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Setting Free the Boys:  
Limits and Liberation in Plato's *Lysis*  

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Plato's *Lysis* illustrates how latent limits function as a practical determinant of identity before they are ever manifest philosophically. The *Lysis* locates these implicit boundaries at the threshold of self-knowledge, revealing how, in the domain of character, limits are the analog of philosophical presuppositions. The connection between the latent boundaries of identity and philosophical presuppositions becomes problematic whenever character limits tether common-sense to unexamined principles. This paper examines how Socrates' erotic method works in the *Lysis* and explores, more generally, the ability Socrates has to engender a positive transformation in his interlocutors. Socrates seems to display a unique capacity first for detecting and then for disclosing the blind-spot in his interlocutor's character that often undermines a straightforward acceptance of their argument.

In the most extreme cases, such as with Meno and Callicles, Socrates seizes upon such a performative contradiction to attempt to spark their heightened self-awareness. But the remedy offered by Socrates' disclosure produces a wide variety of results in those with whom he converses. Many times, Socrates is not successful in effecting a change in them. Meno, for example, proves to be practically unteachable because he never acknowledges that he has anything to learn. His conceit of wisdom precludes him from any real learning. Callicles cannot maintain a friendly disposition toward Socrates as long as he clings to his desire to win the argument. He must either drop the veil of friendliness or abandon the attempt to dominate Socrates. Nor would it seem that Socrates was successful in his counsels to Charmides and Alcibiades, if we can surmise anything from their subsequent political careers. The *Lysis*, however, offers a positive example of the Socratic method and substantiates the effectiveness of his erotic strategy toward young Athenian boys. At least one of the two main characters appears to benefit greatly from Socrates' intervention. For this reason alone, the *Lysis* deserves close attention.

Socrates typically provokes the unwitting disclosure of his interlocutor's character flaw through a volatile combination of arousal and humiliation. These two disconcerting components comprise the critical dynamic of Socrates' erotic method of practicing philosophy. One side of this erotic method fans the flames of his auditor's passions to heights unimaginable without Socrates' intervention, while the other side undermines the possibility of acting on the grandiose desires once they are awakened. Nowhere is this admixture of incendiary arousal and wholesale humbling set in greater relief than in Socrates' first exchange with Lysis. Perhaps no other context allows the positive effect produced by his tactics to be seen so clearly. By examining his approach to Lysis in this essay, it will be possible to differentiate Socrates' method of erotic exchange from other forms of exchange, e.g. pederastic, economic, and political.

It is illuminating to explore the way that in the *Lysis* Socrates' two-pronged method accomplishes the profound and particular disclosure of identity through a subtle delineation of *Lysis'* limits. This focus upon limits accords with Socrates' general strategy of exposing some deficiency in the interlocutor that sabotages fulfillment of his aspirations. With Lysis, as with others, Socrates attempts to provide a certain kind of knowledge, the most important aspect of which is not abstract, theoretical knowledge but a highly particular, highly personal self-knowledge. Through evincing what may perhaps be called his "tragic flaw," Socrates has a remedial effect on Lysis. He awakens in Lysis both the desire to know and the possibility for greater self-sufficiency (*autarkeia*). Socrates serves as a mirror to Lysis, offering him an almost uncanny, reflexive access to his own identity.

In the *Lysis*, Socrates not only inflames Lysis' passions, provoking his desire for knowledge; the way he combines this arousal with a powerful humbling forms the possibility for a genuine liberation. Concentrating upon these two emblematic features of Socrates' method may be propitious for understanding Socrates' seeming seduction of *Lysis* in the dialogue. This investigation should yield greater insight into the nature of Socratic seduction in general. It seeks to discover whether or not Socrates seduces his interlocutors into thinking that their best hope of attaining wisdom and freedom depends upon further association with him. Some form of seduction surely occurs with the noble, beautiful, and very young *Lysis*. Yet the qualms to which Socrates confesses after his presumptive "capture" of the boy (at 218c) indicates perhaps that Socrates knows he is overstating his case and that his thinly veiled hubris may have led him to exaggerate his efficacy.

Framed as the enigmatic paragon of the *Lysis*, Socrates may turn out to bequeath something invaluable to his interlocutors, something that galvanizes them and unlocks their potential for self-sufficiency. The *Lysis* demonstrates the degree to which the Socratic method culminates in the kind of "loosing" or "setting-free" its title connotes. This vastly unappreciated dialogue depicts the dynamics of such a "loosing" under the beguiling Eros of the Socratic method. Understood as a setting-free, Socrates' erotic approach to *Lysis* not only looses in him a desire to...
know; it fundamentally empowers him. Socrates' greatest gift to his interlocutors may then turn out to be less a body of knowledge than the empowerment of their freedom, spawned by interaction with him. Freedom (eleutheria), here, takes the form of the extreme self-mastery Socrates exemplifies through his vexing behavior in Plato's dialogues. That the awakening of his freedom summons Lysis from passivity to activity will be one of its most important effects. The example of the indomitable Socrates teaches that knowledge, as particular self-knowledge, and freedom, as self-sufficiency, are thoroughly interwoven.

Previous commentators have not clarified how the Lysis outlines the connection between limits and liberation. As the dialogue unfolds, Socrates looses the sovereignty of unexpressed, undisclosed boundaries and points the way to self-sufficiency. Conceived as ardent self-sufficiency rather than emancipation from all limitations, Socratic setting-free involves the shift to a perspective that grasps the natural boundaries inherent in things. It distinguishes such limits from an act of subjugation, recognizing that limits are not simply impositions of authority upon individuals but what forms and shapes individuals qua individuals. By unearthing the connection between limits and liberation, and differentiating external from intrinsic limits, the Lysis discloses the way limits as such contribute to the formation of identity. Its hypothetical bracketing of all external constraints permits intrinsic limits to become one of the dialogue's conspicuous themes.

**Step One: Problematizing the Familiar**

In their first exchange (206e3-211b5), Socrates exposes Lysis' trust. It will become apparent how the issue of limits arises through the course of Socrates' questioning. Lysis must be delivered from his trust before his present limits can be uncovered and he can be aroused from his complacency. Through his systematic query, Socrates shifts the emphasis from conventional limits that constrain extrinsically to natural limits that intrinsically restrain. Knowledge of any art or skill will demand such a shift in understanding. So will the application of the Socratic method if it is to be successful in making apparent to Lysis something pivotal about his identity. He shows Lysis that there are many kinds of boundaries, some of which, like illiteracy, emanate from the individual and some of which, like the laws governing the age of majority, do not.

Socrates' method demonstrates one sense of the "loosing" signified by Lysis' name. The first answer to the question, "Who or what is being loosed in the Lysis?" must include the surreptitious limits that Lysis takes for granted. It is precisely this loosing from latent trust in the familiar, through the hyperbolic occlusion of various kinds of constraints, that is the aim of Socrates' careful problematization of established authority: familial, political, religious, poetic, sexual and philosophical. Notice how differently Socrates behaves with Lysis than he does during the adversarial contest he initiates with Menexenus. Their respective propensities to trust certain things necessitates his different formulae for the two boys. Whereas Lysis trusts traditional authorities—his parents, his religion, his city, and the poets—Menexenus relies too heavily upon argumentation, especially arguments of the eristic kind notorious among the Sophists. Socrates harnesses their proclivity to rely upon something familiar as the Archimedean point of his approach to each of the boys.

The way Socrates tailors his tactics to the unique character of the two boys suggests that each of us trusts most our own fundamental beliefs and that these beliefs readily intertwine with our philosophical standpoints. Perhaps these fundamental beliefs predispose each of us to take for granted certain behaviors, persons and arguments. In this sense, reliance upon the familiar characterizes not only the act of trusting but also the fulcrum for that trust which underlies such acts, disposing each of us to trust what we do. Even though Plato does not use the word pistis (trust) in the Lysis, the dialogue delineates three levels of trust while evidencing important ways that trust is a necessary precondition for any act of placing one's affairs in the hands of another. It is the subtle domination of a more stealthy kind of trust that places covert limits upon the two boys. It is from these implicit limits that Socrates attempts to emancipate Lysis. Lysis needs to be cut loose from his customary moorings because, in his present circumstances, his reliance upon familiar authority governs him much more profoundly than his pedagogy or any external constraint.

In order to reconstruct the context for Socrates' exchange with Lysis, it may help to recall the pretext for this conversation. Hippothales had asked Socrates to exemplify a way of speaking to his beloved that will endear him to his beloved. Socrates did not promise to show Hippothales how a lover can engender the fondness of his beloved but only how he needs to speak to his beloved in order to make him easier to catch. The series of questions Socrates puts to Lysis, then, are intended ostensibly to show Hippothales how to humble and check the beautiful boy rather than infusing him with pride and vainglory as Hippothales does through his lugubrious praise. In the dialogue's opening scene, Ctesippus recounts the ridiculous extremes and ignominious compromises to which Hippothales is prone in his manic pursuit of the beautiful boy. Socrates takes it as a rule of thumb that no hunter who makes his prey harder to catch can truly be called a good hunter. As exemplar to Hippothales, Socrates goes on the hunt and the Lysis dramatizes his unusual brand of huntsmanship.
Socrates begins unsettling Lysis and delivering the boy from his trust by questioning the love his parents have for him. This will require the subversion of the belief that being happy means being permitted to do whatever he desires. This common-sense view of happiness converges here with the common-sense view of freedom: as doing whatever one wishes. It turns out, of course, that Lysis' parents do not let him do whatever he pleases. They do not let him take the reins of their chariots in the races, they do not let him whip the mules, they do not let him conduct himself to and from school, and at school still more masters rule over Lysis. Nor does his mother let Lysis play with her weaving implements. Therefore, either Lysis must reach the conclusion that his parents do not love him, he is not free, and he is wholly unable to pursue his own happiness or else the common understanding of happiness and freedom must be raised to a philosophical level and re-examined.

Now it happens that there are certain areas where Lysis is allowed to do as he wishes. These include the areas of reading, writing and playing his lyre. Lysis supposes that he understands (epistamai) these disciplines and not the others (209e2-3). But of course he is still not free to defy all limits in the practice of these arts. He may have slightly greater liberty when writing, to put the letters in whatever order he desires, than he has when he is reading words already formed before him. Likewise, he may have some flexibility in the tightening or loosening of the strings of his lyre or in varying his manner of plucking it, but an intrinsic limit must still obtain in order to maintain a harmony of the strings. Lysis does not seem to notice these internal limits, supposing that once the external constraints are lifted, he will be able to pursue his desires and pleasures without limit.

Step Two: Fanning the Flames of Desire
Socrates appears to be awakening in Lysis the natural human desire for "the more" (ta pleon) that Plato calls pleonexia. It is here that Socrates begins to inflame the powerful reservoir of passions in Lysis. For insofar as Lysis overlooks the intrinsic harmony and order that function as a limit in reading, writing and music, he may abandon himself to the insatiable desire for more and more. Socrates arouses the boy's spiritedness (thumos) still further when he proclaims that on the very day that Lysis becomes knowledgeable, his father will turn over all of his affairs to him. Not only will his father place Lysis in charge of his household; so will his neighbor, the Athenian people, and the Persian king.

The hyperbolic promise Socrates holds out to Lysis is that when he acquires knowledge, his legitimate claim to authority will follow automatically. But the case of Socrates himself should provoke doubt that "the many" esteem knowledgeable people for their usefulness and love them. What is even more peculiar is the subtle intimation that only the kind of knowledge that Socrates offers is likely to equip Lysis to fulfill his teeming desires. Yet the attentive reader of Plato will recall Socrates' profession of his inability to teach anyone anything. Such a reader will also wonder about the fact that, as the possessor of this knowledge himself, the redoubtable Socrates exhibits no desire for the kind of authority Lysis aspires to wield.

Socrates embellishes the hyperbole by arguing that Lysis' rightful dominion will extend naturally from his father's household to his neighbor's, to Athens, and finally to the Persian empire. He clearly begs the question about the kinds of knowledge (technai) that are useful and about whether or not prudent knowledge alone is a sufficient condition to inspire strangers to turn over their affairs to Lysis. Furthermore, prudent knowledge (sophron) is exactly what Socrates claims to possess in the greatest proportion vis-a-vis other men. Plato's dialogues often show Socrates comparing himself to others who lack self-knowledge or moderation, both of which are implied by the Greek concept of sophrosune. In Xenophon's Apology, Socrates is said to have called himself "the freest, the most just, and the most prudent (sophronesteron) of men." This emphasis on prudence evokes perplexity about the extent to which Socrates' own self-sufficiency is linked to his prudent disdain for political office or material possessions. It would surely seem that his utter lack of concern for modes of political and material exchange places Socrates beyond the reach of corruption and bribery. He is not a slave to anyone not because he is a liberal man in the usual sense but precisely because he does not care for the material and political things by which men—and for classical Athens the gender specificity was significant—commonly appraise one another. His erotic method contravenes the exchange cycle by which one man places another in his debt through the bestowal of material or political rewards. Socrates does give something to those with whom he converses and his pupils surely incur a debt of gratitude. But the appreciative student may attempt to repay this immeasurable debt only through forms of honor or love and not with payments or gifts.

In the present context, Socrates pretends to overlook the precarious trajectory of a techne that can be either combined with the excellences of character to produce good ends or divorced from these excellences and directed toward bad ends. It is a recurrent theme in Plato that the doctor who can heal is also the one who can harm most efficiently, albeit not in his capacity as doctor. This ethical ambiguity makes it likely that those in positions of authority will value someone they trust more than persons of greater competence and will tend to entrust their affairs to a
person in whom they have a prior trust. Yet Socrates sidesteps this difficulty entirely in asserting that he and Lysis would be permitted to replace the king's own son in supervising the food preparation. Pushing his examples to a comic extreme, Socrates claims that they would be permitted to throw handfuls of salt into the king's sauce or to sprinkle ashes in the son's troubled eyes in order to heal his vision.

By this point the reader will no doubt have experienced intermittent laughter at the lengths of Socrates' hyperbole and the innocent charm of Lysis' ebullient imagination. Taking this exchange seriously compels one to question what the argument presupposes here, viz. the trust that is a precondition for entrusting. Rather than simply begging the question of trust, however, Socrates proceeds from Lysis' implicit trust to a patent consideration of trust in these last two examples—at least for the reader. By hypothetically eliminating all extrinsic limits, Socrates brings Lysis face to face with his own deep-seated limit.

Understandably, the impassioned Lysis could be carried away with excitement over these intoxicating possibilities. Were Socrates to leave the matter here, it would appear that he has done more to propagate Lysis' pleonexic desire than to actuate his recognition of limits. Leading the discussion to the subject of the friend, though, interjects a kind of limit into the conversation, deflating Lysis' unbounded desire. For not only do relations with others cultivate an awareness of, and respect for, limits, thereby modulating the pleonexic side of spiritedness, but the way Socrates introduces the friend passes first through knowledge.

Socrates claims that only knowledge renders one useful and free. With regard to those things about which we acquire prudence, Socrates insists that:

everyone...will entrust them to us; we will do in regard to these matters whatever we wish, and no one will voluntarily obstruct us. Rather, we ourselves shall be free in regard to them and rulers over others, and these things will be ours, for we shall profit from them. (210b2-c5; Bolotin, p. 28)

Socrates continues by insisting that if Lysis does not acquire good sense no one will entrust anything to him. He will not rule over others but will be subject to them. He will gain no profit but will instead be disenfranchised. From this he concludes for Lysis that if Lysis does not attain wisdom, he will be entirely useless. He will be loved, even by his parents, only insofar as he is useful. The argument concludes that no one is a friend to anyone and no one loves anyone who is useless.

Socrates is taking more and more for granted as his humbling of Lysis nears its climax. He interchanges prudence or "good sense" (phronesis), skill (techne) and wisdom (sophia); he frames Lysis' alternatives in stark, binary absolutes; he allows the common-sense understanding of freedom as doing whatever one desires to stand; he emphasizes the profitable element of skill rather than the possibility that it may lead progressively to "good sense" and wisdom; he makes utility the basis of all friendship and love, even the parental love that seems most selfless of all; and, most noticeably, Socrates abandons an essential condition of trust he stipulated earlier.

At 209c3-6, Socrates supplies the condition for the father to entrust (epitrepsein) the management of his household to Lysis. The father must be convinced (egesetai) that his son's thinking is better than his own. Lysis' neighbor employs the same criterion as the father (209c8-d2). The Athenians need only to "perceive [aisthomai] that you think capably" (209d2-4). The Persian king will want a demonstration (endeixaietha) of their culinary talents before he will entrust his food preparation to Lysis and Socrates (209d5-e3). This same king is ready to turn over the care of his son to Socrates and Lysis if he assumes (inapolambanoi) that they are skilled in the medical art (210a2-5). When he generalizes from these examples to make his argument to Lysis at 210bff, Socrates omits any conditional term that would justify trust in the boy. He fails to include any condition that one who would entrust his affairs to Lysis be convinced, perceive, receive a demonstration, or even suppose that Lysis possesses a particular skill, much less the proper phronesis or a good ethical disposition.

Step Three: The Humbling Knowledge of Limits

The problem with knowledge is that it both transgresses and uncovers limits. To become knowledgeable is to push back one's previous limits. Yet knowledge simultaneously explicates limits that were heretofore wholly latent. When Lysis becomes as skilled in other matters as he is in reading, writing and playing his lyre, others may come to value his expertise in those areas. But knowledge will also make Lysis aware of the natural boundaries that inhere in any art or skill. Socrates is willing to overlook all of the difficulties raised by his hyperbolic argument to Lysis in order to isolate the problem of limits and the seamless connection of limits to trust in the familiar. Through such isolation, the trust that has been previously presupposed is now set in relief so that it may become quite concrete and explicit for Lysis. With regard to knowledge, Socrates' approach suggests that...
**teche** combined with **phronesis** may evolve into genuine wisdom, as Lysis begins to embrace the whole of knowledge.

The turn toward knowledge transfigures Lysis’ focus from the perspective of a subjugated individual to a vantage-point from which limits can be conceived as immanent in the order of things. In this way, Plato reorients the investigation of limits. This process transports Lysis beyond the restricted viewpoint of the superintended individual, for whom all limits are taken to be a constraint. From a new vista Lysis is able to grasp that limits not only restrict him but produce his self-understanding. Socrates shows Lysis how various limits combine to forge his identity. At the same time, Plato permits the reader to conceptualize broadly the way limits structure and demarcate the pliant forms character may take. Through this shift in perspective, Plato elucidates the manner in which limits as such give shape to the individual as a self—at once political, sexual, and philosophical.

Yet, some boundaries may be more determinate and less malleable than others. The limits that demarcate the individual as a self may not admit of the same degree of change as the limits that issue from ignorance. Boundaries like mortality or those that delimit what is knowable may be less amenable to change than the kind of limits belonging to the individual. But they may sometimes be transgressed. This may explain why Socrates begins by appearing to transgress established authority.

Socrates completes the humbling of Lysis by telling him, in effect, that he has no right to think highly of himself inasmuch as he is not yet thoughtful at all. He has already (208e8-209a5) led Lysis to the conclusion that he derives no benefit from his possessions, his noble rank, or his body. Presumably, this includes his good looks. In a formulation reminiscent of the way Socrates upbraids Meno, he tells Lysis that he is no better than a slave since he is able to do nothing he wants, rules over no one, and various hirelings are placed over him.

The inflammatory aspect of Socrates’ erotic method has given way to the concomitant chastening of Lysis. Socrates targets Lysis’ passivity and connects this passivity to his glaring lack of self-sufficiency. Lysis not only supposes that all limits constraint his freedom; he assumes that all limits are externally imposed upon him by others. The incisive questioning Socrates carries out is designed to produce a disruptive effect, one way or another, in his interlocutor. Lysis reacts positively to the provocation; he does not display anger or despair. He is not shamed or dishonored by the methodical antidote, although it must surely have been painful. Lysis offers a more thoughtful response in his second attempt to explain why his parents entrust reading, writing, and music to him while forbidding him to do the other things Socrates enumerates. Lysis explains: “I suppose… it’s because I understand these things, but not those” (209c1-2). He had first attempted to explain why so many people rule over him by saying “that’s because I’m not yet of age, Socrates” (209a5-6). Socrates wastes no time in professing his doubt that this is the reason for the restrictions placed upon him. Lysis’ more thoughtful response prompts Socrates to call him “you best [ariste] of men.”

It is instructive to consider the way Lysis behaves during the balance of the conversation. In a dialogue that bears his name, Lysis is not the primary interlocutor. Menexenus talks much more than Lysis does. As Menexenus returns to the conversation, Lysis urges Socrates to go through the same procedure with his comrade that had unsettled him. But Socrates exhorts Lysis to try to recall the steps of the regimen himself and to solicit help only if he cannot remember everything. He reconfirms that Lysis listened attentively throughout their conversation. In his tutorial way, Socrates encourages Lysis to become an active participant rather than remaining merely a passive object of adoration and pursuit. His method has a synergistic effect on the boy. After Socrates subdues him, Lysis becomes an animated auditor of Socrates’ contest with Menexenus. He is so anxious to demonstrate what he has learned that he blurts out the answer to a question Socrates has directed to Menexenus. His lack of self-restraint causes Lysis to blush with embarrassment at his own impropriety. But this blush betokens a new eagerness in Lysis. With Socrates, however, Lysis is much more cautious at the beginning of their next exchange. In this second and final exchange with Socrates—a discussion of the conflicting stories poets tell—Lysis demurely equivocates in his answers to Socrates. He becomes more reticent as the dialogue progresses. Rather than being hostile, as Meno is, to the bewitching “torpedo-fish” Socrates, Lysis seems sobered by the disquieting experience he has undergone at Socrates’ direction.

Apparently, Lysis and Menexenus would rather stay with Socrates at the end of the dialogue than leave with their governors. With this ironic intimation, the Lysis depicts the complete reversal of roles between Socrates and his interlocutors. The hunter becomes the hunted while the initial object of pursuit is set free to do some hunting of his own. Whereas the pederasts purport to teach virtue, wisdom, and truth in exchange for a little pleasure, Socrates shows himself to be the one from whom the boys can truly benefit. That Plato does not show Socrates consummating the sexual part of this exchange makes it easier to see what the boys get from Socrates than what Socrates gets from the boys. Though Socrates first had to pursue the boys—entering their schoolyard and seducing them in con-
versation, breaching and transforming their view of the world—one imagines that after their empowerment Socrates will be hounded by his new, knowledge-hungry pupils.

The Lysis is one of several examples of this dramatic reversal. We see a parallel movement in the Charmides. Likewise, Alcibiades’ report in the Symposium of his attempt to ensnare Socrates reverses the temper of Socrates’ approach to him in the first Alcibiades. In the Lysis, Socrates both wins Lysis’ favor and supplants him as the object of adoration in the dialogue. What does Socrates give to boys like Lysis that makes this ugly, old man so enduringly attractive to them?

In the Lysis, Socrates triggers the combustion of Lysis’ power, offering a mode of access to that power through his own, paradigmatic freedom and self-sufficiency. He may even be encouraging Lysis to enrich himself from this potent dowry. It is no wonder that this self-sufficiency has emerged as the touchstone of Socrates’ erotic method. Socrates’ idiosyncratic self-mastery often gives rise to catalytic reactions in his interlocutors, provoking the discovery of untapped potential or unacknowledged conceit in them. Like knowledge, self-sufficiency is something Socrates can share without any consequent diminution of his own portion, something that cannot be said of other kinds of exchange. In fact, his empowerment of others may even intensify Socrates’ own power. The incommensurability of his benefaction with the interlocutor’s ability to repay it may provide the initial source of Socrates’ power. But the more he measures his extraordinary tenacity, indomitability and self-sufficiency against that of others with whom he converses, the more disproportionately powerful, and less in need of anyone or anything, Socrates appears.

The Lysis shows that Socrates considers his approach to be more akin to an act of seduction than to enervation or domination. In a seduction the other is mobilized subtly through an arousal that converts passivity into activity. The Socratic seduction gets the interlocutor to do something while making him think it was his idea in the first place. If self-sufficiency is the ultimate end of Socratic self-mastery, and if empowerment is the positive outcome of the way Socrates effects the reversal from hunter to hunted in the game of Eros he plays with Lysis, then neither would Socrates’ erotic method perpetuate the endless cycle of upmanship that characterizes other forms of exchange. The kind of self-rule Socrates shows Lysis navigates a middle course between ruling over others and being a slave to them. Other approaches may attenuate the power or constrain the freedom of the participants. But the alluring aphrodisia of Socrates’ erotic method liberates rather than enslaves.

Endnotes

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 12th Annual Conference of the Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy, October 30, 1993, held at Binghamton University, Binghamton, NY.

2. Which is precisely what he does at 505c-d where he tells Socrates to carry out the argument by himself. Callicles had previously professed his friendship and goodwill toward Socrates (see, for example, 485e and 486a). In turn, Socrates addresses Callicles as “friend” (499e) and begins his severest chastisement of Callicles’ position with the entreaty, “In the name of friendship...” (500b). The performative contradiction involved in Callicles’ desire to dominate Socrates in argument at the expense of friendly relations gives the lie to his claim at 492b that only the strong man will be in a position to give gifts to his friends. Socrates concludes his refutation of Callicles by insisting that the strong (immoderate) man can be friend neither to men nor gods because such men exhibit no willingness to share. Without moderation, one is incapable of community and one who is not capable of community is incapable of friendship. Cf. Gorgias 507e.

I am indebted to Roger Duncan’s short but insightful discussion of philia in the Gorgias. Roger Duncan “Philia in the Gorgias.” Apeiron, Vol. 8, May 1974: 23-25. Duncan shows that Callicles’ desire to win the argument and dominate Socrates is in tension with the friendly tenor that initially frames their conversation but he does not develop the wider implications of this tension. His clues provoked me to consider the broader relation between philia and pleonexia in Plato.

3. Charmides, the only man Xenophon shows Socrates advising to enter political life, became one of the Thirty Tyrants. Alcibiades was brought up on charges of sultlying the Herms and he was widely regarded—by Thucydides and Xenophon, among others—as the reckless captain of Athens’ demise. Eva C. Keuls explores the great mystery surrounding the castration of the Herms in Reign of the Phallus: Sexual Politics in Ancient Athens. 2nd ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985. See especially pp. 381-394.

4. The possible exception may be the dialogue that most parallels the Lysis, viz. Alcibiades 1. Because the Lysis is the only dialogue in which Lysis appears, we cannot judge fully the effect Socrates has upon him. This interpretation extrapolates from the dramatic clues Plato gives us in this short conversation with the boy. After Socrates is through with him, Lysis remains attentive, even excited. (Cf. especially 213df?) Lysis is much more cautiously circumspect in his next exchange with Socrates, however, reflecting that he learned a lesson from their first exchange. He responds with an equivocal “perhaps” to Socrates’ question about whether or not the poets tell the truth. For the rest of the dialogue, Lysis is somewhat laconic. Plato does indicate
various nods and assents on Lysis’ part. At 213d3ff, Socrates tells us that Lysis blushed after blurting out his opinion and, at 222a6, that Lysis is silent. That Socrates expressly mentions Lysis’ silence may be intended to indicate an attentive, participatory reticence.


5. It is not easy to position this self-knowledge within the terminology of epistemology. Plato does not really explain how, within the traditional categories applied to his theory of knowledge, the soul can have knowledge of itself. Even assuming a form of “soul”, it is not easy to see how a particular soul recognizes itself. This difficulty suggests that the traditional categories are too narrow to encompass the richness of Plato. Socrates is certainly concerned with the problem of self-knowledge, taking up its relation to sophrosune at Charmides 164dff, invoking self-knowledge as the essential condition for discriminating between what one knows and does not know at Charmides 167a, and raising the issue of self-knowledge again in the discussion of first and second order technai at Charmides 169d-170a. Cf. also Alcibiades I 129a and 133c.

In the Phaedrus, Socrates disparages abstract, theoretical knowledge and attributes hubris to a lack of self-knowledge, saying:

I myself have certainly no time for the business, and I'll tell you why, my friend. I can't as yet 'know myself,' as the inscription at Delphi enjoins, and so long as that ignorance remains it seems to me ridiculous to inquire into extraneous matters. Consequently I don't bother about such things, but accept the current beliefs about them, and direct my inquiries, as I have just said, rather to myself, to discover whether I really am a more complex creature and more puffed up with pride than Typhon, or a simpler, gentler being whom heaven has blessed with a quiet, un-Typhonic nature. By the way, isn't this the tree we were making for? (229e3ff)


6. I am thinking especially of Sophocles’ Oedipus Tyrannos and the tragic myopia Oedipus displays toward himself.

7. Autarkeia is one of the two necessary conditions Aristotle gives for happiness in Nicomachean Ethics 1.7. He stipulates that the “final good must be a thing sufficient in itself” (teleion agathon autarkes emai dokei).” (Cf. NE 1097b9ff) Aristotle continues immediately upon introducing this condition for happiness by saying that this does not imply a life in isolation because “man is by nature a political being.” (epete phuei politikon de anthropos). Liddell and Scott define autarkeia as “sufficiency in oneself; independence.” See Liddell, H.G. and Scott, R. A Lexicon Abridged from Liddell and Scott’s Greek-English Lexicon Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986, (Impression of 1990) p. 116.

The full pertinence of this self-sufficiency to Socrates will be developed throughout this paper. Whereas freedom (eleutheria) is employed in the paper to signify the negative side of freedom, the “freedom from” (see note 13), self-sufficiency connotes the positive side of freedom, the sense of not requiring anything to be imported from the outside, i.e. to be independent and to rule oneself.

8. Lysis and Menexenus are probably the youngest interlocutors in any Platonic dialogue. They belong to the younger of two groups of boys that are assembled inside the newly-constructed Palestra and still have a pedagogue. Gregory Vlastos attributes to their extremely young age the unusual tenor of argumentation Socrates employs in this dialogue. Rather than really cross-examining Lysis, Socrates merely presents several alternatives (usually three) from which Lysis picks one. There are very few open-ended questions put to either boy in this dialogue. Their extreme youth should have the further effect of diminishing the reader’s expectation of a mature account of friendship or love here. For a thorough discussion of the different qualities of Socratic eloquence, see Vlastos, “Socratic Eloquence,” Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy, 1 (1983): 27-58 and Ronald M. Polansky, “Professor Vlastos’ Analysis of Socratic Eloquence,” Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy, 3 (1985): 247-260.

9. It was Hippothales’ hubris that made him appear ridiculous to Socrates at the beginning of the dialogue. Socrates chastises Hippothales for not realizing that his praises of Lysis were, at bottom, praises of himself. When Socrates refers to himself as “ridiculous” near the end of the dialogue (223b,5) we must ask ourselves whether Socrates’ hubris has led him to overstep appropriate boundaries in his approach to Lysis.

Indeed, Socrates comes perilously close to the shaming kind of hubris in his exchange with Lysis. Athenian law prohibited certain kinds of shame, rage or assault against citizens. (Of course, since Lysis has not yet reached the age of majority, his inviolability as a citizen is not yet fully protected within the scope of the hubris laws.) If it can be shown that Socrates really shames Lysis by reducing him to the level of a slave, then this humbling will constitute a kind of hubris. If, however, Socrates does not enslave Lysis through his questioning, he will be vindicated. For an excellent discussion of the relationship of political, economic and sexual hierarchies in classical Athens, and a more detailed explication of the hubris laws, see David Halperin, “The Democratic Body: Prostitution and Citizenship in Classical Athens,” in David M. Halperin One Hundred Years of Homosexuality and Other Essays on Greek Love.

10. This confession occurs just after Socrates has presumed to show conclusively that only the philosopher, who is neither wholly good nor wholly bad, can truly be called the friend. Socrates says: "...I rejoiced greatly myself, as if I were a hunter and had, to my satisfaction, what I had been hunting. But then some most strange suspicion came over me—from where, I don't know—that the things we had agreed to were not true..." David Bolotin, *Plato's Dialogue on Friendship*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1979, p. 43.

Socrates continues by saying that he is afraid that they have come across some false arguments about the friend, "false like boastful human beings" (Bolotin, p.44). Perhaps this is the kind of hubris of which Socrates knows he is guilty. He clearly seems to intimate to Lysis that he can give him the knowledge he needs to attain his aspirations. Paradoxically, those who spend time with Socrates seem to end up realizing that they no longer aspire to the same things they did before they met Socrates, unless they end up like Charmides or Alcibiades. Finally, one still has to decide how to interpret the manic element of Socrates' character and his public claims to be unable to teach anybody anything.

11. I would suggest that the title of this dialogue is carefully chosen for what it reveals about a critical aspect of Socrates' method. Lysis' name means "a setting free" or a "loosing," especially in the case of a prisoner. It seems to intimate to Lysis that he can give him the knowledge he needs to attain his aspirations. Paradoxically, those who spend time with Socrates seem to end up realizing that they no longer aspire to the same things they did before they met Socrates, unless they end up like Charmides or Alcibiades. Finally, one still has to decide how to interpret the manic element of Socrates' character and his public claims to be unable to teach anybody anything.

12. I am indebted to David O'Connor of Notre Dame for his incisive remarks in his lecture, "Socrates and the Gift," presented at the 12th Annual conference of the Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy, October 30, 1993, at Binghamton University, in Binghamton, NY. I have integrated many of Professor O'Connor's insights into my thinking about Socrates and followed up several clues he offered in his talk. I wish to acknowledge a special debt to him for inspiring me to read Xenophon differently.

13. Liddell and Scott indicate an analogy. The Latin word *liberalis* as *eleutheros* as *liber* is to *eleutheros*. *Eleutherios*, like *liberalis*, describes the way one acts when one is free. It also means liberal, freely-giving, the way one who is free deals. The sense of freedom signified here is primarily negative, the freedom from constraint, need, bondage, blame, etc. The word *eleutheron* means "a setting free" as the word *hesis* does. Cf. Liddell and Scott, p. 215.

14. There is a marked suspension of the everyday which frames this dialogue. It takes place during a religious hiatus, the festival of the Hermea, with the various ages intermingled, the boys in their holiday dress, and the pedagogues off somewhere drinking. The dialogue opens with striking threshold imagery, which not only alerts us to the suspension of everyday practices but also to the issue of boundaries or limits that it thematizes. Socrates is between the Academy and the Lyceum and just along the city wall when he is met by Hippothales and Ctesippus. He is neither collared, like he is at the beginning of *Republic*, nor forced by any internal necessity to enter the place and action of the *Lysis*. The newly-built wrestling school in which the dialogue transpires evokes the image of a bounded conflict that is a Platonic dialogue. The reader is invited to reflect on what is being bracketed or suspended as the dialogue unfolds. Perhaps it is *Eros* itself that is being bracketed during the middle sections of the dialogue, only to reinsert itself near the end. In any case, it would seem that there is as much hypothetical in the setting of the dialogue as there is in Socrates' tactics toward Lysis.

15. See note #18.

16. We could add to this list Lysis' trust in the rewards that he expects to follow automatically upon his noble rank and exceptional beauty. At one point in their first exchange, at 209a, Socrates seems to be telling Lysis that he has no right to prance and preen, holding his body out as a kind of prize, since he does not possess the requisite autonomy over his body. Lysis is still shepherded around by others and since he does not rule over his own body, his beauty is of no use to him.

Vlastos to claim that the individual is not the object of love in Plato at all but, as he shows from the ladder of love in Diotima's speech in the *Symposium*, only a vehicle for pure love. While this traditional reading seems highly problematic, for reasons that would require another essay to enumerate, it does suggest why, in the *Lysis*, Socrates weaves together being useful and being loved.

In his classic essay, "The Individual as an Object of Love in Plato," in *Platonic Studies*, Ed. Gregory Vlastos, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973: 3-11, Professor Gregory Vlastos argues that the connotation "being useful" is not to be understood in the narrow sense and that the beloved's utility is not to the lover but is indiscriminate, i.e. being useful as such in the sense of "good-producing." This leads
17. The question which inaugurates Socrates' contest with Menexenus typifies the sophistical kind of question one finds in eristic argumentation. The best example of this kind of argument is found in Plato's *Euthydemus*. Moreover, the sharp distinction between lover and beloved is a quasi-technical verbiage common to discussions about pederasty, as can be seen in the speeches of Phaedrus, Pausanias, Eryximachus, and Agathon in Plato's *Symposium*. The inaugural question of the discussion with Menexenus is related to the questions that propel the *Phaedrus*, such as the question regarding whether the lover should better become involved with a beloved who does not love him in return or with one who does. Cf. the Lysis 212b ("When someone loves someone, which one becomes a friend of the other, the one who loves of the loved one of the lover?") The phrasing of this question in the *Lysis* goes straight to the heart of the problems posed by asymmetrical relationships which are, after all, more common than the reciprocal and equal type. It is noticeable that in Aristotle's treatments of friendship (*Nicomachean Ethics* VIII-IX; *Eudemian Ethics* VII-VIII) there is far more discussion of the friendships based upon utility and pleasure than of those rare friendships of character. In a society where only propertied, free-born, male, Athenian adults were afforded citizenship, it is easy to see that relationships with wives, slaves, resident aliens, and children will never be truly reciprocal or equal.

18. The act of "entrusting" will be critical to the Socratic arousal in the first exchange with Lysis. The notion that various authorities will "turn over" or entrust their affairs to Lysis is the incendiary device Socrates employs to inflame Lysis' passions, as we will see below. In all, Plato seems to be adumbrating three levels of trust: (1) a wholly latent level of trust, i.e. the predisposition toward or reliance upon the familiar that conditions the second level of trust; (2) the overt, reflective trust one has in things or people; and (3) placing one's affairs in the hands of another. In the traditional schema of the divided line that Socrates sketches in *Republic VI*, the first and second levels correspond roughly to *pistis*, in the realm of *doxa*. It is important to note that Socrates' approach to *doxa* accomplishes only the initial "turning-around" that is the impetus toward knowledge. The levels of *pistis* and the relation of *pistis*, *epitrepesein* and *doxa* need to be examined in greater detail. In brief, there is discernible in the *Lysis* a level of trust or belief that can be explicated but there is also a level that is so closely tied to one's character that it is more akin to a "predisposition" than a belief that is grasped as being a belief.

19. It is noteworthy that there are, for Plato, other kinds of overt trust besides the trust in others. Plato often focuses upon instances where such overt trust is misplaced—in rulers (*Gorgias* 525d-526b), arguments (*Phaedo* 89d-c), names (*Cratylus* 440a-d), and pleasures (*Philebus* 67b-c)—and there is assuredly a genuine kind of trust that results from deliberation and practical wisdom. This can be trust in others or in oneself.

20. In fact, though, he does show this in his own, deceptively philosophical way. His immediate reply to Hippothales' request is: "It's not easy to say." Cf. The *Lysis* 206c4.

21. One of several things that make Socrates an unusual hunter is that instead of "capturing" his prey through the hunt, Socrates sets loose the prey. Whereas the lovesick troubadour, Hippothales, makes Lysis harder to catch through his relentless flattery, the way Socrates "catches" the boy paradoxically liberates him at the same time.

22. The clearest argumentation about this aspect of natural human desire is, of course, Glaucon's speech in *Republic II*.

23. This is, of course, ironic. Socrates does not teach like the Sophists claim to do, and I would argue that this means further that he does not teach much that is formulaic or doctrinaire, but he does teach. Sometimes, as in the *Meno*, his failure to teach is not a failure to try. *Meno* may not be teachable but Lysis surely is.


25. It may still turn out that Socrates values his enhanced or intensified self-sufficiency much more than these acknowledgments. The word "gift" (*dora*) in Greek is closely tied to bribery or a "payoff." Aristotle takes up the question concerning how one can repay someone who teaches us philosophy at *Nicomachean Ethics* 1164a34-1164b5. Aristotle writes: "And so too, it seems, should one make a return to those with whom one has studied philosophy, for their worth cannot be measured against money, and they can get no honor which will balance their services, but still it is perhaps enough, as it is with the gods and with one's parents, to give them what one can."

26. As Bolotin, in his interpretive essay on the *Lysis*, claims he does. Bolotin remarks that the youth of Socrates' interlocutors in the *Lysis* helps "to explain what might otherwise be a serious omission from the dialogue..." In particular, the *Lysis* contains no mention of trust (*pistis*). See Bolotin, *Plato's Dialogue on Friendship*, pp. 67-68. Bolotin contends that Eros "aims at the now" and argues from this premise that trust ultimately turns on the promise to remain alive forever which is, of course, impossible. This analysis seems to misconstrue the respective temporal dimension of both trust and Eros. Eros is a striving for what one has not or is not at present, i.e. that which one is *endees* about. This "not-yet" at which Eros "aims" renders the desire futural, even if the desire contains within it the anticipation of fulfillment.

Trust seems to have the past as its predominant temporal modality. Trust is primarily for the familiar and, as I have argued, what is most familiar is that upon which one fundamentally relies. This is why trust is an obstacle to change; it roots...
one to the past and to the taken-for-granted. My argument is that Plato, by seeming to
beg the question, forces us to think about the implicit and overt levels of trust that
subtend entrusting.

27. The relation between *pleonexia* and *philia* in Plato is one that needs to be
developed further. The *Gorgias* may provide the clearest indication that Plato consid­
ers these to be two possible directions of spiritedness: one which respects boundaries
and recognizes limits as arising from the natural human desire for sociality and the
other which oversteps all limits and ignores boundaries out of the natural human
desire for *ta pleon*. Roger Duncan brings out this connection without developing it
fully. See note #2. The *Lysis* contains an undeveloped counterweight to this side of
*thumos* in its presentation of *philia* as involving the recognition of necessary limits.

28. Here again Plato is playing with the ambiguity of the Greek words derived
from *lust* and *lussis*. (For example, "To be useful" and "to be set free" are two primary
senses of the word *lustiteleio*.)

29. Plato employs the phenomenon of blushing at critical junctures in many
dialogues. Cf. *Charmides* 158c, *Protagoras* 312a, *Euthydemus* 273d, 297a, and,
most famously, at *Republic* 350c. He sometimes uses the blush in a figure of speech
to signify shame, such as at *Gorgias* 522c, *Phaedrus* 243d and 255a, *Apology* 17b,
*Symposium* 217e, *Republic* 566c and 606c, *Laws* 819d, 819e, and 820b. In the *Lysis*,
he invokes a blush on three occasions: 204bff, 204c, and, in the present context, at
213d.

30. This is how Meno describes Socrates' method, charging that he makes any­
one who comes close to him feel numb. Cf. the *Meno* 80aff.

31. There are other justifications for the practice of pederasty, including the
protection of the beloved by the lover, an initiatory role performed by the lover, and
so on. The first three speeches in Plato's *Symposium* provide a good overview of the
contemporary, Athenian arguments for the practice.

32. Socrates makes plain the paradox of pederasty: how can one justify an
exchange relation, wherein the older man provides wisdom to his young lover in return
for sex, when the young boy, who is supposed to lack the wisdom he hopes to receive
from the older man, must display the more noble aim in the relation? For an elabora­
tion of this paradox, see Allan Bloom's discussion of Pausanias' speech in his *Love


34. The political problem for Lysis will be the problem facing all Athenian citi­
zens. It does not concern the casting off of any particular yoke but rather how to
behave as a continent individual in the absence of external constraints. More pre­
 cisely, given that the citizen is a propertyed, male Athenian, the most important ques­
tion of limits may be the one regarding the citizen's self-restraint vis-à-vis wives,
concubines (*hetera*), prostitutes (*porna*), slaves and, most problematically, young boys.
The *Lysis* may concern how one is to behave on the threshold of the law, in the
margins of what is explicitly proscribed. Practices involving young boys are a particu­
lar problem for Athenian citizens, as Michel Foucault points out, because these
boys are vulnerable disproportionately to the older men and yet boys like Lysis will
soon grow up to be their equal. See Foucault *The Use of Pleasure* Trans. Robert
Hurley New York: Random House, 1986. Also see David Halperin's excellent essay,
"The Democratic Body: Prostitution and Citizenship in Classical Athens" (see note
#9), John J. Winkler's illuminating essay, "Laying Down the Law: The Oversight of
Men's Sexual Behavior in Classical Athens," in Winkler *The Constraints of Desire:
Anthropology and Gender in Ancient Greece* New York: Routledge, 1990: 45-70; and
two pathbreaking books by Sir Kenneth J. Dover: *Greek Popular Morality in the
Time of Plato and Aristotle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974) and