

**Michael Griffin (tr.)**

*Olympiodorus, On Plato First Alcibiades 10-28.* London: Bloomsbury, 2016. Pp. 231.

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With this second volume, Michael Griffin ['G.' hereafter]'s translation of Olympiodorus' *Commentary on the Alcibiades* in the Ancient Commentators on Aristotle series reaches its completion. G. has taken on the thankless task of the translator with commendable enthusiasm, thoroughness and accuracy; the resulting volume is, like its predecessor, a labor of love that began under the tutelage of Robert Todd at the University of British Columbia, in G.'s undergraduate days (see 'Preface'). As is common for the series, an arsenal of scholarly tools supplements the translation itself: (1) an introduction; (2) a list of textual emendations; (3) explanatory notes (at an impressive number of 509, taking up 33 pages); (4) a bibliography; (5) a Greek-English Glossary; (6) an English-Greek index; and three indices, of (7) passages cited, (8) names, and (9) subjects.

Running to 31 pages, the introduction aims to complement the more wide-ranging one in the first volume, but also offers a self-standing preliminary account of Olympiodorus as a philosopher and his main concerns in the second half of the *Alcibiades* commentary. It lays out the importance of the *Alcibiades* in the Neoplatonic curriculum and sketches the main interpretative grid that ancient commentators such as Proclus and Damascius imposed on Plato's text, namely their theory that philosophical excellence is to be acquired and refined through a series of hierarchically ordered stages.<sup>1</sup> G.'s account of this theory of a 'scale of the virtues' (pp. 4-12) is one of the most philosophically sensitive and lucid treatments of the subject known to this reviewer.

G.'s translation, based on the second printing of Westerink's (1956) Greek text and supplemented with only a few emendations by G. himself or earlier editors such as Creuzer, is of the highest quality. It presents a readable and accurate rendering of Olympiodorus' Greek, while taking pains to approximate the lively, colloquial tone of Platonic dialogue wherever the *Alcibiades* is quoted in the commentary. The translator's sometimes generous use of square brackets for English supplements to the Greek might not be to everyone's taste,

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1 The only quibble one might have with this part of the book is the brief allusion to Plotinus' treatise 'What is the living being and what is man?' (*Ennead* 1.1) on p. 14: here, the reader could gain the mistaken impression that Plotinus endorsed, rather than critiqued, the definition of the self as 'soul using the body as an instrument'.

but the intention behind them is laudable: it is to give the reader a clear idea what is explicitly stated in the text and what is not.

I conclude this review with some comments on the interest of the volume as a whole. In the portion of the dialogue that Olympiodorus discusses from lectures 10-28, the young and dashing Alcibiades makes the transition from double ignorance (thinking that he knows what he does not know) to simple ignorance under Socrates' questioning; he is then encouraged to take care for his self and, in the concluding section of the dialogue, assisted in this endeavor by the reciprocal love between both interlocutors. Olympiodorus' commentary, while rarely profound, includes interesting reflections on the nature of Socratic dialectics. According to Olympiodorus, Socrates, as questioner, does not assert any premises, but instead 'supplies the construction [of the syllogism] and its conclusion' (*In Alc.* 99.19-20).<sup>2</sup> Socrates' activity, however, is not confined to this role, and Olympiodorus recognizes that actual teaching also takes place in the dialogue (*In Alc.* 117.1-10).

Two passages of particular philosophical interest are (1) the discussion of political self-knowledge in lecture 20 and (2) the excursus on the nature of friendship in lecture 27. Following Damascius' lead, Olympiodorus defines the dialogue's overarching philosophical theme or *skopos* as 'political self-knowledge', where 'political' (*politikos*) refers primarily to the internal arrangement of one's psychic constitution. Given Alcibiades' ambitions to rise to prominence among his peers, however, the political (in the wider sense of the word) subtext of the work is not lost in the commentary; Olympiodorus in fact devotes several suggestive pages to an analysis of the statesman's knowledge in terms of the Aristotelian quartet of material, formal, efficient and final causes (*In Alc.* 177.2-188.10).

In his discussion of Socrates' and Alcibiades' amorous relationship (see *Alcibiades* 130d-133c), Olympiodorus suggests that levels of self-knowledge beyond knowing oneself as a political person are intimated in the dialogue. Specifically, these are purificatory and contemplative self-knowledge, or knowing oneself 'in the act of liberation from the affections' and knowing oneself 'as liberated' from them (cf. *In Alc.* 172.7-9). For Olympiodorus, Alcibiades' communion with Socrates' soul opens the door to these higher forms for him and provides a metaphysical explanation how love can lead to an awareness

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<sup>2</sup> All quoted translations are by Griffin.