Socratic Eros and Self-Knowledge
in Plato’s *Alcibiades*

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Contemporary studies of the *Alcibiades*\(^1\) have not yet completely freed itself from the long tenacious debates on its authorship.\(^2\) Although the number of defenders of its authenticity has recently been growing, many scholars still hesitate to make use of the dialogue as a source of materials for Platonic studies.\(^3\) But doubts from difference and similarity\(^4\) are more or less matters of subjective tastes. Of course, doubt based on stylometry sounds much more objective and even scientific, the overall claim of which is that this dialogue does not fit into the standard chronology of Platonic corpus in respect of style and contents. However, this ‘scientific’ doubt begs the question: it assumes that Plato’s works can or should exhaustively be ordered by the chronology of his writings and that this order reflects the development of his thought. When he wrote his dialogues, was he doing like a jeweler who produces a necklace by making one jewel at a time and

\(^*\) This work was supported by the Korea Research Foundation Grant funded by the Korean Government (MOEHRD). (KRF-2005-043-A00130)

\(^1\) It is customary to call it the *First (or Greater) Alcibiades*, in parallel with another dialogue called the *Second (or Lesser) Alcibiades*. The latter is admittedly un-Platonic and I have little to say about it, so I will call the former simply the *Alcibiades*.


\(^3\) For example, N.D. Smith (2004) argues that notwithstanding increasing defenders of Platonic authorship we still have reasons to take extreme caution in accepting the dialogue as genuine and using it as an interpretive resource.

\(^4\) Many of them depend on the difference of the dialogue from other Platonic works, but some pay attention to the similarity as well.
putting each jewel into a string in order and never rearranges these jewels? I do not think this kind of strong developmentalist assumption can do justice to such a special dialogue, and basically the burden of proof belongs to those who doubt its authenticity. So, in this paper, I put aside the issues of its authenticity and chronology, and concentrate on the discussions in the dialogue themselves and their unity.

In spite of these debates, there seems to be some kind of agreement that self-knowledge is the unifying theme of the *Alcibiades*. Many of previous discussions noticed that in spite of its potentiality to be involved in erotic situations the dialogue is least erotic and concentrates solely on *logos* or rational self. On the surface of the dialogue this observation might be fair enough, but, if we want to understand the messages of the dialogue completely, more attention should be paid to the eros part than it is being done now. Self-knowledge is certainly an important theme in this dialogue, but not the only leading, unifying theme as J. Annas thinks. Also, if too much emphasis is placed on self-knowledge or *logos*, we cannot fully understand why this dialogue is constructed in this manner. The leading frame of the dialogue is above all eros. It starts with, and ends in, eros. In some critical phases of dialogue this theme of eros is explicitly mentioned and confirmed. We should pay attention to how these two themes, eros and self-knowledge, which in other dialogues are treated separately and never come together, are united here. This is the main concern of this paper.

5) This jewelry image about Plato’s chronology was inspired by Myles Burnyeat’s recent discussion at Cambridge.


7) For a few exceptions, cf. G.A. Scott (2000) and J. Gordon (2003). Scott compares this dialogue with the *Lysis* and notices that Socrates in both dialogues trades roles with the young men, Alcibiades and Lysis respectively. His attention on the role trade is significant, but it should be approached in broader context of eros theme, which will shortly be elucidated below. In the *Alcibiades* the essence of eros is reciprocity, in the context of which the role trade at final passage should be viewed. Eros in ordinary life is one-sided, while philia is reciprocal. It is the *Lysis* that begins to break this scheme through its discourse of philia. For a full discussion on philia and eros in the *Lysis*, cf. Kang, Chol-Ung (2007). Gordon argues that the aspect of eros or philosophical seduction is an important key to understanding this dialogue. Her approach and solution are plausible, but eros theme should be dealt more deeply with the question of how these two themes, eros and self-knowledge, meet here. Also, she tends to make light of god/daimon in this dialogue. If we pay attention to self-knowledge and eros together, the importance of god/daimon will reveal itself naturally. Cf. D. Johnson (1999).