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Plato's "Lysis": A Reconsideration

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PLATO'S *LYSIS:* A RECONSIDERATION*

I

Commenting on Plato's *Lysis,* one of the group of earlier aporetic dialogues characterized by their apparent search for some particular definition, W.K.C. Guthrie remarks that it is not a success.[1] Whether this response is influenced by the general scholarly attitude towards the dialogue or his own assessment of it, it does reflect a longstanding bias concerning the *Lysis.*

The *Lysis* ostensibly tackles the question of friendship: What is the basis of one man's attraction for another?[2] Socrates and his interlocutors, the boys Lysis and Menexenus, discuss various solutions to the question, and the fact that they are still unable to say what it is at the end of the dialogue seems to emphasize the failure of the venture.

It is the thesis of this paper that such a reading is misgiven. My contention is that while they cannot say what friendship is, one of the boys, Lysis, does in fact apprehend the nature of friendship, and that this is seen in the actions which underlie his words.[3] Thus I stress that the dialogue lends itself to a very positive reading in the light of which it cannot be considered a failure. I wish to emphasize that I am not advancing any thesis regarding the aporetic dialogues as a group. I am concerned solely with this one dialogue, wishing only to follow the assessments of those such as Friedlander[4] and Gadamer[5] (and in particular the latter), which lean towards a non-aporetic interpretaion of the *Lysis.* As will be seen, my discussion, developed from these others, goes further in its conclusion.

Of course, the *Lysis* has always had a prominent position among the early dialogues because it stays close to the historical figure of Socrates,[6] and this attests to one sense, at least, in which the dialogue is important since it gives an essential description of the character of Socrates and his method. In fact, as we see Socrates not teaching but provoking the boys to search out the truths for themselves, prompting them to use their minds, we recognize in this friend and philosopher the quintessential Socrates.

Furthermore, from this point of view, the very medium of dialogue for the presentation of philosophic ideas is validated. Plato did not believe that it was a good idea to attempt to *tell* mankind anything, this is forcibly argued in the Seventh Letter. He chooses, rather, to demonstrate his ideas, inviting the reader to participate in the inquiry and, like the characters therein, to follow or not follow, to see or not see, what is presented in the words and the structure of the dialogue. The reader is not lectured or persuaded by eloquent arguments, he lives the inquiry *himself and is persuaded by himself with the truth generated in the soul* "like a blaze kindled by a leaping spark". (Letter VII, 341d)

In what follows I intend to present a fresh consideration of the *Lysis* in the light of recent interpretations of its import, particularly that of Gadamer and his concern with the Doric harmony between *logos* and *ergon* that he finds suggested in the dialogue. My contention is that the more positive and satisfying conclusion alluded to above can be reached through an assessment of the notion of friendship that appears in the structure of the dialogue. While this interpretation does not neglect the discussions that take place between the dialogue's participants, it emphasizes what is said in terms of what actually happens in the dialogue and the ways in which those involved respond to the ideas expressed. First, I wish to refresh the reader's memory

with a very brief outline of the dialogue's structure:

The dialogue begins with an introduction that sees Ctesippus and Hippothales enticing Socrates into a wrestling-school where he is to show Hippothales the proper way of talking to Lysis, the one dear to him. Following this introduction the dialogue concerns three main discussions separated by significant reactions from the participants. The first conversation involves Lysis (his young friend Menexenus has been called away) and Socrates. During the course of the discussion Socrates humbles and checks Lysis, "instead of puffing him up and pampering," showing Lysis where his true value lies and demonstrating to Hippothales how he should proceed.

When Menexenus returns Lysis wants him to receive the same treatment from Socrates, and thus the second conversation is between Menexenus and Socrates and concerns the quest for a "friend".[7] They pursue a line of inquiry that leads them to conclude that it is not the lover who is the friend, but the loved, just as it is the hated who is an enemy, not the hater.[8] This leads them, ultimately, to the further conclusion that a man is often a friend to one who is no friend, or an enemy to one who is no enemy, but even a friend. At this point Menexenus is lost and Socrates suggests that they may have been conducting their search improperly.

Socrates involves both boys in the final conversation. The discussion moves to the question of desire and the notion of friends belonging to one another. But if those that belong are alike then, by virtue of a previous conclusion, they cannot be friends, a paradox which the dialogue seems unconcerned to delve, and a situation which, to Socrates' mind, makes them appear ridiculous: they consider themselves friends, but cannot say what a friend is.

II

The reader who examines the arguments in depth will understand that problems confront anyone who expects a stated resolution to the dialogue's inquiry, and, as noted above, scholars in general have found little in the *Lysis* to warrant much positive attention.[9] Some, in discussing the early dialogues, even dismiss it with no more than a passing lament for the confusion and inconclusiveness.,

Those who do pay it some discussion often tend towards one of two camps, the first dwelling on the failures and discussing reasons for them, and the second finding the dialogue's only justification in its association with, or preparation for, the more satisfying arguments of the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus.*[10] Clearly, if we are to defend the *Lysis* we must show how it contributes an internally consistent thesis to the Platonic corpus.

More recently attempts have been made to develop more positive interpretations of this dialogue. Gadamer suggests that the negative conclusions of the 'traditional' approach arise because the scholars involved have neglected the principle of the Doric harmony between *logos* and *ergon.*[11] This is to propose that the *ergon* is lost in the concern over the *logos,* that the failure of the traditional approach lies in the emphasis on sophistry and interpretation while the encounter with the man is overlooked.

In focussing on the deeds that underlie the words one is immediately impressed by the degrees of friendship actually exhibited within the dialogue. This is stressed by Friedlander in his discussion of the *Lysis.*[12] The two boys are shown as friends in the natural sense before the philosophical discussion begins. Above this is the

somewhat higher sense of friendship seen in the love of Hippothales for Lysis and Ctesippus for Menexenus. Finally, the highest sense of friendship is seen in the service of *paideria* (education, 'philosophical enlightenment') displayed by Socrates towards all four dialogue participants.[13] Thus when various degrees of friendship are discussed within the dialogue they are appreciated by the participants in accordance with their experience. For example, "when the notion of congeniality is applied to the love between human beings, Menexenus asserts, whereas Lysis remains silent. This shows the difference in their experience."[14] Also, according to Friedlander, when these degrees of friendship are mentioned the reader understands how they are represented in the dialogue, such that at the end the reader is well aware that the "pretended" lover is exemplified in Hippothales, while the "genuine" lover is shown in the figure of Socrates. In this way Friedlander ultimately proceeds to add his voice to those who recognize the *Lysis* as a precursor of the *Symposium:* the *eros* which concerns the later dialogue is clearly behind the *philia* of the *Lysis.*

There is much to be said for Friedlander's thesis of 'exhibited' friendship, and it certainly presents the dialogue in a more positive light. My contention is only that he has not gone far enough.

Like Friedlander Gadamer emphasizes the friendship that exists between Menexenus and Lysis at the beginning, but he does so by stressing that their friendship is simply that which is characteristic of children. "Friendship for them is that naive comradeship of boasting and outdoing one another in which children warm up to each other."[15] When Lysis bursts in on Menexenus' confusion (213D) agreeing with Socrates that their train of thought was misconceived, Gadamer sees Lysis not only involved in the dialogue but undergoing a change of awareness.

> Not only does his own childish understanding of friendship, which is based upon the sameness of friends, resist these sophistic distinctions which Socrates has been making. It seems that as a consequence of his being so disquieted by these sophistries, something of a premonition comes to him that real friendship might be an entirely different, tension-laden thing.[16]

This tension-laden relationship is expressed by the word *oikeion* (that which pertains to the household). Gadamer wants it understood in the limited sense of where one feels at home and belongs, because friendship consists in the fact that a person finds his self-awareness, his self-confidence, ***through*** the other, and not that he merely wishes to forget himself and his needs in the other.

It is important to note that for Gadamer Lysis has the premonition but not the apprehension. Thus when Socrates brings the converstion to the apparent truth that those who love belong to each other such that the lover must be befriended by his favourite, Hippothales, the unlucky lover, concurs passionately while Lysis falls silent not liking the result. "The logos here has not yet revealed something in deed (*ergoi*) to this boy, whose experience still lags behind what Socrates has been saying."[17] One must know what friendship is in order to distinguish it in what has been said, and it is this that the boys do not yet know.

So Gadamer concludes that the boys end in ignorance. They do not know because children could not know, but their "not-knowing" has all the positive promise of Socratic ignorance, the false knowledge has been cleared, the way is prepared for the soul to see. Gadamer, then, gives the *Lysis* one of its most positive

treatments yet. But, again, I would wish to press further, to suggest an *apprehension* on the part of Lysis, revealed through his responses in the dialogue.

III

The existence of friendship in the *Lysis* is best seen in two explicit moments. In looking at the dialogue one understands that there may be more meaning expressed than the words themselves can carry. In Gadamer's terms there is the *ergon* beyond the *logos,* in the light of which the words themselves can take on a new meaning. From this perspective nothing included in the dialogue might be irrelevant to its decoding.

Socrates is detained outside a wrestling-school into which he is ultimately drawn. One is struck immediately by the backdrop of physical struggle and fierce competitiveness against which the dialogue ensues. We see the discussion of friendship rise and fall within an environment that knows the daily effort of men and boys bettering themselves by overcoming and being overcome.

The reason for Socrates' presence there is to show Hippothales the proper way to speak to his beloved. But while many commentators see this and the initial conversation with Lysis as no more than an excuse to set up the "real" examination of friendship, this is not the case. It plays a necessary and integral part in the whole; just as Menexenus' being called away before the discussion can really begin is also necessary. While it might be suggested that Menexenus was only there to draw the more timid Lysis into dialogue with Socrates, the point is that the same end could have been achieved with Menexenus remaining there. He leaves so that something can happen to Lysis alone. And he leaves, to state the obvious, *so that he might come back.*

Concerning Menexenus' return A.E. Taylor notes: "Some by-play follows here, and when the argument is resumed it is with a different interlocutor. This is a device for calling our attention to the fact that the main issues of the dialogue have not been raised."[18] No, the main issue has been raised, the by-play involves probably the key, and certainly the first, moment in the dialogue. When Menexenus returns Lysis asks Socrates to repeat to Menexenus what he had said to him. Socrates has just finished humbling Lysis, methodically de-constructing his ego so that the reconstruction would be truer, showing him exactly where his real value lay. This was done in order to show Hippothales how one should speak to one's beloved. Here in Hippothales we do indeed, as Friedlander suggested, witness the false friend. Hippothales' dominant characteristic is a disharmony of words and deeds, he praises Lysis in order that the glory should be reflected back onto him by association. Now, at the moment when it is clear that Hippothales is not a friend, Lysis requests Socrates to treat Menexenus as he had treated him.

It is here that the first crucial moment arises (211 C). When Socrates questions the motives of Lysis, asking if he wishes to see revenge in watching Menexenus triumph, he replies no, that he wants Socrates to trounce Menexenus, to put him down (*kolazein* — to chastise). In other words, he wanted Menexenus to experience what he had just experienced because he realized its value. This is no childish putting down of a friend, this is the moment when Lysis catches his first understanding of the friendship and enacts it.[19] Highly competitive in appearance, this friendship places the friend in a position where he can be humbled or excel, and be better for it. Lysis sits back and, without warning his friend, allows Menexenus to become engaged in a conversation that Lysis himself can see, through the avid attention he is

paying, is misconceived. It is not until Menexenus confesses that he is lost, and Socrates suggests why, that Lysis interjects. He blushes because the words had escaped him unintentionally. Socrates notes that he had been closely applying himself to their talk, and had possibly forseen the problems into which Menexenus was being led. But he remained silent. Now, is his outburst of excitement an expression of pleasure at seeing Menexenus' defeat? A kind of gloating through which Lysis benefits? Or is Lysis' excitement prompted by seeing his friend fail for his own sake? And, further, is this to be construed as friendship? I suggest that it is. Presumably, since they confess to be friends, Menexenus' failure will reflect upon Lysis as well. Of course Hippothales would never have permitted something like that to occur, and this fact serves to emphasize the difference between the two attitudes.

As the dialogue proceeds first Lysis and then Menexenus are drawn into a further discussion. The boys agree or express doubts or misunderstandings, mostly in unison. But then Socrates suggests that someone desiring another would never desire him or befriend him if he did not belong to his beloved in some way. At this point (222 A), while Menexenus responds in the affirmative, Lysis is silent. Here is the second moment that reveals friendship in action. The silence here, *sigae,* has the added sense of 'keeping secret', and this ambiguity suggests a deeper meaning, that Lysis might have spoken but kept silent. Because of course, if Lysis does not want to concede this point why does he not state it? I would suggest that he sees exactly what is coming, understands the undesirability of the conclusions that will follow, but remains silent deliberately. He sees the argument does not work but rather than telling Menexenus this he 'keeps secret', allowing him to discover it for himself. His silence is a painful silence. While Gadamer suggests that the logos "has not yet revealed something in deed (*ergoi*) to this boy," the opposite seems the case — the silence of Lysis is a deed, it is the act of not intervening in what is happening to Menexenus. Lysis stops and allows Menexenus to follow into Socrates' conclusion without any restraining words, words which under other circumstances would seem to indicate friendship. But the friendship of Lysis allows the other (the loved) to fall or excel, forces him into that situation of trial, because it understands the result to be the betterment of the other.

Friendship when it speaks, the first moment, does so that both might learn. And when it is silent, the second moment, it is again to allow a learning experience. There seems a definite harmony of words and deeds in Lysis' character. He professes friendship in his request that Menexenus might be put down, and in his silence in the face of his friend's downfall.

Interestingly, Roger Duncan, in examining the notion of *philia* in the *Gorgias,* concludes for some reason that the desire for friendship is as natural as the desire to outdo others.[20] As we have seen, they are indeed remarkably similar, but how paradoxical this appears without the vivid example of the *Lysis,* where what *appears to be* the outdoing of another is *illustrated* as a deep love and friendship for that other.

Socrates draws out of these boys not only a sincere attempt to understand their friendship, but also the enactment of friendship. The deeds are juxtaposed against the words which so often hide them. We have a succinct expression of Socratic irony here, the irony which bridges the gap between the ignorance of words and the knowledge of existence. This irony expresses the tension between ignorance, the inability to voice what friendship is, and the direct experience of the unknown, the

existence of "the friend". To describe in words alone what friendship is would be to falsify it in some way, to prevent the necessary moment of encounter in the discovery of the idea. Because one cannot capture in a definition this living reality. So the characters 'speak' friendship beneath the definitional failure of the dialogue. No serious man, says Plato in the Seventh Letter, will write about serious realities for the general public. Unless a man has an affinity for what he's seeking he won't see it anyway, and to describe it to him is to misdirect him, to suggest that he can chase after it in words.

Perhaps this is why Socrates accords so much attention to definitions, to *logos.* What have been seen as defective arguments within a perplexing context emphasize the inadequacy of definition without an underlying experience. Those who attend to the logic alone in an attempt to explain the dialogue share with the initial interlocutors the same risk of being misled. And the type of problem that can arise from such an attempt has already been noted (note 8).

So, the importance of the dialogue's ending is not diminished but seen in a positive light. They cannot say what friendship is, but this is not to conclude that the dialogue has failed. Clearly, they will always be unable to say what it is, since it will always be something that cannot be 'said'. One is reminded here of Euthyphro's confusion, *All' o Sokrates, ouk echo egoge, opos soi eipo ho noo,* and his concern that the definitions they put forward in search of 'piety' continue to encircle them (*Euthyphro* 11B). The best we can do is attempt to point to it (friendship, piety, etc.), to demonstrate it by example. Although no conclusion has been reached, we know them to be friends through the use of the concrete situation to illustrate the discussion.

While there are still a number of points regarding this dialogue that could be pursued (for example, the continuing discussion of the relationship of *philia* to *eros*), I hope to have shown that it does indeed present, in the way it is composed, a full-fledged concept of friendship.

In concluding I should acknowledge the relevance of the *Lysis* to our situation. Friedlander suggests that for Plato "there was no philosophy without friendship or love". Socrates is a friend who presents the other with the opportunity to excel, the occasion to learn. The view of friendship extolled here is inextricably wedded with learning. One acts for the sake of the other's betterment; friends wrestle, throw and are thrown on a sphere above the physical. Socrates de-constructs to present the possibility of a learning process in the reconstruction.

Beyond this, the *Lysis* emphasizes that friendship and philosophy are inseparable. While the metaphor of the wrestling-school has a physical connotation, it is in the arena of the intellect that this friendship really appears valuable. The solitary thinker is the anti-thesis of what is described here. The quest for knowledge is a co-operative venture. We force those whom we take as friends into learning situations with the expectation that they will reciprocate. Truth, if it is found anywhere, is to be found in the dialogue of our lives, and not in the words that at their best can only express the periphery of the dialogue.

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Notes

*An earlier version of this paper was read at Wilfrid Laurier University in March, 1982. This paper arose from my many conversations on Plato with Jose Huertas-Jourda. I have further benefited from his helpful comments on the final draft.

1. W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy,* vol.4. (Cambridge: University Press, 1962), p.143.

2. No real digression is needed to explain this concept of friendship prevalent in the behaviour of the Greeks. Guthrie provides more than an adequate discussion of this in his history (noted above), explaining that love between males was perfectly natural in Athens and not a topic of embarrassment. It was believed that in male attachments, usually younger with older, lay the potential for heroism and virtue, and the possibility of a lasting, spiritual relationship.

   In Plato this relationship is best seen in the interchange between Socrates and Alcibiades in the *Symposium.* Socrates believes that by his love he will inspire Alcibiades to live a richer life, and this in turn gives Plato the opportunity to emphasize the possibility of true *eros* over the lower falsehood of homosexual love.

   The *Lysis* takes place against the backdrop of such understandings, both Athenian and Platonic. Viewed from these perspectives the existence of friendship acquires no small importance. The State sees this institution (which promotes courage and virtue) as being essential for its survival. While for Plato friendship is seen as an integral part of the education of the just man.

3. Other dialogues have lent themselves to similar treatments. For example, Jan H. Blits' analysis of the *Euthyphro.* ("The Holy and the Human: An Interpretation of Plato's *Euthyphro,*" *Apeiron* 14 (1980) pp.19-37.) Here the author introduces a thesis that also argues against the failure of the dialogue by focusing on the dialogue's action as well as its arguments.

4. Paul Friedlander, *Plato: An Introduction,* vol.2. (New York: Bolligen Foundation, 1964).

5. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermenuetical Studies on Plato.* translated and introduced by P. Christopher Smith, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980).

6. *Ibid.,* p.1.

7. The English reader is often confused by the ambiguity that arises with the use of *philia* and its verb, *philein.* As a noun *philos* suggests 'friend', as an adjective it is commonly passive and denotes the 'loved'. But in composition, with say *sophia,* it has an active sense as understood in our word 'philosophy'. The verb *philein,* 'to love', or 'like', can cover a variety of loves, but rarely suggests sexual love (*eros,* verb — *eran*).

   A further confusion arises, however, through Socrates' willingness to shift from *philos* to *eros* without feeling the need of a distinction. It has been pointed out, though [Drew A. Hyland, "*Eros, Epithumia,* and *Philia* in Plato," *Phronesis* 13 1968] that the fact that Plato wrote one dialogue on friendship (*philia*) and two on *eros* indicates that he at least recognizes a distinction between the two. Hyland's paper, here noted, is in part an attempt to delineate that distinction.

8. Some confusion is caused by the Wright translation in the popular Hamilton & Cairns edition which states the opposite — "it is not the object of love that is the friend, but the lover" etc. (213A) Working from the Greek of the Loeb edition we find: *ouk ara ho philon philos ek toutou tou logou all' ho philoumenos.* One can only surmise that Wright renders the passage as he does in order to make it logically consistent, yet there's good reason to believe that Plato intended the logic to appear as confusedly as it does (see p.14).

9. Crombie suggests (*An Examination of Plato's Doctrines,* 1962) that the *Lysis'* appeal lies in its intellectual teasing. The dialogue contains a series of arguments which create perplexity such as to form "a conundrum which he could solve if he had a mind to, but which he feels the reader may prefer to solve for himself." (p.20) The result of this appears to be that the reader is entertained rather than edified.

   Grote (*Plato and the Other Companions of Socrates,* vol 1. 1867) feels that the dialogue's main concern is solely to present defective arguments in order to demonstrate their defectiveness, and he concludes that it ends "not only without any positive result, but with speakers and hearers more puzzled than they were at the beginning." (p.515) Perhaps this too is entertaining.

   Guthrie points to a more alarming fault. That unlike other dialogues the *Lysis* portrays Socrates, and not his interlocutor, as failing to make proper distinctions. (p.146) Furthermore, "even if those are right who take a kindlier view of Plato's aims and methods in the dialogue, it remains true that anything of importance in it can be found in others".

   These things of importance tend to be seen as early formulations of Plato's more complex concept of *Eros.* With this introduction under our belt, it is believed that we'll be more comfortable with the loftier notions elaborated in the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus.* Of course the point might be made that since the shortcomings of the *Lysis* are corrected elsewhere and gathered into a more comprehensive theory, and if the only constructive points are more coherently integrated in later dialogues, then why bother with the *Lysis*? Hence we are brought back to those scholars who simply passed over the dialogue in search of more fertile ground.

10. Laszlo Versenyi identifies and expands upon these two interpretative trends in his paper: "Plato's Lysis", *Phronesis* 23 (1975) pp.185-198. He notes: "At one extreme readers found the *Lysis'* arguments so defective, confused, Sophistic and eristic that they came to regard the dialogue as a purely negative semantic or logical exercise lacking in all substantial content and positive theory. At the other end, reading the dialogue as a kind of prolegomenon for the *Symposium, Republic,* and the *Phaedrus,* scholars tended to find positive content in the *Lysis* by interpreting it not on its own or in the context of the early Socratic dialogues but on the basis of Plato's later epistemological and metaphysical theories." (p.185) He goes on to provide ample examples of both interpretative camps.

11. Gadamer, p.6.

12. Friedlander, pp.92-104.

13. *Ibid.*, p.94.

14. *Ibid.*, p.100.

15. Gadamer, p.7.

16. *Ibid.*, p.12.

17. *Ibid.*, p.20.

18. A.E. Taylor, *Plato: The Man and His Work.* (London: Methuen Press, 1960) p.67.

19. It might be argued in Gadamer's favour that the understanding here is limited. Lysis could be acting instinctively, but this does not appear to be the case later in the dialogue.

20. Roger Duncan, '*Philia* in the *Gorgias.*' *Apeiron* 8 (1974) pp.22-27.