# Imitation and self-examination: the later Neoplatonists on the Platonic dialogue as moral education through visualisation

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CHAPTER 5

# *Imitation and Self-Examination*
## *The Later Neoplatonists on the Platonic Dialogue as Moral Education through Visualisation*

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It has become something of a truism in contemporary Platonic scholarship that the philosophical content of Plato's dialogues should be studied in conjunction with their literary form. Ancient Platonists would have agreed.[1] They hold that all elements of a Platonic dialogue, including its literary aspects such as Plato's description of the characters that participate in the dialogue, contribute towards one single aim (σκοπός; *skopos*).[2] In this essay, I intend to explore the views of the Neoplatonic commentators on the relation between Plato's ethical philosophy and the literary format of the Platonic dialogue. I shall focus in particular, on the role of visualisation in the process of moral education. In their commentaries, the Neoplatonists call attention to the literary quality of 'vividness' (ἐνάργεια; *enargeia*) which they ascribe to the Platonic dialogue and which they believe contributed much to the moral education of the reader. They argue in particular, that the vivid depictions of both good and bad characters in the Platonic dialogues invite the reader to take Plato's ethical philosophy to heart.

I shall first briefly introduce the notion of vividness. We will then examine how, according to Platonic and modern psychology, the vivid example of good characters can help to make us better people. In the second part of this essay, we will examine the somewhat more paradoxical case of bad characters: if the vivid examples of good characters help to turn us into morally good persons, why does Plato choose to present bad characters, and in particular Alcibiades, with equal vividness? He does not

[1] Previous versions of this essay were read to audiences in London, Dublin, Leiden and Oxford. I am grateful to them for the helpful questions and comments I received on these occasions.

[2] According to Neoplatonic commentators, characters together with the setting and dramatic date of the dialogue make up its matter (ὕλη). On this matter of the Platonic dialogue, see, for example, Proclus, *Commentary on Plato's Alcibiades*, ed. Segonds (1985: 131, n. 7 to p. 8) and Sheppard (2021).

do so, one may assume, to inspire us to try to emulate the vicious life of the latter. We will find that the Neoplatonists interpret these vivid representations of bad characters as an invitation to self-examination and self-improvement on the part of the reader.

## 5.1 Good Characters

### *5.1.1 The Paradox of Plato's Literary Artistry: Imitation* (Mimesis) *and Vividness* (Enargeia)

For the ancients, art is all about imitation or *mimesis* (μίμησις). The more convincing, that is, the more lifelike, an artistic representation, be it in literature or in the visual arts, the better it is. Hence, vividness or *enargeia* (ἐνάργεια) is the hallmark of great literature. *Enargeia* refers to the capacity of an author to conjecture up images before the (mental) eyes of its audience (πρὸ ὀμμάτων), that is, to make appear things that happened in the past or somewhere else as if they are present here and now. Demetrius in *On Style* and other ancient literary critics discuss at length the techniques by means of which great authors like Homer and Lysias succeed in producing such vivid images. Because of this vividness, *enargeia* is not just a matter of visualisation, but also creates a cognitive and emotional involvement of the audience in the story.[3]

The Neoplatonists were familiar with this jargon of ancient literary criticism, as is clearly brought out by Anne Sheppard in her recent book *The Phantasia of Poetics: Imagination in Ancient Aesthetics* (London 2014). She calls attention to the following passage from Proclus' *Commentary on Plato's Republic* in which he compares the literary artistry of Plato to that of Homer:

> **T.1** Plato first of all follows meticulously the stylistic form of the Homeric *mimesis*. The characters of all those who appear in the dialogues are developed and the qualities of their lives passed on to us with a vividness (*enargeia*) equal to that with which Homer described the heroes, and both writers present their characters virtually as if they were present and expressing their own opinions and as if alive before us . . . Indeed the representation (*mimesis*) of these men moves our imagination in many ways and changes our opinions, adjusting them to the changing subject-matter, so that many are moved to cry with Apollodorus as he wails in distress, and many as well with Achilles as he laments for his friend, and at such a great distance in time

[3] I derive this information from the extensive discussion of *enargeia* by Sheppard (2014: 19–46).

> they experience the same things as those who were then present. We seem to be actually present at the events on account of the vivid (*enarge*) presentation of the things imitated, generated in us by the representation (*mimesis*).[4] Proclus, *Commentary on Plato's Republic*, ed. Kroll (1899: 1.163.19–164.7); trans. Sheppard 2014: 42–3

This passage aptly illustrates the paradoxical nature of Plato's literary craftsmanship. Good literature is persuasive *mimesis*. So, if both Plato and Homer are great literary artists, this is because they both excel in *mimesis*. Moreover, because of their *enargeia*, they create emotional involvement of the audience with the story. An apt illustration of this emotional involvement is the final scene of Plato's *Phaedo*, when Socrates drinks the hemlock. One of the characters, the above-mentioned Apollodorus, is overcome by emotions and weeps so loudly that the others, with the notable exception of Socrates himself, break down too. Plato paints the scene with such vividness that it still has the power to move modern readers. Paradoxically, however, Plato himself, in the *Republic* calls attention to the 'ancient quarrel' between philosophers and poets, which revolves precisely around the mimetic and emotional nature of poetry and literature in general. Poetry is bad because it is three stages away from the truth and appeals to and feeds the lowest part of the soul that is home to non-rational desires and emotions.[5] In fact, Socrates in the *Republic* explicitly refers to and criticises Homer's description of the weeping Achilles that Proclus here cites as proof that Plato and Homer are equally effective mimetic artists.[6] If we assume, with Proclus, that Plato intentionally triggers an emotional response on the part of his readers, the question

[4] τὸ μὲν γὰρ τῆς λέξεως εἶδος ὅπως κατ' ἴχνος συνυφαίνεται παρ' αὐτῷ τῆς Ὁμηρικῆς μιμήσεως, καὶ ὡς τὰ ἤθη πάντα τῶν διαλεγομένων ἀνήπλωται καὶ αἱ τῆς ζωῆς ἕξεις μετὰ τῆς ἴσης ἐναργείας ἡμῖν παραδέδονται, μεθ' ὅσης καὶ Ὅμηρος τοὺς περὶ τῶν ἡρώων λόγους διέθηκεν, καὶ ὡς μονονουχὶ παρόντας ἑκάτερος καὶ φθεγγομένους τὰ ἑαυτοῦ δόγματα καὶ ζῶντας παρίστησιν τούτους οὓς ἂν μιμῆται, παντὶ καταφανὲς καὶ διὰ τῶν εἰρημένων ὑπέμνησται. Καὶ γὰρ τὴν φαντασίαν ἡμῶν κινεῖ παντοίως ἡ τῶνδε τῶν ἀνδρῶν μίμησις καὶ τὰς δόξας μετατίθησιν καὶ συμμεταμορφοῖ τοῖς ὑποκειμένοις πράγμασιν, ὥστε πολλοὺς μὲν Ἀπολλοδώρῳ συνδακρύειν ἀναβρυχωμένῳ, πολλοὺς δὲ Ἀχιλλεῖ θρηνοῦντι τὸν φίλον, καὶ τοσούτοις ὕστερον χρόνοις τὰ αὐτὰ πάσχειν τοῖς τότε παροῦσιν. Οὐδὲ γὰρ ἡμεῖς ἀπεῖναι δοκοῦμεν τῶν πραγμάτων διὰ τὴν ἐκ τῆς μιμήσεως ἐναργῆ φαντασίαν τῶν μεμιμημένων.

[5] Cf. Plato, *Resp.* X.597e6–8, ed. Slings 2003: 'Then the tragedian will be this too, if he's an imitator, being three stages away from the king and the truth, along with all the other imitators?' (trans. Emlyn-Jones and Preddy 2013: 401–3).

[6] Cf. Plato, *Resp.* III.388a5–b4, ed. Slings 2003: 'Again we shall beg Homer and the rest of the poets not to portray Achilles, son of a goddess: . . . "taking the sooty ashes in both hands and pouring them over his head" (Homer, *Il.* 18.23) nor even when crying and complaining about things to the extent and in the way the poet has described' (trans. Emlyn-Jones and Preddy 2013: 229–31). Elsewhere Proclus (*Commentary on the Republic*, ed. Kroll 1899, 1.49.13–50.28) rejects the Aristotelian theory of *katharsis*, precisely because looking at emotions will 'nourish our emotional part (*to pathetikon*)', while quoting

that Plato's readers, both the Neoplatonic commentators and we moderns, face, is why Plato, given his reservations about *mimesis*, presents his doctrines in the shape of vivid dialogues.

### 5.1.2 *Platonic* Mimesis *vs. Stoic Bare (*psilos*) Rules*

Proclus believes that in the case of Plato's dialogues, *mimesis* contributes significantly to the moral education of the readers. He writes:

> **T.2** Others, then, have written technical expositions *On Duties*, by means of which they hope to improve the characters of those who are educated by them. Plato, however, sketches for us the outlines of our duties by means of the *mimesis* of the best of men. These are far more effective than the duties that are embedded in bare rules. For *mimesis* arranges the lives of its public in its own characteristic manner.[7] Proclus, *Commentary on the Timaeus*, ed. Diehl (1903: 1.16.6–12); trans. my own

Proclus here briefly alludes to the Stoic-Platonist debate on *kathekonta*, to which David Sedley first drew attention in an essay by that same title. I here briefly summarise his findings. An important element in Stoic ethics are the καθήκοντα, duties. A καθῆκον is 'that which, when done, has a reasonable justification', that is, it is in keeping with the universal reason according to which all good Stoics strive to live. According to the Stoics, these duties should be taught by means of straightforward 'rules' or 'precepts' (παραίνεσις in Greek; *praeceptum* in Latin). Platonists, even though they 'repeatedly concede that rules *can* be formulated verbally, their contention is that the personal character of the dialogue form, permitting as it does the direct portrayal of morally good behaviour, is didactically far more effective than rulebooks'.[8]

Stoics sometimes differentiate between *kathekonta* and *kathorthomata* (κατορθώματα), the latter being the actions of the Stoic sage. A *kathekon* and a *katorthoma* may very well be identical actions. That is to say, the same thing may be reasonably done by both the non-sage person and the Stoic sage. They differ in that, unlike the non-sage, the Stoic sage performs his action with real understanding. However, the term *kathekon* may also be

with approval Plato's rejection of poetry in the *Republic*. On this passage and Proclus' rejection of *katharsis*, see Sorabji (2000: 296–7).

[7] ἄλλοι μὲν οὖν περὶ καθηκόντων τέχνας γεγράφασι, δι' ὧν ἀξιοῦσι βελτίους τὰ ἤθη ποιεῖν τοὺς ὑπ' αὐτῶν παιδευομένους· ὁ δὲ Πλάτων δι' αὐτῆς τῆς μιμήσεως τῶν ἀρίστων ἀνδρῶν τοὺς τῶν καθηκόντων ἡμῖν ὑπογράφει τύπους, οἳ πολὺ τὸ δραστικώτερον ἔχουσι τῶν ἐν κανόσι ψιλοῖς ἀποκειμένων· διατίθησι γὰρ ἡ μίμησις τὰς τῶν ἀκουόντων ζωὰς κατὰ τὴν ἑαυτῆς ἰδιότητα.

[8] Sedley (1999: 138).

used in a generic sense, which covers both the reasonable actions of the non-sage and of the sage. Sedley argues that in the Stoic-Platonist debate on *kathekonta*, the term is used in this generic sense.[9] The ancient Platonic commentators, then, assume that Plato's dialogues, and the proems in particular, show us 'the exemplary behaviour of the wise, from which the non-wise too can learn'.[10] Proclus' commentaries in particular, provide examples of this sort of ethical interpretation of the proems. The discussion of the opening lines of the *Parmenides* in which Cephalus from Clazomenae, the narrator, remembers how he was warmly received by Plato's half-brother Adeimantus (Plato, *Parmenides* 126a1–4, ed. Burnet 1907) provides a case in point:

> **T.3** You see how the men from Clazomenae become attached at once to Adeimantus, who holds out his hand to them. Glaucon is present, but silent; while it is the other who greets and welcomes the visitors. What do these circumstances symbolise? It could be said that there are many lessons about duties (*ta kathekonta*) here: for example that one should be ready with help for strangers, out of respect for the daemon and god of hospitality; that the citizens should anticipate the visitor in expressions of goodwill, and in general that the stronger should be the first to run to the aid of his acquaintances; and that a man should keep a promise to the best of his ability, which is what Adeimantus seems to intend here when he announces that he will do whatever he can for the Clazomenaeans.[11] Proclus, *Commentary on the Parmenides* 666.4–15, ed. Steel (2007: 54–5); trans. Morrow-Dillon (1987: 52), slightly adapted

More examples of this sort of ethical exegesis may be found in Proclus and other ancient Platonic commentators.[12] For the moment, though, this example, to which I will return briefly below, suffices as an illustration of how reading Plato's dialogues supposedly does not only contribute to our intellectual development, but also our ethical upbringing.[13]

[9] Ibid. (132–3). [10] Ibid. (134).

[11] Ὁρᾷς ὅπως οἱ ἐκ Κλαζομενῶν ἥκοντες ἄνδρες προσεχῶς ἀντέχονται τοῦ Ἀδειμάντου καὶ οὗτός ἐστι τὴν χεῖρα ὀρέγων αὐτοῖς· καίτοι καὶ ὁ Γλαύκων πάρεστιν, ἀλλὰ σιωπῶν, ὁ δὲ καὶ ἀσπάζεται καὶ ξεναγεῖ τοὺς ἄνδρας. Τίνων οὖν ταῦτα σύμβολα; Λεγέσθω μὲν γὰρ καὶ ὅτι καθηκόντων ἐστὶν ὑπογραφὴ πολλῶν ἐν τούτοις, οἷον ὅπως δεῖ περὶ τοὺς ξένους ἕτοιμον εἶναι τὸν ξένιον τιμῶντας δαίμονα καὶ θεόν, καὶ ὅτι δεῖ τὸν ἀστὸν προκατάρχειν τῆς φιλοφροσύνης ἢ τὸν ξένον καὶ πανταχοῦ τὸν δυνατώτερον πρότερον ἐπιτρέχειν εἰς τὴν θεραπείαν τῶν γνωρίμων, καὶ ὅτι δεῖ τὰς ὑποσχέσεις ἀσφαλεῖς ποιεῖσθαι καὶ κατὰ δύναμιν, ὃ δὴ καὶ ἐνταῦθα δοκεῖ ποιεῖν ὁ Ἀδείμαντος, τοσαῦτα τοῖς Κλαζομενίοις παρέξειν ὅσα δυνατός ἐστιν ἐπαγγελλόμενος.

[12] These passages are listed and discussed by Sedley (1999: 134–40).

[13] Proclus and other ancient Platonists tend to find representations of *kathekonta* in the proems of Plato's dialogues in particular, even though this need not mean that Platonists believed that they occurred there exclusively (cf. Sedley 1999: 139). I suggest that these ethical interpretations of the proems reflect the assumption that underlies the Neoplatonic educational programme as a whole

Sedley explains the Stoic-Platonist debate about how to teach duties from their respective psychological theories. Unlike the monolithic conception of the soul entertained by the Stoics, according to which the soul is entirely rational, the Platonists distinguish between rational and emotive parts of the soul. He observes: 'This gives considerable educational power, for good or ill, to means other than purely rational, including habituation and the imitation of role models – as Plato had himself argued at great length in the *Republic*.' (Sedley 1999: 152).

In corroboration of this remark, Sedley points to a passage in *Republic* X, where Socrates first praises Homer for being a good poet since his poetry provides delight, yet, next scolds him for being a poor teacher, and hence bans Homeric poetry from his utopian city. He next compares other types of poetry, which provide role models, favourably to Homeric poetry in this pedagogical respect:

> **T.4** [Does this mean that we should recognise that] the only forms of poetry we are to allow in our state are hymns to the gods and eulogies of good men? But if you allow the Muse of delight in lyric and epic, then both pleasure and pain will rule in your state instead of law and the thing which appears to be the best for the common interest at all times, namely reason.[14] Plato, *Resp.* X 607a3–7, ed. Slings 2003; trans. Emlyn-Jones and Preddy 2013: 437

Unfortunately, none of the technical discussions to which Proclus refers has come down to us and our knowledge of the Stoic *kathekonta*-literature depends on later reports by, e.g., the Roman Stoic Seneca, *Letter* 94. From his discussion, it emerges that not all Stoics, least of all Seneca himself, believed that duties should be taught exclusively as a series of rules. Be that as it may, I believe that Sedley is basically right in arguing that the debate between the Stoics and Platonists is informed by their differing views on human psychology.

according to which some form of preliminary purification of the passions is required before one sets out to do philosophy proper. For this reason, the Neoplatonic curriculum begins with such ethical dialogues as the *Alcibiades* and *Gorgias* and culminates in the metaphysics of *Parmenides*. The ethical interpretations of the Neoplatonic commentators of the proems of the individual dialogues suggest that they ascribed to these a similar function of preliminary purification. On the purifying function that the Neoplatonists assigned to some Platonic dialogues and other texts, see Van den Berg (2014: 390–1).

[14] εἰδέναι δὲ ὅτι ὅσον μόνον ὕμνους θεοῖς καὶ ἐγκώμια τοῖς ἀγαθοῖς ποιήσεως παραδεκτέον εἰς πόλιν; εἰ δὲ τὴν ἡδυσμένην Μοῦσαν παραδέξῃ ἐν μέλεσιν ἢ ἔπεσιν, ἡδονή σοι καὶ λύπη ἐν τῇ πόλει βασιλεύσετον ἀντὶ νόμου τε καὶ τοῦ κοινῇ ἀεὶ δόξαντος εἶναι βελτίστου λόγου.

### 5.1.3 *Platonic* Paideia *Through* Mimesis

This brings me to the question of how exactly, according to Proclus and other Neoplatonists, '*mimesis* arranges the lives of its listeners in its own characteristic manner' (T.2). Let me first unpick Proclus' notion of *mimesis*. Proclus, in line with Sedley's analysis, assumes that *mimesis* appeals to the non-rational part of the soul. In his sixth *Essay on the Republic*, Proclus identifies three types of poetry that correspond to three parts of the soul. Inspired poetry is related to the mystical organ of the soul, the so-called didactic poetry appeals to the rational part of the soul, whereas mimetic poetry goes with the lowest element of the soul. About this mimetic poetry Proclus observes:

> **T.5** Third, next to these [sc. other types of poetry], there is the type of poetry that is a mixture of opinions and impressions, and that is full of *mimesis* and that both is and is called mimetic. This type of poetry at times only makes use of copies and at other times it puts forward something that is only seemingly, but not really a likeness . . . It is a sort of *tromp l'oeil* (*skiagraphia*) painting of real things, but not precise knowledge; it has chosen as its goal to capture the souls of its public and aims especially at the emotional part of the soul the nature of which is to experience pleasure and plain. As we have said before, one part of this sort of poetry is concerned with copies, i.e. the part that aims at the correctness of the *mimesis*, while the other part is such as we just discussed, i.e. about impressions and only produces what seems to be *mimesis*.[15] Proclus, *Commentary on the Republic*, ed. Kroll (1899: 1.179.15–32); trans. my own

Thus, we should distinguish between mimetic poetry that copies something as accurately as possible, and another type of poetry that only gives us the impression of an accurate copy. As appears from his subsequent discussion, Proclus assumes that Plato discusses the former type of *mimesis* in the *Laws*, whereas he derives the latter type of *mimesis* from *Republic* Book X. There, Plato (*Resp.* X.602d2–4, ed. Slings 2003) calls attention to the fact that painters often represent things as smaller or larger than they actually are in order to create the optical illusion of perspective (*skiagraphia*). In the *Laws*, however, the stranger from Athens, distinguishes

[15] Τρίτη δὲ ἐπὶ ταύταις ἐστὶν ἡ δόξαις καὶ φαντασίαις συμμιγνυμένη καὶ διὰ μιμήσεως συμπληρουμένη καὶ οὐδὲν ἀλλ' ἢ μιμητικὴ καὶ οὖσα καὶ λεγομένη καὶ τότε μὲν εἰκασίᾳ προσχρωμένη μόνον, τότε δὲ καὶ φαινομένην προϊσταμένη τὴν ἀφομοίωσιν, ἀλλ' οὐκ οὖσαν, εἰς ὄγκον μὲν ἐπαίρουσα τὰ σμικρὰ τῶν παθημάτων . . . σκιαγραφία τις οὖσα τῶν ὄντων, ἀλλ' οὐ γνῶσις ἀκριβής, τέλος τε προϊσταμένη τὴν τῶν ἀκουόντων ψυχαγωγίαν, καὶ πρὸς ἐκεῖνο διαφερόντως βλέπουσα τὸ παθητικὸν καὶ χαίρειν καὶ λυπεῖσθαι πεφυκὸς τῆς ψυχῆς. Ἔστιν δὲ ὅπερ ἔφαμεν καὶ ταύτης τὸ μὲν εἰκαστικόν, ὃ καὶ πρὸς τὴν ὀρθότητα τοῦ μιμήματος ἀνατείνεται, τὸ δὲ τοιοῦτον οἷον εἴπομεν, φανταστικὸν καὶ φαινομένην μόνον τὴν μίμησιν παρεχόμενον.

between *mimesis* that aims at a correct image of the original and a sort of *mimesis* that only seeks to please its audience. This is the Homeric 'Muse of delight' that Plato in the *Republic* opposes to the good poetry of hymns to the gods and encomia to good men (T.4). In the case of the latter type of poetry, pleasure is something that accompanies the correctness of the representation, but it is not what that artist aims at. Its aim is 'to charm the young towards virtue' (Plato, *Leg.* 671a1, ed. Burnet 1907). In other words, the pleasure provided by poetry is only a means to an end (virtue), not the end in itself. Proclus concludes his discussion of the image-making poetry of the *Laws* thus:

> **T.6** This sort of poetry, then, which is grouped together with the sort of music that educates the characters of people and that is capable of judging the harmonies and the rhythms, one could rightly call "copy-making" and "mimetic" in this sense. For this reason, it does not have pleasure as its goal, but the correctness of the copies.[16] Proclus, *Commentary on the Republic*, ed. Kroll (1899: 1.190.20–5); trans. my own

It is, no doubt, this type of true *mimesis* that Plato practises when writing his dialogues, as opposed to the *mimesis* of poets whose aim is merely entertainment.

I now come to the link between true *mimesis* and moral education. On the Neoplatonic scale of virtues, the virtues that are associated with the non-rational element of the soul are the Aristotelian character virtues. Hence character-formation does not involve understanding, but is a matter of habituation by means of imitation (*mimesis*) of noble actions. Iamblichus, in his *Letter on Education*, refers in this context to the fine actions of people near to us that we can actually see or perceive otherwise:

> **T.7** First of all, *through the senses*, in the persons of father and mother and tutor and teacher, it (sc. education) sets out models of noble actions, in order that the children, as they behold them, may strive to assimilate themselves to them. Then, by means of training, it leads them on nobly and creates good characters, while they are not yet able to take in a reasoned account, by familiarisation with what is noble turning their souls towards the better.[17] Iamblichus, *Letter 14, To Sopater, On Bringing up Children*, ed. Dillon-Polleichtner (2009: 41.7–13); their translation

[16] τὴν ἄρα ποιητικὴν ταύτην, ὅση τῇ μουσικῇ συντέτακται τῇ παιδευτικῇ τῶν ἠθῶν καὶ τάς τε ἁρμονίας δύναται κρίνειν καὶ τοὺς ῥυθμούς, εἰκαστικὴν ἄν τις ἐν δίκῃ προσείποι καὶ οὕτω μιμητικήν· διὸ καὶ οὐ τὴν ἡδονὴν τέλος ἔχει, ἀλλὰ τὴν ὀρθότητα τῶν εἰκασθέντων.

[17] Πρῶτον μὲν οὖν **διὰ τῶν αἰσθήσεων** ἐν πατρὶ καὶ μητρὶ καὶ παιδαγωγῷ καὶ διδασκάλῳ προτείνει παράδειγμα τῶν καλῶν ἔργων, ἵνα οἱ θεώμενοι παῖδες αὐτὰ ζηλῶσι τὴν πρὸς αὐτοὺς ἀφομοίωσιν· ἔπειτα τοῖς ἔθεσιν ἄγει καλῶς καὶ ἐμποιεῖ τὰ σπουδαῖα ἤθη, μήπω δυναμένων αὐτῶν λόγῳ

Actions of fine men of the past, one assumes, may fulfill the same function – and perhaps even better if they were exceptionally good men – provided that they are depicted in the vivid way that is characteristic of Plato's true *mimesis*.[18] In keeping with the theory of moral education through perception, Proclus refers to Platonic dialogues as 'sketches' (*hypographein*) of our duties (T.2). The term 'sketch' (*hypographe*) is already used by the anonymous *Commentary on Plato's Theaetetus* (4.17–23) – dated by Sedley and others to 50 BC–AD 150 – in the context of the Stoic-Platonic debate on *kathekonta*: 'the proem contains a sketch (*hypographe*) of actions that are fitting and that one ought to do, the sort of things that the Stoics call *kathekonta*'.[19] Sedley comments: 'The word "sketch" (ὑπογραφή) does not here mean, as it often does, an "outline account" of a thing as distinct from a full-scale definition. It means a "portrayal" or "illustration".'[20] The visual aspect of such sketches is also evident from Proclus' discussion of the proem of the *Parmenides* when he introduces his discussion as follows (T.3): '*You see* (ὁρᾷς) how the men from Clazomenae become attached at once to Adeimantus, who holds out his hand to them.' 'You' here refers, of course, to us the readers, who are invited both to picture the warm welcome that Cephalus receives from Adeimantus and to follow the example of the latter.

### 5.1.4 *Excursus: Ancient Ethics and Modern Psychology*

Interestingly, modern psychological research corroborates the Platonic position. Modern psychologists stress that human beings are far less rational than we, and the Stoics, like to believe. Jonathan Haidt in his book *The Happiness Hypothesis: Putting Ancient Wisdom and Philosophy to the Test of Modern Science* (London, 2006), for example, argues that the ancient metaphor of the soul as a human rider who tries to control an animal, for example, horses in the Platonic tradition, or an elephant in Buddhist texts, is an apt illustration of the rational and non-rational aspects of the human psyche. Whereas a modern car will go in any direction in which the driver steers it, animals may go in the opposite direction to that

λαμβάνειν, διά [τε] τῆς συνηθείας τῶν καλῶν τρέπουσα αὐτῶν τὰς ψυχὰς πρὸς τὸ βέλτιον. Iamblichus, when commenting that the young are not yet able to take in a reasoned account, echoes Plato, *Resp.* III 402a2, ed. Slings 2003 (. . .νέος ὤν, πρὶν λόγον δυνατὸς εἶναι λαβεῖν. . .).

[18] For a modern attempt to square Plato's condemnation of *mimesis* in *Republic* X with the mimetic nature of the Platonic dialogue along these lines, see Tsouna (2013).

[19] περιέχει δὲ τὸ προοίμιον τῶν προσηκόν των καὶ πρακτῶν ὑπογραφήν, ἃ οἱ Στ[ωικ]οὶ καθήκοντα ὀ[νομά-]ζουσιν.

[20] Sedley (1999: 134).

intended by the rider. In a similar way, Haidt claims, our rational decision-making system is often taken for a ride by our non-rational decision-making system, which tends to operate directly *on sensory impulses*. According to Haidt, the 'wisdom' of the ancients consists in the fact that they understood that moral education is a matter of addressing both the rational and the non-rational aspects of the human psyche so that our inner animal and rational rider both move in the same direction of their own accord. Vivid examples, both in real and literary life, may be useful in this respect: they appeal to our non-rational aspect that is especially susceptible to sensory impulses. The Canadian student of classical Chinese philosophy, Edward Slingerland, has brought the insights of Haidt and other modern psychologists to bear on ancient Chinese philosophical texts, which, like those of Plato, combine philosophy with literature. He refers, for example, to stories about the Chinese philosopher Mencius:

> Or, for those who lack the services of a personal moral trainer (i.e. Mencius, RMvdB), heading to the library or picking up a Kindle might be the solution. The psychologist Jonathan Haidt observes that no less a figure than Thomas Jefferson argued for the moral function of great literature. . .: 'When any . . . act of charity or of gratitude, for instance is presented to our sight of imagination, we are deeply impressed with its beauty and feel a strong desire in ourselves of doing charitable and grateful acts also. . . . Now every emotion of this kind is an exercise of our virtuous dispositions, and dispositions, like limbs of the body, acquire strength by exercise.' Just as the four limbs of the body are strengthened by exercise, so are the four sprouts of proper wu-wei behaviour nourished by the imaginative workout provided by literature. (Slingerland 2014: 208–9).

Not unlike the readers of the stories about Mencius, the readers of Plato's dialogues lack the personal guidance of Plato the philosopher. Plato the literary artist, however, presents us with vivid 'sketches' of *kathekonta* that invite imitation, just as Jefferson claims that acts of charity 'presented to our sight of imagination' compel us to do likewise. Admittedly, the opening lines of *Parmenides* may not seem to the modern reader to be the most convincing example of this moralising power of literature. One need only think, however, of Plato's aforementioned vivid depiction of the death of Socrates at the end of the *Phaedo*.[21] This passage has arguably made a greater impression on Plato's readers than his philosophical arguments on why we

[21] Cf. Tsouna (2013: 11): 'In fact, Plato's predominant imitation is Socrates, the bravest, wisest and best of all men (cf. *Phaed*. 118a). It is his words and acts that are centrally represented by *mimesis*, when Socrates acts in his usual way, namely in a steadfast and rational manner (cf. *asphalos te kai emphronos*: *Resp*. III.396d).'

should not fear death and dying. A good many philosophically minded ancient readers of Plato, be they Platonists or not – one need only think of the Stoic Seneca – did their utmost to imitate his brave death, even if they did not accept the preceding philosophical argument.[22]

## 5.2 Bad Characters

### 5.2.1 *The Case of Alcibiades: Correcting* Philotimia *(Ambition)*

So far, so good. We can now see how vivid *mimesis* of good men may lead us towards virtue. This, however, leaves us with the problem of the Platonic *mimesis* of less than perfect people like Apollodorus and even downright immoral ones, such as Alcibiades. The latter was infamous for his unbridled ambition (*philotimia*), a character flaw that Plato highlights in his depiction of him. If the vivid representation of good people makes us good, then surely equally vivid representations of bad ones are likely to corrupt us. Obviously, this cannot have been Plato's intention. So, then, what do the Neoplatonists make of Plato's representations of bad people? I will now examine this question by taking a closer look at some ancient commentators on Plato's *Alcibiades Maior*.

According to the anonymous *Prolegomena to Plato's Philosophy*, which originates from Proclus' circle, the *skopos* (aim) of the *Alcibiades* is:

> **T.8** To expose the ambition that lives in everyone of us. In each of us there lives the ambition of an Alcibiades, which we must discipline and train for something better.[23] Anonymous, *Prolegomena* 23.22–4, ed. Westerink (1962: 45); trans. Westerink 1962: 44

Thus, one could say that Plato's bad characters are bad because they reflect us, or at least some less desirable characteristic of ours: contemplating the vivid representation of, for example, the ambitious Alcibiades, then, is like looking in a mirror and invites both self-examination and self-improvement.[24] If to us,

[22] For a similar Neoplatonic interpretation of the character of Socrates as 'a target for imitation, a paradigm for *mimesis*, both by the characters in the dialogue *and* by the reader of the dialogue', cf. Griffin (2014: 105–8).

[23] . . .ἄμεινον οὖν καθόλου λέγειν ὅτι περὶ τῆς ἐν ἑκάστῃ ψυχῇ φιλοτιμίας σκοπὸν ἔχει τοῦ ἐλέγξαι. Ἔστιν γὰρ ἑκάστῳ ἡμῶν οἷον Ἀλκιβιάδειος φιλοτιμία, ἣν δεῖ ῥυθμίζειν καὶ κοσμεῖν ἐπὶ τὸ βέλτιον.

[24] In a similar vein, Olympiodorus, *Commentary on the Alcibiades* 61.8–11, ed. Westerink (1956: 41), claims that the cross-examination of the spirited Thrasymachus by Socrates in the *Republic* strengthens our intention 'to put a stop to the Thrasymachus in us' (ἐννοοῦμεν καταπαῦσαι τὸν ἐν ἡμῖν Θρασύμαχον). Olympiodorus, *Commentary on the Gorgias* §0.1, ed. Westerink (1970: 1), mentions Thrasymachus, together with Gorgias, Polus and Callicles as examples of bad characters that are subjected to Socrates' criticism for the moral instruction of Plato's reader. Anne Sheppard

modern readers, ambition may seem to be not much of a vice and perhaps even a virtue, it is useful to remind ourselves that ancient *philotimia*, the love of honour(s), the desire for public esteem, was an important yet highly ambivalent force in the ancient world. It was the main motivation that spurred on ancient politicians and that brought out both the best and the worst in them.[25] *Philotimia* is a sort of emotion and hence should be associated with Haidt's inner animal, rather than with its rational rider. In the Platonic tradition, it is in particular, associated with the good horse. Hence, in terms of moral education, an intellectual analysis of *philotimia* by itself will not suffice, since this will only appeal to the rider. There must also be some form of non-intellectual persuasion. To this end, the literary qualities of the Platonic dialogue, and its vividness/*enargeia* in particular, are relevant.

The ancient commentators find a fine specimen of Platonic *enargeia* in the following passage, taken from the beginning of the *Alcibiades*. Here, Socrates imagines how the ambitious Alcibiades will, in the near future. speak to the people in the Assembly:

> **T.9** Now then: you intend, as I say, to come forward as adviser to the Athenians in no great space of time; well, suppose I were to take hold of you as you were about to ascend the platform, and were to ask you: "Alcibiades, on what subject do the Athenians propose to take advice, that you should stand up to advise them? Is it something about which you have better knowledge than they?" What would be your reply?[26] Plato, *Alcibiades* 106c3–9, ed. Burnet 1907; trans. Lamb 1955: 107

Proclus comments on this passage:

> **T.10** Admiration is also due for Plato's presentation of the argument: for its degree of vividness, of impact, of knowledge . . . The way in which Socrates

(forthcoming) concludes from these and similar passages that we are dealing here 'with a stock typology of a number of the characters in Plato's dialogues . . . The association of these πρόσωπα with particular characteristics – Alcibiades and Polus with ambition, Callicles with the love of pleasure, Thrasymachus with shamelessness – is likely to be something which the Neoplatonists inherited from earlier interpreters.' Another testimony of this line of interpretation is provided by St Basil, *Letter* 135.1.24–32, ed. Courtonne (1957: 50): Plato wrote dialogues in which he both fights the doctrines and satirises (παρακωμῳδεῖ) the characters (πρόσωπα) of such people as Thrasymachus, Hippias and Protagoras. St Basil warns, however, that, in order for this sort of moralising satire to be effective, the characters must be named and be notorious individuals. See Charalabopoulos (2012: 124–9) for a detailed discussion of this passage.

[25] I have analysed Neoplatonic discussions of *philotimia* as an ambiguous political emotion in Van den Berg (2017).

[26] Φέρε δή· διανοῇ γάρ, ὡς ἐγώ φημι, παριέναι συμβουλεύσων Ἀθηναίοις ἐντὸς οὐ πολλοῦ χρόνου· εἰ οὖν μέλλοντός σου ἰέναι ἐπὶ τὸ βῆμα λαβόμενος ἐροίμην· "Ὦ Ἀλκιβιάδη, ἐπειδὴ περὶ τίνος Ἀθηναῖοι διανοοῦνται βουλεύεσθαι, ἀνίστασαι συμβουλεύσων; ἆρ' ἐπειδὴ περὶ ὧν σὺ ἐπίστασαι βέλτιον ἢ οὗτοι;" τί ἂν ἀποκρίναιο.

> brings before his eyes, as if on a stage, the people and the platform itself, and the one (sc. Alcibiades, RMvdB) in a hurry to seize his place as adviser, and the other (sc. Socrates, RMvdB) taking hold of him and bridling his impulse with reason, offers much vividness, and at the same time it makes clear that unexamined action is wrong and that one should not rush to correct others before one has examined one's own knowledge.[27] Proclus, *Commentary on the Alcibiades* 185.21–3 and 186.3–11, ed. Segonds (1985–6: 246); trans. my own

Proclus here explains in the manner of an ancient literary critic how Socrates achieves the effect of *enargeia*, of conjecturing up a scene before Alcibiades' eyes. Socrates, however, does not sketch, as a literary author might have done, this scene for our entertainment. He wants to make a philosophical point. The vivid scene is meant to make clear that one should never act on an impulse. We can here see the Platonists' problem with the Stoic *kathekonta*-literature. The bare rule 'think first, act later' is probably less effective than Socrates' approach: he allows Alcibiades to *experience* in some sort of virtual reality what it would be like to enter the platform of the Assembly without proper preparation.

The Socrates of the *Alcibiades* is, of course, a product of Plato's literary invention. Socrates' *enargeia* is, in fact that of Plato, who through his dialogues addresses us, his readers. According to Proclus, the take-home lesson is the following:

> **T.11** Reason should be in charge of our actions and should make our ambitious inclination more sensible and weight and judge our unexamined impulse. Let us distance ourselves from and say goodbye to our inner platform and people and let us listen to the advices of intellect after we have cut the tumult of our emotions (for that is the true adviser of souls). Let us search the Good, once we have turned ourselves to it.[28] Proclus, *Commentary on the Alcibiades* 186.11–18, ed. Segonds (1985–6: 246–7); trans. my own

[27] Ἄξιον δὲ θαυμάσαι καὶ τὴν μεταχείρισιν τῶν λόγων, ὅσον μὲν ἔχει τὸ ἐναργές, ὅσον δὲ τὸ πληκτικόν, ὅσον δὲ τὸ ἐπιστημονικόν ... Τὸ δὲ ὥσπερ ἐν σκηνῇ τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ αὐτῷ τὸν δῆμον ὑπ' ὀφθαλμοῖς ἀγαγεῖν καὶ αὐτὸ τὸ βῆμα, καὶ τὸν μὲν σπεύδοντα τὴν τοῦ συμβούλου χώραν καταλαβεῖν, τὸν δὲ λαμβανόμενον αὐτοῦ καὶ οἷον χαλινὸν ἐπάγοντα τῇ ὁρμῇ τὸν λόγον, πολλὴν παρέχεται τὴν ἐνάργειαν, ἅμα δὲ κἀκεῖνο ποιεῖ δῆλον ὡς οὐδὲν ἀνεξετάστως προσήκει πράττειν οὐδὲ πρὸ τοῦ τὴν ἑαυτοῦ γνῶσιν ἀνακρῖναι πρὸς τὴν τῶν ἄλλων ἅττειν ἐπανόρθωσιν·

[28] λόγος οὖν ἡγεμὼν ἔστω τῶν πράξεων καὶ τὴν μὲν φιλότιμον ἕξιν σωφρονεστέραν ποιείτω, τὴν δὲ ἀνυπεύθυνον ὁρμὴν εἰς βάσανον ἀγέτω καὶ κρίσιν, καὶ χαίρειν εἰπόντες τῷ βήματι καὶ τῷ δήμῳ τὸν ἐν ἡμῖν δῆμον καταστησώμεθα καὶ τὸν θόρυβον τῶν παθῶν ἐκκόψαντες ἀκούσωμεν τῶν τοῦ νοῦ συμβουλῶν (αὐτὸς γάρ ἐστιν ὁ τῶν ψυχῶν σύμβουλος ἀληθής) καὶ πρὸς τοῦτον ἐπιστρέψαντες τὸ ἀγαθὸν ἀνερευνήσωμεν.

One might argue that this lesson makes all the more impact on us, because, thanks to Plato's *enargeia*, we have actually *seen* Socrates stopping Alcibiades. Admittedly, Proclus does not quite explicitly say this. The anonymous author of the aforementioned *Prolegomena*, however, does:

> **T.12** There is yet another explanation in addition to the previous one of why Plato chose such a form of writing. It goes as follows: Plato did not want to present to us the subject-matter *in a bare manner*, i.e. devoid of characters. If, for example, he discusses friendship, he does not deal with it *in a bare manner*, but as it appears in a certain individual. And in the case of ambition, he does not discuss it by itself as such, but as it appears in a certain individual. For in this way our soul, when it sees others being refuted and being praised, it will be more easily forced to assent to the refutations or to emulate those being praised. And this is comparable to the case of souls that upon *seeing* other souls being punished for their crimes in Hades, come to their senses because of fear for the punishments that are inflicted upon those other souls.[29] Anonymous, *Prolegomena*, ed. Westerink (1962: 15.20–8); trans. my own

From the fact that the anonymous author identifies the aim (*skopos*) of Plato's Alcibiades with *philotimia*, we may deduce that when he talks about *philotimia* 'as it appears in a certain individual', he has Alcibiades in mind. The way in which he opposes Plato's mimetic style involving literary characters (*prosopa*) to bare (*psilos*) presentation of the ethical subject-matter, furthermore, recalls Proclus' criticism of the abstract Stoic *kathekonta* that we have seen above. Plato's *enargeia* is not explicitly mentioned, but clearly implied: our soul sees the Platonic characters being refuted, just as the souls see other souls in Hades being punished.

The latter is, I assume, a reference to Plato's graphic eschatological myths like the Myth of Er at the end of the *Republic*. Plato's graphic description of the punishments of the souls in the Myth of Er makes these souls appear before the mental eyes of his readers. In fact, Plato draws attention to the almost theatrical nature of the Myth of Er. He describes the punishments as 'horrible spectacles' that 'we saw'.[30] In a similar vein, Plato next describes the scene in which the souls are made to choose their

[29] ἕτερος δ' ἐστὶν ἐπὶ τούτῳ λόγος τοιοῦτος, ὅτι διὰ τοῦτο τοιοῦτον εἶδος συγγραφῆς ἐπετήδευσεν, ἵνα μὴ **ψιλὰ τὰ πράγματα καὶ γυμνὰ προσώπων** παραδῷ ἡμῖν· οἷον περὶ φιλίας διαλεγόμενος, ἵνα μὴ αὐτῆς **ψιλῆς** μνημονεύσῃ ἀλλὰ τῆς ἐν τῷδε γενομένης, καὶ περὶ φιλοτιμίας οὐκ αὐτῆς καθ' ἑαυτὴν ἀλλὰ τῆς ἐν τῷδε. Οὕτως γὰρ μᾶλλον ἡ ἡμετέρα ψυχὴ ὁρῶσα ἄλλους οἷον ἐλεγχομένους ἢ ἐπαινουμένους ἀναγκάζεται συγκατατίθεσθαι τοῖς ἐλέγχοις ἢ ζηλοῦν τοὺς ἐπαινουμένους· καὶ ἔοικεν τοῦτο **ταῖς ὁρώσαις ψυχαῖς** ἐν ᾅδου ἄλλας ἁμαρτήμασι τιμωρουμένας καὶ σωφρονούσαις τῷ φόβῳ τῶν τιμωριῶν τῶν ἐν ἐκείναις γινομένων.

[30] Plato, *Resp.* X.615d3–4, ed. Slings (2003): ἐθεασάμεθα γὰρ οὖν δὴ καὶ τοῦτο τῶν δεινῶν θεαμάτων·

next lives as both 'pitiful to see, as well as laughable and strange', thus comparing it to a tragicomedy.[31] As we have seen, pleasure and pain belong to the non-rational part of the soul, the same part that is susceptible to the *mimesis* of literature. Since it is desire for pleasure that motivates the non-rational part to act against the commands of philosophy, the vivid depiction of pain will be the only sort of motivation that will stop it from its unholy pursuit of pleasure. In this way, be it for different reasons, both the rational rider and the animal will now start to move in the same direction. I take it, then, that the author presents us with two reasons why Platonic *mimesis* is a more effective way of communicating moral lessons than abstract commands. First, we will be more inclined to accept these when we see them applied to others. Second, it appeals to our non-rational part, that is, precisely the part of the soul from which wrongdoing originates, in a way that abstract commands could not.

Interestingly, these Neoplatonic remarks about *enargeia* and moral education chime with a recent discussion of the Myth of Er by the Belgian scholar Pierre Destrée. Focusing on the Myth of Er as a spectacle, he writes:

> As in the case of the pitiful state of the prisoners in the Cave, we spectators are not induced to feel pity, or only so in a sort of distant, ironic way . . . And, we may suppose that the benefit here, although indirect, is here patent too: Glaucon (and Plato's audience) are induced to be motivated to reconsider his own life, and values, and stick to his decision to follow Socrates in the difficult path towards the knowledge of the Good, which is the *conditio sine qua non* for obtaining the *eudaimonia* he is seeking after. (Destrée 2012: 124)

In short, both Destrée ('we spectators') and the Neoplatonists assume that Plato's power of visualisation, of putting things before the eyes of his public (*pro ommaton*) stimulates self-examination and provides a visceral motivation to live in accordance with one's philosophical understanding of the world, so that our inner rider and animal move in concord.

[31] Plato, *Resp.* X.619e6–620a2, ed. Slings (2003): Ταύτην γὰρ δὴ ἔφη τὴν θέαν ἀξίαν εἶναι ἰδεῖν, ὡς ἕκασται αἱ ψυχαὶ ᾑροῦντο τοὺς βίους· ἐλεινήν τε γὰρ ἰδεῖν εἶναι καὶ γελοίαν καὶ θαυμασίαν.