used to support the identification of the target of the *Alcibiades* with the civic mode of self-knowledge, but to explain or to substantiate why it is the case that the civic person needs the body. The appeal here is to θυμός and ἐπιθυμία, which we recognize as the two irrational parts of the soul in Plato's *Republic*. According to standard Neoplatonic doctrine, the soul has its irrational parts in virtue of its embodiment. If the soul would never have been embodied, it would not have had its irrational parts.³ These parts are necessary, our passage argues, in view of the tasks of the civic person: to defend his country and to do good to his (fellow) citizens. This further specification of what it means to be a civic person also gives us further content to what it is to know oneself civically. When you know yourself civically, you will know yourself as a soul using θυμός and ἐπιθυμία.

As Olympiodorus sees it, the requirement that the civic person engage with the irrational parts of the soul also means that there is a use for the passions (πάθη). This surfaces in *in Alc.* 4.15–5.1, the passage cited above: in mentioning the irrational soul parts themselves, what Olympiodorus has in mind is the passions that result from them and that drive particular types of action which the civic person is called upon to engage in. Rather than extirpating them as the Stoics would recommend and as the purificatory person does, then, the civic person aims to use the passions for the purposes for which they were given. As Olympiodorus comments in the *Gorgias* commentary: the creator gave man the passions in order that he might use his temper and his desire in view of the good.⁴ Knowing yourself civically, then, involves knowing yourself as using passions in certain ways.

Furthermore, the civic person will deal with pleasure and pain, in an attempt to moderate them and to have the right amount of them. The *Phaedo* commentary specifies that, in contradistinction to the philosopher of purification and of contemplation:

3 This does not mean that the irrational parts disappear. Post-mortem punishment as required in the myths of the *Gorgias* and *Phaedo*, for instance, makes sense only on the assumption that the irrational soul parts persist for them to be curtailed (but cf. Olympiodorus' views on punishment in the *Gorgias* as analysed by Renaud in this volume, pp. 173–176). In order to deal with this difficulty the Neoplatonists had a doctrine of various types of 'vehicle' (ὄχημα) or 'garments' (χιτῶνες) of the soul, which it successively comes to occupy or wear in the course of its descent. The thing we nowadays would recognize as our body is only the last in a series. See Dodds 1963, 'Appendix II'; Hadot 1978, 98–106, 181–187; Finamore 1985; and Fortier (p. 225) in this volume.

4 *In Gorg.* 19.3, 109.8–9W; cf. 32.5 and 49.6.

The civic person is concerned also with pleasure and pain, for he pays attention to the body, too, as an instrument, and his aim is not freedom from affects, but moderation in them.

in Phd. 4.3.12–14; tr. WESTERINK, mod.

The civic person's engagement with pleasure and pain is presented here as a direct consequence of his involvement with the body. This is intelligible against the background of the idea that pleasure and pain are natural concomitants of the satisfaction of bodily desires. Since the civic person makes use of the body as an instrument, he will also care for the body, in the same way that a craftsman cares for his tools: it should be in the proper shape to allow him to execute whatever is his duty. Therefore the civic person will satisfy the necessary desires like hunger and thirst, which cannot be ignored on pains of death or malfunctioning. As with any desire and any satisfaction, this will involve pain and pleasure. Civic self-knowledge, therefore, involves knowledge of oneself as choosing the appropriate course among pleasures and pains.

The last two points, concerning passions and concerning pleasure and pain, both involve the pursuit of moderation. In a passage of the *Phaedo* commentary which connects the two points, Olympiodorus says: 'The civic person, who aims at moderation of affects, will choose [pleasure and pain] within narrow limits' (*in Phd.* 4.11.7–8; tr. Westerink, mod.). This is in contrast with both the mode of purification and that of contemplation: in the former one seeks, and in the latter one has achieved, freedom from passion (*ἀπάθεια*).⁵

2 Knowing Oneself as Involved in Particular Actions

Knowing oneself in a civic way is knowing the soul in its connection to the body; this involves knowing it as a tripartite structure, as something subject to passions, and involved with pleasure and pain. We can call this the affective dimension of civic self-knowledge. A second dimension of civic self-knowledge is also a direct result of the soul's embodiment: its activity in relation to

5 In the *Gorgias* commentary we find many statements to the effect that Olympiodorus recommends the extirpation of the passions. See e.g. 34.3, 35.3. JLT are right to emphasize this (1998, 233 n. 668; 289 n. 873), but I would argue that this does not constitute a real departure from *μετριοπάθεια* as the aim of civic life. It is, for one, not wholly clear that Olympiodorus is speaking within the confines of the civic mode when recommending *ἀπάθεια* (so for 21.5 and 22.2). Moreover, the context of the *Gorgias* matters: speaking among others to a committed hedonist like Callicles, it makes perfect sense to emphasize the reduction of passions. The same commentary also includes more positive statements about the passions (see previous note).

particular actions. Let us call this the particularist dimension of civic self-knowledge. Consider the following passage from the *Phaedo* commentary:

The civic philosopher draws his conclusions from a universal major premise based on reflexion and from a particular (μερική) minor, because he uses the body as an instrument and is therefore concerned with actions (πρακτά), and actions are particular (μερικά), and such things are individual (καθ' ἕκαστα), so that the civic philosopher depends on one particular premise for his conclusions.

in Phd. 4.4.1–5, tr. WESTERINK, mod.

This passage focuses on the kind of arguments a civic philosopher will use. For Olympiodorus, a paradigm argument is one in Aristotelian syllogistic form. In this specific case we recognize the structure of Aristotle's practical syllogism: one premise is universal and could qualify as a piece of knowledge. The other is particular, involving reference to a *this*, a concrete particular that is available to us through perception.⁶ Olympiodorus suggests here that it is a necessary consequence of the instrumental role of the body that the civic soul deal with particulars. We can readily imagine the reason behind this: a corporeal entity like the body cannot act on universals, which are necessarily incorporeal. We should note that Olympiodorus does not explicitly describe civic self-knowledge as knowledge of oneself as active in relation to particulars. Given the intimate connection this passage makes between using the body as an instrument and being active in relation to particulars, this must nevertheless be part of his view.

This also follows from a wider identification of the subject matter of the civic philosopher. Three passages are relevant here. Olympiodorus expands on the subject matter of civic knowledge in his *Gorgias* commentary, which is devoted in great part to an analysis of the civic virtues and civic expertise (πολιτική ἐπιστήμη).⁷ While this commentary is surprisingly silent, in explicit

6 Cf. *EN* 1143b2–5 and 1147a25–28. This also lies behind the reference in *in Alc.* 204.5–8 to πράξεις as being concerned with τὰ καθ' ἕκαστα (more on this puzzling passage in fn. 32 below). While concrete particulars are grasped through perception, Péter Lautner argues that perception is not limited to concrete particulars (see above, pp. 85–90 in this volume).

7 See Tarrant 1997, 202–203 for an argument that we should not translate πολιτική (ἐπιστήμη, ἀρετή, εὐδαιμονία) as 'political'; in *JLT*, 31 he extends this to 'social' and 'civic' as well. To my mind this restricts Olympiodorus' concern too much to the internal order of the soul. The principles given in the *Gorgias* and *Alcibiades* (see below, p. 121) commentaries suit external politics very well; even the *Phaedo* commentary contains passages like 4.3.1–6 (cited below, p. 135) that are best interpreted as at least including external politics.

terms, about self-knowledge, it does make clear that the expertise it outlines includes or presupposes self-knowledge. As Olympiodorus puts it at one point:

It is impossible without knowledge to become a statesman. For the statesman seeks to understand who are his subject-matter. If so, he seeks to understand also what is the essence of man, whether it is the body, or external things, or the soul. And when he discovers that it is the soul, again what sort of soul. So he seeks to practice knowledge.

in Gorg. 40.4, 202.28–203.4 WESTERINK; tr. JLT

According to this passage, the civic philosopher seeks self-knowledge as part of identifying the subject matter of his expertise. The description of the civic philosopher's quest here is reminiscent of the trajectory of the *Alcibiades I*, with its triad of external things, the body and the soul and with its subsequent attempt to characterize the kind of soul involved. Given that the passage talks about the civic philosopher, it is natural to think that the answer to this latter, indirect question is that it is the soul in its relation to the body. The passage itself leaves this open, however. But a comparison with two other passages, that similarly talk about the subject matter of civic expertise, gives us a much more specific description.

In the proem to his *Gorgias* commentary, Olympiodorus speaks of the tripartite soul as the matter (ὕλη) of civic knowledge. This is part of a discussion of the six 'principles' of civic knowledge.⁸ These principles are related to the traditional Platonic causes: the material, the creative, the formal, the paradigmatic, the instrumental and the final (0.5, 4.11–5.9 W).⁹

In addition to this six-causal account of civic knowledge in the proem of the *Gorgias* commentary, the *Alcibiades* commentary also includes an account of civic knowledge, this time analysed in terms of four causes (*in Alc.* 178.1–179.10).¹⁰ This time, the material cause is identified as actions (πρακτά).

8 JLT suggest that the six are principles of constitutional *well-being* (1998, 58 n. 21) and supply this consistently in their translation. The Greek is fairly clear in asking ποῖα τῆς πολιτικῆς ἐπιστήμης ἀρχαί. Perhaps we can combine the two by saying that the state of well-being has these six as its causes, and that these therefore are ἀρχαί of the associated, civic, knowledge.

9 As to the other principles: its form are justice and temperance; the creative cause is the philosophical life (but cf. 45.1, 232.7W and 46.7, 240.5W); the paradigm is the cosmos; the instruments are habits and education; and the goal is the good.

10 It is not clear how these two accounts relate. The identifications in the *Alcibiades* commentary occur when the commentary is in full swing and are very closely tied to the text on which Olympiodorus comments, *Alc.* 124e1–127d5. This may be evidence that this

The three passages combined suggest that civic self-knowledge is part of civic expertise as knowledge of its subject matter. They further give us reason to believe that this subject matter is the soul in its tripartite structure and as engaged in particular actions.¹¹

Further light is shed on the particularist dimension of civic self-knowledge in the course of Olympiodorus' exegesis of an Orphic myth. This exegesis is an intriguing ingredient of the *Phaedo* commentary's discussion of the civic virtues, but we will have to go through it with some patience due to the allegorical details involved. With other Neoplatonic commentators, Olympiodorus thinks Socrates' comment, in *Phaedo* 62b4, about human beings being in the 'custody' (φρουρά) of the gods, is an appeal to this myth as being an esoteric argument against the legitimacy of suicide.¹² The Orphic myth, as Olympiodorus relates it, speaks of the reigns of four successive gods (*in Phd.* 1.3.4–9):¹³

The first is that of Uranus, to which Kronos succeeds after emasculating his father; after Kronos Zeus becomes king, having hurled down his father into Tartarus; then Zeus is succeeded by Dionysus, whom, they say, his retainers the Titans tear to pieces through Hera's plotting, and they eat his flesh. Zeus, incensed, strikes them with his thunderbolts, and the soot of the vapours that rise from them becomes the matter from which men are created.

tr. WESTERINK

account is more local than the account in the *Gorgias* commentary, which occurs in the proem and is much farther from any particular passage in the *Gorgias*.

- 11 Olympiodorus does not have much to say about the way in which an agent is dependent on factors outside himself for the external success of his particular actions. We do find concern with this in other Neoplatonic texts, see O'Meara 2003, 132–139.
- 12 Based on Socrates' statement that this is a λόγος, which, 'in the language of the mysteries (ἐν ἀπορρήτοις)' says that 'we men are in a kind of prison (φρουρά)'. Socrates considers this to be 'an impressive (μέγας) doctrine and one not easy to understand fully (διιδεῖν)' *Phd.* 62b2–6, tr. Grube. On Olympiodorus' discussion of suicide see Gertz 2011, 27–50, with 40–44 on the Orphic myth. According to Damascius (1.2.3–5 Westerink), the connection between the φρουρά and the Orphic myth of the Titans and Dionysus harks back to Xenocrates.
- 13 We hear of other gods in other tellings of the myth of successive reigns. Plato's *Philebus* (66c8–9) speaks of the sixth and final generation, which implies that in the version referred to by Plato, Phanes and Night precede Uranus. As Brisson 1992, 490 argues, Olympiodorus was aware of other candidates, but for some reason or other (cf. the note in Westerink 1976 *ad loc.*) chose not to include them here. See Demulder and Van Riel 2015, 278–287 for an argument that this has to do with what they think is Olympiodorus recognition of only five degrees of virtue.

We need to add a number of elements from other texts to make the central part of this story intelligible.¹⁴ The reason Zeus is angry is, of course, that Dionysus is his son. The reason Hera plots against Dionysus is, of course, that Dionysus is not her son: he is the offspring of Zeus and Kore. In her jealousy, Hera incites the Titans to kill Dionysus in an ambush. The Titans divide him, boil him, and eat him. In other tellings of this story, Zeus sends Apollo to gather up the remains of Dionysus, while Athena has managed to save his still beating heart. This allows Zeus to revive Dionysus.

Olympiodorus interprets this myth in a complex way that most likely contains elements original to him.¹⁵ The first move in his interpretation is the detemporalization of the narrative. Myths relate in temporal succession what in reality constitutes a hierarchical succession, he claims.¹⁶ A second move is to see the different reigns as representing the different levels of virtues. In this way, Uranus comes to stand for the contemplative virtues, Kronos for the virtues of purification, Zeus for the civic virtues and Dionysus for the ethical and natural virtues.

It is worth our while to consider what happens to Dionysus, before we turn to Zeus. Even though Olympiodorus claims that Dionysus stands for the natural and ethical virtues, the realities he and his history denote turn out to tell us much about the civic mode of existence.

- (i) [Dionysus] is torn to pieces, because these [sc. the ethical and natural] virtues do not imply each other; (ii) and the Titans chew his flesh, mastication standing for extreme division, because Dionysus is the patron of this world, where extreme division prevails because of 'mine' and 'thine'. (iii) In the Titans who tear him to pieces, the *ti* ('something') denotes the particular, for the universal form is broken up in genesis, and Dionysus is the monad of the Titans.

1.5.8–13; tr. WESTERINK

In this passage we find three (compatible and related but) different explanations of Dionysus' being eaten by the Titans. In (i) the division of the god is linked directly to the scale of virtues that shapes the exegesis of the myth of the successive reigns as a whole. In Neoplatonic doctrine, civic virtues never occur separately from each other, even though we can still distinguish between

14 I follow the reconstruction in Brisson 1992, 490–91.

15 For discussion see Brisson 1992 and Edmonds 2009.

16 This is a common Neoplatonic move; for a clear statement elsewhere in Olympiodorus see for instance *in Gorg.* 48.1–2 and see Renaud, p. 174 in this volume.

the different virtues. On the level of purification and contemplation, such distinction is overcome, the four cardinal virtues being used to describe different aspects of the same thing. But on the level of natural and ethical virtue, someone can have one virtue without having any of the others. On the natural level, one virtue can even be at odds with another, according to Damascius' report.¹⁷ On the ethical level, mutual clashes are no longer possible, but it is possible for ethical virtues to occur in isolation. These virtues are the result of habituation and good upbringing, and involve a kind of true opinion.¹⁸ The latter aspect makes them good starting points for education.¹⁹

We will return below to part (ii) of the passage, which involves reference to different human individuals and their interests. With part (iii) we return to the particulars with which civic self-knowledge is concerned. As an explanation of the Titans' eating Dionysus, it is much more ontological than part (i). It is no longer related to the natural and ethical virtues per se, even though it concerns the domain in which they occur. Dionysus and the Titans symbolize the domain of genesis and particulars. In their mutual relation, the Titans stand to Dionysus as participated items stand to their unparticipated monad. As our passage expresses it, Dionysus is the monad or universal of which the Titans are the particulars. This fact is supported by the etymological derivation of 'Titans' from *ti*. Paradoxically, Dionysus is the enduring patron of generation and the universal of material division.²⁰

This interpretation of the Dionysus myth as dealing with ontological particulars resurfaces when elements of the myth recur later in the commentary. This is the case specifically in connection with Socrates' citation, in the *Phaedo*, of an Orphic line: 'there are many who carry the thyrsus, but Bacchantes there

17 *In Phd.* I 138.2: ἐναντία ἀλλήλαις ὡς τὰ πολλά.

18 Dam. *in Phd.* I 139.1: ἐθισμῶ καὶ ὀρθοδοξίᾳ τινὶ ἐγγιγνόμενα. See Griffin, pp. 59–63 in this volume about the lack of unity of natural virtues. See Saffrey and Segonds 2001, lxi–xcviii; O'Meara 2003, 40–49; Brisson 2006 for discussion of the Neoplatonic doctrine of virtues.

19 For an example see Proclus *in Alc.* 100.17–19, in which Alcibiades' rejection of his lovers is ascribed to true opinion, considered there as the point of entry for Socrates' instruction. Alcibiades is the paradigm of someone who possesses ethical virtues but now needs to be turned towards the civic ones.

20 Damascius' exegesis contains other and partly more specific ontological identifications. Damascius' and Olympiodorus' treatments are both in all likelihood based to a large extent on Proclus' commentary, so that there are good grounds to use Damascius' commentary as background to that of Olympiodorus. On this point, however, there is reason for caution. In general terms, Olympiodorus is much more reluctant than Damascius and Proclus to multiply the gods in his explanatory scheme (and, specific to this context, multiply demiurges). Furthermore, in the explanation of this myth Damascius clearly disagrees with Proclus (see Dam. *in Phd.* I 4).

are few' (69c8–d1).²¹ Olympiodorus specifies that the thyrsus-bearers are civic philosophers, whereas the Bacchants are those being purified.²² The civic philosophers, that is, still find themselves in division, whereas the stage of purification is also a stage of unification. In his exposition of the virtues, Olympiodorus comments on the same line by highlighting, again, the ontological division of our human situation, this time making explicit that it is our involvement in matter that is responsible for the division:

[he means] by those who carry the thyrsus without becoming Bacchus philosophers still involved in civic life, while the thyrsus-bearers and Bacchants are those on the way to purification. We are chained to matter as Titans by extreme partition, in a world where mine and thine prevail, but we are resuscitated as Bacchus.

8.7.5–7; tr. WESTERINK

What ties this exegesis to civic self-knowledge is that we are dealing here, again, with the subject matter of civic knowledge, represented in these exegetical contexts by the reign of Zeus. According to Olympiodorus, Zeus is the demiurge 'whose activity is directed on secondary existents' (1.5.7). This is an instance of the outflow of higher levels that recurs across the Neoplatonic metaphysical picture. In the first *Phaedo* lecture it is linked directly as to its symbol to Hera, who prods Zeus time and again to exert 'providence towards secondary things' (1.5.18–19).²³ Furthermore, and as we saw already, 'Zeus, incensed, strikes [the Titans] with his thunderbolts' (1.3.8). Olympiodorus interprets this as signifying the reversion (ἐπιστροφή) effected among the Titans by Zeus, so that the Titans once again become unified towards himself and become Dionysus. The identification of Zeus with the demiurge is frequent in Neoplatonic texts, while Zeus is often presented as legislator and judge as well. Demiurge and civic expertise both direct their attention to what is below them.²⁴

21 On this line and its history see Bühler 1999, 371–372 (I owe the reference to Bremmer 2017, 112 n. 73). On a possible difference in Damascius' and Olympiodorus' take on this line see Demulder and Van Riel 2015, 287–289.

22 *in Phd.* 7.10.10–14: διὸ καὶ στίχον αὐτοῦ φησιν ἐφεξῆς: 'πολλοὶ μὲν ναρθηκοφόροι, παύροι δὲ τε Βάκχοι'. καὶ ναρθηκοφόροι μὲν, οὐ μὴν Βάκχοι, οἱ πολιτικοὶ φιλόσοφοι, ναρθηκοφόροι δὲ Βάκχοι οἱ καθαρτικοί.

23 τὰ δεύτερα, a term which in causal contexts refers to effects, often specifically corporeal ones (cf. *in Phd.* 4.2.2, 4.8.2, 5.1.2–5)—though not all corporeal things are secondary (I am grateful to the anonymous reader for discussion of this point).

24 In civic contexts like the *Gorgias*, Zeus the demiurge plays a prominent role, especially in interpretation of the final myth. Iamblichus is said to have made the demiurge the σκοπός of the *Gorgias*. For discussion see JLT, 23–28.

3 Knowing Oneself as a Human Individual

Olympiodorus' exegesis of the Orphic myth also refers to division of a different kind: that between 'mine' and 'thine'. This brings us to a third, personal dimension of civic self-knowledge. In part (ii) of 1.5.8–13, as cited earlier on page 123, Olympiodorus explains what happens to Dionysus in the following terms: 'and the Titans chew his flesh, mastication standing for extreme division, because Dionysus is the patron of this world, where extreme division prevails because of "mine" and "thine"'. The division of Dionysus' unity by the Titans is a division into different spheres of ownership: 'mine and thine'. The citation alludes to the discussion of *Republic* book 4 and so introduces a clearly political aspect to the story of Dionysus and the Titans. In the *Republic*, Socrates devises a πόλις that is as unified as possible, in which the guardians feel pleasure and pain as one. To this end, he introduces the community of property, of wives (and husbands) and children. The reasoning behind this is that an alignment of the predicates 'mine' and 'thine' and of the personal interests expressed by them is necessary for the city to act and feel in unison (*Rep.* 462c2–8). Possessive pronouns used in a conflicting way are evidence of a defective constitution that allows for differentiation of interests. The civic structure Socrates proposes, with its virtues (the specifically civic virtues, as the Neoplatonists interpreted them), ensures that property and interests are aligned between the members of the guardian class.

To return to Olympiodorus' text: in the absence of the civic virtues, Dionysus is divided by the Titans, i.e. there is differentiation between what is mine and what is yours, what is perceived to be in my interest and what in yours. Hence, the function of civic expertise is to unify people's interests and possessions. It does so by inculcating the civic virtues, which aim at the coordination and unification—in brief, the ordering—of people's interests, when these people live together in a community. As knowledge of the subject matter of civic expertise, civic self-knowledge must therefore involve knowledge of oneself as having interests, claims and an identity that pertain to one as a human individual different from others, or in a non-committal sense of the word 'person', as a particular person.

This personal dimension of civic self-knowledge is at stake in two other significant passages as well, this time from the *Alcibiades* commentary. One occurs when Olympiodorus distinguishes the civic mode of self-knowing from other modes. This is part of his comments on the mirror passage (132c–133c), which Olympiodorus thinks deals directly with the other modes. In this passage Socrates exhorts Alcibiades to look into a soul in order to see god and wisdom there. Olympiodorus comments:

Now by saying 'look away to me', he has indicated that the target of the dialogue is self-knowledge in a civic sense; and by saying 'not to any random part,' that it is also self-knowledge in a purificatory sense ... and by saying 'you shall see intellect', he has indicated that it is also self-knowledge in a contemplative sense ... and through saying 'and god', he has indicated that it is also self-knowledge in an inspired sense.

in Alc. 8.5–11; tr. GRIFFIN, mod.

The most remarkable difference here between the civic and the higher modes is the social dimension to which Olympiodorus appeals. If his purpose were to identify an element in the text that would describe the object of civic self-knowledge as the soul, he had ample choice.²⁵ In fact, Olympiodorus does not cite the dialogue *verbatim*, but paraphrases it in a significant way.²⁶ The dialogue does not feature the explicit words 'look away *into me*'. It in fact seems to leave it open, on the explicit level of the text, whether the soul into which a soul must look is the soul of someone else or itself. Olympiodorus' interpretive choice makes clear that the interpersonal dimension is important to him in specifying the civic mode of self-knowledge.

A similar emphasis on the interpersonal dimension of the civic mode of knowing oneself is present in a difficult passage much later in the *Alcibiades* commentary. This passage confirms the tight connection between civic self-knowledge and knowing oneself as an individual. But it also complicates this connection: it seems to suggest that we can know the civic soul, the level at which the individual soul interacts with other individuals, and yet fail to know the individual. This, I will suggest, underlines the imprecise and transitory nature of civic self-knowledge which Olympiodorus is also concerned to bring out. Because of the difficulty of the text, we will have to go through it patiently to draw out its implications for civic self-knowledge. Lecture 26 starts as follows:

(a) He describes the rational soul as 'the self itself' when it does not use as an instrument the body or life in a body, like the purificatory or contemplative person: and he describes the rational soul as 'self' when it avails itself of the affections and the body as an instrument, referring to the civic soul. (b) And he also describes this 'self' as 'each self', because of the individual life (ἄτομον ζώην) that clings to it due to its activity concerning

25 εἰς ψυχὴν αὐτῆ βλεπτόον (133b8) is the most obvious choice.

26 I should note here that Tarrant 2007 has proposed a significantly different text of *Alc.* I 133c as the text that Olympiodorus may have read.

individuals (περὶ τὰ ἄτομα). (c) And since, when his aim was to discover ‘the self itself’, he discovered ‘each self’, he indicates in what follows that he did not discover what he set out to. (d) But perhaps he does not even discover ‘each self’, but only ‘self’: for he discovers who the civic person is, but not who Socrates is. (e) This is why Proclus investigates—not as part of an independent digression, but in his interpretation of the primary text—who is the common (κοινός) human being and who is the singular (ἴδιος) human being.... (f) The text adds this point on next, saying, ‘For if we discover the common human being, perhaps we will also discover each particular human being, which we also need: for we also care for this. For the discussion was about Socrates and Alcibiades. But if not the former, then neither the latter’.

209.24–210.16; tr. based on GRIFFIN²⁷

In order to understand what Olympiodorus is saying here, we need to review briefly what happens in the *Alcibiades*. Once the interlocutors have agreed on the need for self-improvement, they quickly agree also on the prior need for self-knowledge, citing the Delphic maxim ‘know yourself’ in support. Socrates sums this up by saying:

if we know it (αὐτό), we will perhaps know the care of ourselves (ἡμῶν αὐτῶν), but if we do not, never.

Alc. I 129a8–9

A few lines later, Socrates remarks:

Come on, then, in what way may the self itself (αὐτὸ τὰυτό) be found? For in that way we will perhaps find out what we ourselves are (ἑσμέν αὐτοί), but if we stay ignorant of this I suppose we will not be able to.

Alc. I 129b1–3²⁸

The identification of the human being with the soul follows. Next, Socrates remarks that they have answered their question only imprecisely (μὴ ἀκριβῶς),

27 Modifications especially in 210.5, where I take it that ἐκ τοῦ ... ἐνεργεῖν gives the reason why individual life clings to the civic person. In 210.6 Griffin seems to translate τὸ αὐτό instead of αὐτὸ τὸ αὐτό. Numbers (a) through (f) are my addition to facilitate discussion below.

28 My tr. Here and below I translate αὐτὸ τὸ αὐτό by ‘the self itself’ in order to remain close to Olympiodorus’ text. The Platonic phrase by itself could also be translated as ‘the itself itself’ (among other options).

since they have passed over the original object of their search. He explains what he means:

What we just now formulated in this way, that we had first to search for the self itself (αὐτὸ τὸ αὐτό). But now instead of the itself (τοῦ αὐτοῦ) we have searched for what each oneself (αὐτὸ²⁹ ἑκάστων) is. And perhaps that will be enough. For we would not pronounce anything to be more authoritative (κυριώτερον) about ourselves than the soul.

Alc. I 130d3–6

Much in these passages from the *Alcibiades* is open to controversy. But at least they seem to establish a chronological order of inquiry and a cognitive order. In chronological terms, we first have the announcement that we will search for αὐτὸ τὸ αὐτό and subsequently the observation that they have effectively searched for αὐτὸ ἑκάστων. In cognitive terms, knowledge of αὐτό is necessary for knowing self-care (129a8–9) and knowledge of αὐτὸ τὸ αὐτό is necessary for knowing what we ourselves are (129b1–3). In the third passage it turns out that this may be necessary only if we wanted precise knowledge; searching for αὐτὸ ἑκάστων may fulfil the requirement too, though it will yield a less precise answer.

If we now turn back to Olympiodorus' passage we see that the details of the text are vital for an understanding of his argument. In section (a) he makes clear that αὐτὸ τὸ αὐτό refers to the rational soul in the modes of purification and contemplation. This much is clear also elsewhere in the commentary, as is the identification of αὐτό with the rational soul in its civic mode.³⁰ But the other two elements of the *Alcibiades* passages above are more difficult to pinpoint: αὐτὸ ἑκάστων and ἔσμεν αὐτοί. They are Olympiodorus' focus in (b)–(f).

In (b) Olympiodorus identifies αὐτό and αὐτὸ ἑκάστων, since 'individual life' clings to αὐτό, owing to 'its activity concerning individuals'. From the grammar of the sentence it seems that the civic soul's activity concerning individuals is responsible for the individual life that grows or is added onto (προσφύσσαν) the civic soul. What is meant here by 'individual' and 'individuals' (ἄτομον/-α)? There are three possibilities, which need not exclude each other. We encountered two options in the interpretation of the Orphic myth about Dionysus' division: Olympiodorus associated the civic virtues with division because they deal with (i) ontologically divided things in general and also because they deal

29 Our Plato manuscripts have αὐτὸν ἑκάστων, but in Olympiodorus we find αὐτὸ ἑκάστων (a reading also adopted in many modern editions since Stephanus).

30 See 4.7–17; 204.12–15; 209.15–19; 222.11–14.

with (ii) numerically distinct human beings and their interests (the division of the pre-philosophical virtues seems not relevant to our present passage). A third possibility is suggested by the specification of the subject matter of civic knowledge, as we have just encountered it in the *Alcibiades* commentary, as (iii) actions.³¹ This last option would work only for the second occurrence of ἄτομα in this passage, not for ἄτομος ζωή. The combination of ἄτομος with ζωή in fact makes it seem most plausible that this expression refers to individual life in the sense of the life of numerically distinct human beings.

Section (b) of our passage seems to suggest that this individual life is somehow connected to the civic soul because the civic soul is active with respect to individual actions or to human individuals.³² We could describe this as a principle of individuation: activity concerning individuals (actions and/or individuals with their interests) is responsible for the division into numerically different individuals of the civic rational soul.³³ That is to say: Socrates is different from Alcibiades owing to their preoccupation with actions through the body and their engagement with other individuals.

The next section, (c), is relatively uncomplicated. Olympiodorus emphasizes that αὐτὸ τὸ αὐτό and αὐτὸ ἕκαστον are not the same: after all, they sought the former but found the latter. So far, then, based on (b) and (c), we seem to have a clear division between, on the one hand, ‘self’ and ‘each self’, which they have found; and on the other hand ‘self itself’ which they wanted to search for but ended up leaving aside.

In section (d), however, matters become very complicated. Olympiodorus negates elements of both (b) and (c). Against (b), he tentatively (‘perhaps’) denies that αὐτό and αὐτὸ ἕκαστον are the same, since, he claims, they have found ‘who the civic person is, but not who Socrates is’. The implication is that the civic person is αὐτό, in agreement with the identification in (a), and that Socrates is αὐτὸ ἕκαστον, or in any case one of them. Against (c), then,

31 Cf. 204.5–8, where ἄτομον refers to the individual person or soul (Alcibiades), and πράξεις is used for actions, which are about particulars (περὶ τὰ καθ’ ἕκαστα).

32 This makes it very puzzling why in 203.20–205.7 Olympiodorus (and Proclus, if his reference is correct) introduces an αὐτὸ τὸ αὐτὸ ἕκαστον. He argues that benefiting (ὠφελῆσαι) Alcibiades requires knowledge, not only of αὐτὸ τὸ αὐτό, but even of αὐτὸ τὸ αὐτὸ ἕκαστον, which is τὸ ἄτομον (204.3–6, cf. Griffin 2015, 40–43). This is a puzzling passage: it does not connect ‘the individual’ with the civic soul; nor does the text of the *Alcibiades* contain the phrase αὐτὸ τὸ αὐτὸ ἕκαστον (cf. fn. 6; Griffin 2015, 40–41 elides the difference between αὐτὸ ἕκαστον and αὐτὸ τὸ αὐτὸ ἕκαστον). I hope to return to this difficult passage and its relation to 209.24–210.16 elsewhere.

33 Note the element of circularity in explaining individuation by an appeal to individuals. A precise statement of this mechanism would probably have to involve co-implication rather than the priority of one over the other (ἐκ τοῦ ... at 210.5).

Olympiodorus now claims that they have *not* found *αὐτὸ ἕκαστον*. We should appreciate that this claim rests on a careful reading of the dialogue, which nowhere claims that they have found *αὐτὸ ἕκαστον*, but only that they have been searching (*ἐσκέμμεθα*, 130d4) for it. Socrates clearly has found *something* in the meantime, however, and Olympiodorus chooses to identify this something with the rational soul in its civic mode, *αὐτό*. The link made between the civic rational soul and particular human beings is now severed again.

This presents us with a problem. All along in this chapter we have seen a close connection between the civic soul and activity through the body and concerning other human beings. Now, however, it seems that individual oneselves (Socrates, Alcibiades) and the civic person are different. Let us consider sections (e) and (f) of the passage in an attempt to solve this difficulty.

In section (e) Olympiodorus introduces another pair of concepts, explicitly attributed to Proclus: the common (*κοινός*) and the singular (*ἴδιος*) human being. In section (f) Olympiodorus (and probably Proclus) puts this pair to use in a paraphrase of a passage from the *Alcibiades*. It is not clear, however, which passage it is a paraphrase of. There are two candidates: 129a8–9 and 129b1–3, the first two passages from the *Alcibiades* cited above. Like (f), both have a conditional ‘if ... then’ structure with a ‘perhaps’ (*τάχα*) in the consequent. In 129a8–9, finding *αὐτό* is a precondition (but not a sufficient one, it seems) for getting to know proper self-care. In 129b1–3, finding *αὐτὸ τὸ αὐτό* is also a precondition (but not a sufficient one, it seems) for knowing who we are. In his paraphrase, Olympiodorus mentions both care and the identity of Socrates and Alcibiades in the consequent. There is therefore no way of telling, on the basis of the consequent, which of the two passages he has in view. However, from the pairing of Socrates and ‘each self’ here and the opposition of these terms to ‘civic’ and *αὐτό* in (d) it seems most natural to take *κοινός* to refer to *αὐτό*, i.e. to the rational soul in its civic mode. Finding the civic self is not sufficient, the paraphrase claims, for knowing how to care for Socrates and Alcibiades. Further epistemic work is required.

This inference at least helps us to formulate our problem, which is the problem of the relation between (d) and (b) in general, more precisely: how come, if the activity of the civic soul is responsible for the individuation of human beings (*per b*), that the singular (*ἴδιος*) human being turns out to be something different from this civic soul (*per d* and *e*), which is now called the common (*κοινός*) human being, *and* that it is harder (‘perhaps we will also discover’, 210.14) to get to know the singular than the common? As far as I can see the text does not offer us one clear answer. Here are four possible construals.

First, the opposition between ‘common’ and ‘singular’ may bring to mind the relation between a universal and the particular that partakes of it. Perhaps,

then, they have found the universal of the civic soul but Socrates in addition needs perception of the particular that is he. Only with that added perception can he take care of himself.³⁴ This would be a simple solution but fails to account for Socrates' epistemic caution. If all that remains for him to do, once he has found the common civic soul, is to recognize Socrates as a particular civic soul, Socrates should be much more confident than to say 'perhaps we will also discover' (210.14). Perception of a particular does not seem to fit the additional epistemic work that is required.

Alternatively, perhaps Socrates and Alcibiades have learned something about human nature at some level, but have failed to learn this *de se*. That is, they now have general knowledge of the civic person, but have not yet been able to grasp that they themselves are such civic persons. While this is a possible interpretation, it introduces a distinction between *de se* knowledge and general knowledge that does not seem to match any of the distinctions present in the text.

Third, we may detect a further source of individuation in this passage. Earlier in the commentary, Olympiodorus makes reference to the idea that people have their own proper (οἰκεῖος) god.³⁵ This idea ultimately derives from the *Phaedrus* and its view of human character as associated with one or another of the Olympian gods in whose trains souls journey around the cosmos (246e–253c). It may be that this conception of human character is in the background in this passage too. In that case it is necessary for Socrates, if he is to know himself as an individual, to surpass the civic level and ascend all the way to the inspirational level in order to know the specific god whose follower he is. An indication in support of this interpretation is that one of the earlier passages that reference this idea does so in the very context of the different levels of self-knowledge (172.5–12). The text of 209.24–210.16 itself, however, shows no sign of this conception of proper gods. Moreover, it is not clear that this conception involves any specific concern with individual character rather than character types. Cognition of the latter would certainly help, but not be sufficient, for Socrates to care for the individual Socrates.

Finally, Olympiodorus may here be including, in the reference to 'Socrates', all higher levels, from the purificatory upwards, as well as the civic ones. In this case, we may have discovered the civic level, and with it even something like the cause of individuation, without having discovered all there is to know about Socrates. While Socrates' civic self-knowledge may be sufficient for him

34 This may fit 204.1–7 too, but see nn. 6 and 32.

35 *In Alc.* 20.4–13; 156.6–8; 172.10–12; cf. *in Phd.* 7.4.4–10. Cf. Griffin in this volume, esp. pp. 65–68.

to know himself *qua* individual, there is more to Socrates than the individual. Knowing Socrates in a sufficient degree to care for him requires knowledge of Socrates in the purificatory, theoretical and higher modes as well.

Whichever of these construals is most successful (and there may be more), we have found in this complicated passage a double aspect to civic self-knowledge. On the one hand it ties civic self-knowledge to knowledge of ourselves *qua* individuals and to knowledge of ourselves as dealing with other individuals. On the other hand, it seems to insist that civic self-knowledge is not even sufficient to care for the individuals Socrates and Alcibiades. This constitutes an important ambiguity in Olympiodorus' conception of the civic mode of self-knowledge. A similar ambiguity about the civic mode is also present in a last group of passages which we will look at.

4 The Ambiguous Status of Civic Self-Knowledge

Civic self-knowledge, it turns out, involves affective, particularist and personal dimensions of knowing oneself. For all that, however, it is not a self-contained kind of knowledge. As we saw, Olympiodorus describes civic self-knowledge as a rung of a ladder, below the purificatory, contemplative and even higher forms of self-knowledge. In the course of our cognitive development, we are not meant to remain at the level of civic self-knowledge. The same holds with respect to the scale of virtues. Civic virtues occupy an intermediary position between the natural and ethical virtues on the one hand and the purificatory, contemplative and higher virtues on the other. In Olympiodorus' remarks about the civic level generally, this intermediary position manifests itself in a certain ambivalence which it is worth bringing out.

A suggestive instance of this occurs in Olympiodorus' discussion of the civic virtues and revolves around a lexical feature of the *Phaedo*. One of the instruments Neoplatonists used in finding the whole ladder of virtues in *Phaedo* 68c5–69e5 was extreme attention to detail and the willingness to connect substantial differences to differences of expression. In the *Phaedo* passage, Socrates at some point speaks about the difference between sham virtues and real virtues. The two expressions for 'real' here are τῶ ὄντι and ἀληθῆς (69b2, 3). A little later, we find the expression ἀληθὲς τῶ ὄντι (69b8–c1). While most modern interpreters would consider this a mere variation of expression, Olympiodorus interprets this difference as conveying an important distinction. The former two expressions refer to civic virtues, which are real virtues and not fake ones, while the latter expression refers to the purificatory and contemplative virtues. He comments that this is parallel to the distinction, in the *Alcibiades*, between

αὐτό and αὐτό τὸ αὐτό, of which the former refers to the soul (ψυχή) and the latter to the rational soul (λογική ψυχή).

We may wonder whether Olympiodorus merely draws attention to a similarity in the mechanism of lexical duplication (the text uses ὡσπερ); or whether we are meant to interpret the single and double expressions in both texts to refer to things of the same respective levels. In view of the context of the *Alcibiades*, the latter seems more likely. That is, in the same way that the *Alcibiades* speaks about αὐτό as the soul insofar as it finds itself on the civic level (in its tripartition),³⁶ the τῶ ὄντι or ἀληθεῖς virtues are the civic virtues. Similarly, in the same way that the *Alcibiades* speaks about αὐτό τὸ αὐτό as the soul in the mode of purification or contemplation, the *Phaedo* calls the purificatory and contemplative virtues τῶ ὄντι ἀληθεῖς.

This helps us interpret the position of the civic virtues. In the *Alcibiades* the identification of the αὐτό is presented as a preliminary, indeed imprecise answer to the search for who we are. The more precise answer will be found once we have found the αὐτό τὸ αὐτό, Socrates remarks in 130c8–d4. In view of the parallel Olympiodorus draws, we can treat it as an interpretive possibility that Olympiodorus likewise considers the civic virtues as virtues only in a rough sense: not fake, but not the final answer to the question ‘what is virtue?’ either.

In looking at the civic virtues we already noted that these occupy a middle position between the natural and ethical virtues, on the one hand, and the purificatory and theoretical virtues on the other. We saw that this involves a qualification of the status of these virtues, for instance in the distinction between the ‘really true’ virtues in *Phd.* 69b8–c1, which Olympiodorus takes to refer to the purificatory and theoretical virtues, and the ‘true’ and ‘real’ virtues of *Phd.* 69b2, 3, which he takes to refer to the civic ones.

In other ways too, the *Phaedo* commentary seems to downplay the status of the civic level. For instance, in lecture 3 Olympiodorus states that the civic philosopher is not a real philosopher, because he is concerned with the body (3.6.5–8). This statement is connected to the idea, central to the *Phaedo*, that philosophy is the practice of death, in the sense that a philosopher strives for

36 This applies regardless of whether what we find here is Olympiodorus’ adoption of the position of Damascius or that of Proclus. It is not clear to me that he prefers Proclus’ position here, as Westerink *ad loc.* suggests. Damascius indeed interprets the αὐτό as the logical soul in *in Alc.* 4.12, but specifies this as the πολιτική ψυχή, i.e. the rational soul in its relation to the other parts, in 204.13, 209.18. Olympiodorus clearly ascribes to Damascius the idea that αὐτό τὸ αὐτό is the rational soul in its purificatory and contemplative modes (*in Alc.* 204.14–15, 209.18–19), which tallies perfectly with its alignment with the purificatory and contemplative virtues here.

the separation of the soul from the body. Note that it is not an incidental feature of the civic philosopher that disqualifies him from being a real philosopher; involvement with the body is central to the civic mode.

Similarly, in citing Socrates' citation about the many who bear the thyrsus and the few who become Bacchus, Olympiodorus consistently interprets the thyrsus bearers as referring to the civic philosopher and the few who become Bacchus as standing for the purificatory and theoretical modes.

Counter to this aspect of downplaying the civic mode is a passage in lecture 4 of the *Phaedo* commentary, in which Olympiodorus makes an opposite movement.³⁷ Here Olympiodorus asserts that the civic philosopher knows all things, precisely on the grounds that he is a philosopher. In the context, Olympiodorus discusses and rejects a classification of the civic, purificatory and theoretical modes on the basis of the objects which they study. According to this rejected proposal, the civic philosopher is occupied only with what is 'secondary', i.e. located on a lower level than the rational soul itself (the purificatory mode is said to be about the soul itself and the theoretical mode is characterized as striving upward). Olympiodorus rejects this proposal because

In this case no one would be a true philosopher, since no one would possess 'the knowledge of all things that are', but each will have a partial knowledge only, and even this part of reality he will not discern clearly (*ἀκριβῆς θεωρῶς ἔσται*), if he does not know its relation to the rest. (4.2.7–10)

Note that this is not an observation that applies only to the civic philosopher, but also to the purificatory and theoretical one. Each needs to cover the whole of reality if he is to qualify for the title of 'philosopher'. In the case of the civic philosopher, Olympiodorus specifies his knowledge as follows:

The statesman refers to the principles present in himself to organize the visible world, his eye directed upon the soul: upon reason to guide the leaders, upon spirit, for the soldiers, upon desire, for the labourers; but also, by their education, he shows the leaders the upward way to the Good, so that he must have knowledge of all three. (4.3.1–6)

37 The curricular position of the *Phaedo* (above the *Alc.* and *Gorg.*) therefore does not sufficiently explain the elements in the commentary that downplay the civic level.

On the basis of this passage it appears that the scope of knowledge of the civic mode is the same as that of the purificatory and theoretical modes. This amounts to an appreciation rather than a depreciation of the civic philosopher. How then should we explain the discrepancy between this passage and the passage from lecture 3, in which the civic philosopher was denied to be a real philosopher?

Apparently Olympiodorus is willing to speak of the civic philosopher in different ways. And perhaps this also involves using the term 'civic philosopher' in different ways. Perhaps we can put the difference in the following terms. Insofar as he is a philosopher, the civic philosopher knows all things. Insofar as he operates on the civic level, including its involvement with the body, the civic philosopher is not really a philosopher. Hence, he *qua* civic does not really know all things.

If this is right, we have come upon a challenge for the civic philosopher. If his job is to guide the guardians to goodness and to construct the state according to the divisions in the soul, as lecture 4 says it is, he needs to know all things. Hence, considered as a *civic* philosopher, he seems unable to carry out his civic responsibilities, for which lecture 4 requires knowledge of all things, i.e. his being a true *philosopher*.

This observation matches well with the intermediate role the civic mode plays. It is at the same time the first stage of philosophy proper and also deficient. Its internal structure points beyond itself towards the higher modes of philosophy.³⁸

Based on this conclusion we might surmise that insofar as knowing oneself is concerned, doing so in a civic manner plays a similarly intermediate role between not knowing oneself and true knowledge of oneself. Recall that we found Olympiodorus amending his explanation of what Socrates and Alcibiades end up finding. From their (Alcibiades') position of ignorance, after much searching, they have attained civic self-knowledge. This is insufficient for self-care, however. We saw Olympiodorus add that they have not yet found the individual Socrates (and Alcibiades) (210.9, text cited on pp. 127–128). This is a puzzling statement because civic self-knowledge is so intimately tied to human individuality. We can now connect this puzzle to the double nature of civic self-knowledge (consistently, I think, with the last three of the four proposals suggested on pp. 131–133). At the end of the *Alcibiades*, Socrates and

38 Speaking of the virtues, Porphyry says: καὶ πρόδρομοὶ γὰρ αἱ πολιτικαὶ τῶν καθάρσεων (*Sent.* 32.20–21 Brisson). The civic stage is transitory in a different respect too: as Griffin argues (2015, 16–19), it represents the pivot from the non-philosophical to the properly philosophical stages and as such is the locus of the student's first reversion.

Alcibiades have reached civic self-knowledge. But when we call their self-knowledge civic, we not only specify aspects like embodiment as part of their knowledge, we also qualify its cognitive quality: they know themselves in only a civic mode.

The commentary allows us to specify this deficiency in a way that helps explain why civic self-knowledge points beyond itself. It is its lack of precision. Olympiodorus specifically qualifies the civic way of knowing oneself as imprecise compared to other modes of self-knowledge. In making this distinction, Olympiodorus uses the text of the *Alcibiades*, which has Socrates claim that the result they have obtained is μετρίως, not ἀκριβῶς.³⁹ Olympiodorus links these different grades of precision to the two phrases for 'oneself', αὐτό and αὐτό τὸ αὐτό (we discussed these earlier), and via these phrases to the civic person and the purificatory/theoretical person, respectively. Knowledge of oneself in the purificatory and theoretical modes counts as precise knowledge of oneself, whereas civic self-knowledge is imprecise self-knowledge.

One symptom of this imprecision, in Olympiodorus' view, is the coarseness (παχυμέρεια) of the definition they have obtained. If we define a human being as the soul using a body, we have in fact only circumscribed the civic human being, not the purificatory and theoretical one.⁴⁰ What is more, the definition is also too broad in an important respect, because there are other souls that use a body, i.e. the celestial beings. A proper definition, Olympiodorus points out, would define the civic human being as a soul using a body that moves in a straight line.⁴¹ Refinements of this kind, it seems, are open only to a soul that has progressed beyond mere civic self-knowledge. So the soul that knows itself in a civic way does not even know itself precisely. Hence, to the extent that it is a soul which wants to know itself, the civically self-knowing soul points beyond itself by its very nature.

39 130c5–d1: ἰκανῶς, μετρίως, μὴ ἀκριβῶς vs. σαφέστερον, ἀκριβῶς; to be connected with ἐναργέστατα in 132c7.

40 *In Alc.* 208.10–15; 209.7–14, 19–21.

41 *In Alc.* 208.8–10; 212.10–11. I take it that Olympiodorus gives this as an example of the greater precision still to be desired in civic self-knowledge. For the addition of the mere phrase 'moving in a straight line' seems too easy to bridge the cognitive gap between the civic and higher levels. See also 209.19–21 for the wider sense in which answers in terms of the civic soul are imprecise.

5 Conclusion

The transitional aspect of civic self-knowledge suits its intermediary role in ethical development. It also makes it a suitable choice as the specific *σκοπός* of the *First Alcibiades*, the dialogue that starts the Platonic part of Olympiodorus' curriculum.⁴² The imprecision of the knowledge this dialogue delivers prepares the students for the rest of the curriculum and stimulates them to pass through it.

Nevertheless, civic self-knowledge is the kind of self-knowledge that most corresponds to what many would nowadays understand by self-knowledge. It crucially involves knowledge of ourselves in our embodied condition and of the emotions and desires that are part and parcel of that condition. It is also the knowledge of agents who act with respect to particular things, and in particular times and places, including the here and now, but also the many other times and places to which our lives take us. And, finally, it is knowledge of ourselves as beings with property claims, interests and personal identities, broadly conceived. Absent, it seems, from Olympiodorus' treatment of civic self-knowledge is the idea that one should know the potential as well as the bounds of one's specific abilities. Instead, Olympiodorus focuses on a different kind of ability: that of rising above one's civic state to reach higher levels of identity, in imitation of and ultimately inspiration by the divine. For all the emphasis on embodied life that we find in Olympiodorus' commentary, it remains characteristic of the difference between his view and what many of us would understand by self-knowledge that he takes the latter to be something partial and imprecise.

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⁴² For the question of the curriculum see the classic study of Festugière 1969; O'Meara 2003, 62–65.

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