

Foucault's subject and Plato's mind: A dialectical model of self-constitution in the *Alcibiades*

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Albert Joosse

Utrecht University, The Netherlands

Abstract

In this article I engage with Foucault's reading of the Platonic dialogue *Alcibiades* in his *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, developing his view that this text offers a model of the self-constitution of the subject. Foucault's reading is part of his larger aim to find alternative conceptualizations of subjectivity besides the Cartesian ones that he thinks have dominated modern thought. His reading has been contested; but I argue that the *Alcibiades* does indeed develop a notion of subjectivity as reflexive and self-constituting. Moreover, two aspects of the text that Foucault misrepresents make even clearer the distance of its notion of subjecthood from a Cartesian view. First, the reflexive subject of the *Alcibiades*, though viewed as essentially intellectual, is the result of an ascetic practice of self-constitution. Second, this practice is essentially interpersonal, operating through reciprocal and equal dialectic.

Keywords

Alcibiades, dialectic, Michel Foucault, self-constitution, subjectivity

Introduction

The last phase of Michel Foucault's philosophical work was devoted to what Foucault called the relation between subject and truth. In various places, including in his last lecture series at the Collège de France in 1984, he presented this as the logical completion of a triad of concerns in terms of which he interpreted his philosophical career: concerns

Corresponding author:

Albert Joosse, Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Utrecht University, Janskerkhof 13, Utrecht, The Netherlands.

Email: L.A.Joosse@uu.nl

around veridiction or the conditions of the possibility of discourses; concerns around power and its structures; and concerns around the subject and the relation it has with itself. None of these, Foucault emphasized, ought to be studied in isolation from the others; together, they make up philosophy.¹ This retrospective structuring straightens over what many consider a surprising shift in Foucault's work, one towards the individual subject and its care of itself and towards a methodological treatment of major texts from Greco-Roman antiquity that is close to traditional philology.² It is not my aim in this article to assess Foucault's claim about the coherence of this turn to the subject with his previous work, although what I have to offer might serve as part of the groundwork that makes such assessment possible. Instead, I will explore to what extent the ancient material that Foucault turned to formulates views and strategies that can further Foucault's project, an exploration that will confirm Foucault's intuition that this material can contribute to a critical alternative in today's politics by opening up new ways of conceiving of subjectivity and its production.

Foucault has presented the Platonic *Alcibiades I* as the seminal text for the tradition of self-care in ancient thought.³ He describes this care of self as an attitude in which people consciously shape the way they regard the world, others and themselves, and mould themselves in order to be able to act and react in particular ways. Forms of self-care exist much earlier than the *Alcibiades*, Foucault argues, but what we find in this dialogue for the first time is an actual philosophical *theory* of self-care.⁴ In line with this, Foucault is most interested in the fact that the *Alcibiades* makes self-care a central topic of philosophical reflection, more interested at any rate than in the specific form of self-care that is recommended in the dialogue.

As we will have occasion to note in this article, Foucault's reading of the *Alcibiades* and his use of ancient Greek philosophy more generally have not gone unchallenged.⁵ Among the elements that have been considered anachronistic is Foucault's suggestion that the *Alcibiades* features the idea of a subject's self-constitution. Criticisms of this kind have been to some extent justified, as we will see. Nevertheless, the *Alcibiades* in particular does advance ideas that are close to Foucault's concerns. The suggestion I would like to put forward here is that Foucault was right to see in the *Alcibiades* a theoretical description of a self-care that involves genuinely reflexive self-constitution. However, this description is to be found in the rational and dialectical shape that self-care receives in this dialogue, rather than in the general investigation of self-care that Foucault would like to detach from it.

A further aspect in which the *Alcibiades* is more Foucauldian than is brought out by Foucault's own reading of it is the interpersonal character of the self-care that this dialogue advocates. Foucault limits the role of the classical (above all Platonic) tutor to the transfer of knowledge, in contrast to the Hellenistic-imperial tutor, whom he accords an essential role in the active working on the subject by which the subject constitutes itself. As I will try to demonstrate, the *Alcibiades* describes the process of becoming what one really is as mutual formation through dialogue. This text is therefore not only a better witness to the indispensability of the other in ancient self-constitution than the texts that Foucault adduces; it also outdoes Foucault in its critical distance from a model of self-sufficiency we would conceptualize as Cartesian.

Foucault's programme

Situated at the beginning of his 1981–2 lectures at the Collège de France, Foucault's interpretation of the *Alcibiades* is in some sense, like the dialogue itself, propaedeutic, and very much programmatic. Together with the *Apology*, the *Alcibiades* serves as the first material by means of which Foucault develops a number of fundamental themes and oppositions that underlie the project of his last lecture courses.

According to Foucault, western philosophy has been dominated by a concern with self-knowledge. This has hidden from view the importance of self-care, which in ancient philosophy was actually more important than self-knowledge. The dominance of self-knowledge has to do with what Foucault calls the 'Cartesian moment'. From this moment, the basic idea of philosophy has been that the subject has access to truth just by being a subject.

In ancient thought, however, the subject needed to be transformed in order to access truth. Foucault calls this pattern 'spirituality'. This transformation may come from without, but the subject may also transform itself. Hence the importance of self-care.⁶ Foucault has repeatedly emphasized the correlation of forms of power, regimes of stating what is true, and the forms of subjectivity that suit those forms and regimes. Against the background of the possibility that modern modes of governmentality and scientific discourse dictate, from without, particular forms of how to be a subject – interventions that hide behind the illusion of an immediately accessible self-evidential truth – Foucault wants to unearth the idea of self-care in order to provide an alternative understanding of what it is to be a subject.⁷ New ways of relating to oneself may produce new behaviour and new societal forms. More fundamentally, in Foucault's view someone's relations with others depend on 'his' relation to 'himself'. The subject's relation to himself, he argues, is the ultimate point of resistance to political power. The ancient project is politically important.⁸

Foucault's reading of the *Alcibiades*

As noted, the *Alcibiades* is significant for Foucault as the first text that philosophically analyses self-care. Techniques that serve to shape the self, indeed a whole regimen of them, predate the dialogue.⁹ Here, however, we find an actual theory of self-care. At the same time, this theory gives a particular slant to self-care and to the exercises that belong to it. These lose importance to the extent that they are not subordinated to the philosophical goal of self-knowledge. In Foucault's view, the 'Platonic moment' reconfigures the system of self-care in the service of self-knowledge.¹⁰

The *Alcibiades* describes the encounter between Socrates and Alcibiades, at a moment, the dialogue tells us, when Alcibiades is about to start his political career by speaking to Athens' political assembly. Through a number of examples and scenarios, Socrates convinces Alcibiades that he has no real understanding of anything that may be of service to the Athenians. When Alcibiades finally admits to his ignorance, he tries to get away with the thought that it does not matter, since his Athenian competitors have no clue either. Socrates finds this a shameful sort of excuse, and points out that if Alcibiades is serious about wanting to rule not just Athens but the whole world, his real

enemies will be the Spartans and the Persians, of whom Socrates gives a glowing report in terms of their education, wealth and power. Alcibiades' only chance against such enemies is a superior expertise (123d3–4, 124b2–3).¹¹ That vision finally convinces Alcibiades that he should improve himself, and so he asks Socrates how one should care for oneself (124b7).

It is easy to detect in the text of the *Alcibiades* itself the moment when the injunction to care for oneself is taken up one level to a consideration of what self-care consists in. For Foucault this is the decisive moment. It comes when Alcibiades once again admits that he does not know what he is talking about and that he is in a very sorry state (127c6–8). Socrates reassures him that he is still young and therefore still able to care for himself (127d9–e3).¹² At that moment Socrates does not proceed to give Alcibiades concrete instructions how to care for himself. Rather, he alerts Alcibiades to the risk that one may unawares care for something else rather than oneself. He thus raises the question what caring for a thing consists in. And this requires us to know what that thing itself is (127e9–128a3).

This leads us into the heart of the investigation of self-care. It is important for Foucault to observe that this analysis consists in two questions. First we must establish what we ourselves are; then we can describe what care we should give ourselves.¹³ The first question, who we ourselves are, is addressed, in Foucault's view, in the well-known argument that the soul is the human being. In this argument, Socrates gets Alcibiades to agree that the human being should be identified with that which acts, rather than with that which is being used as an instrument in action. When they also agree that the body is also in a way an instrument through which the soul acts, the conclusion is that the human being is strictly speaking the soul (129c7–130c3). The second question, how we should care for this, is addressed in what I will refer to as the mirror passage (132c7–133c7). Just as an eye is mirrored in the best part of another eye and so can see itself, in the same way a soul must turn towards what is best in a soul in order to know itself.

Let us focus for now on the first question. The way this question is posed is significant, Foucault believes. Having observed that Alcibiades must take care of himself, Socrates does not ask: How does one care for a human being? This would not have been a strange question, since Alcibiades is obviously a human being. Instead, Socrates asks what this 'self itself' is. In Foucault's words:

[O]ne must know what this *heauton* is, what this 'oneself' is. Not, then: 'What kind of animal are you, what is your nature, how are you composed?' but: '[What is] this relation, what is designated by this reflective pronoun *heauton*, what is this element which is the same on both the subject side and the object side?' ... 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?¹⁴

It seems, then, that in Foucault's view the question is not just about who or what Alcibiades the human being is. Nor is it just a matter of language that the question that Socrates poses employs the reflexive pronoun *heauton*. Rather, when he paraphrases the question to be about the 'relation', Foucault suggests that this reflexivity is part of what the question is about.

The end of this citation makes clear that Foucault considers this to be a central question in any analysis of self-care.¹⁵ Whenever we ask about the object of such care, we must not just ask about a given thing that happens to be caring for itself. Rather, its role on both the active and the passive side of care is part of what makes that thing what it is.

We will return to this issue of reflexivity shortly. Closely connected to it is the idea of agency that Foucault emphasizes. As we saw, he thinks that the question about the self is not one about the composition of a human being. When Socrates and Alcibiades find that the answer to the question is 'the soul', we should therefore not understand this to refer to some substance. What we find is not the soul as substance but the soul as subject.¹⁶ The dialogue is interested in the soul as that which acts. In the argument in the dialogue particularly: the soul that acts through the body.¹⁷

That brings us back to the question of reflexivity. In Foucault's view, self-care is genuinely reflexive. It is the same thing that is actively caring and that is being cared for.

Foucault also seems committed to saying that the self that is object of care is itself in an important way reflexive. We may distinguish this a little more sharply than Foucault himself does: it is one thing to say that self-care is essentially reflexive; it is quite another to say that the self cared for in self-care is essentially reflexive. Foucault seems committed to this second claim.

This makes sense against the background of what Foucault calls spirituality. An important element of this, as we saw, is that the subject is transformed by love or by self-exercise. So the background to this investigation of self-care, as Foucault reads it, is the idea of a transformation that gives the subject access to the truth about itself – the idea that you become yourself through self-care.

That idea may make it plausible that the self that we become through self-care is as reflexive as that self-care. The reflexivity of the self, or the subject, would in this light be the consequence of reflexive self-care. If we formulate this in terms of purpose, rather than of consequence, we can appreciate something of the political pertinence of this idea of self-constitution. One engages in the reflexive activity of self-care precisely in order to become a subject that constitutes itself, rather than a subject that is constituted by external forces.¹⁸ But this, I should note, is not something Foucault makes explicit in his reading of the *Alcibiades* itself.¹⁹

Foucault distinguishes the questions about self-care that the *Alcibiades* raises from the answer it proposes. The theorization of self-care and the conception of a self-constituting subject that in Foucault's view comes with it have a future in Hellenistic philosophy in particular. We can separate them clearly from the Platonic solution of self-care.

Foucault makes it very clear that this Platonic solution is to subordinate self-care to self-knowledge.²⁰ When the question about the self in self-care has been answered and Alcibiades asks how one should care for it, Socrates cites the Delphic precept that one should know oneself. The mirror passage explains how this is possible.²¹

In this passage, Socrates explains to Alcibiades that it is with our soul as it is with our eye. If an eye wants to see itself, it must look into another eye. There, and more particularly in the pupil – Socrates calls this the best part of the eye, the part with which we see – the eye will see the image of itself. In the same way, Socrates says, a soul that wishes to see itself must look into a soul, and more particularly into what is best in the

soul. It is knowledge, as the principle that makes the soul what it is, that the soul must turn to if it is to know itself, as Foucault rightly emphasizes.²²

Critical voices

Foucault conceived his project as in part a criticism of modern conceptions of what it is to be a subject. It has in turn been criticized as reading modern conceptions of subjectivity into his ancient texts. Two points recur in particular: that Foucault interprets these texts as speaking about subjects and that in elaborating an individualistic constitution of the self he ignores the universalistic tendency of ancient ethics.

Let us begin with the last point. Foucault's project, it is said, isolates the moments where ancient authors speak of their own situation from the universal order to which these authors orient themselves, as if the form that self-care takes is up to us.²³ This pattern is indeed evident when we read Foucault. The question is, however, to what extent he is justified in isolating one aspect of self-care – that people apply techniques to transform themselves – from the particular shapes this takes in antiquity – shapes that follow a set model. In fact, Foucault does at times speak of the universal anchoring that ancient philosophers give to self-fashioning; for instance, when he calls it a reproduction of an ontological order.²⁴ At such moments, Foucault does seem to recognize the difference between the universality of ancient models that he has little use for and the practice of self-care on the part of the individual that he is interested in.

A more important criticism seems to be that Foucault misconstrues the aim that ancient philosophers had in working on themselves. This aim was not to form themselves into individual works of art, as one sometimes gets the impression when reading Foucault, but to transcend their individuality. That is, not only is self-care bound to a pattern that is independent from me, it also aims to make me part of a universal order that transcends my subjective me, often identified with the divine.²⁵

This is probably a serious problem for Foucault. Let us here restrict ourselves to the *Alcibiades* and Foucault's treatment of it. On the one hand we find in this dialogue a clear reference to the divine. In the final sentence of the mirror passage Socrates says that self-knowledge requires knowledge of 'all the divine'.²⁶ Later neo-Platonist readers interpreted this as an indication that the divine is located within the human soul (see, for example, the 6th-century commentary of Olympiodorus at 217.17). Modern interpreters who develop this element of the text think that what is meant is a god outside the human intellect; for instance, the universal reason that regulates the movements of the heavenly spheres (e.g. the influential Brunschwig, 1996). In either case, the divine is not something up to us – the shaping of the subject has a set terminus.

On the other hand, in its focus on Alcibiades and his political ambitions this text also emphasizes the difference between Alcibiades and other people. Socrates emphasizes that self-knowledge is the prerequisite to knowledge of others and their interests, and describes it as the source of good action. While adhering to something like a universalist model for imitation, the text is in some way individualistic in its appeal: it is Alcibiades who must care for himself and improve himself.

Still, on the whole it seems reasonable to say that Foucault has made his ancient models seem too individualistic, or too individualistically minded, to make them

recognizable ancient thinkers. Let us turn now to the thought that Foucault has transformed them into modern subjects rather than ancient actors.

Using the term 'subject' or 'the self' in connection with this dialogue all too easily brings with it unwelcome modern connotations.²⁷ Talk about subjects and subjectivity, however, may cover many things. There is the idea of uniqueness, of being different from others (close to 'individual'). There is the idea of being the private owner of one's feelings. There is the idea of an essentially self-conscious thing. And there is the idea of being the author of one's actions.²⁸

Foucault himself announces explicitly that 'subject' is our modern term to refer to that which the dialogue investigates and which in the dialogue is distinguished from the issue of how to define the substance that is (or has a) human nature. Decisive for this distinction is that Socrates searches for what is active in self-care.²⁹ This is an important insight, I think. The lens of the investigation shifts from the object of improvement and the techniques that may most effectively handle that object to the agent that carries out this improvement on itself. What makes this technique of self-care special is that carer and cared-for are the same; consequently, Socrates sets about finding the proper object to care for by looking for the source of action, the subject of care.

Talk of subjects in this context has little to do with privacy of feelings. Nor is the idea of being a unique person central to Foucault's project, as we just saw. Foucault is concerned with the subject as the author of its actions. To the extent that he can show that this activity is also part of what Socrates is inquiring after, I think Foucault is entitled to use the term 'subject'.³⁰

Foucault also seems to make use of the idea that a subject is aware of itself, perhaps even essentially so. In his view, when Socrates asks what it is that we ourselves are, and that we ourselves should care for, he highlights the active element in us as something that should be object of its own care. In other words, as something reflexive.

This idea has come in for criticism too. It has been observed that the phrase *auto to auto* that Foucault appeals to does not signal any such reflexive relation.³¹ The precise interpretation of this phrase is controversial: some take it to refer to the formal aspect of being something itself rather than something else (e.g. Denyer, 2001 *ad* 129b1; Gill, 2006: 349–50), others take it as an intensifying expression of the question what we ourselves are (e.g. Brunschwig, 1996: 66–9; Annas, 1985: 130–1). But it seems indeed clear that this phrase does not by itself refer to or describe a reflexive relation. It picks up on the *auto* of a few lines earlier (129a8, where it simply means 'it' or 'that'). The whole of the phrase means something like 'it itself' or 'the itself itself' – by means of which Socrates indicates that he wants to focus on this thing, rather than anything else that may block our view because it is often associated with what we are interested in. It should be said, however, that it is still far from clear what this phrase does refer to. It is a very strange phrase in Greek, and in this use it is not paralleled in the Platonic corpus.³² Moreover, it is not so clear that Foucault really does want to say that this phrase by itself casts the self as essentially reflexive. What he may mean is that it refers to something that is in fact essentially reflexive.

More closely to Foucault's concerns, however, it has also been questioned whether it is the active principle itself that Socrates puts forward as the object of its own care. Instead of self-constitution, one could ask, is this scenario not rather the familiar one of a rational principle that should order the rest of the soul in a proper fashion?³³

I think Foucault has difficulties maintaining that self-care is reflexive in a proper sense when such care is directed towards the non-rational aspects of the soul. And this seems to be one consequence of decoupling self-care and self-knowledge. At the same time we should see that for Foucault this is only half a problem. The government of self that he is interested in and the ancient instances that he invokes are self-care in the traditional sense: it is government of passions, of desires.³⁴

Still, the problem remains to the extent that Foucault does look for a genuinely reflexive relation to oneself. In our text, however, I think we may properly speak of reflexive self-care, and perhaps even of a reflexive self, as I will now argue.

The Platonic *Alcibiades* and reflexive self-constitution

It is important to see that the argumentative movement of the *Alcibiades* does not stop at the idea that the soul is the human being.³⁵ Socrates labels this answer as reasonable but imprecise, and promises a precise answer, which to all appearances he gives in the mirror passage.³⁶ There he says that the object of our attention should be the best in the soul of another. And this is 'the place where wisdom comes about'.³⁷ Socrates calls this the most divine thing about the soul. He thus connects this idea to his earlier statement that the soul is what is most determinative about us.³⁸ In other words, wisdom is cast as the determinative principle in us. This agrees with Socrates' approach in identifying who we are: we are that which uses and rules within us.

As Foucault recognizes, the *Alcibiades* squarely identifies self-care with self-knowledge. Socrates does not speak of a regimen or exercises that ought to get Alcibiades into shape. Caring for oneself is getting to know oneself. This has an important consequence. When self-care is about disciplining lower domains of the soul, real reflexivity may be absent. But this self-care that is identical to obtaining knowledge must direct itself to knowledge as the best thing in the soul.

I think it is this aspect that makes the Platonic solution a genuine instance of reflexivity. Alcibiades' identity is knowledge, a knowledge that he comes to know through the knowledge of Socrates. The text specifies that he will not know himself and so care for himself as well as he ought if he directs himself to other aspects of the soul. The object of his self-knowledge must therefore be this, we would say intellectual, activity of the soul. Socrates also uses the language of activity in his comparison when he singles out the best part of the eye as the object of the reflexive gaze. It seems to me that it is here, rather than around the phrase *auto to auto*, that this dialogue really makes clear that self-care/knowledge is an activity directed at itself.

The idea expressed in the dialogue that self-knowledge is the first knowledge, prior to any other knowledges, allows us to go even further. It is when Alcibiades gets to know himself as knowledge that he will become knowledgeable – in a sense, he becomes the object of his knowledge only when he is a subject of knowledge. Since Socrates has identified this knowledge as Alcibiades' ultimate identity, it is only then that Alcibiades fully becomes himself.

The self-transformation described in the mirror passage is not an instantaneous process. In the model of the *Alcibiades* as well as that which Foucault develops through 1st- and 2nd-century texts, it requires work and continuous exercise.³⁹ Socrates

emphasizes this ascetic aspect of coming to know oneself in three ways. First, he makes clear that Alcibiades' transformation is not achieved in and through the conversation that they are having. Near the end of it, Socrates insists that Alcibiades must keep on getting to know himself in order to become his virtuous self. Second, Socrates describes this process as one in which Alcibiades must turn away from the interaction with the Athenian people and its misleading attractiveness and turn towards the interaction with Socrates. This turning of the self is also a process that has a certain duration, and which risks failure along the way – in his last words Socrates expresses his fear that the Athenian people will win this struggle. Finally, Socrates repeatedly emphasizes that he himself also stands to benefit from the process by which Alcibiades gets to know himself. We will explore the implications of this for the nature of self-care below. For now, however, it suffices to note that these remarks show the self-transformation Socrates advocates to be something that one should engage in throughout one's life.⁴⁰

What all this suggests is that the *Alcibiades* offers us a view of genuinely self-constituting subject-hood. However, it is the rationalist version that turns self-care into self-knowledge which allows for truly reflexive self-formation. In the *Alcibiades*, moreover, this epistemic orientation does not deprive the process of its ascetic character. On the contrary, the acquisition of self-knowledge through dialectic requires exercise throughout one's life.

Self-constitution and the other

In the final part of this article, we turn to the context in which this reflexive self-constitution is developed in the *Alcibiades*. The dialogue thematizes the relation between Socrates and Alcibiades as the framework in which self-care takes place. This is especially interesting in view of Foucault's attempt, in his lectures, to describe the version of self-care of the 1st and 2nd centuries CE as requiring a master who is involved in the subject's exercise on himself.

Foucault devotes a whole course, that of 27 January 1982, to the question of '*l'Autre*'. He states as a general rule that the process of self-exercise that aims at the self requires the intervention of another.⁴¹ The greater part of the course describes the different forms that this intervention takes in the 1st and 2nd centuries. Foucault differentiates, for instance, between the philosophical school with its varied audience as a 'Hellenistic type' and the private counsellor as a 'Roman type'.⁴² He pictures the variety of private counsellors, in partial prefiguration of his lectures of 1982–4 on *parrhêsia* [frankness] and governmentality, as ranging from Euphrates, the relatively unphilosophical teacher of Plinius, through Seneca's building on existing relations of *amicitia* [roughly: friendship] to guide others, to the relation between Emperor Marcus and his mentor Fronto.⁴³

Against the background of this array of possible advisory roles, Foucault's justification of his claim that self-exercise must always involve another as tutor turns out to be quite meagre. Of his two key witnesses, a text by Musonius that he cites does not in fact exist, while a letter by Seneca states both that no one can escape *stultitia* [foolishness] by himself without the help of another and also that some people can.⁴⁴ It is indeed hard to find firm evidence that Hellenistic schools like the Stoics held that moral perfection is impossible to reach without the intervention of another.⁴⁵

The *Alcibiades* receives surprisingly little attention at this point in Foucault's lectures. Foucault does take it as a given that the general formula about the essential role of the tutor does also apply to the situation described in the Platonic dialogues generally. Within the brief compass of half a page, he even gives a typology of that type of tutorship, which he divides into three subcategories: the example; the teacher; and the figure of Socrates as the person who shows you that you are ignorant. Foucault groups these together as a Socratic type of *maîtrise* that functions through memory and is fundamentally concerned with leading the subject from ignorance to knowledge.⁴⁶ Neither does the typology seem specifically based on the *Alcibiades* nor does Foucault seem to have it apply to this dialogue more particularly than to others.

While Foucault gives a careful analysis of the self-care that is discussed in the *Alcibiades*, he leaves the role of Socrates vis-à-vis Alcibiades in relative obscurity. In the course of 27 January 1982, the duality of the mirror passage and its implications for the pedagogy of the *Alcibiades* remain unmentioned. In later texts, Foucault even appears to have read the passage as not involving another at all. In his words, the central concern for the soul is for it 'to turn its eyes towards itself'.⁴⁷ Here, the remedy that Socrates proposes is taken to be introspection of some kind.

I think this is a missed opportunity on Foucault's part. But before I work out the dual aspect of self-care in the *Alcibiades*, let us briefly consider why Foucault gave so little attention to it. One possible reason may have been that he considered the role of the other in the Socratic dialogues to be a theme too well known to discuss. However, when Foucault was lecturing, the central role of self-care in many ancient philosophical texts had been relatively neglected in contemporary scholarship,⁴⁸ so that an investigation of Socrates' place within this would have been far from superfluous. After all, Foucault's taking the *Alcibiades* seriously as a philosophical contribution was itself something relatively rare in the early 1980s.⁴⁹

Another possible reason for Foucault to neglect the role of Socrates as the other in the *Alcibiades* is more internal to his work. As we have seen, Foucault partly frames the Platonic approach to self-care as subordinating it to the purely epistemic business of self-knowledge. The Platonic model thus becomes a foil against which Foucault can set out the more ascetic, self-constituting version of self-care he finds in the 1st- and 2nd-century texts. Indeed, he seems to refer to the Platonic model later on when he contrasts the constitutional role of the tutor in the Hellenistic model with the role of someone who merely transmits knowledge that comes to occupy the place of ignorance.⁵⁰ The role of Socrates, it seems, is too epistemic for Foucault to consider its specifics. Now, the Platonic Socrates would be the last person to equate learning with the filling-up of an empty vessel.⁵¹ Consider only the laborious process of giving birth to theories as Socrates describes it in his image of midwifery in the *Theaetetus*, where it is his interlocutor, not Socrates himself, who is the source of any wisdom that might possibly emerge. In other words, in my view, Foucault was quite mistaken in grouping together the Socratic type of mastery with the mastery by example and the mastery of the teacher. Perhaps as an unfortunate result of this, Foucault has blinded himself to the deeply interactive way in which the *Alcibiades* conceives of self-care.

The *Alcibiades* gives us in fact an interesting model that incorporates key aspects of Foucault's programme. On the one hand, it spells out the idea that someone else is

needed.⁵² On the other hand, it requires this someone else for the subject's self-constitution. The *Alcibiades* here has the features that Foucault wants to detect in the Hellenistic cases. The subject's self-constitution occurs in the encounter of those two centres of potential thought that realize this thought in their dialectical exchange.

As noted before, the *Alcibiades* starts with the encounter of Socrates and Alcibiades, the latter about to make his debut in Athenian politics, and continues with Socrates' progressive attempts to make Alcibiades care for himself. In order to understand how Socrates frames the relationship between the two of them, let us note how Socrates introduces himself to Alcibiades. He explains that he has for a long time been observing Alcibiades and his treatment of the other lovers, who have now disappeared. All of them failed and fled away, because Alcibiades thought of himself 'that he was in no respect in need of any man' (104a1–2). In fact, however, Alcibiades is very much in need of Socrates, because without him, he cannot bring to an end all the plans that he has and cannot acquire the power that he desires (105d3–4, e1–5).

When we next ask what Alcibiades needs Socrates for, the dialogue first confronts us with one of its most marked ideas: if Alcibiades needs Socrates, the reverse is true too. The central passage here is the following:

So let us consider together in what way we may become as excellent as possible. Mind you, I am not arguing that you need to be educated and I don't. There is no respect in which I differ from you except one. – Which? – My guardian is better and wiser than Pericles, your guardian. – Who is it, Socrates? – A god, Alcibiades, that did not let me speak to you before today. Trusting in him I also say that his apparition will occur to you through nobody but me. – You are joking, Socrates. – Perhaps. But I am telling the truth that while all of us human beings need care, the two of us do most of all. – Well, it's not a lie that I do. – Nor indeed that I do. (124b10–d5)

We may leave aside the difficult issue of the identity of the god Socrates talks about here and elsewhere in the dialogue, although it may be helpful to note his close association with wisdom and thought in the mirror passage. We should note in this text that at the very moment when Socrates considers how Alcibiades may become better through him, he points to the fact that he himself is just as much in need of improvement as Alcibiades. Socrates counts himself among the needy, that is, among those who need another to reach their best state. And yet he does not suggest that he and Alcibiades join up to go to some other expert. Rather, it is through their mutual help that they will be able to care for themselves. This emerges from a further text:

What must someone do who perceives this [that he is in a bad state], Socrates? – Answer the questions, Alcibiades. And if you do that, if god wishes it, if my predictions are to be trusted at all, you as well as I will have it better. (127e3–5)

In this text too, we find that at the very moment when Alcibiades asks how he may improve – what does he need Socrates *for* – Socrates responds in terms of their joint need for improvement. Differently from the previous text, however, Socrates not only describes himself as in need of improvement, but links his improvement to Alcibiades'

role with respect to him. Moreover, Socrates describes the way in which this improvement is to come about. The process of self-care, which is described in the mirror passage later in the text, is here briefly summarized as the asking and answering of questions. In the usual Socratic way, any 'education' that is going on here is clearly no mere transfer of knowledge. The different roles of Socrates and Alcibiades as questioner and answerer, respectively, should not obscure their equal dependency and their equal progress through dialectic.⁵³

This state of mutual dependency clarifies the position of the mirror passage. The clear face-to-face dualism on the eye-side of the comparison is not an accidental feature but carries over into the soul-side of the comparison. Alcibiades needs his tutor Socrates to obtain a full relation with himself, as Foucault would say, and the same is true for Socrates.

That reciprocity is also marked through the dialogue's treatment of the erotic aspect of the relation between Socrates and Alcibiades. Foucault has analysed well in the *Use of Pleasures* that the typically Platonic contribution to the debate about *erôs* is its breaking-up of the dominant-passive dichotomy to construct a reciprocal erotic relationship.⁵⁴ In the *Alcibiades*, the mirror passage, with its clear erotic component, functions on a reciprocal basis; the partners see eye to eye. The love theme culminates in the all but last exchange of the dialogue, in which love and guidance are linked closely together:

[Alcibiades speaks] And I will furthermore say this, that we risk exchanging positions, Socrates, I taking yours and you mine. There is no way that I won't tutor [will be *pai-dagôgos* to] you from this day on, and you will be tutored by me. – Then my love won't differ from a stork, excellent boy, if having hatched a winged love on your side it will be cared for [*therapeusetai*] by it in return. (135d7–e3)

The erotic response comes with a corresponding care. Socrates started out as the lover who cared for Alcibiades and tried to make him care for himself too. At the end of the dialogue, Alcibiades has turned into a lover too, whose self-care involves care for Socrates as well. Moreover, this care is clearly a long-term, life-shaping affair. Alcibiades has not suddenly been improved, Socrates has not now reached perfection; they have to work towards it. Their prolonged and repeated questioning and answering is their stylization of existence.⁵⁵

Conclusion

As we have seen, the best state of a human subject as envisaged in the *Alcibiades* is clearly intellectual. Foucault concluded that the role of the tutor in the *Alcibiades* is merely to transfer knowledge, know-how. It is clear by now that this seriously underestimates the role that this dialogue accords to reciprocal interpersonal interaction. It is only through interaction that thought and wisdom develop and that human subjects attain their real and best shape.

Rather than being circumscribed from without by a regime of allegedly self-evident truth, therefore, the Foucauldian subject that we can reconstruct through the *Alcibiades* must work to constitute itself as knowledge and does so by interacting in thought and

talk. On a wholly different level than discussed earlier, therefore, Foucault's reading of the *Alcibiades* appears to be too Cartesian – too static and too self-sufficient – to capture its full force for his own project. In this dialogue, first, the epistemic orientation of self-care does not preclude the need for self-transformation. The development towards thought as the highest shape of the human being is, in Foucault's terms, both erotic and ascetic.⁵⁶ Socrates and Alcibiades will be each other's tutors in the future; they will continue to work on themselves. And so, second, the intellectual amelioration of these individuals proceeds through an exchange of thought, through talk. A full relation to the self leads through the other.⁵⁷ The *Alcibiades* thus offers us an alternative to Foucault's asymmetric practice of *parrhêsia*: self-exercise through reciprocal communication.

In his last lecture courses, Foucault returned to the basic ancient idea that through self-government one can come to govern others. Although the aim of this article has not been to provide a detailed discussion of the relation that Foucault sees between self-care and government of self, the interpretation of the *Alcibiades* that I have offered has clear implications for this governmentality of self and indeed of others.⁵⁸ The reflexive understanding that Alcibiades must develop in communion with Socrates not only constitutes him as a subject but also qualifies him as a political agent, as Socrates goes on to argue in the dialogue. In this way, the *Alcibiades* offers a model in which close relations with others are the incubators of a governmentality of self and others.

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Notes

1. 2009: 10, 62–5; and, in the lecture course of 1982–3, 2008: 4–8.
2. See, for example, Vegetti (1986).
3. To be precise, Foucault thinks there are widespread techniques of the self before Plato, but these undergo a decisive reorganization through Plato, amounting to the first philosophical appearance of the care of the self (Foucault, 2001: 50). The dialogue is called *Alcibiades I* or *First Alcibiades* to distinguish it from another dialogue in the Platonic corpus that is also called *Alcibiades* (*Second Alcibiades*). I am concerned only with the former, to which I will for that reason refer simply as *Alcibiades*.
4. It contains 'la théorie même de la souci de soi' (32, also 46).
5. A good overview of the reception of volumes 2 and 3 of the *History of Sexuality* can be found in Larmour, Miller and Platter (1998), esp. pp. 23–8.
6. See in particular Foucault (2001: 16–18). A whole series of related oppositions runs through this work, on which see Jaffro (2003: 70).
7. As an alternative to the way in which sciences (including the humanities) have provided more or less constraining descriptions of what subjects are and can and cannot do, or the way in which institutions have determined subjects' self-understanding, to mention two directions that Foucault's earlier work has taken. Miller (2007: 216–17) indicates another direction of

resistance in connecting self-knowledge with capitalism. Jaffro (2003: 53) emphasizes that Foucault's view of antiquity as both far and near makes it a suitable location for a contemporary alternative.

8. '[I]l n'y a pas d'autre point . . . de résistance au pouvoir politique que dans le rapport de soi à soi' (2001: 241, and cf. *ibid.*: 241–2). The idea that self-government is prior to and conditions governing others pervades Foucault's Collège de France lectures of 1981–4.
9. 2001: 46–50.
10. *ibid.*: 66–7.
11. For this text I use the classic reference method by page (number) and section (letter) of Stephanus' edition of 1578.
12. For Foucault it is significant that Socrates does not say that Alcibiades has still time to learn, but that he has still time to take care of himself (2001: 45).
13. Foucault (2001: 39–40).
14. Foucault (2005: 53). The French version reads:

[I]l faut savoir ce que c'est que heauton, il faut savoir ce que c'est que soi-même. Non pas donc: 'Quelle sorte d'animal es-tu, quelle est ta nature, comment es-tu composé?', mais: '[Quel est] ce rapport, qu'est-ce qui est désigné par ce pronom réfléchi heauton, qu'est-ce que c'est que cet élément qui est le même du côté du sujet et du côté de l'objet?' . . . Le texte d'ailleurs le dit très clairement: il faut savoir ce que c'est que auto to auto. Qu'est-ce que c'est que cet élément identique, qui est en quelque sorte présent de part et d'autre du souci: sujet du souci, objet du souci? (2001: 52)

15. Perhaps it is in this sense that he calls it 'méthodologique' (*ibid.*).
16. 2001: 56–7.
17. Miller (2007: 223) speaks of the soul conceived of as 'less a substance than a relationship'.
18. Foucault speaks of 'formation de soi', 'Selbstbildung' (2001: 46).
19. cf. Miller (2007: 216–18).
20. 2001: 66.
21. *ibid.*: 65–8.
22. Foucault wrote:

[L]'âme ne se verra qu'en dirigeant son regard vers un élément qui sera de même nature qu'elle, et plus précisément: en regardant l'élément de même nature que l'âme, en tournant, en appliquant son regard vers le principe même qui fait la nature de l'âme, c'est-à-dire la pensée et le savoir [to phronein, to eidenai]. (2001: 68)

23. Vegetti (1986: 929–30); Hadot (1989: 265–6); Pradeau (2002: 137, 141); Inwood (2005: 341–7), on Seneca, argues that his taking himself as an *exemplum* may give the mistaken impression that he speaks of something essentially uniquely individual.
24. Foucault wrote:

Par le logos, par la raison et le rapport au vrai qui la gouverne, une telle vie s'inscrit dans le maintien ou la reproduction d'un ordre ontologique . . . De cette existence tempérante dont la mesure, fondée en vérité, est à la fois respect d'une structure ontologique et profil d'une beauté visible, Xénophon, Platon et Aristote ont donné bien souvent des aperçus. (1984: 103)

25. Hadot (1989: 262–3); Pradeau (2002: 138–43).
26. *pan to theion gnous* (133c5).
27. Hadot (1989: 269) ('*sujet*'); Pradeau (2002: 154), commenting on Foucault's commitment to a certain interiority; Gill (2006: 347–51) ('the self'). See Gill (1990) for a more general treatment of 'self', 'human being' and related concepts in connection with ancient thought (not concerned with Foucault).
28. Cf. Gill (2006: 347).
29. Foucault (2001: 39–40): '*Qu'est-ce que c'est que ce sujet, qu'est-ce que c'est que ce point vers lequel doit s'orienter cette activité réflexive, cette activité réfléchie, cette activité qui se retourne de l'individu à lui-même?*'
30. Another sense of 'subject' is possible – when we interpret it etymologically as an equivalent of the Aristotelian *hypokeimenon*, it may refer to a bearer of an activity that in virtue of a degree of potentiality that inheres in it remains distinct from its activity. In this sense, perfect self-constitution would imply the withering away, as it were, of the subject. I owe this point to Alexis Pinchard.
31. Inwood (2005), on the question what *auto to auto* is: 'Foucault is adamant . . . that the relation of reflexivity involved in taking care of oneself is itself an independent object of enquiry, the "subject" or the "self" in a robust sense . . . Very little argument is offered in support of this' (2005: 335). Inwood is followed here by Gill (2006: 344–59; cf. Gill, 2007a: 156 and 2007b: 100–1). In a footnote, Inwood seems to imply that Foucault takes the two *autos* in the phrase as the subject and object, respectively, of a verb: 'it is the fact that subject and object are the same that makes the clause reflexive' (2005: 335, n.15, cf. *ibid.*: 338). I doubt whether Foucault meant that the clause itself is reflexive. I also do not think Foucault meant to 'reify reflexivity' (*ibid.*: 338) or detects an 'ontological novelty' (*ibid.*: 332) in the *Alcibiades*.
32. In other Platonic dialogues, the use of the qualifier '*auto*' often signals that something like a Platonic Form is talked about: it serves to single out a particular aspect, e.g. beauty, from beautiful things. Although the view that this phrase in the *Alcibiades* also refers to a Form has had defenders in the past (e.g. Allen, 1962), most commentators agree that this is not at issue in our passage.
33. Inwood (2005: 336, 338).
34. Among many texts, see, for example, Foucault (1984: 79–82), in the chapter on *enkrateia* in *L'usage des plaisirs*, where he speaks of a '*héautocratique*' relation. This is close to how Plato and Aristotle speak of self-control.
35. Foucault seems to ignore this when he says that the questions (1) what the self is and (2) what self-care consists in are answered successively (39–40 and 51). He shares with some of his critics the idea that 'the self is the human being' is the key answer to the question who we ourselves are (e.g. Inwood, 2005: 336).
36. This emerges from Socrates' methodological remarks in 130c5, c8–9, 132b6–7, c7.
37. *ibid.*: 133b9–10: *touton autês ton topon en hôi engignetai hé psukhês aretê, sophia*.
38. Denyer (2001: 218, 234–5) (notes *ad* 130d6–7 and 133c1–2).
39. Contrast Foucault's characterization of the Platonic type of conversion, which agrees more with other Platonic dialogues than with the *Alcibiades* (2001: 200–1).
40. It is not restricted to a pedagogical phase for young people, as Foucault repeatedly casts the self-care of the *Alcibiades* (*ibid.*: 74, 79–90, 197–8).
41. *ibid.*: 123: '*Pour que la pratique de soi arrive à ce soi qu'elle vise, l'autre est indispensable.*'

42. *ibid.*: 131–9.
43. *ibid.*: 144–58.
44. Foucault refers to a fragment 23 of Musonius, which does not exist. Editor Frédéric Gros suggests (p. 139, n. 2) it is fragment II.3 that Foucault means to refer to, but, as Gros also notes, that fragment concerns a rather different question. Seneca says in *Moral Letters* 52.2 that ‘no one is sound enough to rise up on his own [from the state of *stultitia*]; someone must stretch out his hand and lead him out’. However, in the next line he cites Epicurus, to all appearances in a concurring way, as saying that there are some people who are able to make their own way, and such people are highly to be praised.
45. Foucault argues that since only the *sapiens* has a full rapport with himself, the *stultus* is unable to will himself, and therefore needs another to will himself (2001: 129). This is an intriguing idea. However, apart from its absence in the sources, it illegitimately equates the confused willing of the *stultus* with the absence of a will. Nor is it clear how in Foucault’s scenario the other can make the subject will at all, how he gives him a will, so to speak. Foucault does raise this very question (*ibid.*: 130), but substitutes for it the question *who* is the mediator, to which the answer is: the philosopher – yet it remains unclear how the philosopher makes the subject will himself. In the later lectures, *parrhêsia* is treated as the privileged attitude of the philosopher-counsellor, but Foucault never explains how it impacts on this, one might say ontological, problem about the will.
46. *ibid.*: 124. Here Foucault lags behind Pierre Hadot, who wrote of the Socratic dialogue as a transformative event equal or analogous to what he calls spiritual exercises (2002: 44–7, from a paper originally given in 1974).
47. Foucault wrote (1994: 713): ‘*le problème ... pour l’âme ... est de tourner les yeux vers elle-même*’. In the lectures of 1984, he also says, looking back on his result in 1982, ‘*On trouvait là le principe que s’occuper de l’âme c’est, pour l’âme, se contempler elle-même*’ (2009: 117). In *Herméneutique du Sujet* 68, paraphrasing the passage of the *Alcibiades*, Foucault’s text does not specify whether it is itself or another soul that the soul should look into (the text of the passage itself, read in isolation, does not specify this either). On the next page, paraphrasing a passage that scholars nowadays consider to be a later addition, Foucault does use the phrase ‘*une âme semblable à la nôtre*’ (*ibid.*: 69). However, this idea remains completely undeveloped.
48. As is well known, Foucault drew on the work of Paul Rabbow, Ilsetraut Hadot and especially Pierre Hadot.
49. The *Alcibiades* has recently become a more popular topic of study among classicists and ancient philosophers again, and one might suspect that this is not wholly unconnected with Foucault. In the 1960s and 1970s, hardly anyone studied this dialogue.
50. 2001: 130, where Foucault says, in reference to Seneca’s letter 52: ‘*C’est une sorte d’opération qui porte sur le mode d’être du sujet lui-même, ce n’est pas simplement la transmission d’un savoir qui pourrait venir prendre la place de, ou se substituer à, l’ignorance.*’
51. Explicitly in *Symposium* 175d.
52. It lies in the nature of this text, as a dialogue, that we do not get an absolute theoretical assertion that it is impossible for any person to reach perfection without the intervention of another. Nothing suggests, however, that Alcibiades is an exception, or if he is, it is on the other side of the spectrum, that of someone who, more than others, would have been able to do it on his own. Besides, if even Socrates needs another, everyone does. The relationship between

- Socrates and Alcibiades is exemplary for any relationship between philosopher and pupil – although precisely this division of roles is questioned in this dialogue.
53. In his typology of the *maîtrise* of memory, Foucault was fully right to state that the Socratic *maîtrise* ‘s’exerce à travers le dialogue’ (2001: 124); however, he seems to have considered this dialogue as merely a means to achieve a filling-up of ignorance by knowledge, through memory. Note, by the way, that in the *Alcibiades* there is no mention of Alcibiades *remembering* the wisdom he acquires through dialectic. In his exegesis of the *Laches* in 1984, Foucault was close to recognizing the equality between Socrates and his interlocutors, but backtracked, noting that Socrates has the role of the master who points the way to the master that is the *logos* (2009: 141–2).
 54. Part 5 of *L’Usage des Plaisirs* [The Use of Pleasures].
 55. This longer-term perspective is also present when Alcibiades expresses his commitment to start caring about justice from this moment on, and Socrates expresses his hope that Alcibiades will complete that care too (135e4–6). The very last exchange, however, offers the sobering perspective of Alcibiades’ failure to stick to Socrates through Socrates’ prophecy – long fulfilled at the time of writing: ‘I fear, not because I distrust your nature, but seeing the force of the city, that I as well as you will be overpowered’ (135e6–8).
 56. 2001: 17.
 57. Compare here, from a psychoanalytic perspective, Leo Bersani’s thoughts on what he calls ‘impersonal narcissism’ (Bersani and Phillips, 2008: 77–87).
 58. After the mirror passage, in many ways the climax of the dialogue, Socrates presses the need for self-transformation on Alcibiades in terms that explicitly include the city: it is Alcibiades as well as the city that may or may not know themselves and act accordingly. This suggests a civic dialectic reminiscent of the philosophical discussions among the populace of the city described in Plato’s *Laws*.

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