
ἄρχαί

AS ORIGENS DO PENSAMENTO OCIDENTAL
THE ORIGINS OF WESTERN THOUGHT

INTRODUÇÃO | INTRODUCTION

Introduction to *Studies on Plato's Lysis*

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Plato's *Lysis* shows Socrates in conversation with two boys he has met at a wrestling school, Lysis and Menexenus. Their debate

revolves around the notion of *philia*, seeking to pin down the nature of this relation, who or what takes part in it, and what causes it. The word *philia* has usually been translated as “friendship” but has a wider application in this dialogue, as it encompasses a variety of friendly and loving attitudes toward both people and things. The kinds of interpersonal *philia* evoked include erotic attachments, kinship relations, utility-based relations, and playful companionship. Roughly two-thirds into the dialogue, the focus turns to a more general theory of desiderative attachments and the question of their ultimate telos and cause. The conversation ends, at least on the face of it, in an impasse, an *aporia*, when the interlocutors find themselves thrown back to the point from where they started, and no attempt to answer the question of what *philia* is or what motivates it has stuck. The *Lysis* nevertheless offers many incentives for further discussion and has elicited radically different responses from its interpreters as to what its real message is. For instance, does it promote a form of utilitarian egoism according to which human attachment can never, or should never, be altruistically motivated? Or does it hint at a very different concept of interpersonal love based on the idea that friendship, as it were, completes us since it connects us with those that share the same values? Does this dialogue stay within the familiar ambit of Socratic ethics, centered around the question of what it takes to achieve happiness (*eudaimonia*) in a human life, without a concern for metaphysical questions? Or, quite the contrary, does its discussion of the highest object of love (*to proton philon*) point forward to the metaphysical program of Plato’s so-called middle-period dialogues and especially to the notions of the form of the good or the form of the beautiful, notions which are at the center of the *Republic* and the *Symposium*? These questions and others will continue to be debated about this puzzling dialogue. The essays assembled in the present volume address many of these topics.

How should we approach a dialogue such as the *Lysis* that introduces a number of tentative answers, but dismantles each answer in turn and finally throws us back to the point from where the investigation started, leaving us in a state of *aporia* (puzzlement, impasse)? This is the question at the center of *Jan Szaif’s* essay

(Szaif, 2022). He distinguishes three approaches: doctrinal, skeptical, and aporetic-maieutic. Whereas the “doctrinal” approach tries to reconstruct a theory of *philia* from certain select components of the arguments in the *Lysis*, the “skeptical” approach reads the refutations and puzzling outcome of this dialogue as a demonstration of how to deconstruct the illusion of knowledge. According to the “aporetic-maieutic” reading, by contrast, this dialogue’s aim is not only to undermine our ill-founded conviction that we already understand *philia*, but also to provide the seeds for the future development of a theoretical understanding of this phenomenon, while not yet pre-determining one answer or theory as the only correct one. Szaif advocates for this kind of aporetic reading on the basis of a description of how Socrates develops and structures the aporetic series of arguments and objections. He also demonstrates how the aporetic method in the *Lysis* differs from the *ad hominem* aporetic in some of Plato’s earlier dialogues. His essay connects these results with a discussion of how aporetic discourse in the *Lysis* serves a protreptic function, both at the dramatic level and vis-à-vis the reader. After an analysis of the *indirect* protreptic practiced in the *Lysis* and a comparison with the explicit protreptic in the *Euthydemus*, Szaif concludes with a defense of Plato’s protreptic use of aporetic discourse against an early ancient critic, Dicaearchus.

Reid Comstock and Trevor Anderson likewise pursue the question what kind of effect on his interlocutors Socrates’ conversation in the *Lysis* aims to achieve (Comstock and Anderson, 2022). They focus on the role of the boy Lysis as a recipient of Socratic protreptic, highlighting the significance of the humbling of the interlocutor for this kind of protreptic. The notion of humbling is first brought up at 210e (compare 206a), as part of Socrates’ proposal about how a suitor should approach his love-interest. Most of the interpreters who have discussed this aspect of the dialogue have limited it to the exchange in 207d-210e, where the young interlocutor is humbled through an argumentation that calls into question his worthiness to be loved by his parents. Comstock and Anderson argue that humbling is a strategy that characterizes Socrates’ interaction with Lysis throughout the entire dialogue and reaches its proper form

only at a dramatic moment toward the end of the conversation, at 222b, when Lysis falls silent. They distinguish between what it means to humble someone “in speech” and “in fact.” While the first passage is only a play and the humbling is merely verbal, the conversation as a whole aims to achieve a humbling in fact, the goal being to win over Lysis as a philosophical friend and companion in the search for wisdom. This kind of humbling, they argue, is achieved not through a refutation of some theoretical conviction about *philia*, but by presenting Lysis with a practical dilemma about how to act as a friend—a dilemma that results in a feeling of cognitive dissonance caused by Lysis’ realization that the way he wants to act is in conflict with what the argument seemingly demonstrates.

Turning now to the question of what kind of theory of *philia* this dialogue might promote, it helps to first lay out the theoretical options. As *David Jennings* explains in his essay, there are two proposed theories in this dialogue that stand out (Jennings, 2022). According to the first, what is neither good nor bad is friend of the good (he calls this the “Intermediate thesis”). According to the second, one is friend to what is akin to or belongs (*oikeion*) to oneself (the “Akin thesis”). Jennings observes that interpreters who pursue a constructive reading have to take a stance as to how these two apparently competing theories relate to each other. Are they consistent ways of viewing friendship? One approach would be to interpret them as just different but compatible ways of characterizing one and the same phenomenon or, alternatively, as descriptions of two different kinds of *philia*. The other approach would be to deny the compatibility of the two accounts, such that Socrates (or Plato) or the reader could embrace only one of them. Jennings pursues the latter option, arguing that the two theories make incompatible claims about the relation between desire and need and about whether friendship must be beneficial: The “Intermediate thesis” claims we become friends only with what is good for us. Need alone doesn’t always issue in desire and friendly love; we must also recognize that what we are missing is good for us. The “Akin thesis,” by contrast, claims that we are friends to what is akin to us. The akin could differ from what is good for us, and our need for akin persons or things all

by itself causes us to desire and love them. Jennings then spells out why he thinks that the Intermediate thesis is the best candidate for being Socrates' view of friendship: it is more consistent with certain Socratic core tenets (such as the claims that *philia* is beneficial, the object of love is a good that one lacks, and that not everyone who needs a good like wisdom loves it) and it better coheres with how Socrates describes and practices philosophy in the *Lysis*.

Assuming that a unified account of *philia* emerges from this dialogue, what exactly is this theory a theory about? What kind of relationship does it analyze under the label "*philia*"? Some commentators have argued that *philia* in the *Lysis* is the familiar relationship we would ordinarily call "friendship," in which two persons have reciprocal affection, personal intimacy, and altruistic concern. Others have argued that it is merely a species of the general desire for the good that not only human beings but all ensouled things have. Andrew Payne considers each of these interpretations in his paper (Payne, 2022) – calling them the "Personal Friendship reading" and the "Specific Desire reading" respectively – and argues for an alternative: that *philia* is a fellowship between human beings where they have a common desire for the good and their bond is structured by wisdom. On his view, which he calls the "Fellowship reading," *philia* is very much like the contemporary associations that exist to support, or show appreciation for, things of value, such as the Friends of the Modern Art Museum or the Friends of the Wissahickon (a creek near Philadelphia). This sort of partnership, he argues, does not require that partners have the mutual intimacy, affection, and concern that are characteristic of personal friendship. According to the Fellowship reading, the notion of *philia* contains more than just the idea of a shared desire for the good. The partners' desire for the good must be oriented towards or guided by wisdom, either because one of its members has it or because they collectively aim at it. Among the puzzles in the dialogue that this reading might help to solve, it might help us understand how philosophy can function as an instance of *philia* and render friendship possible among budding philosophers like Lysis and Menexenus and with mature ones like Socrates.

The essay authored by *Irina Deretić* develops a different perspective on how to understand a wisdom-seeking form of friendship that may develop among the participants in this dialogue (Deretić, 2022). One of the points of contention in scholarly debate has been whether or not the *Lysis* promotes a conception of friendship and love that ascribes to the other person merely an instrumental value, such that we only love those we view as beneficial to us. Deretić presents a reading according to which the key arguments of this dialogue can be read in line with an altruistic (or non-egotistical) conception of friendship: Some of these arguments undermine their apparent egoist conclusions, others hint at a non-egotistical conception of *philia*, while others again concern our relation to impersonal objects of desire, which, according to Deretić, do not fall under the egoism/altruism dichotomy. She argues that one of the proposed accounts of friendship found late in the *Lysis* especially supports a non-egotistical model: namely, the idea that friends are those who “belong with” each other (*oikeioi*). The friendship based on this kind of belonging is incompatible with instrumental friendship, she suggests, since it depends on a special kind of fit and suitability, not just of the one to the other but of each to each other. This natural fit allows friends to reveal to one another their inner selves and thus positions each to make the other better. The friendship that grows during the drama of the dialogue between Socrates and the boys Lysis and Menexenus, that is, between a mature philosopher and his younger students, is a paradigmatic case of the non-egoistic mutually beneficial form of friendship. This “pedagogical” type of friendship, as she calls it, lays the groundwork for friendship between philosophers who work together, each according to their abilities, in the pursuit of truth.

One of the most famous and elaborate theories of *philia* is found in Aristotle’s ethical writings. Aristotle argues that true *philia* is a relationship between two persons, each of whom loves the other for who they really are, wishes them good things for their own sake, and recognizes that concern in the other. Aristotle’s view of friendship has surely influenced commentators of the *Lysis*, and that influence may be largely responsible for the “Personal Friendship reading” that

Payne refers to in his paper, a version of which has been elaborated by Deretić. *David Roochnik* offers a reading that points in a different direction. He argues that the conception of *philia* in the *Lysis* defies the expectations for friendship that we find in Aristotle's work and conforms more closely to the account of *eros* found in Socrates' speech in Plato's *Symposium*. In erotic love, the lover, on account of some lack or need, desires to possess an object, and that object need not reciprocate the feelings, while in friendship we don't expect that same sort of desire to be present, but we do expect the affection to be mutual. The narrative and dramatic frame in the *Lysis* mixes erotic love and friendship, and Socrates' discourse uses erotic love as an example of friendship (or a lover as an instance of a friend) in a number of cases. He also treats friendly love as though it could be aimed at an object that we desire but which does not or cannot love us back, such as wisdom or the good. Roochnik concludes that the principal goal of the dialogue is to blur the distinction between *eros* and *philia*. Because of our fundamentally erotic nature as humans, standing between the good and the bad, but continually striving for the good, the objects of our ordinary forms of *philia* are not what truly belongs to us. When the true, erotic form of *philia* is enacted, it might thus very well undermine the existing relationships between the friends and lovers portrayed in the *Lysis*.

The present volume is a result of the XIII. West Coast Plato Workshop in 2020, dedicated to the *Lysis* and hosted by Nicholas D. Smith at Lewis & Clark College in Portland, Oregon. It was also Nick Smith who suggested to the participants that there might be an opportunity for those interested to publish a selection of the conference papers as a special issue and who put us in touch with the editor of *Archai*, Gabriele Cornelli. After a process of peer reviewing, six essays were selected that address many of the questions raised by this dialogue. Our thanks go to Nick Smith for initiating this volume and to Gabriele Cornelli for supporting its publication. We also thank all the participants of the workshop and especially the authors included in this volume and all those who submitted their paper drafts for review.

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