



# PhD Research Proposal Form

## China Scholarship Council (CSC)

### 2026

#### FIELD

PHILOSOPHY

**Thesis subject title:** Self-knowledge and dialectic in Plato

**Name of the French doctoral school/Ecole doctorale:** ED 540 Lettres, Arts, Sciences Humaines et sociales

**Name of the Research team/Equipe de recherche:** Centre Jean Pépin UMR 8230  
Website: <https://umr8230.cnrs.fr/>

**Name of the Supervisor/Directeur de thèse:** Dimitri EL MURR, Professor of Ancient Philosophy and Chair of the Philosophy Department (ENS-PSL)  
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**Lab Language/ Langue de travail:** French and English

#### Research Proposal Abstract/Présentation du sujet:

With late Neoplatonic philosophers, especially after Iamblichus (ca. 250-330), Plato's dialogues became part of a school curriculum as well as the means to a philosophical initiation. In that specific context, the question of the order in which these dialogues should be taught arose with great acuity. One pressing question was for instance which dialogue to begin with. The Neoplatonists answered this question straightforwardly: students wishing to learn Plato's philosophy should begin with the *Alcibiades*, because this dialogue deals with the first of all philosophical questions: self-knowledge. Once most of the Platonic dialogues had been read, the curriculum ended with the *Parmenides*, because this dialogue, thanks to its particularly complex dialectical form, provides access to the knowledge of the principle, the One or the Good. For these late Platonists, then, self-knowledge and dialectic were seen as far removed from each other: if, as Plato repeatedly claims in the *Republic* and elsewhere, dialectic is indeed the highest science, and can therefore only be practised by seasoned philosophers, self-knowledge seems merely to amount to some kind of prerequisite for philosophy and not to an end in itself. Yet, in several passages of the Platonic dialogues, most notably in the *Alcibiades*, Socrates explains that the goal of philosophy is to respond to the Delphic Oracle ( $\Gamma\tau\omega\theta\iota\sigma\alpha\tau\tau\omega\tau\omega$ , 'know thyself').

This thesis project aims to examine the relationship between self-knowledge and dialectic across the Platonic dialogues, and understand in what sense it is coherent for Plato to consider that self-knowledge is both a prerequisite for dialectic and the ultimate goal of all dialectical enquiries,



even when this enquiry is concerned with particular objects other than ‘the self’. By conducting this investigation on the basis of a detailed study of the Platonic dialogues in which the two concepts are addressed jointly (mainly the *Alcibiades*, the *Apology*, the *Charmides*, the *Phaedrus*, the *Symposium*, the *Republic*, and the *Theaetetus*), this project is grounded on the following hypotheses: a) self-knowledge is conceived by Plato as knowledge of the true self, that is the rational soul, and therefore as the knowledge of what is *universal* within us; b) dialectic, although it is a method aiming to know the intelligible Forms, or Ideas, has an ethical, even therapeutic dimension, because the knowledge it produces in the soul allows the knowing subject to know itself as such, i.e. as a rational soul.

Another central question raised by the thesis is to determine to what extent the dialogical dimension of dialectic plays a role in the process of self-knowledge. In other words, if dialectical inquiry is always a *joint* endeavour, in what sense does the self-knowledge that may result from dialectical enquiry require other souls in order to occur? Within this specific framework, more specific questions can be raised so as to shed new light on how self-knowledge and dialectic relate to one another: a) how does Plato conceive of the epistemological dimension of the ethical bond of friendship that often brings together philosophers engaged in dialectical research? and b) how does this relate to the key Platonic ethical principle of *homoiōsis theōi* (‘assimilation to the divine’)? A very important passage at the end of the *Alcibiades* helps see the issue at stake in more detail. In that passage (*Alc.* 132d-133c), Socrates explains what self-knowledge consists in by using an analogy: if an eye wished to see itself, it would look into the pupil of another eye; similarly with self-knowledge, for one who would wish to know oneself should look into another one’s rational soul. It is clear then that this paradigm of specular reflection has nothing to do with a socio-psychological narrative of self-knowledge acquired through the gaze of others (Giannopoulou 2015: 85). Rather, the soul must ‘contemplate’ another soul performing its primary function of knowing and thinking. In this sense, this ‘contemplation’ must be understood as a process of examination, understanding and dialogue. During this process, the two souls assimilate to Beauty, Justice and all intelligible realities. This assimilation (*όμοιωσαί*) occurs precisely through comprehending their innate *συγγένεια* (kinship) with the divine (Pépin 1971), thereby achieving self-knowledge. This analogy presents a clear triadic pattern which is germane to a correct understanding of Platonic friendship (Gill 2007, El Murr 2024), suggesting therefore that ethical conditions for dialectical enquiries such as friendship (*philia*) are important conditions for self-knowledge according to Plato, and that self-knowledge and assimilation to the divine are closely related.

The topic of self-knowledge in Plato has garnered many valuable and wide-ranging studies in the past 40 years or so (e.g. Annas 1985, Rappe 1995, Gill 2006, Lane 2017, Leigh 2020), and this is also true of specific dialogues in which this topic plays an important role, such as the *Alcibiades* (e.g. Brunschwig 1996, Joose 2014, Gill 2007, Ferguson 2019), the *Phaedrus* (Griswold 1996, Tsouna 2012) or the *Theaetetus* (Giannopoulou 2015). There is, however, no systematic study of the relationship between self-knowledge and dialectic across the entire Platonic corpus in English or French. The recent book in French by Quérini 2023 is a very useful study but it is only partly dedicated to Plato and does not address the dialogical dimension of self-knowledge (and notably ignores the role played by friendship in that context).

## References:

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Tsouna V. (2012). "Is there an answer to Socrates' puzzle? Individuality, universality, and the self in Plato's *Phaedrus*." *Philosophie antique*, 12: 199-235.

### Type of PhD: Full PhD

#### 1. Full PhD

- Joint PhD/cotutelle (leading to a double diploma) : **YES/NO**
- Regular PhD (leading to a single French diploma) : **YES/NO**

2. Visiting PhD (students enrolled at a Chinese institution who come to ENS for mobility period) : **YES/NO**

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