Linda Napolitano. *Platone e la cura di sé e dell'altro*. Mimesis: Milano, 2024, 408 pp., ISBN: 9791222308951

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Is there a philosophical practice of "care of the self" in Plato? Can a less intellectualistic image of this philosopher be reconstructed? And can it prove fruitful to contemporary philosophical practices? L. Napolitano in her new study aims to show that philosophical practices are central to Plato's philosophy and still relevant to modern thought. She offers a meticulous examination of the concept of philosophical care in the controversial *Alcibiades I*, relating it to both ancient and modern philosophical contexts. Her work consists of two parts: the first explores ancient and contemporary philosophical practices, while the second provides analysis, commentary, and a new translation of the dialogue.

Napolitano's primary aim is to advocate for an experiential, practical reading of Plato's philosophy, challenging intellectualist interpretations still prevalent in contemporary scholarship. Her reading highlights the importance of the non-rational aspects of the mind, known through lived experience, and the praxes used to direct them wisely. It is grounded in a historical framework championed by Foucault, Hadot, and Patočka (p. 25-31), which identifies the care of the self (*epimeleia heautou*), a practical exercise of self-transformation (*askesis*), as the foundation of pre-modern efforts to attain truth, by contrast with the purely intellectual model of modern, post-Cartesian views. In addition to the rational (*logistikon*) dimension of human nature, Napolitano underscores the significance of emotional and relational dimensions as integral to Plato's philosophy. Two crucial aspects are the embodied relational dimension in which virtues are cultivated and exercised (p. 129-147), and the formative role of well-directed desire (p. 147-177). Other aspects include pleasures and pains, the enchanting power of words, the meek disposition ground-

https://doi.org/10.14195/2183-4105_26_4

ing dialogical praxes, and especially our relation to death (p. 177-199). The pervasiveness of practical concerns supports Napolitano's argument that these elements are not merely ancillary to Plato's philosophy, but rather integral to his philosophical project. The mutual implication of philosophy as theoretical enterprise and as practical endeavour is best encapsulated by Napolitano's observations on the Socratic dialogue: Plato considers thought as an inner dialogue with oneself, and self-examination as a dialogical practice directed at one's best possible development, the explication of teleologically oriented natural potentials for a rational and wise existence (p.114-129, 324-333). Therefore, subjects can position themselves as their own interlocutors and as their own objects of examination, and they can orient their actions towards their best possible development. Napolitano proposes to take this conception as the foundation of the very dialogical practice promoted by Plato, rendering the theoretical and practical dimensions inextricable: philosophical dialogue is a practice of self-care, and self-care is the foundation of philosophical wisdom. Thus, she provides concrete methodological guidelines and a reasonable theoretical framework for a reading of Plato attentive to his engagement with the human self, as experienced in its affective and relational aspects.

Regarding the problem of authenticity, Napolitano argues that the form and contents of the *Alcibiades I* are consistent with Plato's corpus, thereby establishing it as a crucial text for understanding Plato's philosophical practices. She briefly mentions the state of the question and the hermeneutical problems caused by a text that likely underwent several interventions and interpolations (p. 217). Napolitano's main purpose, however, is not to take a definitive stance on this issue but rather to highlight the coherence of this dialogue with Plato's philosophy, and particularly its great philosophical value. After a section dedicated to exploring the coherence of Plato's representations of the character of Alcibiades, she addresses the objections that have been raised against this dialogue's authenticity. While it has been judged as anomalous and at times even simplistic, she observes, it does not present any extraneous doctrine or element, and its seemingly simplistic arguments are part of a more complex dialogical and educational process, through which the protagonist, Socrates, guides the deuteragonist, Alcibiades (p. 219-221). Even its most controversial passages, where the daimonic sign to Socrates is identified as divine (105d-e, 124c), are read as consistent with Plato's corpus, since similar conflations of the daimonic and the divine appear in the *Apology* and several other dialogues (p. 223-224). Napolitano refutes other alleged anomalies such as its apparent dogmatism, its more didactic and less dialogical tone, its less 'embodied' or concrete characters, and its less explorative nature. She makes a compelling case for considering the *Alcibiades I* as a genuine Socratic dialogue, written either by Plato or by a faithful imitator, and as fully compatible with the philosophy that emerges from Plato's corpus. This consistency is crucial for her to legitimately identify philosophical praxis as a core aspect of Plato's philosophy. Napolitano thus offers a fresh reading of the dialogue as a valuable model for understanding the care of the self in Plato. She favours the thesis of authenticity, but she maintains a non-committal position. Her emphasis on intertextual coherence is instrumental to regarding it as a useful interpretive key. Her work shows that if we consider this dialogue as aligned with Plato's authentic thought, we gain greater clarity on the practical ends

and methods of Plato's philosophy. Aspects from disparate dialogues such as the practice of inner dialogue (*Soph*. 263d-264b), the knowledge of oneself acquired through an erotic relation (*Phdr*. 255d-e), or the power of beauty and Eros to engender inner growth and generative force (*Phdr*. 249d-e, *Symp*. 206c-e) acquire further intelligibility when viewed through this lens.

The experiential framework constitutes the unifying thread between Napolitano's two lines of inquiry, the examination of philosophical practices and the philological close reading of the dialogue. On one hand, she examines the ancient Greek concept of *askesis*, which Plato elaborates starting from a pervasive cultural and religious background (p. 31-50), as well as the contemporary philosophical elaborations about "care", focussing on Gadamer, Foucault, and Heidegger (p. 51-90). She shows that in Plato we can find an *askesis* modelled upon athletic training and spiritual practices, extending beyond personal discipline to encompass ethical, political, and cognitive dimensions that are still relevant today (p. 91-114). According to this concept, care is not an isolated, medicalised technique but a dynamic and open-ended practice that defines the entire human sphere. It is a practical kind of knowledge, more akin to artful expertise than abstract theoretical models. The ambitious scope of this work may appear disorienting to readers less familiar with her approach, and it suffers from a lack of focus on the historical developments of the concept of the self. Nonetheless, her overall contribution is enlightening as it opens new avenues of research that put ancient philosophy at the heart of contemporary interests.

The main strength of Napolitano's work is her rigorous, well-documented challenge to the intellectualistic interpretation of Plato and of his representation of Socrates, which she considers a prejudice (p. 147). This view found its staunchest defender in Vlastos, who argued that the core tenet of Socratic philosophy, as presented by Plato, was the sufficiency of knowledge to engender virtuous behaviour (Vlastos, G. (1995). *Studies in Greek Philosophy, Volume II: Socrates, Plato, and Their Tradition*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, p. 43-59). This typically analytical position might still influence current interpretations of Plato's works that focus almost one-sidedly on cognitive skills. Napolitano's aim is to dismantle this view from its foundations, showing how emotional and relational skills are central to the care of oneself as a composite whole. The strongest point Napolitano makes concerns relational skills that are necessary to the intellect itself: self-knowledge (*synnoia*) and inquiries (*skepseis*) accomplished through shared dialogue constitute the primary act of care for one's intellectual faculty, taking precedence even over the knowledge of intelligible realities (p. 146). This consideration is followed by an extensive examination of the various desires that need philosophical care, some of which pertain to cognition, such as questioning wonder (*thaumazein*), which stimulates philosophical research, and love of wisdom (*philosophia*) itself (p. 176-177). By supporting her claims with abundant textual evidence and careful theoretical analysis, Napolitano succeeds in showing that the very cognitive effort to attain knowledge and wisdom is supported and even inherently constituted by emotional and relational factors. Her study aligns with current research focussing on the multifaceted nature of human experience and on ancient philosophical care such as that carried out by Migliori, Fermani, Stavru, and Candiotto. It also follows a trend of the last two decades

whereby more attention has been paid to emotional aspects (Rowe, Erler, Hobbs) and to the nature of the self (Sorabji, Gill, Remes, Mortley) in Plato and Platonic philosophy, even within more analytical traditions. What is unique in Napolitano's work is the abundance of textual evidence and the force of the philosophical reasons she provides for embracing a more "practical" Plato.

A limitation of her study is its lack of elaboration on the epistemological and metaphysical outcomes of a non-intellectualistic and non-dogmatic reading of Plato. Following Foucault, she observes that the care of the self is intended as the development of structural cognitive skills which are initially present only as potentials, and which can give access to true knowledge and wisdom once adequately developed. The prerequisite for such development is feeling one's own cognitive lack and desiring the object or state which one does not possess. However, it is necessary to know one's soul and its good in order to take care of it correctly. We face here the risk of logical circularity: care is a prerequisite for knowledge, but knowledge is a prerequisite for care. Two opposite views might resolve this aporia: either a wider, ontologically grounded intellectualism (1) or a pragmatic regulative approach (2). On one hand, we might conclude that Plato's care of the soul is situated within a broader ontological framework, which grounds the reality and structure of the soul in the world of Forms depending upon the Good, objects of pure intellectual acquisition (1). For the direction of emotions and desires towards a good inner condition and towards the transcendent truth to be possible, both must be ontologically real. This would be consistent with the paradigm of a progressively less Socratic and more dogmatic Plato. On the other hand, we could construe Plato's metaphysical conception as the tentative pragmatic result of a practical evaluation, based on the successful development of the soul as a whole enabled by this conception. The noetic vision of the Forms and the Good might be inferred pragmatically as the regulative condition for the development of one's soul, the acquisition of more wisdom and a more solid foundation to navigate the moral and cognitive complexities of embodied life (cf. *Phd*. 85c-d). Trabattoni, for instance, has identified a "metaphysics of experience" in Plato, whereby his metaphysical principles, albeit conceived as ontologically real, furnish the necessary conditions to understand and justify our embodied experience rather than just an alternative, transcendent world (Trabattoni, F. (1994). *Scrivere nell'anima. Verità, dialettica e persuasione in Platone*. Firenze, La Nuova Italia). No definitive answer is present in Plato's dialogues, and cautious readers must acknowledge that his Forms are both an ontological ground and the source of an attractive, transformative force. Napolitano's questioning attitude is therefore reasonable, but a tentative resolution of this problem would make her argument stronger. Her forceful stance against intellectualism points toward a wider theoretical framework that requires further development.

Another limitation is the scarce attention paid to the problem of authenticity from a historical, not merely inter-textual approach. This obscures its rich, productive relation with ancient thought, especially with the Orphic-Pythagorean and later Platonic traditions. For example, Napolitano does not directly respond to Renaud and Tarrant's recent work on the *Alcibiades I* and its ancient reception (Renaud, R.; Tarrant, H. (2015). *The Platonic* Alcibiades I. *The Dialogue and its Ancient Reception*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press). Therefore, she misses the chance of

engaging with an "ancient approach" that would enable her and her readers to reflect more explicitly on their own hermeneutic presuppositions and on the relation between the ancient conception of "soul" and the modern conception of "self". In addition, Napolitano downplays the fact that the care of the soul is often situated within a broader aspiration toward assimilation with the divine in Plato's works. This emerges clearly in the most problematic section of the *Alcibiades I* (132c-133c), which includes a clear Platonic or Christian interpolation. Examining the historical reasons for this interpolation and how later interpreters view this text through a theological lens would not obscure its human and relational aspects, but it would clarify them by locating them in their teleological context. Napolitano devotes some attention to the thorny issue of the Pythagorean tradition (p. 33-35), albeit always with the purpose of examining their spiritual practices rather than reconstructing historical developments. Despite these limitations, her approach remains defensible and scholarly sound, if considered as an effort to highlight the practical value of Plato's philosophy.

Overall, Napolitano's new study achieves its goal of fostering a productive, well-informed dialogue between academic philosophy and philosophical practices. It should not be read either as a study in the history of thought or as a modern reinterpretation of ancient ideas. Rather, it is aimed at presenting an understanding of Plato that can be fruitful even today, while remaining textually grounded. It succeeds thanks to a well-documented close reading and a cautious positive evaluation of the value of the *Alcibiades I*. Its questioning angle is adequate to the complexity of its subject. Its main limitations are the disorienting effect of shifting between contemporary and ancient perspectives, its limited focus on historical developments, and its lack of a larger theoretical framework for the problem of intellectualism. These flaws are compensated for by a rich and textually sound articulation of frequently overlooked elements of Plato's philosophy, as well as clear philosophical reasons for their persistent relevance. This study thus represents a stimulating contribution to the fields of ancient philosophy and philosophical practices, offering indispensable insights for scholars engaged in these domains.