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How and Why Socrates' Arguments in *Lysis* Are Incoherent

The Wikipedia page on *Lysis* politely describes the arguments therein as "para-logical." This amusing turn of phrase is also quite accurate. Platonic dialogues often strike us as less than philosophically rigorous, but even granting this *Lysis* stands out as particularly troubled. In this less well known dialogue Socrates is waylaid on his way to the Lyceum by Hippothales and Ctesippus, who ask him to join them and their friends inside a newly constructed palaestra. Within Socrates engages in a discussion of the nature of friendship with Hippothales' beloved, Lysis. He considers and discards various definitions of friendship. Throughout this discussion his reasoning is incoherent in a variety of ways. This paper will examine some outstanding examples of "para-logical" reasoning. But simply tearing apart Socrates' flimsy arguments would be rather uninteresting, and so we will also examine the question of *why* Plato would have Socrates use such incoherent reasoning. There must be a more interesting reason than that Plato was simply a bad philosopher, because we know that he was, in fact, a superb philosopher.

One of the most obvious problems with Socrates reasoning throughout his discussion with Lysis is over-abstractification. It is a tendency in most of Plato's work, and in much of Ancient Greek philosophy, to abstractify to the point of absurdity; in *Lysis*, this tendency is particularly pronounced. The discussion begins with Socrates flattering Lysis' friend Menexenus by praising their strong friendship, and self-deprecatingly asking Menexenus if he can answer a question about friendship itself. "As soon as one man loves another, which of the two becomes

the friend[?]" (Lysis 212a) From this relatively grounded beginning the conversation journeys into territory more related to identity theory than friendship. Can the good be friends with the good, or the bad? Is like friends with like, or unlike with unlike? Perhaps good is friends with that which is neither good nor bad? All these considerations seem difficult to grasp because "to be friends with" applies to people, not to abstract concepts. Socrates seems to be talking more about similarity or attraction than human friendship.

This leads us to what is perhaps an even deeper difficulty – Socrates'/Plato's complete dismissal of any psychological considerations whatsoever. When discussing the nature of justice, or piety, or wisdom, it seems at least more plausible that there is some abstract concept to which our human behavior conforms. If justice means some form of reciprocity, then there is a clear relationship between this idea and our actions – for example, harming those who have harmed us and helping those who have helped us. But in the case of *Lysis*' discussion of friendship, there is no such clear relation. I do not know whether this is because of some fundamental difference between friendship and those other concepts – if this is so, I confess to being unable to discover it. But even if this is the case, there are also certain fundamental characteristics of real friendship that are not taken into account.

For example, one of Socrates' basic assumptions is that friendship must be based on usefulness. That is, that which the beloved possesses which draws the lover to him is something which the lover lacks – whether that something be beauty, wisdom, or any other virtue or quality. Thus a relationship based upon usefulness is created, in which the lover uses the beloved (if they are successful in their courtship) to obtain some quality that they lack. Interestingly, in *Symposium* Socrates describes the opposite relationship, in which the beloved "gives in" to the lover in order to improve himself – ideally through gaining virtue. Of course, if we take more

than a few seconds to think about it, we can see that in reality friendships are based on far more than this simple principle. In fact I think most people would suggest that the foundational principle of friendship is the enjoyment of someone's company because they are similar to oneself – an idea which Socrates rejects, because if someone is similar to you, you cannot gain anything you don't already have by spending time with them: "How then, I wonder, will the good ever be friends at all with the good, when neither in absence do they feel regret for each other, being sufficient for themselves apart, nor when present together have they any need of one another? (215b)

It has been made clear just how leniently Plato handles the eminent philosophical problem in *Lysis*. I think it fair to assume that he was, indeed, being purposely lax in his reasoning, and not simply falling prey to an endless series of glaring logical fallacies – Plato was no fool, on all accounts. We are then left with the question: *why* would Plato treat his conceptual quarry so gently? The discussion in *Lysis* bears far more of a resemblance to the early speeches of *Symposium* than to the meticulous argumentation in *Republic*. Perhaps it is not unreasonable, then, to analyze *Lysis* as more of a literary work and less a philosophical treatise, as we might wish to do with much of *Symposium* (especially Aristophanes speech). Of course all of the Platonic dialogues contain elements both of literature and of philosophy; *Lysis* simply appears to lean more towards the literary angle.

If we read *Lysis* as a story, what is Plato trying to tell us? Disengaging from the pure philosophy, we find what may be one of the most human portraits of Socrates. In the very first sentence we seem him in the most mundane of scenarios, simply walking from the Academy to the Lyceum (coincidently the two sites of the famous schools of Plato and Aristotle). He is waylaid by chance – perhaps mirroring the unexpected and uncontrolled urges of affection,

which Socrates and his interlocutors are unable to pin down with a definition – and before agreeing to join Hippothales and Ctessipus, he asks: "who is your prime beauty?" (204b) He wants to know if it is worth his time to enter the palaestra and engage in their discussion – reminiscent of a modern young adult asking "Are there gonna be hot guys/girls at this party?" I do not mean this facetiously; this is how Socrates' question truly struck me. This is also related to his idea, discussed above, that affection forms due to a lack of something in the lover which the beloved can provide. Certainly Socrates' young interlocutors are unlikely to grant him any great wisdom; but they have beauty to offer in abundance, in accord with the standard Athenian man-boy relationship at the time.

Socrates plays his role of mentor well; practically the first thing he does is give Hippothales advice on wooing his beloved (Lysis):

> You ridiculous Hippothales, before you have gained the victory, you compose and sing a hymn of praise on yourself… If you succeed in winning such a youth as you describe, all that you have said and sung will… be in fact your hymn of triumph… But if he escape your grasp… the greater will be the blessings which you will seem to have missed…" (205e)

This is probably the most reasonable thing that comes out of Socrates' mouth the entire dialogue. When he enters into conversation with Lysis he attempts to demonstrate the *proper* way to woo one's beloved – that is, by "humbling and checking, instead of puffing him up and pampering him" (210e). He does this by engaging Lysis in his usual labyrinthine elenchus, this time using – as discussed above – an unusual amount of sophistical arguments, which Plato usually has him avoid. It is possible that he does this to deliberately confuse the conversation and enhance his demonstration for Hippothales' benefit. A similar tactic may be employed during his discussion

with Menexenus, which was engendered by Lysis' request that Socrates take the arrogant Menexenus down a notch.

One particularly amusing moment occurs when Socrates almost blurts out advice to Hippothales *during* his discussion with Lysis. He stops himself just in time, realizing that informing Hippothales that he is currently demonstrating the correct way to woo a beloved would be quite embarrassing for the boy. Other moments of real or apparent confusion on Socrates' part can be found in many of the dialogues. Here and elsewhere I think they serve to humanize him, to present him as more than just a philosophy god floating around on a Cloud. The task Plato has set himself here, then, seems to not only be to relate Socrates philosophical theories, but also to preserve the man himself in the immortality of words.

The dialogue ends with the guardians of the various youths on the scene swooping in and herding them off to locales unknown. This is oddly reminiscent of Socrates brief conversation concerning freedom, which preceded the main discussion. In this section of the dialogue he asks Lysis how much freedom his parents give him. After some consideration, they discover that the boy has, in fact, very little freedom at all – almost all of his actions seem regulated or limited in some way. Then Socrates points out examples of things that Lysis *does* have freedom in, and leads him to realize that the defining factor is knowledge and understanding.

The principle illustrated is that in that which we have good understanding of we are given authority, and in that which we have no understanding of we are treated as a child. The intercession of the guardians at the end almost seems to emphasize this point. They prematurely end the congregations philosophical journey. Perhaps this serves to represent their collective lack of understanding, and thus their lack of authority over philosophical discussion. The analogy is

far from perfect, but it is significant that one of Socrates' core beliefs is that we all know far less than we think.

Socrates' arguments in *Lysis* are overly abstract and far from coherent. Yet clearly they are like this for a purpose. By de-emphasizing the philosophy and putting his effort into the frame story, Plato creates a picture of Socrates that is intensely human and may resonate deeply with the modern reader. We see Socrates as he really was (probably), not simply a fount of occasionally sarcastic philosophical aphorisms, but a real person with real desires and real flaws. Other dialogues that accomplish this well are *Charmides, Phaedrus,* and *Symposium* (specifically Alcibiades speech "in praise" of Socrates). Perhaps if we read these dialogues and the others and focus on the man instead of the philosophy, we will gain insight into one of the most famous thinkers of all time, and do Plato a favor in the process.