

What Really Happened in Plato's *Lysis*

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Philosophers have recently begun to seriously analyze Plato's account of friendship in the *Lysis*. Many of these philosophers have proposed ideas about Plato's theories of "first," "second," and "third" levels of friendship in the *Lysis*.¹ However, I find these analyses to be incomplete and therefore unsatisfactory. Although these different types of friendship are addressed in the dialectic of the *Lysis*, the actual events of the *Lysis* have thus far been mistakenly glossed over and ignored by most scholars. It is in these narrative sections of the dialogue that Plato shows, rather than tells, his readers his account of friendship and its elements. In this paper I argue that the opening and closing scenes, as well as the actual events that occur within the *Lysis*, relayed to the reader through Socrates' narration, reveal an overlooked aspect of Plato's philosophy regarding friendship—an aspect that the dialectical conversation as such tends to eclipse.

David Bolotin analyzes the *Lysis* extensively in his book, *Plato's Dialogue on Friendship*. The majority of this book is devoted to clarifying the conversations that occur between Socrates and the younger boys and attempting to answer the questions Socrates presents. In doing so, Bolotin's work is representative of the body of work that has thus far addressed the *Lysis*. Bolotin, on occasion, takes segments of Socrates' narration into account when analyzing the dialogue, but does not address large sections of it.² His overall view of the conclusion of the *Lysis* is solely based on the conversation between Socrates and the younger boys and not upon the events that occur within the dialogue.³

A 2005 analysis of Plato's *Lysis* by Terry Penner and Christopher Rowe also represents a type of analysis that is fairly common among the current literature on the dialogue. Rowe and Penner argue that the “first friend,” a phrase denoting the final goal of a friendship hierarchy, is the “knowledge of the good, wisdom, happiness or the Form of the Good.”⁴ The “first friend” is sought for its own sake. The authors also argue that we can love other things, given that they are “in fact a means to the ‘first friend.’”⁵ Besides using evidence from the conversation occurring between Socrates, Lysis and Menexenus, Rowe and Penner also recommend that each dialogue should be read as a “unified whole [which is] more than the sum of its parts.”⁶ Although the interpretation of a “first friend” is debatable, it does have a foundation in the dialectic occurring within the *Lysis*. The problem with this analysis of the dialogue, however, is that it leaves substantial elements of the dialogue unexplained. Why is the setting of the *Lysis* presented with such detail and care? Why does Plato include so many details throughout the entire dialogue in his narrations that appear to be separate from the ongoing dialectic? We should not assume that Socrates included these details carelessly or needlessly, but instead, think of them as possible critical significance. We should attempt to discover whether there is meaning within these sections of the dialogue, and, if there is meaning, what Plato is trying to convey through these narrations.

Other scholars have paid some attention to these subtle hints in setting and actions outside of the conversation. Christopher Planeaux believes that the setting of the *Lysis* is “not quite right.”⁷ He argues that Socrates’ opening of the *Lysis* (“I was traveling from the Academy directly to the Lyceum...”) would not, geographically, have taken Socrates to the north of the Lyceum, as that route is “blatantly indirect.”⁸ Planeaux recognizes the

fact that Plato, “an exceedingly meticulous writer,” cannot be assumed to have been careless on details such as these. Planeaux concludes that this description reveals Socrates’ true intention to “go to the Fountain of Panops and not the Lyceum.”⁹ He insists that it would be highly unlikely for Socrates to be unaware that the wrestling school was constructed “near a frequented locale” and that Hippothales, “a close companion” to Socrates, was attending the school.¹⁰

I cannot dispute the ancient geography and I take their description of the paths as accurate, but although this indirect path may initially seem “not quite right,” it is easy to imagine that if Socrates, someone who is frequently stopped by others who want to converse with him, actually wanted to go to the Lyceum in an efficient manner, then he might have to take an indirect, “less traveled” path. Avoiding others may, in fact, be, for Socrates, the most direct and time efficient way to the Lyceum.¹¹ Planeaux clearly recognizes the importance in the details of Plato’s writing; however, the conclusion he draws from the alleged inconsistencies in the narration is that the “stability of the *Lysis* overall is much less secure than might appear.”¹² Planeaux rightly drew his attention to Socrates’ narration, but was sidetracked with all of the seeming inconsistencies.

Hans-Georg Gadamer acknowledges the dual layers of the *Lysis* and the actions within the dialogue, which he describes as *logos* (word) and *ergon* (deed).¹³ He, however, concludes that the underlying *ergon*, that is, Socrates’ indirect example of friendship, was unsuccessful because Lysis and Menexenus did not yet have the life experience or maturity to grasp that “in sameness and difference, longing and fulfillment, growing intimacy with others and with oneself are all one and the same thing.”¹⁴ He proposes that this is why Socrates, after the conversation with the boys, stood up to try to find “older

men” with whom he could talk; these men would understand what the boys could not. Gadamer, like Planeaux, took an important step away from the typical analysis of the *Lysis* by detecting the layer of *ergon*, or “doing” itself. Gadamer, though, concludes that this kind of showing by example, or deed, failed to work.¹⁵ The remainder of this paper will follow Planeaux’s and Gadamer’s lead in paying close attention to Socrates’ asides and actions while avoiding Planeaux’s mistake and Gadamer’s conclusions about the *Lysis* in an alternate reading of what really *happened* (as event) in the *Lysis*.

The *Lysis* begins in a narrative way with Socrates speaking to an unstated audience. He tells them that when he was on his way “from the Academy straight to the Lyceum.”¹⁶ It is on this path that he happens to run into Hippothales and Ctesippus, who clearly know Socrates. Hippothales begs Socrates to abandon his destination and to “come straight over” to the boys instead, promising Socrates that it will be worth his time. Hippothales clearly is in some kind of distress and need for advice; we can see this in the way Hippothales nearly begs Socrates to come and talk: “You won’t come?”¹⁷ Socrates quickly finds out from Ctesippus that Hippothales has been singing ridiculous songs and writing poems for a boy, Lysis, with whom he is madly in love. Socrates immediately begins to talk with Hippothales about this type of love-struck behavior and warns against it, saying: “...the skilled lover doesn’t praise his beloved until he has him... these good-looking boys, if anybody praises them, get swelled heads and start to think they’re really somebody.”¹⁸ Hippothales then asks Socrates the important question to which he desperately needs an answer: “What different advice can you give me about what one should say or do so his prospective boyfriend will like him?”¹⁹ In Socrates’ response to this question we can anticipate the importance of *ergon* to the dialogue; he

replies that it isn't "easy to say," but that, if he can talk with Lysis, he may be able to give Hippothales "a demonstration" of how to talk with him. This early exchange provides the foundation for the rest of the dialogue. If the *Lysis* were simply about different types of friendships, discursively explored through the forthcoming conversation, then Socrates' entire introduction to the dialogue would be irrelevant.

It now becomes necessary for Socrates to fake a natural interaction with Lysis. Hippothales informs Socrates that Lysis will probably come to Socrates and Ctesippus on his own (since it is during the celebration of the festival of Hermes, where older men frequently mix with younger boys), but that, if he doesn't, Socrates should have Ctesippus call his nephew, Menexenus over to them, as Menexenus and Lysis are both cousins and close friends. Socrates agrees to this plan, takes Ctesippus with him, enters into the wrestling-school and takes a seat in the quiet part of the room, opposite where Lysis stands. Hippothales' plan works; Menexenus comes over and sits beside them after he sees Ctesippus. Lysis, at this point, feels brave enough to join the conversation now that his close companion is there and takes a seat next to Menexenus. Hippothales has taken a seat "in the rear" from which he can observe but cannot be seen by Lysis. Plato alerts the reader to these cues and events that are happening outside of the dialogue when he demands of the reader, with regard to Hippothales, "Let's not forget about him."²⁰

Not forgetting about Hippothales, we also remember that, as Socrates starts a conversation with Lysis, he is doing this, not because he desired to have a conversation with Lysis (for he was going "straight to the Lyceum"), but because he wants to *show* Hippothales how to act around his lover so that Hippothales can stop making a fool of himself. He obviously cares enough about Hippothales to willingly deceive those with

whom he is entering into conversation, as they have no idea of Socrates' true intentions. Herein we are *shown* our first lesson about friendship. Socrates' friendship with Hippothales causes Socrates to be willing to slightly deceive Lysis (with regard to Socrates' true intentions of the conversation) for the benefit of his friend, Hippothales.

As Socrates begins engaging in conversation, he immediately attacks Lysis by using dialectic to tell Lysis that his parents trust him with virtually nothing and by telling him that his father does not really love him, since he is “good for nothing” in certain areas of life.²¹ The reason Socrates does this becomes clear when Socrates exclaims:

...I glanced over at Hippothales and almost made the mistake of saying: “This is how you talk with your boyfriends, Hippothales, cutting them down to size and putting them in their place, instead of swelling them up and spoiling them, as you do.”²²

The importance of controlling one's beloved is further demonstrated when, upon Menexenus' return, Lysis asks Socrates to do to Menexenus what Socrates has just done to Lysis, himself; he wants Socrates to “teach [Menexenus] a lesson!”²³ Lysis wants Menexenus' ego to be controlled as well. Within this passage lies another indicator of the significance of Socrates' actions. Socrates almost “made the mistake of saying,” which leads us to ask: in what way is this a mistake?²⁴ On one level, it would be a mistake because saying this would embarrass Hippothales; however, when considering this question one must also remember that a mistake is intending to do one thing, but, instead, does something else. By telling Hippothales how to interact with his boyfriends, Socrates would intend to convey to Hippothales how to treat an object of passion, but would, instead, belittle Hippothales. It is only by avoiding “the mistake of saying” that Socrates can successfully show Hippothales the true way to deal with his passionate feelings.

Herein our second lesson regarding friendship is constructed in something Menexenus should *do*. In order to generate and maintain reciprocal friendship, both participants must be humble enough to partake in the friendship. If one's ego is too large, one cannot successfully be the object of either friendship or of a romantic relationship.

Having put both boys in their place, Socrates enters into dialectic with Menexenus and Lysis about friendship and what makes two people friends with one another. He critiques several poets' cliché adage about friendship. During this part of the dialogue, like many other Platonic dialogues, Socrates asks the two boys direct questions about friendship, leading them to agree with several contradictory statements about friendship. This, as far as the dialectic of *Lysis* goes, leads to the *aporia* at the end of the dialogue concerning a linguistic, explanatory definition of friendship. At the end of this dialectic between Socrates and the boys, Lysis and Menexenus seem substantially confused regarding what to say about friendship, as "Lysis and Menexenus just managed a nod of assent."²⁵ Interestingly enough, however, Hippothales simultaneously "beamed every color in the rainbow in his delight."²⁶ If Socrates' story had really just been about first, second and third friendships, why would Hippothales have been this happy?²⁷ By analyzing at surroundings of the narration in the dialogue, we can see that Socrates has not only *shown* Hippothales an act of friendship by talking with Lysis, but he has also *shown* Hippothales how to deal with passionate feelings for another person. He has *shown* Hippothales how to befriend another person. Now Hippothales can stop hopelessly writing poems, singing foolish songs, and endlessly annoying his friends. Socrates gave Hippothales an answer, not through dialogue, but through his actions.

The *Lysis* ends with Socrates saying, as Menexenus and Lysis are leaving:

Now we've done it, Lysis and Menexenus—made fools of ourselves, I, an old man, and you as well. These people will go away saying that we are friends of one another—for I count myself in with you—but what a friend is we have not yet been able to find out.²⁸

Socrates implies that, through the process of showing Hippothales how to interact with the object of his love interest, he has become friends with Lysis and Menexenus.²⁹ This friendship had just emerged during the time in which they were engaging in philosophical discourse. They were certainly not previous companions, as Socrates claimed not to even know who Lysis was at the beginning of the dialogue. This reemphasizes the layers of the *Lysis*. The dialogue's attempt to come to a verbal definition of friends is not complete; the *Lysis* ends in *aporia* and the reader is left without a definition of friendship. Different levels of the dialogue, however, were successful. Hippothales finds delight and relief, having found a way to deal with his passionate feelings because of Socrates' act of friendship on behalf of Hippothales. Furthermore, a friendship has formed between Socrates and Lysis as well as Socrates and Menexenus despite their failed attempt to specifically explain friendship as a whole. It is here that the reader is shown, not told, an element of Plato's philosophy of friendship, what being a friend means, and how friendships are formed.

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¹ Philosophers such as Terry Penner, Christopher Rowe, David Robinson, and David Bolotin are some examples.

² Bolotin does address the opening on the dialogue; he believes that Socrates' report to an unnamed audience about this interaction "indicates Socrates' aversion to friendships based on secrecy or on the exclusion of all outsiders" David Bolotin, *Plato's Dialogue on Friendship: An Interpretation of the Lysis, With a New Translation* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1989), 70. He thinks that Hippothales is "unimpressed" by Socrates' agenda, that is, to go straight to the Lyceum, and also contends that Socrates doesn't show significant interest in stopping to converse with Hippothales until Hippothales mentions young beautiful boys: "[Socrates] seems more attracted by unknown beautiful boys than by acquaintances who may not be outstanding in beauty or in any other way," *Ibid.*, 70.

³ *Ibid.*, 225. Bolotin concludes that "love (or friendship) for the Good would be impossible in a being that was permanently free of wants and needs" and that this is shown in Socrates' "restatement at the end of the *Lysis* (222d6-7)."

⁴ Don Adams, "Plato's *Lysis* (review)," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 45, no. 2 (2007): 1.
<http://muse.jhu.edu/login?uri=/journals/journal_of_the_history_of_philosophy/v045/45.2adams.html> (accessed August 15, 2009).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁷ Christopher Planeaux, "Socrates, an Unreliable Narrator? The Dramatic Setting of 'Lysis,'" *Classical Philology* 96, no. 1 (January 2001): 60. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1215472>> (accessed September 10, 2001).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹¹ Another alleged discrepancy that Planeaux points out is that, although Socrates first does not admit to knowing Lysis, he immediately recognizes Lysis in the wrestling school (Planeaux, "Socrates, an Unreliable Narrator? The Dramatic Setting of 'Lysis,'" 63-64). If one pays close attention to the dialogue, however, one realizes that Socrates is recounting this situation to an unknown audience. He is reflecting on going into the school and seeing Lysis; of course, in hindsight, he knows which boy was Lysis. Planeaux also mentions that it is strange to name a dialogue on friendship "Lysis," which means "releasing." The most apparent reason for the name of this dialogue is that Lysis was a real person. Bolotin also contends that it could be because Lysis is released from his "implicit acceptance of paternal rule" (Bolotin, *Plato's Dialogue on Friendship An Interpretation of the Lysis, With a New Translation*, 66).

¹² Planeaux, "Socrates, an Unreliable Narrator? The Dramatic Setting of 'Lysis,'" 67.

¹³ Gadamer also agrees that the "usual approach" to the *Lysis* focuses on reconstructing the line of argument in the dialogue and logically analyzing it. He states that this method "has the most trouble" because it "fails to take the principle of the Doric harmony between logos and ergon as its guide." Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato* (New York: Yale University Press, 1983), 6.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 19-20.

¹⁵ Gadamer believes that Lysis and Menexenus did not grasp the *ergon* in the *Lysis*; he infers this from the boys' falling silent and unwilling admittance that "the boy for his part should love the true lover too"

(Gadamer, *Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato*, 19). I would argue that the boys' unwilling admittance was not a sign that Socrates *ergon* failed. The *Lysis* ends in *aporia*. By the end of the day, these boys were not content with the poetic proverbs of friendship that the dialogue had produced. On the level of *logos* (word), the attempt to reach a conclusion about friendship failed, but thinking through friendship for oneself has begun for both boys, which explains the boys' hesitation and unwillingness to accept the previous statement made by Socrates.

¹⁶ Plato, *Lysis*, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper and D.S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1997), 688.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 690.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 690.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 690.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 691.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 694.

²² *Ibid.*, 694-695.

²³ *Ibid.*, 695.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 694.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 706.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 706.

²⁷ Bolotin contends that Hippothales is delighted because Hippothales believes ("and probably rightly") that *Lysis* has finally been forced to confess his love for Hippothales through the dialectic (186). It does not seem, however, that "managing a nod of assent" is equal to confessing love for another person. It seems much more likely that Hippothales simply realizes how to deal with his passionate feelings and how to approach objects of his passion in an appropriate and effective way.

²⁸ Plato, *Lysis*, 707.

²⁹ Bolotin points out that Socrates does not explicitly say that he "supposes he is the boys' friend;" however, the fact that Socrates does not deny that other people will regard them as friends seems very relevant. Bolotin, *Plato's Dialogue on Friendship: An Interpretation of the Lysis*, 199. Bolotin instead interprets this as Socrates' warning to the boys that they must not consider themselves friends before they can intellectually know what a friend is. I would argue, however, that this is not a warning. It is Plato's attempt to show that, although dialectic did not produce an answer to the question, "What is friendship?," the process of dialogue and conversation succeeded regarding the very topic of the dialectic: friendship.