Eros as Self-Knowledge in Plato’s Alcibiades I and Symposium

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Abstract:

This thesis examines the interrelation between desire, care, self-knowledge, love, and political power in Plato’s Alcibiades I. It argues for the central role of eros as a transformative force enabling self-knowledge and, consequently, authentic care for others. Drawing on Foucault’s concept of epimeleia heautou (care of the self) as a spiritual practice, the study investigates the philosophical trajectory that links self-care to collective care through eros. By analysing the relationship between Socrates and Alcibiades as presented in Alcibiades I and the Symposium, the work reflects on the ethical and political implications of eros as mediation between the human and the divine. Ultimately, it highlights the limits of this process in achieving genuine political virtue.

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Eros as self-knowledge in Plato's *Alcibiades I* and *Symposium.*

Towards a politics of collective care.

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»Warum huldigest du, heiliger Sokrates,
Diesem Jünglinge stets? kennest du Größers nicht?

Warum siehet mit Liebe,
Wie auf Götter, dein Aug auf ihn?«

Wer das Tiefste gedacht, liebt das Lebendigste,
Hohe Jugend versteht, wer in die Welt geblickt,
Und es neigen die Weisen
Oft am Ende zu Schönem sich.
Friedrich Hölderlin, *Sokrates und Alkibiades* (1798)

0. Introduction

Plato's *Alcibiades I* is a dialogue that intertwines concepts of desire, care, self-knowledge, love, and political power. In this thesis, my aim is to explore how these elements are interconnected, with each other and within the framework of Plato's work. By shedding light on these connections, I intend to argue for the centrality and importance of *eros* in the process of self-knowledge, which in turn makes possible a genuine relationship of care with the world.

The thesis, in other words, aims to reflect on the necessity for political action to mediate through e*ros* in order to become virtuous; in this way, it will be possible to establish communities based on care for others. The line of argumentation moves from the inquire of the relationship between Socrates and Alcibiades, as it emerges in the *Alcibiades I* and the *Symposium*. The second aim of the thesis is to examine whether Socrates and Alcibiades are able to successfully complete the theorical relational journey that connects self-care to collective care, going through *Eros* as self-knowledge. The outcome will be partially negative, and we will explore the reasons for this failure.

The exceptional nature of *Alcibiades I* is such that ancient scholars such as Albinus and Olympiodorus already described it as the beginning of all philosophy[1], particularly concerning Socrates' exhortation to Alcibiades to turn inward, towards self-reflection, before focusing on his own affairs and political ambitions. In most recent times, Foucault explored the theme of self-care in his lecture series *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* (1981-1982), where

[1] Cf. Moore, J.G. "Foucault, Michel. Speaking the truth about oneself: lectures at Victoria University, Toronto, 1982."

he aimed to trace the historical shift from the ancient Greek emphasis on "care of the self" (*epimeleia heautou*) to the post-Cartesian focus on "know thyself" (*gnothi seauton*). For Foucault, it is important to restore the ancient approach to self-knowledge through *care of the self*, which was inherently a spiritual practice, where "the philosophical question of 'how to have access to truth'" was inseparably linked to the "practice of spirituality (of the necessary transformations in the very being of the subject which will allow access to the truth)" (Foucault 2005: 17)[3]. In this thesis, I want to maintain this idea, keeping always in mind the concept of *epimeleia* as a fundamental step when addressing the process of self-*epiphaneia* through *eros.*

If it is true, as S. Weil wrote, that "The whole of Greek civilization is a search for bridges to relate human misery with the divine perfection"[4], *eros* is undoubtedly one of the most powerful bridges. His double function of *mediator* and *interpreter* (ἑρμηνεῦον καὶ διαπορθμεῦον[5]) derive from his nature of *daimon,* and allow him to become a place "in the middle between both [humans and gods][6]", where the human reason opens itself to madness. In a passage from Sophocles' *Antigone*, taken up by Weil[7], the chorus, faced with the desperate reaction of Creon's son at his father's resolute decision to condemn his bride-to-be Antigone to death, sings of the invincible power of Eros. "In battle the victory goes to love; / prizes and properties fall to love. / Love dallies the night / on a girl's soft cheeks, / ranges across the sea, / lodges in wild meadows. / O Love, no one can hide from you: / you take gods who live forever, / you take humans who die in a day, / and they take you and go mad." [8]

[2] I will use italics whenever I use a transliterated Greek word or when I use the English word that is a literal translation of the Greek.
[3] Foucault, Michel. [Herm^neutique du suet English] The hermeneutics of the subject: lectures at the College de France, 1981-1982 / Michel Foucault; edited by Fr&JeYic Gros; general editors, Francois Ewald and Alessandro Fontana ; translated by Graham Burchell
[4] Weil, Simone (1951): *Waiting for God*. New York: Harper & Row.
[5] Plato, *Smp*. 202e
[6] ibid. "ἐν μέσῳ δὲ ὂν ἀμφοτέρων συμπληροῖ"
[7] Simone Weil, Maria Concetta Sala, and Gabriele Gaeta (2014): *La rivelazione greca*, Milano: Adelphi, p. 17.

[8] Carson, Anne. *Antigone*. London, 2015. Print. Oberon Classics

I will discuss about *eros* as a relational and fundamental passage which leads to an experience of knowledge. Through self-knowledge, it makes possible the continuous improvement and realization of *epimeleia heautou.*

Epimeleia heautou, insufflated with *eros*, can thus ground one of the highest human possibilities: collective care, i.e. true political virtue. For Socrates and Alcibiades, this last point turns to be a direction to pursue, rather than an arrival point, because they are not able to follow its end.

1. Socrates and Alcibiades in dialogue

In this chapter I will focus on the main characters of my thesis: Socrates and Alcibiades. I will try to portray an intellectual and relational biography of the two, drawing upon the platonic dialogues *Alcibiades I* and *Symposium*: in these dialogues their relationship is portrayed with different shades, which, we will see, give back an interesting and rich picture of a love deeply affected by the V century Athens. Also Xenophon, the other great *alumnus* of Socrates, provided a vast accountment of his teacher's life, especially in *Memorabilia*, but with a rather historical lens.

The biography here shall be intellectual, because what interests the most this enquire are the two men's philosophical lives and the peculiar influence of *eros* upon it; relational, because, as I aim to argue, in Plato the individual comes only after and as a consequence of the relation with the other; furthermore, it is in their very relationship that both Alcibiades and Socrates can find a way to virtue, or at least continue to search for it. I will talk about their very different features, both plainly physical and temperamental, their attitudes in life and their own way of relating to the world and to each other. This will be done by tracing the stages of their relationship, which can be reconstructed especially starting by the *Alcibiades I*.

1.1 Alcibiades

Alcibiades appears in four of the platonic dialogues. He is portrayed as a beautiful, ambitious, rich, intellectually lazy[9]; foolish and potentially a perpetrator of the most vicious of acts[10]; and a morally ambiguous, impulsive, charismatic Athenian youth[11]. Overall, as a vast part of the critical production highlighted, he is a tragic character, whose potential is compromised by his moral and psychological weaknesses[12] and ambition and desire for Socratic wisdom are undermined by his impulsiveness and moral flaws.[13]To better understand his character and his dramatic role, it is important to root him deeply in his historical context, taking in account his peculiar position in the course of Athenian democracy. In fact, Alcibiades stands at the intersection of two eras: one where the aristocrats still dominated state politics, and another marked by the rise of the so-called "new politicians," a political class of non-nobles who brought a different style to both the form and content of politics. Representatives of these two perspectives could be Pericles, an aristocrat from a great family, and Cleon, a member of the wealthy emerging entrepreneurial class: the former always composed and appealing to the rationality of the assembly, the latter coarse in manners and inclined to exploit the emotional aspects of the masses.

According to Thucydides[14], the death of Pericles marked the end of an era, that of politics as a service to the common good, characterized by a balanced relationship between the political leader and the assembly, and the beginning of a new and inferior era, that of demagoguery, where politics became a field for personal affirmation, driven by ambition, the desire for profit, and the will to dominate. In this era, individuals aimed to manipulate the assembly, using it as a sort of manoeuvring mass. What is puzzling about Alcibiades is that he embodies characteristics of both these political generations: the high social and cultural background of the aristocrats and the unscrupulousness of

[9] Cf. Alc.I
[10] Cf. Alc.II
[11] Cf. Smp
[12] Cf. Martha Nussbaum (1986): The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[13] Cf. David M. Johnson (2006): "Socrates and Alcibiades: Eros, Politics, and Philosophy," in: *The Cambridge Companion to Socrates*, ed. by Donald R. Morrison, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 145-170.
[14] Thucydides : *History of the Peloponnesian War*, II, 34.8–42.1.

Pericles' successors. Prominent aristocrat, belonging to the Alcmaeonid family, which had embraced democracy since the time of Cleisthenes, and direct descendent of Pericles, the young Alcibiades had none of the sober moderation and stability of political engagement that one would expect from an aristocrat youth. On the contrary, his rocky life testifies to a great aptitude for changing his fate and manipulating public opinion in his own favour. This remarkable unscrupulousness and Alcibiades' refusal to fully share the democratic way of life, perhaps out of a sense of pride, more closely resembles the new political model of populism and blind, personal ambition. These strategies allowed him not only to appear convincing but also to overcome various difficulties, from the defeat in the Battle of Mantinea in 418 BC (which he presented as a success) to the disastrous Sicilian Expedition, after which he defected to Sparta. Even after his first and second exiles, as Aristophanes' "The Frogs" attests, there was still discussion in Athens in 405 BC about a possible recall for him. From this very ability to immerse himself in various situations[15] and the tendency to prioritize self-involved political issues it is possible to evince the transgressive and self-involved aspect of his personality, which is exactly what Socrates warns his twenty years old self from in the Alcibiades I[16]. The dialogue starts in medias res, and Alcibiades is indirectly introduced by Socrates as who the young aristocrat thinks he is, or at least, as how he likes to speak about himself, which is, superlative.

As readers, we meet Alcibiades through his external traits, which are imbued with his search for aesthetic. Most importantly, he is beautiful: his body is what his countless lovers admire the most. Later in the dialogue, Socrates will suggest that all of these lovers the youth had were in love not with him, but with his bodily beauty, which is impermanent. What is evident is that Alcibiades was conscious on the effect he made while entering a room with his extravagant dress[17]. In Symposium, during his speech about *eros*-Socrates, there is a passage in which he expresses his disconcertment for Socrates'

[15] Cf. *Plutarch's Lives. 4, Alcibiades and Coriolanus. Lysander and Sulla*. Repr. 1986. Print. The Loeb Classical Library BV000014217 80.

[16] Cf. Plato, Alc.I 123d 6-7. Alcibiades is not yet 20 years old in the dialogue, which dramatic date is 433, just before the Peloponnesian war.

[17] Cf. Alc.I, 113e9

resistance to his beauty[18]. The high opinion Alcibiades had about his figure, together with his descendance from a large aristocratic family and the presence of his famous friends, "and among the noblest, who in case of need would be ready to serve you"[19], contribute to grow his arrogance and effortlessness in success which makes him argue at Alcibiades I, 119c1: "I am sure that I will prevail by far over them in natural endowments". Alcibiades is here adopting the values of the most aristocratic of all poetry by declaring that, in political competition, his good breeding alone is enough for success, and does not need enhancement by anything that can be learnt. This idea was central in Omer, where the famous poet Pindar claimed about athletic competition that "What comes by breeding is always best".[20] and proclaiming the superiority of "the man whose glory is innate" (*suggeney...eudoxiai*) over "the man who has only what is thought (*didakt'ekei*). If one can easily prevail against others with natural gifts, there is no need to take care of oneself and strive for true virtue and knowledge. Socrates reaction to such a position is once again of disconcertment and quite of disappointment, since, as he argues, this way of thinking shows a lack of respect first of all to Alcibiades, and then to himself and his love, which turns out to be misplaced. First of all, Alcibiades makes a mistake and lacks in ambition in choosing other Athenian politicians as his own enemies, as someone who is content to govern only amongst their own people. Secondly, but not less importantly, he lowers his desire for self-improvement, to which power and ambition depend directly. Following on the reading of Olympiodorus, Socrates is disappointed and ashamed to keep his love in a man who has "petty ambitions", who decides to lower his desire, to settle down for a cozy position of power without developing his full potential virtue. It is clear at this point of the dialogue that what Socrates is admiring the most in Alcibiades is his desire to have more, to become better, more virtuous, aka more powerful, even if the young aristocrat has not yet quite well cleared what virtue is, and what the priorities in order to become better are. The philosopher, the one who has nothing but his search of the best life, is attracted

[18] Smp, 216c
[19] Alc.I, 104a
[20] Omer, *Odissea,* 9.100-2

by a young man whose insatiable thirst for power and reputation make him also a searcher, always missing and trying to achieving something bigger for himself.

In the next section, I will have a closer look to who the famous philosopher is, especially at his lover's eyes, what his desire is, and what kind of relationship he entertains with Alcibiades.

1.2 Socrates

About Socrates, who wrote nothing, rivers of ink had been written, since the firsts who met him and by him were deeply influenced, Plato and Xenophon. The reason why so much word has been and after more than 2000 years still is spent in the attempt to capture his essence, his way of life and the coded messages behind his physiognomy lies right under the modern reader eyes when, in several platonic dialogues[21], they stumble on the adjective "ἄτοπος", literally "without a place": in English we can say, Socrates is excentric. Like when, walking with the young Phaedrus in the homonymous dialogue, he marvels at the beauty of the landscape around Athens, like a foreigner who sees it for the first time would do, Socrates often appears out of place, bewildered between the very inhabitants of a city he claims to love to the point of sacrificing his own life for it and its laws. Alcibiades employs this term for Socrates in both of the dialogues where the two are present: at Alcibiades I, 106a3-5 he uses "*atopoteros*" to state the since Socrates began speaking to him, he became even more outlandish, but he already was before, when following the youth in silence; ("Even then you were very outlandish to look at")[22].

It is interesting to note how Socrates is for Alcibiades a "*a-topos*" and somehow puzzling just by his look, out of the norms. One crucial rule from the traditional Greek *ethos* he surely breaks is the καλοκἀγαθία: with Nietzsche, Socrates is "the first great Greek to be ugly." His outlandish aspect is reiterated by Alcibiades during his speech in *Symposium.* The youth describe

[21] Cf. Smp, Phaedr., Alc.I, e.a.
[22] Alc. I, 106a3-5

Socrates first of all as ugly, grotesque as a caricature: “I say, that he is exactly like the busts of Silenus, which are set up in the statuaries' shops, holding pipes and flutes in their mouths; and they are made to open in the middle, and have images of gods inside them. I say also that he is like Marsyas the satyr.”[23] . Socrates has a snub nose and protruding eyes. Alcibiades repeatedly compares him to some statues of Silenus or to Satyr Marsyas: both are male hybrid creatures, similar to men but with monstruous or animal-like features, who were related to the cult of Dionysus. From the very beginning of this description, Alcibiades notes a discrepancy between Socrates appearance on the surface and his internal beauty. The statues of Silenus hid images of divinities inside them; Socrates share with Satyrs like Marsia, apart from the look, a kind of magical aura and his proverbial capacity to “numb” the minds of his interlocutors, “with your words only, and do not require the flute”[24]. Like Satyrs, Socrates is “ὑβριστής”[25]; however, while the usual hybris of satyrs is sexual assault, when their natural shameless is fortifies by wine and overcomes their natural cowardice, Socrates’ hybris is very different, and that’s clear to those who, as Alcibiades shows further in his speech, will not be afraid to get to know him properly. The philosopher, who initially comes across as ridiculous in the eyes of most and Alcibiades himself, is tractable precisely in his stubborn rejection of the young man. He appears to have a great opinion of his beauty which can perhaps be vaguely traced from his looks from a good observer, but is internal. A kind of hierarchy of beauty, expressed through the symbolism of gold, shines through from Socrates' behaviour in the drunken Alcibiades speech. Socrates claims to refuse Alcibiades erotic favours exactly because his own soul is more beautiful than Alcibiades’ body, and it would be as exchanging gold for brass. From the moment they speak for the first time at the very beginning of Alcibiades I, after a long silent relationship made only by Socrates steps “trailing” the young aristocrat wherever he goes, the philosopher is showing a kind of reticence and cautiousness in offering himself and his advice to Alcibiades, as

[23] *Smp*., 215b
[24] *Smp*. 215b-d
[25] ibid. 215b7

if he wasn't quite sure of the use the young man would do of his love. It is exactly this kind of behaviour, similar to an escaping that makes the traditional pederastic relationship's roles (ἐρώμενος and ἐραστής) between the two flips: Socrates, who was depicted as the active desiring part, becomes himself object of desire. This reversal of roles is already somehow anticipated in some points of the *Alcibiades I,* as with the expression "βραχὺ ὑπηρετῆσαι"[26], where Alcibiades, who has so many powerful relatives at his service, is expected to render services ("βραχὺ") to Socrates; it is then thematized more explicitly towards the end of the dialogue[27], in the metaphor of a winged and love, like the one storks share. According to a popular belief, young storks would lend assistance to the old ones who had previously raised them. Even if this hinted reciprocity of love is not realized to the very end because of Alcibiades' refractoriness to pursue virtue to the end and perhaps, following Vlastos commentary, because of Socrates "frigidness", makes their relationship something very different of a canonical pederastic exchange, in which the roles were fixed and the outcomes for both parts established (fame and political moral in exchange for erotic favours). In her article "On the Epistemic Value of Eros. The Relationship Between Socrates and Alcibiades"[28], Laura Candiotto provides an extended argumentation about how this peculiar philosophical relationship pursues educative goals, but differs from *paiderastia.* I won't delve into that line of argumentation now, but I will limit myself to follow it, reminding about Socrates' role that, as G. A. Scott has underlined, is neither a pedagogue in the ordinary sense of the Athenian society, nor a teacher in the manner of the sophists[29]. In the Apology, Plato depicts Socrates as someone who has never been anyone's teacher[30].

I will argue here that the difficulty on giving a fixed definition of the relation between Socrates and Alcibiades is due to the fluidity of desire as an always changeable element, that, flowing from one another in different forms, create

[26] Alc.I, 106b4
[27] ibid., 135d8-e1
[28] Laura Candiotto, "On the Epistemic Value of Eros. The Relationship Between Socrates and Alcibiades", Peitho, Examina Antiqua 1 (8) / 2017, pp. 227
[29] Cf. Gary Alan Scott, 2000:13

[30] Plato, Ap., 213b

symmetrises and mirroring images and sometimes even lack of identity, allowing a deeper knowledge to come in. Let's start from the personal, initially separate desires of the lovers, as they are reported from Socrates in the *Alcibiades I*.

1.3 Declaration of ἐλπίδα in the *Alcibiades I*

At the beginning of the *Alcibiades I,* Socrates, after a kind of *captatio benevolentiae* towards the young aristocrats, goes over his wishes, claiming to have observed him long enough to know his ambitions. The true aspiration of Alcibiades is linked to power and his public reputation[31]. He wants, quite literally, to fill the world with his name. The youth hopes to persuade the Athenian assembly of his merits, and then, once Athens yelds to his persuasions, to use it as a power base from which to dominate the world. Socrates argues to exercise a power amongst him, and to have the capacity to infuse him with a strength that no one else has. At this point, Socrates explicates that his ἐλπίδας lie increasing the power he holds in Alcibiades, after demonstrating him how precious he can be for the youth: he wants him to understand how indispensable he is to him, for him to accomplish his desires.[32] Alcibiades is disconcerted from this claim, since he does not quite understand how Socrates can help him, or, we can say, how Socrates can of use in order for him to become a good politician. In this dialogue, like in the *Symposium,* power and desire seem to walk together, inextricably connected. In the *Alcibiades I*, in particular, there is an unbalance of power, as of desire, from Socrates towards Alcibiades. Socrates desires to have power on Alcibiades, who initially refuses it, because his desire is oriented on getting powerful. In the Symposium the situation seems to be exactly the opposite: Alcibiades, completely sincere because he is drunk, launches into a desperate sermon about how much he desires Socrates, to the point of being obsessed with him and hating him. Socrates, meanwhile, tends to escape, and denies himself to the youth, because whereas the philosopher desires the truth, the young

[31] "ἐμπλήσεις τοῦ σοῦ ὀνόματος καὶ τῆς σῆς δυνάμεος πάντας ὡς ἔπος εἰπεῖν ἀνθρώπους", *Alc.I,* 105c5
[32] Cf. Alc.I, 105e

aristocrat repeatedly shows not to be ready to live in it, thrown to lower occupations each time he gets enough far from Socrate's eyes to forget his own shame. In this section of the *Symposium,* Socrates becomes the object of an erotic desire that overflows into obsession: he becomes the eternally searched, eternally evasive. I will return of the connection between erotic desire and obsession in the next chapters. From what I said until this point, it looks like Alcibiades' and Socrates' desires are always distinguished in the course of the dialogues. This would mean that they can never correspond to each other and they will continue to run after the other one in Platonic bibliography, without making their love generating anything but pain, or in Socrates' case, even indifference. Maybe the educational outcome of their relationship turned out to be a failure, but it is not quite true that the two lovers' desires stayed separated and individual all along. There is a way in which they can possibly break out of this stalemate of desires and get closer to each other, and that is words, a powerful tool. ("τοῖς λόγοις χρωμένους", *Alc. I*, 130d10"). By discussing with each other, they can find a common ground to coordinate their desires into a common one, which can be beneficial to both. In the *Alcibiades I,* this common desire can be summarized in the following sentence: "φαμὲυ γὰρ δὴ ὡς ἄριστοι βούλεσθαι γενέσθαι"[33]. These words, said by Socrates at *Alcibiades I,* 124e1-2, are also Alcibiades comment in *Symposium* 218d: "Nothing is more important to me than being as good as possible". This demanded excellence can sound almost arrogant, as if the two men are again falling into hybris, but that's why Socrates is continuing to address himself to his "divinity", which should help them achieve their aspiration to goodness, which is, to virtue. In the next chapters I develop this thought, arguing that this divinity is eros. I will delve into his multifaceted identity in platonic philosophy and try to reconstruct the passages which those to get to know him go thorough in their quest for a good life.

2. ***Epimeleia heautou*** **and the soul in the mirror**

[33] *"We* say that we want to become better". My translation

Before delving in the exploration of *eros*, its nature and its connection with politics, I think it is worth to spend a few paragraphs on another key concept in *Alcibiades I*, which appears also in some passages of Socrates-Diotima's speech in Symposium[34]: επιμέλεια. In the second part of the chapter, I will proceed to inquire how the concept of care is interconnected through the self with the one of knowledge in the *Alcibiades I.*

2.1 ἐπιμέλεια

The first English translation, "care", could lead us to think about this concept, and especially when referred to the subject[35], as a soft acceptioned, solipsistic exercise. On the contrary, I want to argue here that επιμέλεια, as thematized in the *Alcibiades I,* is not at all a closed place where the self-focused individual is enough to him/herself, in a kind of cartesian "cogito ergo sum"; it is rather a door to the Other, and a hard exercise of practicing not self-focus, but focus on the position of the self in society, and, as human species, in the cosmos. It is about taking responsibility, which comes with attention, for our own existence, starting from what we have and shifting then to what we are. In other words, to find our place in the polis and inhabit it as well as we can: quite the opposite, in fact, from taking distance from political spheres, where others live, in order to take better care of ourselves. This second sense of the term is perhaps better expressed from meanings as "attention, thoughtfulness, diligence", "employment, study, practice", or even, in a more ritualistic and religious acception, "worship, reverence, honour, commission". At 124d, in *Alcibiades I,* Socrates states: "Nevertheless, it is the truth when I say that we need application, all men are in rather need of it, but you and I in a very special way."[36]. But why are Socrates and Alcibiades such in need of looking after? And what shall the object of this looking after be?

We saw in the previous chapter how both Alcibiades' and Socrates' hopes (ἐλπίδα) lean toward a type of power, or possibility (δύναμις). Alcibiades'

[34] *Smp.,* 206c, 212b
[35] ἐπιμέλεια ἑαυτοῦ, care for oneself
[36] Alc.I, 124d: "Λέγω μέντοι ἀληθῆ, ὅτι ἐπιμελείας δεόμεθα, πολλῆς μὲν πάντες ἄνθρωποι, ἀτὰρ νώ γε καὶ μάλα σφόδρα."

hope is connected to the power within Athenian council; Socrates hopes to have influence on Alcibiades' heart. During the first and the second part of the homonymous dialogue, Socrates panders with subtle irony to Alcibiades' claims regarding his political aspirations. He pretends to get along with them, without excessive pressure, but still, he makes him a special request for the conversation to be: he demands the youth to answer with honesty to the questions he will ask.[37] I underline "with honesty": as we know, the dialogical search for truth is the cornerstone of the Socratic *elenchus*, in which the philosopher brings his interlocutor to observe and dissipate his prejudice on various matters, often with spiritual pain or an ostentatious sense of annoyance as side effects. This is exactly what happens to Alcibiades, who after a few arguments, which I will not report here, admits he is not sure on what he can bring to the Athenian council, and that his noble natives and natural talents are not enough to make the difference in politics. He doesn't know what justice, concord and good government are, because he never learnt it,[38] and, initially he cannot even recognize his real enemies.[39]

To prevail on his true rivals, Alcibiades must acquire a savoir faire, a τήχνη to which apply himself to. But since, as we mentioned, he ignores the true nature of justice, virtue and good governance, he doesn't know what to look for, neither towards what his attention must be channelled in order for him to become a good politician. Socrates never says it directly, but during all the dialogue implies that his young lover is not heading towards the right things, with his will of taking care of the city. Better explained, he didn't look into his desires well enough to see what is hiding behind them: will of power, fame, richness: in ancient Greek, this concept is called "πλεοναξìα". Like many young and inexpert but promising politicians who have a high opinion of themselves, Alcibiades seems to have good intention for making his part for Athenian society, but he thinks to do so simply by letting his natural features flow, without never really having reflected about himself and the position he's occupying in the world. Until the very last line of the dialogue, Socrates warns

[37] Cf. *Alc.I*, 110a 3-4
[38] Cf. *Alc.I,* 110d5-112d11
[39] Cf. *Alc.I*, 119a8

him about the dangers of being thrown in the vortex of political activity without protection: “Yet I fear, and not because I somehow doubt your natural gifts, but because I see the strength of the city, that it may have won over me and you.” [40]

What Alcibiades is missing is a true knowledge of what is Good, what is truly important and to pursue. He may has had as a mentor a great politician such as Pericles, but- we see here a critic by Plato to the educational system of the entire ruling class that brought Socrates to trial in 399 BC – his educational path did not suffice his need for a stable knowledge (ἐπιστήμη, i.e., something that stands alone). Proof of this is, as mentioned also in Menon, that Pericles was not able to transmit his virtue even to his own children. He is similar to poets who are enlighten and tell deep truths, but cannot tell how they know them and teach them to someone else. In the Meno, the ability of teaching it to someone else was considered an excellent proof of really knowing something[41] . Stepping into the field of visual metaphors, which are largely used in the *Alcibiades I* and will be discussed later in the thesis, what Pericles and few other wise politicians and poets have is not real knowledge, but a mere image of it, its reflection.[42] Still in the *Meno*, this kind of knowledge had been defined as “δόξα ἀληθής”, true opinion[43]. Perhaps it would still be possible to take care of the city well and wisely without being truly wise, i.e., without knowing the *aitiai* of this well doing. This could be achieved from Alcibiades, for example, by imitating big Athenians as Pericles and his rival Thucydides and by employing his natural intelligence: nevertheless, if he chose this path, a young and ambitious man like him would easily be pulled towards petty behaviours and become the ruin of Athens. To overcome πλεοναξία, ἀκρασία, and other ethical-political fallacious, Alcibiades needs to back his ἔθος with deeper roots, which are stable and not skipping easily from men’s mind,“ἀλλὰ δραπέται γιγνόμεναι ἐκ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου νοὸς”, like true opinions[44]. This is precisely where ἐπιμέλεια comes in, as interconnection between political

[40] *Alc. I*, 135e5
[41] Pl., *Meno,* 93a-94e
[42] Cf. Alc.I. Examples are Themistocles, Thucydides, Lycurgus for Spartans
[43] *Meno*, 85c
[44] Men., 97e-98a

ambition and philosophical eros. Alcibiades needs to look after (ἐπιμελεῖσθαι) himself before he can take care of anything else without being a risk for the polis in the first place. Plato portrayed Socrates as rather concerned and pessimistic about this point, especially in the *Alcibiades I.*[45] Despite having late or even neo-platonic features and being of dubious authenticity, this dialogue has been described by many commentors as the dialogue of self-care and as a good starting point for delving in Plato's philosophy, or even in the whole philosophy. As reconstructed from Foucault in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, a series of lectures given from 1981 to 1982, already in the II century Albinus wrote that every man who was "naturally gifted" and "come of age to philosophize," if he wanted to keep himself safe from political turmoil and practice virtue, should begin with the study of Alcibiades; and this in order to "turn to the inside" and determine what the "object of his cares" should be. Later, Proclus said that this text should be regarded as "ἄρχή ἅπᾶσης φιλοσοφίας" the principle and beginning of all philosophy. Olympiodorus, comparing the whole of Platonic thought to a sacred enclosure, made *Alcibiades I* the "propylaea" of the temple, whose "aduton" would be the Parmenides. In the same series of lectures, Foucault defined "ἐπιμέλεια ἑαυτοῦ" as "an act toward self, others, and the world". It is important to notice that ἐπιμέλεια initially serves as a duty to fill the gaps of a lacking education. Socrates makes his friend notice, through a sort of *ante-literam* sociological inquire, the valid type of παιδείαs that what will be his rivals outside the city received. The kings of Sparta undergo a very thorough education, teaching them the indispensable virtues. As for the future king of Persia, he is entrusted from the age of fourteen to four pedagogues, who teach him: one wisdom, the other justice, the third temperance, and the fourth courage. [46]

There is, like for the formally mentioned as for the traditional Athenian educational path followed by Alcibiades, a proper time for beginning to

[45] This especially shows from the very last passage at 135e5. We find in historical accounts reasons for Socrates' pessimisms about his mission as Alcibiades' guide. Alcibiades will take part only a few times after the dramatic date of the dialogue to the Peloponnesian war in 431 BCE. In 414, after the disastrous exitus of the Sicilian expedition, he defected to Sparta. There seem to be in this passage of the Alcibiades a ponderate sense of failure from the Socratic side, as Socrates would recognize that philosophy is not powerful enough to drive the youth, but also "them both "away from the temptations of fame and power in the city.

[46] Cf. *Alc.I,* 123d-124a

exercise ἐπιμέλεια ἑαυτοῦ. After admitting, for the second time in the dialogue[47], that he finds himself "in an extremely shameful condition", ("αἴσχιστα ἔχων")[48], the youth is urged on by Socrates, who tells him that his condition, while serious, is not irreparable, since he is still far from being 50 years old[49], which is the age at which traditionally an Athenian citizen should have entered his primacy of intelligence and thus reached full maturity. If he does not lose his nerve, Alcibiades still has time to take care of himself. Socrates' exhortation here recalls to the dictum "γνῶθι καιρόν", one of the ethical doctrines from the seven sages of Greece, which from the VI century onward imbued Athenians' common sense, including Plato. These doctrines expressed the highest values of classical Greekness, strictly connected to the visual sphere: they drew on the art of measurement, proportion, harmony, symmetry, number, and rhythm in music. In order to honour his καιρὸν, Alcibiades must begin to turn his attention to a stable, irreducible part of himself: in this way he can nurture ἐπιμέλεια with truth, making it stable and adopting it as his *modus vivendi*. This necessity leads to another ancient maxim, "γνῶθι σεαυτόν"[50] which is presented as a first subordinate of "ἐπιμελεῖσθαι σεαυτόν". By tracing the argument emerging towards the dialogue it is possible to individuate some basic connections, and summarize what we said until here as follows: in order to achieve his political ambitions, Alcibiades needs to take care of himself at the convenient moment; the convenient moment is now; to take care of himself, he needs to know himself, i.e., the himself he wants to care for; to know the himself he wants to care for, he must know what this "himself" is. Thus, ἐπιμέλεια ἑαυτοῦ is absorbed and reabsorbed from γνῶσις ἑαυτοῦ: knowing oneself is necessary and sufficient condition for taking care of oneself.

The self of the self ("τὸ αὐτὸ τὸ αὐτό"), that Socrates and Alcibiades try to individuate in the section 128e-130e, is that part of the αὐτός which is irreducible and is not depending on any other part: we could call it, perhaps, the οὐσία of the self. Foucault, in the former quoted lectures on the

[47] the first at *Alc. I,* 116e3-4
[48] *Alc. I,* 127d7-8
[49] "πεντηκονταετής". *Alc.I,* 127e1
[50] *Alc.I,* 124b

Hermeneutic of the self, said: "Moreover, the text says it very clearly: we must know what is auto to auto. What is this identical element present as it were on both sides of the care: subject of the care and object of the care? *"*.[51]

Following Foucault, it is necessary to bring subject and object of care closer together through self-knowledge. With other words, we must become conscious and responsible for that subject/object of care, which is identical: by doing so, we would acquire an agency that allows us to take care of ourselves and of the world. I will not report here all the passages of the *elenchus* driven by Socrates to unveil the "self of the self", but I will cite its outcome: "the men are souls"[52]. It emerges in this section a strict identity between the human being and the soul. Socrates and Alcibiades are souls conversing with each other through words.[53] Words, as the body, are "ὄργανα", instruments of the soul, which is the active centre of the self. The Delphic motto can be then re-written under these circumstances as "know your soul".

2.2 Visual metaphors: the soul in the mirror (γινώσκειν, ἰδεῖν)

In all the last section of *Alcibiades I,* and especially in the passage right after the one we just commented, the conversation shifts to a visual, metaphorical plane. The elements on which the discourse is centred are the eye, the look, and the mirror, (κάτοπτρον). Like the eye that, in order to observe itself, needs a mirror, and in the mirror looks at the pupil[54], the soul, in order to know itself in its essential part, should look into a mirror that allows it to do so. The most suitable κάτοπτρον to look into our soul is precisely the eye of the other, who loves us. This act of mirroring in a lover's eyes is possible only if they are looking at what we are, i.e. our soul, and not at what we have, i.e. our things. In each other's gaze we see our own eye reflected, in a living surface that is similar to us. This metaphor is visual in nature, but it flows immediately to the plane of knowledge, because the eye is the mirror of the soul. The gaze

[51] Foucault, M. (2005). *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France 1981–1982*. New York: Picador, p. 53 (= Foucault 2001a, p. 52).
[52] c3 τὸν ἄνθρωπον...ψυχήν... 5-6 ἡ ψυχή ἐστιν ἄνθρωπος (*Alc. I*, 130c)
[53] Cf. *Alc. I*, 130d9-11
[54] κόρη, or the part of itself where its essence, the sight, lies

becomes a path of knowledge, it transforms the encounter with Socrates, for Alcibiades, into an encounter with himself. The boundaries between looking and knowing, in this kind of metaphysics of the gaze, become thinner. We have to keep in mind that the sight, already in classical Greek culture, was considered the most important sense for the cognitive process, as Aristotle illustrates in the famous passage that opens the Metaphysics.[55]

The connection between sight and knowledge is well exemplified in ancient Greek by the verbal form "οἶδα," which is both the perfect of εἶδον and thus translates "I saw," but is also used in the present tense with the meaning of "I know."

However very near in acception, while "οἶδα" indicates a quite immediate knowledge, of intuitive, and spontaneous kind, "γιγνώσκω" can be more accurately translated by "come to know", as in a process. It is interesting to note that, in the *Alcibades I*, for a similar process of learning, through which Alcibiades has to go to gradually get to self-knowledge, is used the word "ἐπιφάνεια": not only in the sense of appearing, but of unravelling, slowly coming to light, referring to those features of the man's soul that would otherwise remain in the shadows. A possible interpretation of this concept is given by the same word used by ancient Greeks for "truth", "ἀλήθεια", as not hidden, unveiled. As we will see in the next few paragraphs, this process of knowing has more to do with a guided act of taking off δόξαι, rather than adding new things. The sentence in which the term "ἐπιφάνεια" is involved is not less interesting than itself, because Socrates claims to be the only person, with the help of the same "θεός" who restrained him to approach the youth until that moment, to have the capacity to activate in him that process of knowledge. The passage is this: "...:ᾧι καὶ πιστεύων λέγω ὅτι ἡ ἐπιφάνεια δί οὐδενὸς ἄλλου σοι ἔσται ἢ δί ἐμοῦ"[56]. The editor Nicholas Denier notes that this sentence is, in the manner characteristics of oracular pronouncements,

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[55] "

"All men by nature desire to know. An indication of this is the delight we take in our senses; for even apart from their usefulness they are loved for themselves; and above all others the sense of sight. For not only with a view to action, but even when we are not going to do anything, we prefer seeing (one might say) to everything else. The reason is that this, most of all the senses, makes us know and brings to light many differences between things." Primavesi, Oliver. *Aristotle's Metaphysics Alpha: Symposium Aristotelicum*.

[56] *Alc. I*, 124c10-11

ambiguous. “Socrates could be saying one or other or both of: ‘Through my agency, the world with get to know of you’ (as promised at 105d2-3), and ‘Through my agency, you will get to know of the god and his meaning’ (as promised at 124b7-c1).” I think that these two possible senses, considered what we said so far, are not excluding one another, and can be taken in together, the first as a logical consequence of the second. What is most important, is that Socrates is here offering to become a κάτοπτρον for Alcibiades, in order for him to look on the inside, and, out of metaphor, to get to know his soul, i.e. himself. This means, through dialogical connection between souls, to take off one by one all the false images of the self, and by reflection of the world, that Alcibiades created until that moment, and put him in front of his naked, real soul. Only someone who has already done the same exercise on himself, as Socrates, can be a good mirror, because, assisted by the “θεός”, he is not afraid and ashamed of looking at the highest and less human part of his lover soul, and reflect it for him. Of course it is still another image, but a closer one to the truth; it is impossible to bring to end the fusion of subject and object aspired from Foucault, because we will always be in need of an observer who is distant enough from the object to create an image of what he/she/they look at. Before is imagined, the self is not even determined, it does not have a figure, and thus it’s not conceivable. As Christopher Moore argued, “The reason why we need an image of the self for ‘knowing yourself’ is that the original is not by itself targetable”.[57]

Socrates distinguishes between what, in the young man, everyone is given to see[58], such as beauty, prestige, noble genealogy, powerful protections, and what only a Socratic mirror can reflect instead: the most hidden but most essential part of his soul. At one point he says to him, "Your thoughts are quite other, and I want to put them before you."[59]. As observed by Lidia Palumbo, in the Socratic mirror it is possible to better distinguish “τὰ διανοήματα”, the thoughts and priorities of men, their true hidden identity.[60] Socrates is asking

[57] Moore, C. (2015). *Socrates and Self-Knowledge*. Cambridge University Press, p. 98.
[58] “παντὶ δῆλον ιδεῖν”, *Alc.I,* 104a
[59] *Alc.I,* 105a
[60] Palumbo, L. (2020). *Socrate o dello specchio. Strategie di scrittura nell'Apologia e nell'Alcibiade*. *Plato Journal*, 20, 81-95.

Alcibiades to review his priorities, by putting himself in front of contents of his soul that he himself doesn't yet know being able to know: these are concepts and fears and psychic contents without the knowledge of which none of his wishes can ever come true[61]. Keeping the metaphor of the κάτοπτρον, Socrates becomes an empty mirror, who is nothing but uncomfortable questions, to which Alcibiades, but also every other interlocutor, can choose whether to look for the answer. It is maybe also for this sense of discomfort given by his continuous questions to unravel truths sometimes unbearable, that Socrates was put to death from his κατήγοροι. Palumbo, in the study I already referred to earlier, highlights that in the *Apology* there is a passage that suggest how the words of Anytus, Meletus and Lycon were sorting the exact opposite effect to the Socratic purification through *elenchus*: they hide Socrates from himself.[62] Since they themselves are afraid and ashamed to look into the truth, the κατήγοροι use a language that confuses, hides, distances, serves to elude attention and remain unaware. The verb λανθάνω lies at the very opposit of the semantic spectrum of Socrates' activity, which is telling, or to have his interlocutors give birth to, "πᾶσαν τὴν ἀλήθειαν"[63]. The first feature of ἀλήθεια, what is not anymore hidden, is to be divine, as mentioned in most of the dialogues. In the *Apology*, Socrates' witness is Delphi's deity ("μάρτυρα ὑμῖν παρέξομαι τὸν θεὸν τὸν ἐν Δελφοῖς", 20e). In the *Alcibiades I*, this condition is expressed by claiming that the higher part of the soul, which is to look at and get to know through the lover's eyes, is inhabited from the deity. Socrates says: "For this part of it resembles the god; and one, looking at it and also knowing all the divine, god and thought, in this way could have even the greatest knowledge of himself." This highest part of the self is where the highest faculties of humans lie, "γιγνώσκειν καὶ νοεῖν", and it is precisely to this part that who desires to know has to look at, in order to become similar to it, in a continuous and self-generating movement. It is now getting clear that, to be able to sustain such a great effort, and act "always keeping before your eyes that which is divine and luminous"[64], one cannot trust only his own *doxai,*

[61] *Alc.I,* 110a-113b
[62] "They spoke so persuasively that they made me lose track of myself", "ἐμαυτοῦ ἐπελαθόμη". Plato, Ap. 34d. Cf P., Lidia, ibid.
[63] *Ap.*, 17b

even when true: he /she has to be conscious of his/her own ένδεια, in order to fully appreciate what is beautiful, and recognize what is good. With other words, an individual who is looking for a full knowledge of themselves has to be "ἔνθεος", literally "inhabited, or being inspired from the divinity". These two features- ένδεια on one side, and the will to generate, to fill that gap, to reach supreme Beauty similar to the highest part of the soul, on the other one- are precisely the cornerstones of *Eros'* nature. In this regard, Gordon affirms the close intertwining between eros and self-knowledge.[65] He writes: "All contexts in which self-knowledge is discussed in Plato are erotic contexts, because self-knowledge is the node where the epistemic element and the ethical element meet in the Socratic theory and practice of 'erotic paideia.'"[66]. Complicating this, following this chapter's train of thoughts, knowledge assumes the role of link between *epimeleia* and *eros*, which we will further inquire in the following part.

3. **Eros**

In this section I intend to focus on the nature of *eros*, particularly in its role as a fundamental *dynamis* toward self-knowledge, which is suggested more explicitly in the *Phaedrus* and the *Alcibiades*, but can also be inferred from the *Symposium*. First, I will talk about *Eros'* genealogy, his relation to madness (μανία) and two kinds of degeneration of this relation: obsession and shame (ἀμέλεια). In the second part of the chapter, I will discuss more *Eros*' double function of ἑρμηνεύς and διαπορθμεύς.[67]

3.1 *Eros* and *episteme*

In the *Phaedrus* and in *Symposium*, *eros* is essentially desire, which ultimately refers back to the suprasensible dimension, and in particular to the form of the

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[64] *Alc.I, 133d8-133e5*
[65] As we shall see in chapter 3, the mythos that Plato has Diotima-Socrates told in Symposium about Eros' parents Poros and Penia and his birth, perfectly satisfies these two features.
[66] Gordon, J. (1999). Eros and Self-Knowledge in Plato's *Alcibiades I*. *Phronesis*, 44(1), 1-26.
[67] *Smp*. 202e

Beauty in itself. In other words, love is one of those ways in which the soul crosses the sensible dimension, through the body and the senses rises to the intelligible one. The engine of this movement is undoubtedly desire, for one desires (ἐπιθυμεῖν) what one is lacking, and, if it's there yet, it is impermanent. *Eros* is deficient, poor, miserable like his mother; but he is conscious about his condition and tries everything, strives, pursues his longing, turns fearlessly to the Beautiful and the Good, eventually finds a way, as he is as resourceful as his father. The journey of the elevation of *eros* is exposed in detail in the Symposium through Socrates' speech. In his case, this striving towards what is lacking is directed towards beauty, and, according to the Greek ideal of καλοκἀγαθία, towards goodness. The stages of this process significantly mirror the progression from sight to knowledge, that is, from the attraction to a beautiful body to the contemplation of pure beauty. As this *scala amoris*[68] unfolds, the lover is involved in various degrees of awe (we recall that the experience of wonder is the foundation of philosophy). The desire for corporeality becomes a desire for the intelligible, for what is beyond and other than the body. Only through the de-centralization from oneself, in a practice of "a-topia" to which the philosopher is well accustomed, can the individual find their essence and know themselves according to the Delphic maxim. Love, integrating the mirror metaphor from the Alcibiades with what emerges from Socrates' words in the Symposium, is the uninterrupted gaze toward the brightest part of ourselves through the eyes of another, who acts as a catalyst for this excellent part. In the famous words of the Symposium, *eros* is nothing other than the perpetuous tendency to return to the possession of the good, which the soul had forgotten during its earthly experience, but of which it had retained traces; literally, the aspiration for "a good that is always its own."[69]. Love and knowledge are, thus, two forces (δῦνᾰ́μεις) that are faces of the same medal: who loves, as who knows, has to be empty of knowledge, and of love, and know it, and necessarily has to keep in him/herself traces of what they are looking for.

[68] The metaphor of the "ladder of love" was vastly used in medieval age, in the christianisation of the platonic eros
[69] *Smp.* 206a

Regarding knowledge, this is demonstrated through the theory of reminiscence, primarily outlined in the *Meno*[70] and the *Phaedo*[71]. Here, Plato argues—drawing on ancient myths, priestesses, and a practical demonstration with Menon's slave help on the spot immediately after—that the soul, before incarnating in the body, possessed knowledge of the Forms, that is, perfect and immutable ideas. When the soul incarnates, it forgets this knowledge but can recall it through a process of reminiscence. Knowledge, therefore, is not a new acquisition but a recollection of what the soul already knew and keeps in itself as ancient traces. Beauty can thus be interpreted as the most memorable of all Forms, the one which, when seen in its various manifestations on earth, ignites the soul's memory of the perfect beauty in the world of ideas. From this arises the soul's upward movement at the sight of a beautiful body, where eros acts as a mediator between imperfect, heartly, sensible beauty, and intelligible, non-human, perfect beauty. This is perhaps the most important, core aspect of *Eros*: he is in the middle, cannot be ascribed to clear, fixed categories, continuously escapes from the temptation of sense, with his movement towards the immortal. He is, in fact, medium and mediator: in ancient Greek, "ἑρμηνεὺς", as we find in Symposium, at 202d. Let's focus here on the larger passage, that shows well *Eros'* crucial role and its ontological traits. Plato-Diotima-Socrates says: "And for this reason, Eros is an interpreter who carries messages between gods and humans, conveying to the gods the prayers and sacrifices of humans, and to humans the commands and responses of the gods. He is in the middle of both and fills the gap between them, so that the whole is bound together in mutual exchange."[72]

3.1.i Genealogy of *Eros*

[70] Cf. *Meno,* 81a-86b
[71] Cf. *Phaedo*, 72a-77b
[72] "καὶ διὰ τοῦτο δὴ ὁ Ἔρως ἑστὶν ἑρμηνεὺς καὶ διαπορθμεύων θεοῖς τὰ παρ᾽ ἀνθρώπων καὶ ἀνθρώποις τὰ παρὰ θεῶν, τῶν μὲν δεήσεων καὶ θυσιῶν, τῶν δὲ ἐπιταγμάτων τε καὶ ἀμοιβῶν: ἐν μέσῳ δὲ ὢν ἀμφοτέρων τὸ μεταξὺ πληροῖ ὥστε τὸ πᾶν αὐτὸ αὑτῷ συνέχεται." Smp., 202d

For its very nature, *Eros,* during his perpetual search*,* makes of two one ("ἐν μέσῳ δὲ ὢν ἀμφοτέρων τὸ μεταξὺ πληροῖ ὥστε τὸ πᾶν αὐτὸ αὑτῷ συνέχεται."). It is significant to recall that the most ancient known myth about *Eros*' genealogy, in the 700 BCE *Theogony* of Hesiod, wanted Ἔρως or love, as one of the oldest entities, coming right after Χάος, the "primordial void" and then Γαῖα, the Earth, as mutual attraction and principle of union and harmony.

"In truth at first Chaos came to be, but next wide-bosomed Earth, the ever-sure foundation of all the deathless ones who hold the peaks of snowy Olympus, and dim Tartarus in the depth of the wide-pathed Earth, [120] and Eros, fairest among the deathless gods, who unnerves the limbs and overcomes the mind and wise counsels of all gods and all men within them."[73][74]

In Plato, this first genealogy is still mentioned by Phaedrus,[75] to enhance the power and majesty of Eros. Later in the dialogue, Socrates, recalling what he heard from the priestess Diotima, will re-tell the well-known story of the generation of Eros at the banquet in honour of Aphrodite.[76] In this second version of the story, from his very conception Eros has not got a lot of that majestic, mysterious and powerful area the ancient poets had depicted around him; in a context of celebration and music, the son of Metis, Poros, drunken of nectar -- *"*at that time, wine was not there yet"[77] -- fell asleep under a tree in Zeus' gardens and Penia, who was at the party looking for alms, saw him, took advantage of him and became pregnant with Eros. Alfred Geier has noted

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[73] Hes., *Th*. 104

[74] This trace was taken up in 414 by Aristophanes, to whose fictional character Plato in the Symposium has the famous myth of the androgynes told. In his play *The Birds,* the great playwriter depicts Eros as direct descendent of Χάος and the common ancestor of the whole mankind: "Weak mortals, chained to the earth, creatures of clay as frail as the foliage of the woods, you unfortunate race, whose life is but darkness, as unreal as a shadow, the illusion of a dream, hearken to us, who are immortal beings, ethereal, ever young and occupied with eternal thoughts, for we shall teach you about all celestial matters; At the beginning there was only Chaos, Night, dark Erebus, and deep Tartarus. Earth, the air and heaven had no existence. [695] Firstly, blackwinged Night laid a germless egg in the bosom of the infinite deeps of Erebus, and from this, after the revolution of long ages, sprang the graceful Eros with his glittering golden wings, swift as the whirlwinds of the tempest. He mated in deep Tartarus with dark Chaos, winged like himself, and thus hatched forth our race, which was the first to see the light."

[75]*,* Smp., 178b-180b
[76] Smp., 203b-204a
[77] Symp., 203b-d

how, in the Symposium, the discussion about Love is not concluded because an explanation of its birth is lacking[78]. Whereas it could be argued that "no account of its birth is given in the Symposium because Love itself does not truly arise in that dialogue about love"[79] the myth of *Eros*' birth is telling us a lot about its very nature and the hybrid planes of being in which he moves. This brief story is absolutely necessary to explain his nature of demon, in the Greek sense of the term as entity that has intermediate nature between gods and humans, which helps to overcome the division between them, making them, in fact, communicate. [80]

Eros, in every sense, is born through the myth as a living contradiction. At 203 c-e, Diotima-Socrates goes on: "In the first place he is always poor, and anything but tender and fair, as the many imagine him; and he is rough and squalid, and has no shoes, nor a house to dwell in; on the bare earth exposed he lies under the open heaven, in-the streets, or at the doors of houses, taking his rest; (...) He is by nature neither mortal nor immortal, but alive and flourishing at one moment when he is in plenty, and dead at another moment, and again alive by reason of his father's nature. But that which is always flowing in is always flowing out, and so he is never in want and never in wealth; and, further, he is in a mean between ignorance and knowledge".[81]

3.2 Eros medium-mediator and the gifts of divine madness

As the famous Gods' messenger Ermes, the *ermeneus* by antonomasia, *Eros* travels, mediates, interpretates, connects in contradiction: he shifts between mankind and Gods, exchanges messages between them, allows men to have contact with the deity, otherwise unreachable. This shifting, out of metaphor, is of ontological nature, and therefore it also permeates the epistemological system of Plato and his contemporaries. It is important to keep in mind, as well highlighted from E.R. Dodds in his seminal work *The Greeks and the Irrational* (1951), that the majority of Greek History interpreted madness and irrationality as coming from the gods, while considered rationality the domain

[78] Cf. Geier, Alfred. *Plato's Erotic Thought : The Tree of the Unknown*. Rochester, NY, 2002.
[79] Geier, Alfred. *Plato's Erotic Thought : The Tree of the Unknown*. Rochester, NY, 2002. p. 16.
[80] ""Μέγας δαίμων, ὦ Σώκρατες· τὸ γὰρ δαιμόνιον πᾶν ἐστιν ἀνάμεσα θεοῦ τε καὶ θνητοῦ." Smp., 202d

[81] *Smp.* 203c-e

of humans. The gods' realm is mad, allows itself all kinds of metamorphosis, does not respect the law of not-contradiction, the principle of identity or any other logical dogma.

"God is day and night, winter and summer, war and peace, satiety and hunger; he undergoes alteration in the way that fire, when it is mixed with spices, is named according to the scent of each of them"[82], reads a famous fragment from Heraclitus, whereas "man considers one thing just and another unjust".[83]

When, in Euripides' *Bacchae,* Dionysus visits Thebes, it is completely useless for its inhabitants to try to pull back and escape his madness. The only solution, as the Thebans will learn to their cost, will be to wait patiently for the god to leave the city, rendering him every honour in the meanwhile.

Plato elaborates on this topic in the *Phaedrus,* where he has Socrates say: " However, enormous advantages now come to us through madness once it is given as a divine gift. In fact, the prophetess at Delphi and the priestesses at Dodona do a great deal of good for Greece, both privately and publicly, when they are mad, but they accomplish little or nothing when they are sound-minded."[84]. The connection between μανία and the god Apollus, traditionally associated with reason, is here thus clearly highlighted, especially as it concerns the prophetic knowledge. Later in the dialogue[85], four types of madness will be distinguished: prophetic, mystic, poetic, and erotic.[86] *Eros* is here depicted as truly an insanity, but as one that has not to be evil, if it is not evaluated adopting the perspective of economic utility. It is not true, says Socrates, that one should prefer the one who does not love to the one who loves, because the former can control himself (*sophronei*), while the latter is insane (*mainetai*).

Socrates refuses to adopt his opponent's criteria of judgment, which are based on the calculation of individual utility, and attempts to replace them with a totally different value system: he aims to show that *eros* is a divine gift, a

[82] Heraclitus, Fr. 67 Diels-Kranz
[83] Ibid., Fragment 22B102 Diels-Kranz
[84] *Phaedr*., 244a-b
[85] Ibid., 245c
[86] The last two are variants of the first two.

grace and a fortune, but for reasons that have nothing to do with the economy of utility and narcissistic self-fulfilment.

"But if any man, with respect to love, shows that it is sent by the gods for evil, let him win the victory by proving his case. But we, on the other hand, must show that such madness is given by the gods for the greatest good fortune(εὐτυχία), and if this proof is less credible to the clever(δεινός), it will be so to the wise.(σοφός)"[87].

Socrates is here subverting the dogmatic belief, current in his time's common sense and in most part of Greek tragedy, that wanted madness exclusively connected to catastrophic visits of the God; something that could not lead to anything but pain, lower instincts and brutality. He states that, if guided from the deity, *Eros* is a wonderful ally for the elevation of the soul: as mentioned further in the *Phaedrus,* it literally put wings[88]**.**

If to the interpretation of *Eros* as forth kind of *mania* we integrate Dodds's thesis about madness and reason and the considerations we made about the *Alcibiades I* and the "highest part of the soul"[89] being of divine matter, we finally are able to grasp the full potential of *Eros*. From being a universal, demoniac force, it becomes thus a transformative entity, acting on any individual who is predisposed to undergo a mirror practice, which has been discussed in the previous chapter. In this sense we can see how, beyond establishing a contact between gods and humans as separate realms in the mythology, *eros* is able to connect and pacify in the physical individual the most human and the most divine part. In other words, it puts us humans in one of the only earthly condition- following the *Phaedrus*' interpretation the only good one- of becoming complete, guided from the other's gaze in our own madness, domain of the god, without leaving our rational part, highest human faculty, behind. In a Nietzschean framework, one might suggest that Eros serves as a mediator between the Apollonian and the Dionysian within each of us. Let's take a closer look on this passage. As highlighted in this and in the previous chapter, *Eros,* by its very nature, is inextricably linked to the pursuit

[87] *Phaedr.,* 245b-c
[88] Cf. Ibid., 249d-252b
[89] Alc.I, 133c

of the form of good "always good in itself" ("ἀγαθὸν αἰεὶ ὂν αὐτῷ")[90]; it is poverty and the desire to overcome it, to create in beauty, to walk towards immortality through works, children, music, *e.a*., honoring its own offspring.[91] It is, above all, a driving force for self-knowledge: once accessed it, *eros* reflects the highest part of the human being, the *nous*, and acts as a mediator between the divine, maddened realm dwelling in the depths of the soul and the human world, made up of norms, with the use of *logos*. Here, its role as an *ermeneus* is revealed, which dismantles the binary opposition of reason/madness, Apollonian/Dionysian, and makes a third reality possible. Let us recall the words of the priestess of Mantinea, as spoken by Socrates in the Symposium:

"What do you mean, Diotima?" I said. "Is Love then evil and foul?"

"Hush," she cried; "must that be foul which is not fair?"

"Certainly," I said.

"And is that which is not wise, ignorant? Do you not see that there is something in between wisdom and ignorance?"[92]

In order to make out of the erotic experience a way into wisdom and get to inhabit this third possible condition, lovers have to be prepared to inquire themselves following the Delphic maxim "Μηδὲν ἄγαν". This means, to get into the Socratic condition of knowing not to know, not to be anything, in order to start a prolific search. In this framework, we will discuss briefly the Platonic interpretation of the other famous maxim, which we mentioned earlier in the thesis "γνῶθι σεαυτόν"[93]. We argue that, as used by Plato-Socrates regarding the erotic discourse, the Delphic motto does not loose its original meaning, but rather, its core features are reinforced.

The ancient maxim "Know thyself" is taken up by Socrates in the *Alcibiades* in relation to self-care. In this instance, the exhortation refers to embracing a knowledge or a desire for knowledge that goes beyond the human condition of

[90] Smp. 206a
[91] Cf. Smp. 208e-209a
[92] *Smp. 202 b-c*
[93] Alc.I, 124b

ignorance or, even worse, the restraining presumption of wisdom. This interpretation seems to truly overturn the original and very ancient meaning of the maxim, which, inscribed in large letters on the front of Apollo's temple, warned the visitor seeking oracular responses to recognize their own limitedness. Even earlier, it is mentioned by Archilochus, who warned people against the sin of hubris. Becoming aware of one's own mortality, not exceeding the limits set by *Moira*: this is considered by critics to be the traditional-religious sense preceding the Socratic-philosophical meaning of the maxim, with the sanctuary of Apollo as its centre.[94] Beyond the first appearances, anyway, it is possible to argue that the Socratic interpretation does not present a true rupture with the traditional sense I have just illustrated here.

In fact, the framework of *erosophia* necessitates compromising with the fact, frequently noted by Socrates throughout the *Alcibiades I*, that the divine is necessary in the process of knowledge, and therefore, primarily self-knowledge. Without the help of the deity, one can never achieve complete self-knowledge. Complicating the issue with what we introduced in the previous paragraphs, while rational elements—what Nietzsche refers to as Apollonian—can bring one to a certain point in understanding the models, to truly know virtue, which is the highest good and the model of all models, it is necessary to ascend to the Dionysian realm. This means, to rely on the divine domain, on symbols, which are found in one's own madness. More suggestively, one must enter this divine cave, guided by *eros*, which is neither human nor fully divine, to be able to "ascend to heaven".[95]

To delve into our own madness, we must be able to endure its light, to continue the metaphor of the "brightest part of the soul" found in Plato[96] and later widely adopted throughout the Christian tradition. In this sense, *eros* can live only in the relation, in the dialogue soul to soul. Only in the virtuous lover, one can find a reliable guide in one's own soul: in this sense love and knowledge, and thus, indirectly, care and politics are relational practices,

[94] Cf. Nagler, Michael N. "Myth and Society in Ancient Greece . Jean-Pierre Vernant Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece . Jean-Pierre Vernant , Pierre Vidal-Naquet." *The Journal of religion* 70.4 (1990)
[95] Alc.I, 131d
[96] Cf. Alc.I

which necessarily require the use of the art of dialogue that Plato so well masters. When the desire for knowledge is indulged, the gaze toward the lover-beloved other- in the *kore*- mentioned in the first chapter, becomes a valuable tool for the sight, the knowledge and the care for one's most hidden part. Madness cannot be reabsorbed and understood from reason, but it can be reordered and interpreted, and give a creative cue in generating: it is thus the realm of immortal, towards which, through the "generation in Beauty" the soul always tends.[97] In this framework we understand why *Eros* is a natural philosopher, and he aims to pursue beauty and generate in it: through the erotic gaze, which out of metaphor is the dialogue soul to soul with our lover, we gradually get to know ourselves, and so we become ourselves. If honoured, *Eros* can thus bring to the widening of one's identity, because it allows the individual to be guided in his own madness from the lover. In the Alcibiades I this is made clear in the following exchange.:

"S.: 'And, as we said in our previous talks, you will always keep before your eyes that which is divine and luminous.' A.: 'It is clear.' S.: 'In looking towards this, you will see and know yourselves and your good.' A.: 'Indeed.' S.: 'Will you act rightly and well?' A.: 'Yes.' S.: 'I want to assure you that by doing so you will be happy.' A.: 'And truly, you are a sure guarantor.'[98]

Martha Nussbaum, in her work *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy,* argued for the practical implications of *episteme*, since knowledge of the good inevitably leads to virtuous action, which in turn is the key to achieving happiness. This interconnectedness is particularly evident from this passage of the dialogue, and it shows how love is vehicle, but also one and the same, with various graduations of benefits, starting from self-knowledge. As Umberto Galimberti highlighted in his studies about Plato and in particular the *Symposium,* the emblematic sentence "I love you" often become a way of expressing gratitude, and could thus be rephrased as "Thank you for letting me know myself".[99]

3.3 *Eros*' *mania* and death

[97] This point also further explains the affirmation from the Phaedrus that "*enormous advantages now come to us through madness once it is given as a divine gift."*
[98] Alc.I, 133c
[99] Cf. U. Galimberti, *Le cose dell'amore*. 2012. Feltrinelli editore.

If *Eros* can be a precious ally for those who get to be in his condition, it can also have disastrous effects and cancel the existence of who is not able to curb is effect to better digest it. In fact, as underlined in the *Phaedrus*, while being necessary for creativity and for honouring the truth, madness can be, and in many cases is, lethal, when it is not mediated by *reason. T*he goodness of *eros* in the lives of men, we should remember, derives precisely from the fact that he is not only divine, but shares with man that art of logical thought, which distinguishes him and keeps him anchored in reason. Greek epic and tragic literature are filled with cases where this does not happen: the madness of love seizes an individual, causing them to fall obsessively in love with someone, usually a hero, and subsequently takes over with disastrous effects for both the lover, the beloved, and all of the surroundings. We could consider, as an instance, Achilles' "Μῆνιν... οὐλομένην" when he is informed about Patroclus' death[100], which drives and determines the entire course of the *Iliad. O*r we could think of the Euripidean heroines Phaedra and Medea, whose terrible revenges for unrequited love serve as a warning against the obsessive state to which eros can lead, taking over the self. In Phaedra's case, Eros, in the bull's body[101] ends up killing Hyppolitus, the very object of her desire; Medea kills the physical offspring of her love, the children she had with Jason.

Nietzsche argued that this overflowing Dionysian love was the true beating heart of classical Greek culture, and that the Greeks feared it deeply, especially Socrates, who, like a true 'mystagogue', sought to bring madness under the control of reason, thereby ending the era of chaos.[102] The tragic plots mentioned above indeed indicate the immense importance that Greek culture attributed to love and the danger of being consumed by madness. According to what has been discussed so far, losing oneself in *Eros* means in the platonic framework venturing into one's irrational side without the necessary tools—without knowing one's limits—and failing to return; in other words, it means returning to the sacred, which equates to the death of reason. Once

[100] Cf. Om., *Iliad*
[101] For this interpretation of eros and the bull cf. Dodd, ibid.
[102] Cf. Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm. *Die Geburt Der Tragödie: Aus Dem Geiste Der Musik*. Cambridge University Press, 2010. Print. Cambridge Library Collection. Classics.

again, the antidote against evil, or, to follow the famous image from the Phaedrus, against the ruinous pull of the black horse towards the abyss, lies in the maxim 'know thyself', which we discussed above. In this context, self-knowledge is understood more in the Archilochian sense of "recognize which flow regulates men" ("γίνωσκε δ' οἷος ῥυσμὸς ἀνθρώπους ἔχει.")[103]: to know—or, in a more Socratic sense, to seek to know—neither too much nor too little. It is possible to exceed one's rhythm without realizing it: in the case of Oedipus, knowing his own rhythm is the greatest misfortune. Knowing himself leads him to discover his monstrous identity, and subsequently to blind himself as punishment for not having seen sooner. In the previous section, we saw how for Socrates, whom Nietzsche called the optimistic philosopher, self-knowledge is inverted and becomes positive. The positivity is possible in this case inasmuch as one can honour madness and accept its gifts, interpreting them through dialogue with others. In the Alcibiades, thought and reason are explicitly linked to the divine. This might explain Socrates' statement to Alcibiades in the homonymous dialogue: "My guardian is better and wiser than your guardian, Pericles."[104]

Socrates' teaching would be more fruitful than that of Pericles because Socrates, aware of his own limits, lives closer to madness; he recognizes that his reason is rooted in it, and he allows himself to be guided by it at every step.

"A.: 'Who is this guardian, Socrates?' S**:** 'He is a god, Alcibiades, the one who has prevented me from talking to you until today. Because I believe in him, I say that you will experience him not through another, but through me.'"[105]

It is worth to discuss this passage, which with is ambiguity stays a fundamental one to follow with our argumentation. Socrates says here that although he had been following the youth for a long time, he had been not allowed to talk to Alcibiades because this own mysterious *daimonion*-guardian whom we cautiously associated with *Eros* in the last paragraph. At the beginning of the dialogue, at 103a-103b, Socrates already argued something

[103] Arch., Fr. 128 west
[104] Alc.I, 105d
[105] Alc.I, 105d

similar, without giving then any explanation about this point. Why was he prevented to talk to Alcibiades for this long time? In which sense he states the youth "will experience him [the god]" not at all but through him, Socrates? In order to address those questions, it is necessary to discuss the failure of the Socratic success of driving Alcibiades towards virtue, which we can clearly read from historical events and from traces present in both the *Symposium* and the *Alcibiades I*.

3.3.i *Eros* and *ameleia:* a Socratic failure?

Although his claim at 105d ("my guardian is better and wiser than your guardian, Pericles"), Socrates does not seem to have the desired effect of guiding the young Alcibiades on the way of the Good. The interpretive hypothesis developed earlier, that the philosopher would be a better influence than Pericles (Nota"σου διαφέρω", "I am your superior", tells S. to A. at 124b), remains just that—a hypothesis—because the reality is quite different. Alcibiades is continually drawn by the lure of power and political fame, causing disasters in politics[106], while simultaneously distancing himself as much as possible from philosophy and Socrates. Many interpreters of the caliber of Nussbaum and Strauss attribute the causes of his own downfall, and what it meant for Athens, to the young man himself. Despite Socrates' best efforts to guide him toward a philosophical life, Alcibiades' flaws ultimately led him away from it. Nussbaum comments that Alcibiades "chooses a life of political ambition, driven by desires for power and recognition" and that he is "a tragic figure, caught between the allure of Socratic wisdom and the pull of his own overwhelming desires." [107]

Indeed, in the Symposium, this ambivalent attitude of Alcibiades towards Socrates and the modus vivendi he embodies emerges with marked clarity. The force by which the young man seems to be overwhelmed whenever he is

[106] Cf. *Life of Alcibiades.* Plutarch, *Alcibiades* 3.1, where Plutarch attributes to Alcibiades much of the responsibility for ruining Athens. He portrays him as a "ἀνὴρ πανουργότατος καὶ ἀνοσιώτατος," which translates to "a man most unscrupulous and impious."
[107] M. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, p. 131-3

in the company of the philosopher resembles in many ways that bittersweet (γλυκύπικρον)[108] love sung of by the Greek poet Sappho. The entrance of the young man in the *Symposium* is memorable: completely drunk, with a crown on his head, he completely changes the atmosphere of the party, and appoints himself as the master, encouraging the previously sober guests to drink to excess. Nietzsche and Popper between the others recognized under Alcibiades' mask the image of the Dionysus himself, bringing the ecstatic and uninhibited nature of the god into what until then had been the feast of reason.

Later, Alcibiades gives his famous speech about Socrates, revealing to the audience the strong influence that the philosopher has over him, and telling things that only his drunkenness allows him to.[109] Among the most striking feelings that Alcibiades admits to experiencing in the presence of Socrates is undoubtedly that of shame, *ameleia*, which we will analyse here. In *Symposium* 214e, the young man confesses that Socrates is the only person in the world before whom he has ever felt shame. A little further on, he continues: "Even now, I am aware within myself that if I were to listen to him, I would not be able to resist and would experience all this. In fact, he forces me to admit that, although I am very deficient (endees), I continue to neglect myself (autos eti emautou amelo), while I am concerned with the affairs of the Athenians. Therefore, I flee from him like from the sirens, with my ears stopped up, so as not to age sitting by his side."*[110]*

Also in the *Alcibiades I* we can find some traces of a similar shame, which is rather portrayed through reticence about Alcibiades' false knowledge. In the *Alcibiades I*, there hovers a sort of sense of demure that seeks to keep hidden Alcibiades's condition, that of being "*manikon*,"*[111]* almost madly ignorant[112]. Both the interlocutors seem to be aware of this ignorance, but they always prefer not to name it, as in an attempt to not give it power. Instead, they often refer to it as "εἶχων οὕτω"[113], literally "to be in this state".

My interpretative hypothesis about the reason for Alcibiades' *ameleia* is strictly interrelated with the problem of Socrates not being allowed to talk to

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[108] Sappho, fr. 31
[109] *"But what follows I could hardly tell you if I were sober. Yet as the proverb says, 'In vino veritas'..."* Symp. 214d.
[110] *Smp.*, 216a 3-7
[111] *Alc.I,* 113c 5-6
[112] Madness is according to Xen. Mem. 3.9.6 with the belief of knowing something of which one is, in fact, ignorant
[113] *Alc.I*, 109e8

him for a long time, which left us at the end of the previous chapter with the unsolved knot: which are the "causes, not of human nature, but of demoniac"[114] that prevented Socrates to talk to Alcibiades in the first place? I believe that this prolonged silence Socrates is forced to maintain is precisely due to his awareness that the young man was not yet ready to open himself to the power of *eros*, that he was, in short, too immature and arrogant to bear the sight of the 'highest part of himself.' In other words, he was unable to embrace his own *endeia*, which is essential for the search, and therefore for love, to be born: accepting one's own ignorance means living in poverty, stripped off all the false images of the self that Alcibiades, a slave to popularity, did not know how to let go. Socrates, who lives in poverty and in philosophy, is the only one capable of revealing to the young man his true identity, through the game of mirrors of *Eros* that we are getting to know. Alcibiades, being "stricken and bitten by the words that philosophy brings with her", and in his "most painful part- the heart, the soul, or whatever one's supposed to call it"[115], does not know how to react to this revolutionary pain that is a real danger for the self he has grown into. When the philosopher finally prepares to speak to him, the youth, though initially confused and vaguely suspicious, seems to heed him, at least in words. Pressed by Socrates' arguments, he declares that he wants to "concern himself with justice, to follow from that moment on the beautiful things"[116] ; and that he wants to follow Socrates step by step, like a young stork caring for an elder one. The shame of himself, therefore, present in implicit touches in the *Alcibiades* and made explicit in the *Symposium*, arises precisely from the young man's inability to put into practice the promises made in theory to the enchanter Socrates. This seems to contradict Socratic intellectualism, according to which everyone does what they believe to be good. Alcibiades is aware that he is 'neglecting himself,' he feels he is not 'honouring his own offspring' but is too weak to do otherwise. Without having known his own soul, he is dragged down by political passions, avoiding as much as possible Socrates' penetrating gaze, thus fulfilling the saying "out of sight, out of

[114] Cf. Alc.I, 104a
[115] Smp. 218b
[116] Cf. Alc. I

mind."[117] Without seeing Socrates, Alcibiades can live far from what Nietzsche called the abyss, forgetting the scariest, and thus better part of himself, which disturbingly returns to surface every time he meets his lover, like an ill-concealed guilt.

Eros διαπορθμεύς: τὰ ἐρωτικά, τὰ πολιτικά

Let's now address the second term associated to Eros in Symposium 202e, "διαπορθμεύν". Literally, it means "ferryman", "one who transports from one place to another"; figuratively, it can be rendered as "translator" or "mediator." We have already discussed Eros's role as a *copula mundi* and his function as a mediator, but we have not sufficiently dwelt on his role as a translator. In fact, besides embodying the connection between the divine and human worlds, Eros's *demonic* nature also allows him to translate words and exchange messages between gods and men, who otherwise would not understand each other. Since they exist, so to speak, on distinct ontological planes—gods on that of *mania*, and men on that of *logos*—they also use different and incompatible languages. It is to fill this gap, that Eros- διαπορθμεύν comes in, with the function "of interpreting and conveying things from men to gods and from gods to men – men's petitions and sacrifices, the gods' commands and returns for sacrifices".[118]

In this way, erotic words come to assume the peculiar aspect of not being completely human, but implying an ulterior sense that is never exhausted on the sensible plane. The speeches of lovers are never just for the purpose communicating in a biunivocal way, in the way *logos* does, where things have only one sense and one talks in order to convey that precise sense. True lovers, as Plato have Aristophanes say during his discourse about the androgynous beings' myth "stay with each other throughout life, though they wouldn't even be able to say what they want for themselves from one another. For no one would suppose this to be sexual intercourse- that it is for the sake of this that

[117] In italian, the expression transaltes in an even more effectice way: "lontano dagli occhi, lontano dal cuore"; literally, "far from the eyes, far from the heart"
[118] Smp., 202e 4-5

each of the two shows such great eagerness to take pleasure in the other; it is something else that the soul of each manifestly wants, which it cannot express, but dimly grasps what it wants, and talks of it as in riddles".[119]

This beautiful passage demonstrates how those who experience eros are unable to express *ta erotika* using the language of reason; instead, they must resort to dark words, emanating from the realm of madness. Many scholars have associated this type of language with the symbol, which points to a deeper, more multifaceted level of reality, where definitions break down, and meaning transcends itself.[120] I will not delve into these complex linguistic theories here, but I will propose, in closing, a parallelism that offers an additional perspective on what has been discussed so far. In the Alcibiades I, there is a passage in which Socrates inquires the youth about what he knows, i.e. what he learnt. Alcibiades agrees with him that he knows literacy, playing the harp, he refused to learn the flute.[121]

At this points Socrates, with what Alcibiades will define in Symposium "a great pretence of seriousness, quite in his characteristic and unusual fashion"[122] , asks him whether the Athenians in council deliberate about how to spell words. What Socrates wants to stress here about the themes discussed in council, which he proceeds to do in all this section 106-109, is explained in other words by Aristoteles in the Nicomachean Ethics. It is worth to mention the integral passage, that reads: "There is no deliberation about those branches of knowledge that are exact and self-contained, e.g. about spelling (for we don't hesitate over how to spell). Instead, the things that we deliberate about are those things that come about through us, but not always in the same way, e.g., about matters to do with medicine, or making money. And we deliberate more about navigation than we do about gymnastic training, since navigation is not such an exact branch of knowledge... And we bring in other people to advise us (συμβούλους) for important matters, where we do not trust ourselves to settle them correctly." [123]

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[119] Smp., 192 c-d
[120] Cf. Jung, Heidegger, Otto
[121] Cf. Alc.I, 106a
[122] Smp 218e
[123] Ar., EN 112a34-b11. Cf. N.Denyer, Plato (2001): *Alcibiades*. Edited by Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

The things that are discussed- and worth of discussion- in council, *ta politika*, are, in short, not one-faced, but are rather ambiguous. They are polysemous, have multiple meanings: they require to have a deep understanding of justice. Topics as war, peace, public finance- all mentioned in 107d- require skill in deliberation, to make oneself sensitive to the varied demand of circumstances. One who wants to master these topics, cannot thus stick only to logos, which was considers from Heraclitus' time as principle of order, closely related to logical norms; they have instead to research deeper into reality, and inquire it many times, and research for the true understanding of things "*which aren't sticks or stones*", i.e., are not of common sense[124]. Alcibiades did not understand yet that, for the very fact that there are wars since the beginning of known times about topic of justice and injustice - "You have heard the Odyssey and the Iliad recited.")[125] – it would not be possible for him to have learned about this topic from the public at large. The fallacy in the youth's argument, as suggested by Socrates, is that he reduces justice to injustice on the same plane as language, that is, to a set of rules in which, univocally, a given juxtaposition of letters corresponds to an object. Reasoning in these terms, he comes to the mistaken conclusion that anyone could have taught him what is right and wrong, and thus virtue, just as he was toughed Greek as a child.[126]

Virtue, however, is not exclusively to give within the realm of the *logos*, which, as we have seen, is the seat of reason and biunivocal language; instead, it can be traced through a continuous, collective search, subject to the admission of one's own ignorance. In other words, similarly to *eros*, political virtue has not only to do with already fixed human norms, but also with truth, which belongs to the domain of divine madness. In conclusion, the awareness on *ta erotika*, which distinguish a *spirit-like* man from a *vulgar* one (Diotima-Socrates states in Symposium 203a), also open a gateway to a deeper knowledge of *ta politika.*

[124] Alc.I, 111b1-c1.
[125] Ibd., 112b
[126] Cf. Alc. I, 111a1

4. Conclusion

Towards the end of Socrate's speech in the Symposium, Plato has him-Diotima tell: "Marvel not then at the love which all men have of their offspring; for that universal love and interest is for the sake of immortality."[127]

The aim of this work was that of investigating the human longing towards the immortality, and "what is good forever". I tried to collect the traces that in the platonic frame connects care, to self-care (*epimeleia heautou*), to self-knowledge, to eros, to universal care. Following the steps of Socrates and Alcibiades through the *Alcibiades I* and the *Symposium,* it is possible to find a way between these concepts and individuate *eros* as fundamental cornerstone of knowledge. The dialogue soul to soul becomes the logical-experiential place of care, where through the other we are able to meet ourselves: Alcibiades, having realized, through dialogue with Socrates, his own ignorance, could remedy this:"'What should one do if one becomes aware of this?" he asks; and Socrates: "One must answer questions, Alcibiades. If you do this, … you and I will become better"[128]. "The revelation (*epiphaneia*) will not occur except through me."[129]

What is here desired is a revelation' of ourselves to ourselves which, then, occurs precisely in dialogue, that is through the questions, refutations, and answers that, already a form of our own thought, we exchange in the concrete relationship with the other.

In conclusion, Socrates and Alcibiades are thus not "masters of love"[130], and their relational journey towards the full development of their souls stays incomplete. Nevertheless, they still offer readers today a perspective on a possible path that leads to collective care, and to that existence within a community which, according to Plato, corresponds to personal flourishment.

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[127] *Smp,* 208b
[128] Alc. I 127e5-7
[129] Alc. I 124c10-11
[130] Diotima, Smp. 208c

I wish to conclude with an ancient tale about care, included by Heidegger in his "Sein und Zeit" to draw upon it his ontological interpretation of "Sorge als Sein des Daseins".

"Cura cum fluvium transiret, videt cretosum lutum sustulitque cogitabunda atque coepit fingere. Dum deliberat quid iam fecisset, Jovis intervenit. Rogat eum Cura ut det illi spiritum, et facile impetrat. Cui cum vellet Cura nomen ex sese ipsa imponere, Jovis prohibuit suumque nomen ei dandum esse dictitat. Dum Cura et Jovis disceptant, Tellus surrexit simul suumque nomen esse volt cui corpus praebuerit suum. Sumpserunt Saturnum judicem, is sic aecus judicat : [198] 'Tu Jovis quia spiritum dedisti, in morte spiritum, tuque Tellus, quia dedisti corpus, corpus recipito, Cura enim quia prima finxit, teneat quamdiu vixerit, Sed quae nunc de nomine eius vobis controversia est, homo vocetur, quia videtur esse factus ex humo"[131]

"Als einst die Sorge über einen Fluß ging, sah sie tonhaltiges Erdreich: sinnend nahm sie davon ein Stück und begann es zu formen. Während sie bei sich darüber nachdenkt, was sie geschaffen, tritt Jupiter hinzu. Ihn bittet die Sorge, daß er dem geformten Stück Ton Geist verleihe. Das gewährt ihr Jupiter gern. Als sie aber ihrem Gebilde nun ihren Namen beilegen wollte, verbot das Jupiter und verlangte, daß ihm sein Name gegeben werden müsse. Während über den Namen die Sorge und Jupiter stritten, erhob sich auch die Erde (Tellus) und begehrte, daß dem Gebilde ihr Name beigelegt werde, da sie ja doch ihm ein Stück ihres Leibes dargeboten habe. Die Streitenden nahmen Saturn zum Richter. Und ihnen erteilte Saturn folgende anscheinend gerechte Entscheidung: »Du, Jupiter, weil du den Geist gegeben hast, sollst bei seinem Tode den Geist, du, Erde, weil du den Körper geschenkt hast, sollst den Körper empfangen. Weil aber die 'Sorge' dieses Wesen zuerst gebildet, so möge, solange es lebt, die 'Sorge' es besitzen. Weil aber über den Namen Streit besteht, so möge es 'homo' heißen, da es aus humus(Erde) gemacht ist. «'[132]

[131] Heidegger, Martin (1967): *Sein und Zeit*. Elfte, unveränderte Auflage, Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, pp. 196
[132]Ibid., pp.196

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