

THE THEME AND TARGET OF PLATO'S DIALOGUES IN NEOPLATONIST COSMO-LITERARY THEORY*

ABSTRACT

*This paper investigates Neoplatonist literary criticism by framing the special interest in the target of each dialogue within the context of cosmo-literary theory. The starting hypothesis is that the themes of Plato's dialogues do not fully meet the expectations of a new didactics based on isagogical schemes as an image of Neoplatonic metaphysics. Among these schemes is the target of each dialogue, whose relation to the theme can be explained, in a fruitful and innovative way, through a cosmic analogy. Thus after examining the more or less explicit criticism of literary criteria of analysis by Plato's ancient exegetes, this article will focus on how Neoplatonists load the Greek term *skopos* (target) with metaphysical content and, accordingly, on how we should translate it in accordance with the commentators' intentions. It will show that the target is the literary counterpart to the One, but that it should not be confused with the theme because the latter must be seen as the literary counterpart to the Intellect.*

Keywords: target; theme; One; Intellect; literary criticism; Neoplatonism

1. PREMISS

It is well known that Plato is the originator of a powerful critique of literature; however, he is also the source of the Neoplatonic tradition, inspiring the idea that the dialogues are a literary image of the cosmos. As several studies have pointed out,¹ the idea of a cosmos of dialogues as an image of the macrocosm-universe combines the Neoplatonist interest in the literary and compositional aspects of Plato's texts (their organic unity) with metaphysical interests. Above all, this idea is supported by what Plato himself says in the *Phaedrus* and the *Timaeus*.² The cosmo-literary theory, which is based on these two dialogues, consists in claiming that an analogical relationship exists between

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¹ See J.A. Coulter, *The Literary Microcosm. Theories of Interpretation of the Later Neoplatonists* (Leiden, 1976); L. Brisson, 'Le discours comme univers et l'univers comme discours', in M. Costantini, J. Lallot, A. Le Boulluec (edd.), *Le texte et ses représentations* (Paris, 1987), 121–8; G. Radke-Uhlmann, *Das Lächeln des Parmenides. Proklos' Interpretationen zur Platonischen Dialogform* (Berlin, 2006); P. d'Hoine, 'Plato's *Phaedrus* as a manual for Neoplatonic hermeneutics. The case of the anonymous *Prolegomena* to Plato's philosophy', in S. Delcomminette, P. d'Hoine, M.-A. Gavray (edd.), *The Reception of Plato's Phaedrus from Antiquity to the Renaissance* (Berlin and Boston, 2020), 131–52.

² Neoplatonists drew inspiration from Plato's remark in the *Phaedrus* (264c) that 'one should set up every *logos*, like a living thing, with a body for itself, so that it should be neither headless nor footless, but have mid-parts and extremities, composed suitably to each other and to the whole'. In the *Timaeus*, the Demiurge is called 'the Father who engendered' the cosmos (37c), since the cosmos as a whole is a living being.

the microcosm of the dialogues and the macrocosm of the universe. Especially the later Neoplatonists developed the idea of the unity of each Platonic dialogue as an organic whole, namely a microcosm created by the writer as a counterpart to the macrocosm created by the demiurge.

The general aim of this paper is not to demonstrate that the *Phaedrus* and the *Timaeus* lie at the basis of the cosmo-literary theory,³ but rather to show that the isagogical elements, namely the introductory questions discussed before beginning the exegesis of Plato and the dialogues, are tools for analysing a text which is not simply literary but eminently philosophical.⁴ More specifically, the aim of this essay is to investigate the difference between the target (σκοπός, or sometimes πρόθεσις) of the dialogues—the main isagogical question of the schemes, which is present in every preliminary discussion, unlike the others⁵—and the theme (ὑπόθεσις and/or πρᾶγμα), in order to understand how and why the cosmo-literary theory influenced 1) the shift of interest from an explicitly literary criterion of analysis to a philosophical one, 2) the linguistic differentiation of technical terms characteristic of ancient exegesis and isagogics, and 3) the birth of a new form of literary criticism that distinguishes general literary creation from the cosmo-dialogical one of the divine Plato.

I start with some considerations on the titles of Plato's dialogues and the thematic information they provide, in order to address the question of the relationship between the theme and the tetralogical classification that some literary creations (including Plato's) have in common according to Thrasyllus. I then consider the existence of extrinsic and intrinsic criteria of analysis in the dialogues in order to draw some conclusions about the importance of linking theory, didactics and exegesis. To this end, I discuss the introductory sections of some Proclean and Olympiodorean commentaries and some fundamental passages from the *Anonymous Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy*,⁶ where references to the cosmo-literary theory are preserved and the target plays a privileged role: for it is the element that, from a literary point of view, represents the One—'that in view of which' (τὸ οὗ ἕνεκα), namely the end itself.⁷

³ See Brisson (n. 1), 126: 'l'assimilation du λόγος au κόσμος comme être vivant subit un glissement significatif de la biologie vers la téléologie'.

⁴ On this topic, see J. Mansfeld, *Prolegomena. Questions to be Settled Before the Study of an Author, or a Text* (Leiden / New York / Cologne, 1994). Some examples on how literary interests are subordinated to interests in philosophical and metaphysical matters are in A. Sheppard, "'In Plato we can see the bad characters being changed by the good and instructed and purified.' Attitudes to Platonic dialogue in later Neoplatonism', in M. Erler, J.E. Heßler, F.M. Petrucci (edd.), *Authority and Authoritative Texts in the Platonist Tradition* (Cambridge, 2021), 227–44.

⁵ On the isagogical questions, see J. Mansfeld, *Prolegomena Mathematica. From Apollonius of Perga to Late Neoplatonists* (Leiden / Boston / Cologne, 1998), 4–5 and more recently A. Motta and F.M. Petrucci, 'Introduction: towards the isagogical crossroads', in A. Motta and F.M. Petrucci (edd.), *Isagogical Crossroads from the Early Imperial Age to the End of Antiquity* (Leiden and Boston, 2022), 1–15.

⁶ For the authorship of the *Prolegomena*, see L.G. Westerink (ed.), *Anonymous Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy* (Amsterdam, 1962), xli–l and J. Opsomer, 'Olympiodorus', in L.P. Gerson (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Philosophy in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, 2010), 2.701. A revised version of Westerink's introduction is published in L.G. Westerink and J. Trouillard (ed.), *Anonyme, Prologomènes à la philosophie de Platon* (Paris, 1990), lxxvi–lxxix.

⁷ See Anon. *Proleg.* 23.9–10.

2. TITLE, THEME AND TETRALOGIES: NEOPLATONIST LITERARY CRITICISM

It is quite certain that most of the first titles come from Plato himself,⁸ as Proclus seems to confirm:

Although the title [*sc.* that of the *Republic*] is ancient, it is clear to everyone that some dialogues have been named by Plato on the basis of their subject matter (ἐκ τῶν πραγμάτων), and not after their characters, like the *Alcibiades* or the *Phaedo*, and on the basis of the topic discussed in the dialogues (ἐκ τῶν ἐν τοῖς διαλόγοις ζητούμενων πραγμάτων), rather than after their settings, like the *Symposium*.⁹

From this discussion concerning the title of the *Republic* we may derive the criteria reportedly used by Plato himself, to determine the title of his dialogues. These are: 1) the subject matter, 2) the characters and 3) the setting. In the *Anonymous Prolegomena* we further read that titles based on characters may refer to characters who have already reached perfection, to ones who are being led to perfection, or to individuals who perform a particular function. When the titles instead derive from the matter at hand, they may refer to events or to what is being examined. At this point, however, the text of the *Prolegomena* breaks off, whereas Proclus makes the point that the indication of the subject matter generally reflects the *main topic*,¹⁰ not a secondary one. Thus the dialogues have not a single topic but rather several ones revolving around a central focus (namely the main topic), which is usually indicated in the title. When the first title does not indicate the main topic, this may be found in the second one. A critical reference to this practice seems to emerge from Proclus' claim that

the title is ancient and not spurious as are some other attributions of titles, which belong to more recent scholars who have taken advantage of their authority (καθάπερ ἄλλαι τῶν ἐπιγραφῶν προσθέσεις οὐσαι τῶν νεωτέρων τῆς ἐξουσίας ἀπολαυόντων).¹¹

It cannot be excluded that Plato himself considered adopting a new and alternative naming strategy (that is, the addition of a second title) to make the main topic explicit.¹² However, according to Proclus, there are some 'recent scholars' who, on the basis of their supposed authority, have added a second title—as I will argue—through literary-analysis procedures that do not conform to the guidelines set by Plato's philosophy. Proclus may have Thrasyllus or others like him in mind.¹³ Indeed, according to Diogenes Laertius, the double title assigned to *every* dialogue is due to

⁸ e.g. Pl. *Plt.* 284b7; Mansfeld (n. 4), 71–4.

⁹ Procl. *In R.* 1.8.16–21; transl. D. Baltzly, J. Finamore, G. Miles (edd.), *Proclus. Commentary on Plato's Republic. Volume I: Essays 1–16* (Cambridge, 2018).

¹⁰ Cf. Procl. *In R.* 1.8.21–2.

¹¹ Procl. *In R.* 1.9.10–12; transl. Baltzly, Finamore, Miles (n. 9).

¹² See Pl. *Ep.* 13.363a; Arist. *Pol.* 2.1262b11, *Rh.* 3.1415b31.

¹³ Proclus can describe someone like Thrasyllus as νεώτερος, because on the one hand much of Proclus' material is traditional, although he puts his own stamp on it, and on the other the Neoplatonists do not have the same sense of historical perspective as us. On Thrasyllus and the questions confronting anyone seeking to organize and classify the works of Plato, see H. Tarrant, *Thrasyllan Platonism* (Ithaca and London, 1993), 85–98 and—especially with regard to the issue of double titles—Mansfeld (n. 4), 71–4.

the classification developed by Thrasyllus,¹⁴ who extended this practice by providing each dialogue included in a tetralogy with a second title indicating its theme.¹⁵

To each of the works Thrasyllus affixes a double title, the one taken from the name of the interlocutor, the other from the subject (ἀπὸ τοῦ πράγματος).¹⁶

So, the second title stems from a reflection on the subject matter (ἀπὸ τοῦ πράγματος) of each dialogue,¹⁷ and seems to respond to the need for clarity and literary systematization in relation to Plato's writing. The evidence from Diogenes also links the importance of the theme to the tetralogical order of the dialogues:¹⁸ we read that the first tetralogy develops a common subject (πρώτην μὲν οὖν τετραλογίαν τίθησι τὴν κοινὴν ὑπόθεσιν ἔχουσιν).¹⁹ The term ὑπόθεσις, clearly used as a synonym of πρᾶγμα, is replaced by σκοπός in the testimony on the tetralogical order of the dialogues in the *Anonymous Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy*:

The tetralogical principle is this: they say that Plato published his dialogues in tetralogies in imitation of the tragic and comic poets, who would take part in contests with four plays dealing with the same subject (τὸν αὐτὸν σκοπὸν), and approach joy in the last one. ... However, we will not accept their claim that Plato adopted the tetralogical order in imitation of the tragic poets; for he criticizes them himself and says that they write 'images of images'. There is another proof that he does not imitate them: for the tragic poets ultimately approach joy, whereas in the *Phaedo*, the last dialogue of the first tetralogy, he did not approach joy but Socrates' death; so it is a mistake to say that his dialogues were published in tetralogies. Moreover, the *Euthyphro* has one target (σκοπὸν) and the *Apology* another, as do the *Crito* and the *Phaedo*.²⁰

This text clearly echoes Diogenes Laertius' passage, but rejects Thrasyllus' parallel between theatrical tetralogies and dialogical tetralogies, for a twofold reason: on the one hand, Plato—given his well-known criticism of playwrights and their deceptive creations, which are removed from the truth by three degrees²¹—would never have imitated their way of proceeding;²² on the other hand—and more importantly for the present enquiry—the internal dynamics of Platonic tetralogies are considered different

¹⁴ On Thrasyllus, see R.G. Hoerber, 'Thrasyllus' Platonic canon and the double titles', *Phronesis* 2 (1957), 10–20; Tarrant (n. 13), 4–17; M. Chase and R. Goulet, 'Thrasyllus', in R. Goulet (ed.), *Dictionnaire des Philosophes Antiques*, 6 (Paris, 2016), 1150–72. On the authoritative role played by Thrasyllus in the arrangement of the corpus, see again Tarrant (n. 13), especially 17–30. On Diogenes Laertius' use of isagogical schemes, see F. Ferrari, 'A Middle-Platonist Plato: introductory *Schemata* and the construction of a system in Diogenes Laertius', in A. Motta and F.M. Petrucci (edd.), *Isagogical Crossroads from the Early Imperial Age to the End of Antiquity* (Leiden and Boston, 2022), 33–48.

¹⁵ See again Mansfeld (n. 4), 71–4. The *Apology* and the *Epistles* are exceptions, and that spurious works excluded from the corpus bear only one title each.

¹⁶ Diog. Laert. 3.57; transl. R.D. Hicks (ed.), *Diogenes Laertius: Lives of Eminent Philosophers, Books 1–5* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1925).

¹⁷ This observation allows Diogenes to draw up a list of the second titles (3.56–61).

¹⁸ Although it is not certain that the first attempt to group the thirty-six dialogues according to a tetralogical scheme is attributable to Thrasyllus, he was unquestionably responsible for bringing the number of tetralogies to nine. On the Platonic tetralogies, see A.-H. Chroust, 'The organization of the Corpus Platonicum in antiquity', *Hermes* 93 (1966), 34–46.

¹⁹ See Diog. Laert. 3.57.

²⁰ Anon. *Proleg.* 24.25–25.1 and 25.25–36, transl. Westerink (n. 6), modified.

²¹ On how Neoplatonists read Plato's hostility to drama and his use of the dialogue form, see Sheppard (n. 4).

²² According to Thrasyllus, Plato himself was inspired by dramatic tetralogies in the publication of his dialogues: see Diog. Laert. 3.56.

from those of theatrical tetralogies. Theatrical tetralogies explore a single theme and offer a joyous play as their last component. But this does not apply to dialogical tetralogies, both because the σκοπός varies for each dialogue—as is shown by the first tetralogy—and because the joyous element is not found in the *Phaedo*, where Socrates dies, as the *Anonymous Prolegomena* indeed stress.²³ This passage might therefore confirm that, in Late Antiquity, a theatrical tetralogy was believed to imply a (thematic) link between the four dramas and to end with a light-hearted play. The thematic unity of the four dramas is expressed by the term σκοπός, which does not indicate—as one would expect in a Neoplatonist text—thematic unity in view of an end. The term σκοπός is used here, in a conscious yet not entirely accurate way, to stress the difference between dramatic and dialogical tetralogies: what four dramas within the same tetralogy (often, though not always) share is not a σκοπός in the strong sense but a common subject which is more properly a mythical theme (ὑπόθεσις). It is precisely because of the impossibility of speaking of a σκοπός in a strictly philosophical sense that the *Prolegomena* criticize those who classify the dialogues on the basis of their main themes. The theme of a play cannot be regarded as analogous to the philosophical σκοπός of a Platonic dialogue, because the σκοπός is not common to the whole tetralogy but unique for each dialogue; the σκοπός has a special relationship with unity in view of an end, and not only with literary unity in the sense of what is common and thus unitary. Hence the Anonymous could attack Thrasyllus—albeit not explicitly, like Proclus—for his use of merely literary criteria of classification.²⁴ By contrast, the didactic principles that meet the theoretical requirements of Neoplatonic philosophy suggest that the Iamblican canon of dialogues reflects a unitary cosmic design, made up of single microcosmic units, each with its own particular target. Such microcosmic units represent the unity of the various parts of Neoplatonist doctrine and, accordingly, reflect the core of its philosophy, namely metaphysics. Using literary criteria means using the dialogues' themes to arrange them into tetralogies. But Plato's dialogues are not theatrical texts.²⁵

I explain in the following section what dialogues are and why they are not simply dialogical literature. But first, to conclude this section devoted to the theme of the dialogues and the alleged criticism of Thrasyllus' authority by Proclus and the *Anonymous Prolegomena*, I mention a passage in which Thrasyllus is quoted and his cataloguing activity explicitly criticized for not being in keeping with philosophical methods.

This explicit criticism is found in Albinus' *Prologue*. Here Albinus tends to stress the importance of intrinsic exegetical criteria for reading Plato and his dialogues. He mentions Dercyllides alongside Thrasyllus in order to criticize authors' choice to promote a thematic order for the Platonic dialogues (based on the characters and the

²³ See Anon. *Proleg.* 25.30–3.

²⁴ See Anon. *Proleg.* 24.1–6. On the reason why the Anonymous does not mention Thrasyllus, see A. Motta, *Prolegomeni alla filosofia di Platone* (Roma, 2014), 64.

²⁵ I do not agree with M. Dunn, 'Iamblichus, Thrasyllus, and the reading order of the Platonic dialogues', in R. Baine Harris (ed.), *The Significance of Neoplatonism* (Norfolk, 1976), 59–80, at 71, according to whom the Iamblican classification has to be considered arbitrary. Rather, the Iamblican curriculum is a reflection of Neoplatonist metaphysics and is therefore structured according to philosophical criteria. This curriculum consisted of two cycles: a first cycle of ten dialogues and a second cycle of two. The first cycle took the student up, through the scale of virtues and sciences, to the highest level, theoretical virtue and science; the second cycle concerned only the highest levels, the theoretical sciences of physics and especially theology.

events in their lives).²⁶ According to Albinus, such an order does not serve the purpose of teaching κατὰ σοφίαν.²⁷ By κατὰ σοφίαν Albinus indicates a criterion of wisdom that is consistent with the Platonic model of wisdom, and hence intrinsic—because it follows the philosophical indications contained in the dialogues—and different from the one characterizing Thrasyllus' cataloguing operation. This might be confirmed by the fact that the expression κατὰ σοφίαν of ch. IV is consistently replaced in ch. VI by the expression κατὰ Πλάτωνα,²⁸ which actually identifies a starting point for students who find themselves in certain conditions *with respect to* Plato's doctrine and who have reached a certain level of learning. Therefore, to say 'according to wisdom' and 'according to Plato' might be to say exactly the same thing, namely that every exegete should reflect on guidelines provided in the dialogues for analysing the dialogues and organizing a teaching plan.

In short, the texts discussed so far would appear to point to Platonist exegetes' desire to challenge Thrasyllus' authority in order to establish the need for new intrinsic philosophical criteria of analysis (κατὰ σοφίαν, κατὰ Πλάτωνα).²⁹ Commentators point out that all the answers to hermeneutic and didactic problems must be found in Plato's own words and in the form he gave to his writings.

3. THE PHILOSOPHICAL IMPORTANCE OF THE TARGET: A MATTER OF ANALOGIES

At this point I demonstrate that the Neoplatonists' shift of focus from the theme to the target of each dialogue is determined by the formulation of the cosmo-literary theory. Let us start with the definition of dialogue, a question first raised in the previous section but which remains open. As far as we know, from Proclus onwards (although the issue had probably already been addressed by Iamblichus)³⁰ a dialogue is not simply—as Diogenes Laertius (3.48) and Albinus (1.147.18–21) defined it—'a discourse composed of a question and answer upon some political or philosophical matter, combined with a becoming delineation of the manners of the characters introduced, and the arrangement as regards their diction'. In the *Anonymous Prolegomena* the dialogue is a cosmos, and each dialogue is explicitly regarded as a living being part of a well-defined metaphysical cosmos.

Since, as Plato himself says, a literary work is comparable to a living being (ὁ λόγος ζῶν ἀναλογεῖ), and therefore the most perfect literary work will resemble the most beautiful of living beings (τῷ καλλίστῳ τῶν ζῶν ὁ κάλλιστος λόγος ἀναλογήσεται); the most beautiful living being is the cosmos (κάλλιστον δὲ ζῶν ἐστὶν ὁ κόσμος), and the dialogue can be compared to the cosmos, as I have already said; consequently the dialogue is the most beautiful of literary forms (ὁ διάλογος ἄρα κάλλιστός ἐστιν λόγος).³¹

²⁶ Albinus, *Proleg.* 4.149.13–16.

²⁷ Albinus, *Proleg.* 4.149.15–20.

²⁸ Albinus, *Proleg.* 6.150.13–18.

²⁹ As shown by B. Reis, 'The circle simile in the Platonic curriculum of Albinus', in J.J. Cleary (ed.), *The Perennial Tradition of Neoplatonism* (Leuven, 1997), 236–67, Albinus' metaphysical convictions anticipate certain characteristics peculiar to the Neoplatonist interpretation of Plato's dialogues.

³⁰ After all, the Neoplatonist canon of dialogues can be traced back to Iamblichus (cf. Anon. *Proleg.* 26.16), so the cosmo-literary theory too goes all the way back to him.

³¹ Anon. *Proleg.* 15.20–2; transl. Westerink (n. 6), modified.

Such a definition necessarily entails a redefinition of the criteria for analysing a text. The interest in this cosmic analogy suggests that the theme of each dialogue implies an analogy with the cosmos and—as I will argue—is therefore one of the metaphysical elements of the literary microcosm.³² The need to look at this peculiarity of Plato's philosophical texts is clearly expressed by Olympiodorus. The criticism that in the *Gorgias* is addressed to the rhetoricians, and which is newly discussed by Olympiodorus in the preliminary remarks of his *Commentary on the Gorgias*, could be extended to all the 'recent scholars' who ignore the metaphysical contents of Plato's texts. Scholars who use literary criteria of analysis and rhetoricians who are unfamiliar with philosophy cannot grasp the analogy between each dialogue and the cosmos, because they are able to analyse the parts of any speech, but not those of a living being such as a dialogue—the best living being and hence the best literary image of the cosmos.³³

However, the relationship between the cosmos and the dialogue is not merely a literary image; rather, it is a concept used to interpret the cosmos through the dialogue and the dialogue through the cosmos. Like the cosmos, each dialogue is made up of six fundamental elements. Identifying these elements in each dialogue and establishing the causal relationships that govern the dialogical cosmos means realizing that a literary creation cannot be separated from its own demiurge. And if the demiurge is Plato, his creation must be consistent with his doctrine:

As we have seen, then, that the dialogue is a cosmos and the cosmos a dialogue (ὥς ὁ διάλογος κόσμος ἐστὶν καὶ ὁ κόσμος διάλογος), we may expect to find all these components of the universe in the dialogue. The constituents of the universe are these: matter, form, nature (which unites form with matter), soul, Intellect and Divinity.³⁴

For the purpose of this investigation, I analyse only how it is possible to interpret each dialogue in the light of the cosmos—not the other way round—and to identify the literary counterparts to the last two elements of the dialogical cosmos. The aim of this exegetical operation is to identify the literary counterparts to the Intellect and the One and thus to demonstrate a far from obvious difference between theme, subject and target. Let us start from the reason why the target may be seen as the counterpart to the One. The Divinity is the One, that God who is the final cause of the cosmos and the Good for the sake of which the cosmos has been created. In order for the target to be the literary counterpart to the One, it must be one and must make it possible, once identified, to grasp the unitary divine design that governs the text. The literary counterpart to the One, in other words, is the τέλος of the dialogue, namely the good at which the dialogue aims.³⁵

Neoplatonist texts indeed describe the target as being one and unique for each dialogue.³⁶ Although the Neoplatonists agree that there is a single target for each

³² On the interpretation of Plato's dialogues according to the theory of the six causes, see d'Hoine (n. 1), 143–6 and B. Bohle, *Olympiodorus Kommentar zu Platons Gorgias* (Heidelberg, 2020), 150–208.

³³ For such a formulation, see Olymp. *In Alc.* 56.14–18 (and n. 48 below).

³⁴ Anon. *Proleg.* 16.3–7; transl. Westerink (n. 6).

³⁵ See Anon. *Proleg.* 17.38–9.

³⁶ On the importance of Iamblichus for the stipulation that each dialogue has a single σκοπός, see B. Dalsgaard Larsen, *Jamblique de Chalcis, exégète et philosophe* (Aarhus, 1972), 435–42; J. Dillon, *Iamblichi Chalcidensis in Platonis dialogos commentariorum fragmenta* (Leiden, 1973), 56 and 264–5; Westerink and Trouillard (n. 6), LXVI and more recently D. Baltzly, 'The Skopos assumption: its justification and function in the Neoplatonic commentaries on Plato', *International Journal of the*

dialogue, this target changes with the exegetes' perspectives. For example, according to Olympiodorus some commentators argue that the target of the *Gorgias* is to discuss rhetoric, which is why they wrongly title it 'Gorgias, or On Rhetoric'. Even though Olympiodorus understands the second title as an attempt to determine the target of the dialogue,³⁷ he finds this identification unsatisfactory.³⁸ But it is not in this discussion that we find proof that the target and the theme are different. Rather, we must move onto the level of macrocosmic analogy. Olympiodorus merely notes the difficulty which exegetes have in determining the target in an unambiguous way. This openly acknowledged difficulty conceals a problem: the proliferation of σκοποί. If a dialogue were to admit more than one σκοπός, the literary unity would be lost and, with it, the analogy with the One. This is the reason why the *Anonymous Prolegomena* seek to downplay the problem or at least to present it as owing to a phenomenon other than the presence of different themes and titles.³⁹ In order to overcome such a problem, the *Anonymous Prolegomena* offer a list of ten rules for the correct identification of the target.⁴⁰ More than the list of rules, however, I would like to dwell on the remark that anticipates it:

How many rules are we to go by in establishing the target of each dialogue? ... The usefulness of such an inquiry will be all the more evident if we think of the double titles of most of his dialogues: nearly all have a double heading, e.g. 'Phaedo or on Soul', 'Phaedrus or on Beauty', etc., so it is not actually clear which of the questions mentioned in the title Plato is discussing (ἄδηλον οὖν ἐστὶν περὶ ποίου ἄρα τῶν ἐγκειμένων τῇ ἐπιγραφῇ διαλέγεται); therefore, it is not without its usefulness to examine this question.⁴¹

This passage seems to support the existence of a difference between theme and target. The second title, which should provide more indications about the theme of the dialogue, filling a sort of 'information gap', may help to define the target, yet it is not the target. Indeed, the target may be a more 'elaborate' version of theme.⁴² As stated in the *Anonymous Prolegomena*, although the double title is known, the target remains unclear, because—if I understand the text well—it is unclear what sort of questions mentioned in the title Plato is discussing, namely *with what sort of soul and what sort of beauty* such dialogues are concerned.⁴³ The non-overlapping nature of theme and target seems to be confirmed by Proclus, who uses the terms πρόθεσις and

Neoplatonic Tradition 11 (2017), 1–24, who properly describes the σκοπός as a kind of magnet, though for reasons I do not agree with in all respects.

³⁷ Olymp. *In Grg.* proem. 0.4, 3.1–7. In the isagogical section of his *Commentary* Olympiodorus neglects to specify that the theme is something other than the σκοπός. Probably the reason is that: 1) this was supposed to be something well known from the introductory lessons to the dialogues—indeed, Olympiodorus' brief reference to the rule of the parts and of the whole shows that both he and his students already knew this general rule, so there was no need to repeat it; 2) in this context Olympiodorus is only interested in showing the countless errors made by his predecessors, not the theoretical strength of his own interpretation.

³⁸ On the target of the *Gorgias*, see also Anon. *Proleg.* 22.1–12, 39–58.

³⁹ This is demonstrated by the case of the *Phaedrus*, for which two double titles are attested, *On the Soul* and *On Beauty* (cf. Anon. *Proleg.* 21.10).

⁴⁰ See Anon. *Proleg.* 21.16–23.35.

⁴¹ Anon. *Proleg.* 21.1–16; transl. Westerink (n. 6), modified; my emphasis.

⁴² As Mansfeld (n. 4), 74 suggests.

⁴³ We do not have a full discussion of the σκοπός of the *Phaedo*, but the Anonymous may be seeking to clarify that this target is the purifying of the soul. The σκοπός of the *Phaedrus* is discussed by Hermias (*In Phdr.* 14.9–11 Lucarini–Moreschini) as the beauty of every kind. Cf. Anon. *Proleg.* 22.6–7, where this is the beauty running through everything.

σκοπός equivalently and interchangeably, introducing a subtle shift compared to the pre-Iamblichean term ὑπόθεσις; in a passage of his *Commentary on the Parmenides* (1.630–1), Proclus deduces that, although the first group of *Parmenides* interpreters may be criticized for ignoring the second title *On Ideas* in spite of its antiquity, the purpose of the dialogue (πρόθεσις) cannot be identified with the second title.⁴⁴ In the prefatory remarks of his *Commentary on the Timaeus*, Proclus seeks to demonstrate the substantial agreement between the purpose (πρόθεσις) of the *Timaeus* and its second title, while confirming that there is not complete identity between the two.⁴⁵ Olympiodorus' interpretation goes in the same direction. He states that, according to Proclus, the target of the *Alcibiades* is self-knowledge, that this is confirmed by a plurality of arguments, and that *one* of these arguments is that the dialogue is entitled the 'Greater Alcibiades, or On the Nature of a Human Being'. Olympiodorus, however, also points out that there is a more accurate way to conceive of the target—namely, Iamblichus'; however, this does not imply that the dialogue can have more than one σκοπός, but only that there is no method that ensures agreement among exegetes. The rules discussed by the commentators show the need to clarify that the σκοπός cannot lead to ambiguity or to equivalent definitions of the same concept, because it is unique like the One.

Furthermore, the issue of the σκοπός is not just a formal matter but one of substance; it is not a literary matter but a philosophical one, as it relates to our understanding of the cosmos and its theological and teleological nature. Establishing the theme of the dialogue is not sufficient to define the substance of the dialogical microcosm: it is like remaining anchored to Aristotelian metaphysics—as I will show—without opening oneself up to the metaphysics of the One. So, the *Anonymous Prolegomena* invite us to reflect on the fact that, in order to correctly endorse the cosmo-literary theory, it is important to adopt not only a biological perspective linked to the *Phaedrus* but also a theological and teleological perspective linked to the *Timaeus*. The theological and teleological foundation of the cosmo-literary theory intertwines the τέλος, the Good and the σκοπός:

He himself says that the dialogue is like a living being, because every literary work is; any well-written piece of literature can be compared to a living being; if, then, the dialogue is comparable to a living being, and a living being has only one purpose (τέλος), the Good (for the sake of which it has been created), the dialogue must also have one purpose (τέλος), that is one target (ἓνα σκοπόν). So we cannot agree with those who say that the *Phaedo* has three targets, the immortality of the soul, the death of the wise, and the philosophical life; this view, as we have said, is wrong, since the targets should not be many but one only.⁴⁶

The fact that terms such as σκοπός and ὑπόθεσις are often used interchangeably should not lead us to assume that this is always the case and hence simply to accept the most common translation. To do so would be to lose sight of the value and meaning of these technical terms, by failing to assess the specific contexts in which they appear. Besides, a translation which does not take account of the possible linguistic and conceptual developments of isagogics can hardly do justice to the huge theoretical contribution

⁴⁴ The σκοπός of the *Parmenides* concerns 'all things in so far as all things are the offspring of one cause and are dependent on this universal cause' (*In Prm.* 1.641.3–5). See Radke-Uhlmann (n. 1), 232–305.

⁴⁵ Procl. *In Ti.* 1.1.5–14 and 1.1.24–7.

⁴⁶ Anon. *Proleg.* 21.27–36; transl. Westerink (n. 6), slightly modified.

made to exegesis by Neoplatonist doctrine. The above passage supports my decision not to translate σκοπός as 'theme' or 'subject', because in such a cosmo-literary context it would be confusing and misleading to do so. A dialogue has only one target as a living being, and such a purpose cannot be a mere theme, but is rather the thematic unity of the dialogue, the good at which it is aimed: that unity which from a Neoplatonic point of view is the ultimate cause of everything, that is, what everything originates from and what everything returns to—the One.

I rather translate the term σκοπός as 'target'.⁴⁷ Besides sharing the same semantic reference (and the desired teleological nuance) as the more generic 'goal', or 'aim', the term 'target' is preferable in so far as it conveys the idea that the σκοπός is also externally directed: it is not only the target of the dialogue but also the target for the dialogue. In this sense, the term might possibly help to translate a certain degree of 'awareness' in the definition of the σκοπός of each dialogue and in the overall arrangement of the dialogues, an awareness that the Neoplatonists, who endorsed the cosmo-literary theory, may have wished to project onto Plato himself. Indeed, in the cosmo-literary theory Plato is the demiurge of a cosmos of dialogues. According to the *Anonymous Prolegomena*, Plato consciously creates a literary cosmos: Plato himself gives reasons ('as Plato himself says'—ὡς αὐτὸς λέγει ὁ Πλάτων) for his choice, namely to create not simply a living being but the most beautiful living being.⁴⁸

In the *Commentary on the Alcibiades* Proclus claims—like the *Anonymous Prolegomena*—that it is one thing to know the σκοπός of the dialogue, and another to know the good (τὸ ἀγαθόν) that derives from such a purpose (πρόθεσις).⁴⁹ For if the σκοπός is not given a teleological flavour, it merely repeats the theme, like a synonym, or—as in the case of the tetralogies—indicates the mythical theme. And this is what happens when one looks at the dialogues merely as literary creations without taking into account the cosmic analogy whereby their demiurge conceived them:

Admittedly, as we have said elsewhere about the dialogues, each one must possess what the whole cosmos possesses; and an analogous part must be assigned therein to the good, part to the intellect, part to the soul, part to the form and part to the underlying nature itself. Let it then be stated that in this work proportionate to the good is conformity to the divine through the care of ourselves, to the intellect the knowledge of ourselves, to the soul the wealth of demonstrations leading us to this conclusion, and practically the whole syllogistic part of the dialogue; for the form there remains the style of the diction and the interweaving of the figures of speech, and of the literary forms, and what else belongs to stylistic ability; and for the matter the persons and the time and what is called by some the plot (ὑπόθεσις).⁵⁰

The theme of the *Alcibiades* expressed by the second title does not fully satisfy the metaphysical σκοπός. Indeed, the term ὑπόθεσις here indicates the material component of the dialogue, that is, its characters and chronological setting, not the theme but the

⁴⁷ L.G. Westerink (ed.), *The Greek Commentaries on Plato's Phaedo. Volume I: Olympiodorus* (Amsterdam, 1976), 15 suggests the literal translation of σκοπός as 'target', based on what he sees as a subtle shift from the pre-Iamblichean term ὑπόθεσις (Diog. Laert. 3.57). See also Dalsgaard Larsen (n. 36), 234.

⁴⁸ The same analogy also occurs with some variations in Proclus and Olympiodorus: see A. Motta, 'L'ekphrasis del discorso: una lezione neoplatonica sul miglior artefatto', *Estetica. Studi e ricerche* 1 (2013), 186–200.

⁴⁹ Procl. *In Alc.* 10.2–3.

⁵⁰ Procl. *In Alc.* 10.3–14; transl. W. O'Neill (ed.), *Proclus, Alcibiades I* (The Hague, 1965).

plot.⁵¹ It is evident from the *Commentary on the Republic* and the *Commentary on the Alcibiades* that Proclus uses ὑπόθεσις and πρῶγμα to express two distinct concepts. This can be demonstrated by focussing again on the analogy between the elements of the cosmos and those of the dialogue, which Proclus also refers to. Proclus says that the subject indicated by the second title (and generally expressed by the term πρῶγμα), namely self-knowledge in the case of *The First Alcibiades*, is the Intellect's counterpart. The subject is not the counterpart of matter (ὕλη), because the literary counterpart of matter is the plot, and accordingly it is not possible to identify ὑπόθεσις and πρῶγμα.

In the *Anonymous Prolegomena* the problem (πρόβλημα) of a dialogue is said to be analogous to the Intellect: for just as the Intellect is devoid of parts (ἀμερής) and may be envisaged as the centre of a circle, with the noetic faculties revolving around it as the circumference, in the same way the problem represents the centre around which the arguments move as a circumference in pursuit of the answer.⁵² The problem of the dialogue is what Proclus calls the main theme,⁵³ which seems to be distinguished from the target, just as the Intellect is distinguished from the One. The Intellect is distinguished in so far as it is closer to the Soul—the demonstrations that revolve around the circumference are analogous to the Soul—and because it is ἔν-πολλά: within it the multiplicity of ideal Forms is perfectly unified without any spatio-temporal conditioning. Furthermore, the Intellect depends on the One, but is not the One. Similarly, as has been shown so far, the theme is connected to the target, but is not the target: for the target must be connected to the τέλος and τὸ ἀγαθόν, notwithstanding commentators' inability to provide an unambiguous definition of it in relation to an individual dialogue. Indeed, the target of the *Alcibiades* is not simply self-knowledge, but the knowledge of our essence, which leads us to perfection.⁵⁴ Thus, as the chief purpose (τὸ δὲ τελικώτατον) and principal target (σκοπιμώτατον) of the whole dialogue, Proclus indicates the consideration of our being:

Even if one should say that the purpose (τέλος) of the dialogue is the care of ourselves and the knowledge thereof, it is actually appropriate that this should accrue to us as an end and as the good that results from what is demonstrated (ὥς τέλος καὶ ὥς τὸ ἀγαθὸν ὑπάρχειν ἡμῖν ἐκ τῶν ἀποδεικνυμένων προσήκει), but the object of enquiry and the purpose of the syllogisms is a problem (τὸ δὲ ζητούμενόν ἐστι πρόβλημα), viz. the knowledge of ourselves.⁵⁵

Therefore, the analogy between the problem and the Intellect and the identification established between the theme and the problem allows us to look at the theme and the target as the microcosmic reproduction of the relationship between the Intellect and the One, while also confirming that the target cannot coincide with the theme or the second title. Moreover, the difference between the target and the theme might reflect the two different approaches to exegesis, namely the philosophical and the literary. The σκοπός—the literary representation of the One—is the eminently philosophical method, an isagogical method used within the context of the Neoplatonist cosmo-literary theory and based on a metaphysical and teleological rereading of the form and contents of the dialogues.

⁵¹ See also Procl. *In Ti.* 1.8.30–1.9.13 and A.-P. Segonds (ed.), *Proclus. Sur le premier Alcibiade de Platon*, 1 (Paris, 1985), 131 n. 7. The *Anonymous Prolegomena* (15.21–9) argue against inferring the σκοπός of a dialogue from the ὕλη, that is, from the characters.

⁵² See Anon. *Proleg.* 17.33–8.

⁵³ Cf. above, *In R.* 1.8.21–2.

⁵⁴ See Procl. *In Alc.* 10.15–16.

⁵⁵ Procl. *In Alc.* 9.16–10.2; transl. O'Neill (n. 50), slightly modified.

4. CONCLUSION

First, I have attempted to demonstrate the existence of a Neoplatonist critique of certain criteria of literary analysis that over the centuries had also been applied to the dialogues, especially in order to read them by analogy with tragedies. These criteria were marked by the excessive use of terms meant to reflect the different nuances of the literary microcosm created by Plato. In particular, I have highlighted the lack of overlap between the target of the dialogues and the theme of the dramatic tetralogies, by considering how the Neoplatonists imbued the term σκοπός with a metaphysical content. The technical terms employed by the Neoplatonists, albeit sometimes interchangeably, are so charged with philosophical meanings that it is difficult to believe that σκοπός, πρᾶγμα and ὑπόθεσις are always synonyms falling within the same isagogical rubric and representing the same element within the macrocosm.

I have discussed the main advantage that Neoplatonists probably derived from their criticism of literary criteria for analysis, namely the possibility of making exegesis and didactics consistent with Plato's doctrine. Within the context of the Neoplatonist cosmo-literary theory, the dialogues are no longer seen as texts in which something is discussed (namely texts with a main theme), but rather as instruments for investigating a metaphysical universe and hence for testing the consistency of the Platonic system as a whole. Clearly, the Neoplatonists did not examine the literary aspects of the dialogues merely in order to distinguish them from the philosophical ones; rather, they always considered the target which Plato had sought to meet through a certain dramatic construction. This is the reason why the theme is expected to remain important in the analysis of the text. But there is more to it: for beyond the theme there is the target, just as beyond the Intellect there is the One.

All in all, the difference between theatrical plays (and other literary genres) and Plato's dialogues lies in that theoretical structure which makes the latter the most beautiful and best living beings: a microcosm that is an image of the macrocosm, whose elements are similar to those of the macrocosm-universe, and through which it is possible to find the unitary core of each dialogue. More generally, the cosmic analogy,⁵⁶ which 'recent scholars' are incapable of grasping, is functional to highlighting the need to read the dialogues according to intrinsic criteria, namely those of Platonic metaphysics.

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⁵⁶ On this topic, see H. Tarrant, *Plato's First Interpreters* (London, 2000), 137–9.