

Specific and Generic Self-knowledge in *Alcibiades I*

A central concern of the Platonic *Alcibiades I* is self-knowledge. In this paper, I propose, first, that the *Alcibiades I* conceives of self-knowledge as comprised of a specific and a generic component. I argue, secondly, that the structure of the *Alcibiades* indicates a relationship between these two components of self-knowledge in which questions concerning what we are in general are prior to questions about our specific selves. Moreover, I demonstrate that the relationship between these two components of self-knowledge reveals a unity within the dialogue that is not readily apparent.

My initial proposal draws upon and departs from a recent contribution from Rachana Kamtekar, “Self-knowledge in Plato” (Kamtekar, 2017). Kamtekar argues that two ways of knowing oneself are considered across the Platonic corpus: (1) knowing one’s specific states of knowledge and ignorance and (2) knowing generically what one is. According to Kamtekar, *Alcibiades I* is focused only on the second, generic way of knowing oneself. While I implement Kamtekar’s distinction between general and specific self-knowledge, I argue, against Kamtekar, that the *Alcibiades I* explores each of these aspects of self-knowledge.

On my interpretation of the *Alcibiades I*, Socrates attempts to help Alcibiades grasp his own, specific states of ignorance by showing that Alcibiades wavers during elenctic questioning (113d – 118b). When Alcibiades acknowledges his ignorance, but is unconcerned, Socrates turns their investigation toward “that which we are” (*ho esmen*) in general (132b). Socrates and Alcibiades’ inquiry leads to the proposal that we know ourselves best when we grasp the part of our soul in which knowledge (or ignorance) comes about. Thus, the *Alcibiades I* treats *both* a specific and a generic aspect of self-knowledge.

The narrative sequence I recount above leads to my second proposal: that the progression of Socrates and Alcibiades’ conversation points to a relationship between specific and generic self-knowledge. We, like Alcibiades, might not be motivated to care about our specific, epistemic states

until we consider the general question “what are we?” If we learn that we are most fundamentally our states of knowledge and ignorance, we have reason to care about these states. The *Alcibiades* seems, then, to propose that the general question “what are we?” is, in this respect, prior to our investigations into our specific states of knowledge and ignorance.

I begin by proposing, in contrast to Kamtekar, that the *Alcibiades* is initially concerned with specific self-knowledge, that is, the knowledge of one’s own states of knowledge and ignorance (section I). I then offer an account of generic self-knowledge in the dialogue as the knowledge that we most know ourselves when we know the region of our souls in which knowledge and ignorance occur (section II). Finally, I propose that we find in the *Alcibiades* a relationship between specific and generic self-knowledge in which generic self-knowledge motivates concern for specific self-knowledge. In this section I respond to a recent contribution by Fiona Leigh (Leigh, 2020) by defending my view that generic self-knowledge motivates us to seek specific self-knowledge, not the other way around (section III).

Works Cited

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