Self-Knowledge in Plato

1. Introduction

Socrates’ account of the defining moment of his life, when he learned that Apollo’s oracle had declared him the wisest of men (Apology 21a¹), recalls the inscription, ‘Know yourself’, in the temple of Apollo at Delphi²:

Having heard these [words], I wondered, ‘Whatever does the God mean, and what is he riddling? For I know (sunoida) myself to be wise about nothing great or small. What then does he mean by saying that I am the wisest? For I don’t suppose he lies; it is not permissible for him.’ (21b2-7)

Socrates has (some) self-knowledge, the very thing the inscription enjoins all to acquire (which prior to Socrates’ intellectualist take on it might have been understood as ‘know your place’), yet the content of this knowledge, that he knows nothing great or small, is now being questioned by the oracle’s pronouncement that he is wisest among men. In response to this conflict between what he knows of himself and what the oracle says about him, Socrates tries to refute (elenchein) the oracle by examining

¹ References to Plato’s text are to the standard Stephanus pagination followed by both original-language editions and most translations. Translations in this chapter are all my own, but the reader may find it convenient to consult John M. Cooper and D.S. Hutchinson (eds.) The Complete Works of Plato (Hackett, 1997) for context and/or other translations.

² In Plato’s Protagoras Socrates says the ancient sages inscribed (grapsantes) their wise sayings in the temple (343b); while we might be skeptical that the ancient sages did the inscribing, Socrates seems to take for granted the existence of the inscriptions.
(exetazō/exetazesthai) those with a reputation for knowledge (21b-c). But he finds that the politicians and poets, who know nothing fine, and the craftsmen, who know only their crafts, take themselves to know about virtue when they do not (22a-e). On seeing this, he realizes that although he knows nothing fine and good, nothing of human and social virtue (20c), at least he lacks the ‘most blameworthy’ (29a-b) false conceit of knowledge that keeps one from seeking knowledge, and his awareness of his own ignorance in this matter is rare enough, and valuable enough, to earn it the title ‘human wisdom’ (23a-b, cf. 20d). This is what the oracle means by saying Socrates is the wisest among men: he is wisest in human wisdom. Socrates reckons that in examining himself and others, he is doing as the god commands him (30a, e). He considers the unexamined life not worth living for a human being (38a). Does examination itself make a life worth living, or is examination necessary for recognizing one’s own ignorance, which is a pre-condition for seeking the (‘divine’) knowledge of what is fine and good (cf. Sophist 230a-c)? We will return to this question below, in section 2.

In contrast with the Apology, the Phaedrus has Socrates saying that he lacks self-knowledge:

I am not able to know myself as per the Delphic inscription . . . whether I turn out to be some beast more complicated and raging than Typhon or a gentler and simpler animal, by nature sharing in a divine and modest lot. (Phaedrus 229e5-30a6)

Which is it, does Socrates have or lack self-knowledge?

On the assumption that the self-knowledge Socrates has ought to be different from the self-knowledge he lacks, this paper explains the differences in content between the
two kinds of knowledge, and describes the two kinds of inquiry directed at each kind of self-knowledge. We may distinguish two questions corresponding to two ways of hearing the injunction to know oneself. (1) Concerning one’s state: is one knowledgeable or ignorant? good or bad? (2) Concerning one’s capacities: what is one’s nature such that one is able to become good or bad, and knowledgeable or ignorant, viz., what are one’s capacities to inquire, desire, anger, and so on? are all of these equally essential to what one is? While an answer to (2) may be implicit in any answer to (1), several (‘early’) dialogues pursue only (1), examining various important subjects about which Socrates and his interlocutors may be knowledgeable or ignorant, and other (‘middle’ and ‘late’) dialogues pursue (2), determining the soul’s basic constituents and exploring their behaviour in different conditions. Both kinds of inquiry treat the self that is to be known (viz., the state or the set of capacities) as capable of being quite different in reality from the way it appears to itself. The answer to (2) includes the claim that the best element of the self is its capacity to know, which when it actually knows is in its best condition itself and makes the soul as a whole good, but—unlike later Platonists and many interpreters (see section 3)—Plato’s answers to (1) and (2) do not reduce the self that is known to the knowing self.

2. Knowledge of one’s state

In Plato’s Charmides, Critias proposes that temperance is to know oneself (164d), and that the person who is temperate has knowledge of what he knows and what he doesn’t know (167a). Some commentators complain that this discussion changes the
topic from knowledge of the self to knowledge of knowledge. But if Socrates’ human wisdom/knowledge of one’s own ignorance is the very self-knowledge enjoined by ‘know yourself’, this is not a change of topic, and in the Charmides, Critias and Socrates agree that knowledge of knowledge (and presumably of ignorance) causes its possessor to have self-knowledge (169e). The idea seems to be that self-knowledge, understood as knowledge of one’s own knowledge or ignorance, is an application of knowledge of knowledge and ignorance to one’s own case.

In the Charmides, Socrates argues that knowledge of knowledge and ignorance is not possible, or, if it is possible, is not beneficial—as one would expect of a virtue like temperance. How do these arguments bear on Socrates’ knowledge of his own ignorance (Apology 21b), and his practice of cross-examining others to test their knowledge or ignorance? In the relevant passages of the Charmides, Critias proposes (and Socrates elaborates):

(1) Self-knowledge is knowledge (epistêmê). Although all the other knowledges are about something other than themselves (166a), temperance/self-knowledge is uniquely of itself and all the other knowledges (166e5-6).

The knowledge of knowledge Critias is describing is not a second-order knowledge that a person with first-order knowledge of some particular subject-matter, e.g. medicine,

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possesses in virtue of possessing that first-order knowledge. Rather, just like any first-order knowledge, knowledge of knowledge is treated as independent of any other (body of) knowledge, and is what it is in virtue of its subject-matter, in this case, knowledge.

(2) A knowledge of itself and all other knowledges would have to be a knowledge of non-knowledge as well (as e.g. medicine, knowledge of health, is also knowledge of sickness). (166e7-8)

(3) Only the possessor of this knowledge of knowledge and of ignorance can know whether he himself or anyone else has knowledge or not. (166e-67a)

(Here the words, ti tis oiden kai oietai, eiper oiden, kai ti au oieitai kai men eidenai, oiden d’ou clearly echo Socrates’ account of the way in which he is the wisest, Apology 21d).

Socrates counters:

(4) The ability to know knowledge and ignorance is sui generis (atopon, 165c4, 168a10) among abilities: there is no sight that is of itself and other sights but not of color, similarly for sound, desire, fear, opinion . . . (167c-68a)

(5) Knowledge is knowledge of something because of the sort of power it (viz. the knowledge) has, as a result of which (hôste) it is of (viz. can grasp) that thing. (168b)

(6) Similarly, the greater is greater than something because of the sort of power it has, as a result of which it is greater than the smaller. (168c)

(7) If the greater were greater than itself it would also be less than itself.

(8) In general, anything that has a power over itself in relation to itself (pros heauto) will also have that nature which is had by the object over which it is a power.
(168d1-3) E.g. if sight, the object of which is color, is itself to be seen, sight must be colored.

(9) But how are we to determine whether all powers are over something distinct, or there are some that can be of themselves? (170a)

The issue is whether all powers are like relative magnitude (e.g. being greater than), which relate relata of contrary natures (the greater, the smaller) and so preclude the power from being related to itself—for that would require it to have contrary natures (168e). Knowledge would not be like this if, e.g., the key feature of the objects of knowledge that makes them knowable is their immateriality and unchangingness, at least if knowledge (or the subject of knowledge qua knower) is essentially immaterial and unchangeable.4

A possible lesson of (1) to (9) is that Socrates’ knowledge of ignorance should not be thought of as knowledge (epistêmê), strictly speaking, for that would have to be of what its object is (i.e. the object’s nature), and the same knowledge would have to be of both its object and the opposite. Perhaps, instead, it should be thought of as some sort of

4 Annas “Self-knowledge” suggests, ‘knowledge of knowledge peters out because there is no way of interpreting it as knowledge of something in the way Socrates requires; and it is clear that the requirement can only be met if knowledge is conceived of as a relation between a subject and a distinct object, existing separately from the knower’ (135). But the requirement isn’t for subject and object to be distinct, but rather, for subject (qua having a given power) and object to have natures such that the power is a ‘fit’ for both subject and object.
recognition or awareness, which need not be of opposites;\textsuperscript{5} sight, after all, is of color but not of the absence of color. Socrates goes on to argue:

(10) Supposing knowledge of knowledge to be possible, knowledge of knowledge (as distinct from knowledge of some particular subject-matter, like medicine or shoe-making) would enable its possessor to know \textit{that} someone is knowledgeable, but \textit{not of} what he is knowledgeable (170a-c).

How can the knowledge of knowledge enable the knowledge or recognition that someone is knowledgeable independently of any knowledge (recognition) of the subject-area over which this someone is knowledgeable? Perhaps the thought is that the person with knowledge of knowledge knows what knowledge is (or, more in line with the idea that knowledge of knowledge and ignorance is a recognitional ability, knows knowledge to be unerring and of what is, cf. \textit{Theaetetus} 152c). Might this enable him to identify other knowers without knowing their special subject-matter? It’s hard to see how: would he cross-examine them? About what? Even if they prove irrefutable, this does not establish them as knowledgeable. Without answers to these questions, it is difficult to determine whether the \textit{Charmides} upholds or corrects Socrates’ assumption in the \textit{Apology} that despite his ignorance about things great and small, he is able to identify the

\textsuperscript{5}Hugh Benson ‘A Note on Socratic Self-Knowledge in the \textit{Charmides}, \textit{Ancient Philosophy} 23 (2003), 31-47. Benson argues that whereas knowledge must be of opposites, mere awareness need not be. Benson takes the \textit{Charmides} arguments to show that Socrates, since he lacks knowledge, can only recognize ignorance, not knowledge; this corrects Socrates’ assumption in the \textit{Apology} that cross-examination enables him, while being ignorant himself, to identify both ignorance and knowledge (33, 40-45).
knowledgeable as well the ignorant. Further, these considerations also raise the question whether, by cross-examination, Socrates is only be able to establish *that* the person refuted is ignorant, not what his ignorance is—contrary to his judgment in the *Apology* that he, the politicians, poets, and craftsmen, are ignorant of human and social virtue.⁶

However, even granting the possibility of knowledge that someone is knowledgeable or ignorant without knowledge of what he is knowledgeable or ignorant about, Socrates argues next:

(11) Knowledge of knowledge, and mere knowledge that someone is knowledgeable, would not be beneficial, as befits a virtue like temperance, for it is by knowledge-what that one identifies an expert in a given area: e.g., it is by medicine that one knows whether one (oneself or another) knows the healthy and the sick, and such knowledge-what is the thing that would enable us to remove error from our lives by assigning tasks to the relevant experts. *(Charmides* 169b, 171b-72a).

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⁶Charles Kahn, ‘Plato’s *Charmides* and the Proleptic reading of the dialogues’, *Journal of Philosophy* 85 (1988), 541-49, concludes that these arguments show that one may only have knowledge of knowledge or ignorance, or ‘second-order’ knowledge, in case one has first-order knowledge of the subject-matter which defines a branch of knowledge. For, Kahn argues, Socrates’ success at identifying his interlocutors’ ignorance presupposes his possession of knowledge in the domains on which he examines them—viz., matters of human excellence and good and bad, generally (546-48).
Socrates lacks this beneficial knowledge.\textsuperscript{7} The thin knowledge of ignorance and knowledge Socrates is supposed to have in the \textit{Apology}, although rare, necessary for the pursuit of knowledge, and in cases like Socrates’ actually motivating the pursuit of knowledge, is no very great thing. Perhaps Plato means to show Socrates refusing Critias’ aggrandizing offer to make him a paragon of temperance. Perhaps he means to credit Socrates with modesty—not the virtue proper, but a ‘human modesty’.

It’s time to step back and ask: while it makes intuitive sense that knowledge of one’s limits—including one’s ignorance—should be a part of self-knowledge, why does Socrates focus on knowledge of one’s knowledge and ignorance to the exclusion of practically everything else? What about knowing one’s likes and dislikes? values and goals? Why does Socrates not inquire into these in the pursuit of self-knowledge (or to get others to pursue it)?

There are two parts to the answer. First, as Plato tells Socrates’ story, Socrates seems initially to have acquired that part of self-knowledge that is knowledge of his knowledge and ignorance as an unintended (albeit natural) consequence of his wide-ranging pursuit of knowledge about the way things are, not because he sought self-knowledge in the first place. In Plato’s \textit{Phaedo}, Socrates says that as a young man he was keen on the study of nature, but it led him to unlearn even the ordinary knowledge he previously had, as a result of which he hypothesized Forms and examined their

\textsuperscript{7}Cf. Richard McKim, ‘Socratic self-knowledge and “knowledge of knowledge” in Plato’s \textit{Charmides}’, \textit{Transactions of the American Philological Association} (1985), 59-77. McKim adds that this beneficial knowledge cannot be attained by Socrates’ methods of cross-examination; I don’t think the text speaks to this question.
consequences and possible grounds (96a & sq.). Plato’s *Parmenides* shows a young
Socrates discovering the many problems with this hypothesis as he is cross-examined by
Parmenides. Socrates likely also cross-examined other people even before the oracle
(likely in the 430’s BCE and before war broke out in 431). Nicias says that it was only as
a child (*pais*) that Socrates didn’t question you and make you give an account of your
whole life (*Laches* 187d-88a); in the 430’s Socrates would already have been in his 30’s,
more than a decade past childhood.⁸ A reason for him to cross-examine other people
before the oracle is suggested by the *Protagoras* (dramatic date c. 433 BCE), where
Socrates (at least initially) cross-examines Protagoras to determine whether he has the
knowledge that would qualify him to teach Hippocrates virtue. This is a sufficient reason
to cross-examine someone even without a god-given mission to expose people’s
ignorance. Finally, the fact that Socrates pursues the question ‘what does the oracle
mean?’ by trying to refute (*elenchein*) it with the example of someone wiser than himself
(*Apology* 21b) suggests that he is familiar with the practice of pointing out contradictions
in order to motivate a deeper interpretation (cf. *Protagoras* 339a-48a). As a consequence
of his pursuit of knowledge, Socrates becomes aware of his ignorance, and presumably of
the ignorance of some others, but it is the oracle’s judgment that makes his purported
wisdom and experienced ignorance itself an object of inquiry for him. Nor are Socrates’
post-oracle cross-examinations only for the sake of exposing ignorance. Thus in the
*Charmides*, Socrates assures Critias that he refutes Critias’ statements for the same reason
he would refute his own: lest he think he knows something he does not, *and* for the sake

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⁸ This is why Nicias can’t be talking about the beginning of Socrates’ ‘elenctic mission’
of the truth, which is a good common to mankind (166c-d). And in the Gorgias, he tells his Gorgias that he would rather be refuted than refute, for being refuted would deliver him of a false belief (458a). So Socrates’ focus on knowledge of one’s own knowledge and ignorance is a consequence of his pursuit of knowledge in the first place.

Second, Socrates seems to think that the way to knowledge of what we believe or value is to cross-examine ourselves as we would in order to inquire into the truth about things, for we don’t (otherwise) know what we believe. For example, in the Gorgias Socrates says Polus denies (ouch hős ge phēsin) that doing what one sees fit is having great power, even as Polus says that he affirms it (phēmi) (466e); Socrates says Polus (and everyone else) believes that doing injustice is worse (for the agent) than suffering it, even as Polus insists that suffering injustice is worse (474b; cf. Diotima telling Socrates that he says love is not a god, contrary to Socrates’ plain assertion that love is a god, Symposium 201e-2d).

9 Tad Brennan ‘Reading Plato’s Mind’ (forthcoming, Keeling Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy, ed. Fiona Leigh) argues that the ‘autobiographical’ Letter 7 presents Plato as concerned with a thicker kind of self-knowledge (than knowledge of one’s own knowledge or ignorance) when he cites his beliefs and values to explain his plans and justify his conduct with respect to both Dionysius, tyrant of Syracuse, and Dion, once their friend and then Dionysius’ nemesis. This explanation form—actions in light of values—is similar to that found in the character-sketches in Republic 8 and 9. I’ve come to the conclusion that such accounts don’t require self-knowledge—they are available to the massively self-deceived as well, for all they require is that what seem to one to be one’s beliefs and values seem to explain one’s actions.
Socrates’ method of cross-examination explains why one might reasonably conclude that people don’t know what they believe. The schema of a Socratic examination is as follows: Socrates asks the interlocutor a question, to which the interlocutor replies with some $p$ (where usually this is because $p$ seems to him to be how things are, although sometimes $p$ is a hypothesis granted for the sake of inquiry). Socrates elicits from the interlocutor further assertions $q$, $r$, $s$, $t$ etc., and then shows that these assertions entail $\neg p$. Socrates then asks the examinee which of $p$ or the other assertions he wishes to revise, or tells him that $p$ has been proved false, or that, contrary to his avowal that $p$, he has been shown not to believe that $p$. What warrants the last of these claims is that presumably the interlocutor hasn’t all along been holding $p$ and $\neg p$ firmly in view (interlocutors are routinely surprised or annoyed by Socrates’ cross-examination), but has been ignoring $q$, $r$, $s$, $t$, or what follows from or is presupposed by them or by $p$, and paying attention only to some of these. In such a situation the interlocutor doesn’t know what he believes, not only in the sense of ‘all the things he believes’ but also he doesn’t know, about any of the specific beliefs $p$ or $q$, $r$, $s$, $t$, whether he believes them or not—if believing it involves accepting its entailments, acting on it, etc. In a sense, what one does believe is determined (produced as well as discovered) by finding out what to believe through cross-examination.

However, inconsistency detection falls short of identifying which member(s) of the set, $p$, $q$, $r$, $s$, $t$, the interlocutor does and doesn’t believe, so how can Socrates know this about his interlocutor, rather than just that somewhere in him lies some ignorance? We might think that Socrates’ dialectical skill enables him to identify which beliefs an interlocutor is committed to because they are entailments of things he already believes,
but entailments by themselves don’t settle which of two conflicting beliefs the interlocutor believes. Does Socrates say what people believe on the basis of his experience examining people and finding no-one can hold on to certain beliefs? Or because he believes that the truth lies within each of us and he has some kind of handle on this truth?¹⁰

Our discussion so far has treated cross-examination of an interlocutor as the same sort of examination one might conduct on oneself, and indeed Socrates says that both can happen in the same conversation. However, Raphael Woolf observes that the dialogues never stage Socrates examining himself—except in the **Hippias Major**, where a

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¹⁰ Gregory Vlastos, in ‘The Socratic elenchus: method is all’ in *Socratic Studies*, ed. Myles Burnyeat, (Cambridge, 1994), 1-37, argues that since inconsistency detection cannot determine what the interlocutor believes, Socrates must be making a ‘meta-elenctic assumption’ based on long experience, viz.: ‘whoever has a false moral belief will always have at the same time true beliefs entailing the negation of that false belief’ (25). From this assumption Socrates ‘could infer securely that any set of moral beliefs which was internally consistent would contain exclusively true beliefs’ (26). Socrates’ own beliefs are internally consistent, so he can attribute them to his interlocutor even contrary to the interlocutor’s avowals. In the *Meno*, Plato develops the theory that we already possess all knowledge in some latent form, so that what we call learning is really just recollecting what we already knew (81a-86b), in order to secure Socrates’ ‘epistemologically naïve’ assumption (28-29).
'someone' who turns out to be Socrates questions Socrates and critiques his answers. Woolf explains this absence by arguing that cross-examination of beliefs requires distance from the beliefs examined but believing makes such distance impossible. So I cannot both believe that $p$, and genuinely be open to $p$’s being false, at the same time. (To believe that $p$, on this view, is to believe that $p$ is true—as opposed to, for instance, to be answerable for $p$, or to judge $p$ more likely than the alternatives.) But this makes Socratic self-examination impossible. Woolf worries that his argument makes a mystery of how Socrates comes by his knowledge of his own ignorance in the first place (103-7), but we need not be mystified. First, Socrates describes thought as a silent discussion that the soul has with itself about the objects under consideration (Theaetetus 189e-90a), and having Socrates speak his thoughts out loud to himself would undermine verisimilitude. Second, in his discussions Socrates engages with many cognitive attitudes other than beliefs so committed they can’t be examined without losing their status: e.g. the hypothesis that virtue is knowledge and its consequences (Meno 87b & ff.); the appearance, from one perspective, that the good person is the one able to do $F$ and not-$F$ when he wants, even though the contrary appears from another perspective (Hippias Minor 372d-e, 376c); the impression of temperance that possession of this virtue produces in the mind of the temperate person (Charmides 159a). So, third, if Socrates needs to examine a firmly held belief of his own, he should be able to temporarily weaken his commitment to its truth and consider it as a hypothesis or appearance if this is necessary for open-minded cross-examination. But, fourth, it is not even clear that cross-

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examination requires this, since we may believe quite strongly both p as well as the q, r, s, t which (escaping our notice) entail not-p; once we notice this, however, even if we weren’t previously open-minded, our new awareness of our ignorance can open our mind.

3. Knowledge of one’s capacities

Following his confession of ignorance of whether he is ‘more complicated than Typhon’ or ‘simpler . . . [and] sharing in a divine . . . lot’ (Phaedrus 229e-30a) Socrates argues that all soul is immortal (245c-e) and then gives an account of what the human soul is like in structure, likening it to a winged chariot, drawn by two horses that represent the appetites and anger, and driven by a charioteer that represents reason (246a-56e). Later in the Phaedrus, Socrates explains that the soul, as a natural thing, should be studied according to ‘the method of Hippocrates and the true account’: for each thing, determine whether it is simple or complex; if complex, enumerate its simples; for each simple, determine its power to act, and on what, and its power to be affected, and by what (270d). The arguments for the division of the soul in Republic 4 and 10 show that a thing may be analyzed into simples by considering cases in which its opposed attitudes or movements require positing distinct subjects to be the bearers of these attitudes or movements (436b-41c); to determine the powers to act and be affected of each simple, it would seem, requires considering each simple in different circumstances: e.g., embodied—in humans, virtuous as well as vicious, in non-human animals—and disembodied. Republic 4’s cases of opposition divide the soul into three: an appetitive, angry, and reasoning part.

These texts may seem to have answered Socrates’ question about what he is by nature, yet at the end of the Republic Socrates says that for the soul to be known as it is in
truth, it should be considered separated from the body (whereas the discussion has so far considered the embodied soul, bringing up cases of psychological conflict and character-types from experience), and in its love of wisdom (611e-12a). He privileges one condition and one activity—philosophy—for determining the true nature of the soul and suggests that among the questions that will be answered by studying the soul’s philosophy is whether it is simple or multiform.

Myles Burnyeat has proposed that the *Timaeus* and *Phaedrus* explore the two alternatives sketched in this passage of the *Republic*, of an essentially simple, rational soul, and an essentially tripartite one. The *Phaedrus* depicts the human soul as tripartite in both its embodied and disembodied conditions (246a-56e), but in the *Timaeus* the soul is purely rational prior to (its first) embodiment, and it is human embodiment that provides the occasion for tripartition (42a-b, 43a-44b, 69c-72d). We can take this suggestion further. Both dialogues are following the *Republic*’s instruction to ‘look at the soul in its love of wisdom’, viz., in its activity of contemplating Forms (*Phaedrus*) or being/becoming rational by understanding the rationality of the cosmos (*Timaeus*). In looking at the soul in its philosophy, the *Timaeus* is looking at how things must be set up—in the world, and locally, in the body—to give an embodied soul the opportunity to do philosophy and thereby return to its simple condition, whereafter its understanding seems to be just like that of the soul of the world. And the *Phaedrus* is looking at both what a complex soul’s motivations must be for philosophy to be possible, and how philosophy affects the various motivations of a complex soul. Plato warns that the

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Phaedrus account is not of what the soul’s constitution is, but of what it is like (246a), and that the Timaeus account, the subject of which is a likeness of a model and, as such, unstable, is itself also unstable (29b-c). Neither dialogue decisively answers the question, ‘is the soul simple or complex?’; rather, one begins with the assumption that the soul is simple and the other that the soul is complex, and both explore some consequences for the soul’s philosophy. What does receive an answer of a sort is the question of what the capacities are of each of the simples (on the different hypotheses) relevant to the soul’s philosophy.

The famous image in the Republic of the human soul as a composite of a human being, a lion, and a many-headed beast (588b-e), with the rational part of the soul as the human being within, likewise points in two ways. On the one hand, the rational part is the human being. On the other hand, Socrates remarks that because the human body is a likeness of the human being within, those who see only the outside and not the inside have the (incorrect) appearance (phainesthai) of a single human animal (588d10-e1).

I want to suggest, in closing, that Alcibiades I also directs us to ‘look at the soul in its philosophy’ in order to know itself, with philosophy described somewhat less commitally than in Timaeus and Phaedrus, as ‘looking at all the divine, god and understanding’ (133c). 13 In Alcibiades I, Socrates supposes that to know how to care for

13 While I don’t want to stake out a position on the authenticity (or not) of this dialogue, I do want to note that all the elements of its account of self-care and self-knowledge are found in the uncontroversially authentic dialogues Phaedo, Gorgias, Theaetetus, Republic. Some will see as doctrinal convergence favouring authenticity, and others, as
ourselves and make ourselves better, we need to know what we are, as enjoined by the Delphic oracle (128e-29a). He reasons that since the person is not the body, but rather the soul that uses and rules the body (130c), the injunction to know ourselves means that we should know our souls (131e). And the way in which we come to know ourselves is suggested by analogy with how an eye comes to see itself: by looking at the part of itself by which it sees, reflected in the eye of another. Similarly, we come to know ourselves by knowing that part of our soul by which we know, for that is where wisdom, which makes a soul good, comes about (132d-33c, cf. 130d-e).

It may seem that here at least Socrates identifies the true self with the subject that engages in inquiry and achieves knowledge, committing himself on the question so carefully but inconclusively explored in the Republic, Phaedrus, and Timaeus. Yet Socrates doesn’t need to say this to answer his initial question, viz., ‘how shall we make

favouring skepticism on the grounds that these loci are the sources of the pastiche that is Alcibiades I:

(1) The care of the soul is connected with the pursuit of wisdom and truth (Apology 29d-30b).

(2) Socrates is not his body (Phaedo 115c-16a), and so must be his soul.

(3) The soul is akin to and knows the pure, eternal and unchanging Forms it knows; this soul is ruler over the body (Phaedo 79d-80a).

(4) The soul is the proper subject of perception, using eyes, ears, etc. as its instruments (Theaetetus 184c-e).

(5) Knowledge of the soul’s true nature is to be found by looking at the soul in its love of wisdom (Republic 611d-e).
ourselves better?’ (128e-29a), for that is answered by, ‘by attending, caring for, and being guided by the part of the soul in which wisdom, which makes the soul good, comes to be’ (133b). Nor does he need to say it to answer ‘what are we?’ in a way that is relevant to answering that initial question, for if there is some part of us cultivation of which makes us good, it doesn’t follow that we are just that part. In fact, thinking that we are only that part could obscure knowledge of our moral and intellectual state, as well as of any internal challenges we might face in becoming good, whereas acknowledging that we are composed of a better and worse part (if we are) would empower our aspiration to be good and enable a more accurate description of our state, good or bad (cf. Republic 430e-31a).

And in fact Socrates does not answer the question ‘what is the self?’ by ‘the subject of knowledge/inquiry’ in Alcibiades I. Like the Republic, Phaedrus and Timaeus, Alcibiades I apologizes for the imprecision of its account of the soul. Alcibiades I’s condition for greater precision about the self is knowledge of what ‘itself’ is, not just, as in the present discussion, what each self (auton hekaston) is (130c-d); however, the fact that the soul more authoritative (kuriōteron, 130d5) than anything else in us suffices to identify the soul with the self, which is user and ruler of the body and its possessions. All this suggests that although further precision about what the self is is possible, it will not be found in this discussion. In this case, we should not expect the eye analogy to precisify what self is any more than ‘soul’ (cf. 132b: we’ve answered that question). What the eye analogy does instead is to suggest how we should pursue the question, ‘what is soul?’: just as an eye sees itself by looking into another eye and in particular at the pupil, the best part of the eye, the part with which it sees, so too, a soul will know itself by looking at that good-making part of a soul in which wisdom comes to be (133a-
b). Certainly the eye won’t see itself at all if it looks at some non-reflective part of the face or eye, and the pupil is the part of the eye responsible for the eye’s best (and indeed defining) activity, seeing. But it would be a mistake to conclude that the eye is the pupil. Similarly, if we don’t pay attention to the wisdom-seeking part of our soul we will miss what our soul—distinctively, and importantly—is; we will miss the defining capacity of human beings. But it doesn’t follow that other parts or capacities are in any sense not us.  

As to how we come to know the wisdom-seeking part of the soul, the eye analogy suggests—as we might expect from the Republic’s ‘observe the soul in its philosophy’ and the Phaedrus’ ‘of each simple, observe what it acts on and is affected by’—

Alcibiades I directs us to the activity and objects of wisdom.

Many modern readers of the Alcibiades I have remarked that it treats self-knowledge as (in Annas’s words) ‘not of the paradigmatically subjective, the embodied individual; [but rather] of the paradigmatically objective, so that the true self turns out to be God, the ultimate reality’. But viewing Alcibiades I’s self-knowledge in the context of dialogues that pursue self-knowledge in the sense of knowledge of one’s soul, which is a set of capacities one has qua human, its objective and universal (rather than subjective

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14 A recent expression of this (widespread) view is in Paulina Remes’ claim that the proper object of self-knowledge is the subject of thought and reasoning, not the mover of the body (although the boundary between self and world is complicated by the fact that the self’s instruments include body, language, and reasons). See her ‘Reason to Care: The Object and Structure of Self-Knowledge in the Alcibiades I’, Apeiron 46 (2013), 270-301, at 285.

15 Annas, ‘Self-Knowledge’, 133.
and individual) answer comes as no surprise. Individuals differ in their states, not their capacities.

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