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## PLATO'S *LYSIS*

The *Lysis* is one of Plato's most engaging but also puzzling dialogues; it has often been regarded, in the modern period, as a philosophical failure. The full philosophical and literary exploration of the dialogue illustrates how it in fact provides a systematic and coherent, if incomplete, account of a special theory about, and special explanation of, human desire and action. Furthermore, it shows how that theory and explanation are fundamental to a whole range of other Platonic dialogues and indeed to the understanding of the corpus as a whole. Part One offers an analysis of, or running commentary on, the dialogue. In Part Two Professors Penner and Rowe examine the philosophical and methodological implications of the argument uncovered by the analysis. The whole is rounded off by an epilogue on the relation between the *Lysis* and some other Platonic (and Aristotelian) texts.

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'It is *this* that a person will love most of all – when he holds the same things to be beneficial to *it* as to himself, and when he thinks that if *it* does well, he himself will do well, and if not, the opposite': Socrates in Plato's *Republic* (IV.412D4–7)

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## Preface

‘They say, too, that when Socrates heard Plato reading the *Lysis*, he said “Heracles! How many lies the young man tells about me!” (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Philosophers* III.35) This apocryphal story – apocryphal, if only because Socrates was surely dead before the *Lysis* was written – might perhaps be taken as an ancient counterpart of one typical modern reaction to the *Lysis*: that it misrepresents Socrates. In particular, so the *modern* story goes, it misrepresents him by making him into a kind of sophist, the sort that uses any means down to and including mere trickery in order to defeat his opponents (in this case a pair of teenagers; a particularly pointless and silly exercise, then). Sometimes the dialogue has been declared not to be by Plato at all, so bad the arguments seemed to be; and even if the twentieth century tended to back off from that view, the general view was, and still remains, that the *Lysis* is not a philosophical success. Its ancient subtitle was ‘On friendship’ – or rather ‘On *philia*’, which already has wider connotations; on that subject, says the standard modern reading, what little the *Lysis* has to tell us, and so far as we can make it out, is mostly false.

The outcome of the present book is an absolute and complete rejection of that standard verdict – which, despite what may or may not be implied by any whisperings recorded by Diogenes, was certainly not standard in antiquity (a thesis for which we provide some evidence in our Epilogue). We – Penner and Rowe – began, four or more years ago, with the firm intention of following the Socrates of the *Lysis* every step of the way, to see just what we could make of his arguments if we supposed not only that he *thinks* they lead where he seems to claim they lead, but that there *actually are reasons* for each step that he takes, if only we could discover what those reasons are. Part of our game-plan was that we had also to be prepared to ditch our own presuppositions, in order to allow for the possibility that Socrates was starting from a different place altogether; equally, we agreed to suspend judgement about just what would be the right place, or places, to start from. (In any case, we continued to discover radical

and fundamental philosophical disagreements between ourselves – even if we have almost always ended by resolving them.) The process proved simultaneously painful and exhilarating.

The results, as they emerged, surprised even us. What we found, and what we describe at length in Part I below, is, first, a dialogue – a philosophical conversation – that pursues a single line of argument from beginning to end; an argument, moreover, that is fully integrated with its literary and dramatic frame. The analysis in Part I covers the characterization and action of the dialogue, its tone and tempo, with every bit as much care as it does the detail of the philosophical discussion itself, because all aspects work together, and none is fully intelligible without the others. The second thing that we found is an argument that springs from, describes, and partly justifies a specific theory – not just about friendship, but about love, including and especially the ‘romantic’ sort, and desire, all of which turns out to be treated together under the umbrella of *philia*. It is a theory, indeed, about what drives our actions in general. This theory we discuss in Part II, along with the lessons we have learned in the course of our extended encounter with the *Lysis* about the way Plato needs to be read. (We make no apology for suggesting that those lessons have an application beyond the one short dialogue which is our immediate subject.)

So far from being a failure, the *Lysis* is in our view a piece of virtuoso philosophical writing, a miniature when set beside other, grander, and acknowledged masterpieces, but nevertheless showing the ‘divine’ Plato at the very top of his form. It is quite able to stand on its own, and is not some kind of sketch for the *Symposium*, or for the *Phaedrus*, both of which, despite being more than two-and-a-half times longer than the *Lysis*, stand at least as much in need of being filled out from the *Lysis* as it can be filled out from them. This is one of the claims we make in our Epilogue, which proposes the larger thesis that the *Lysis* in effect sets the agenda not just for *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, but even for Aristotle in his treatments of *philia* in his *Eudemian* and *Nicomachean Ethics*. With *Phaedrus* and *Republic* Plato sets his face against a key part of the theory of the *Lysis*, and his pupil Aristotle moves still further away from it; yet the starting-points of these subsequent discussions remain recognizably those proposed by that diminutive dialogue which moderns are so ready to dismiss. Nor does the influence of the *Lysis*, or of the ideas it represents, stop there.

The reader who expects an implicit dialogue between us and other modern readers of the *Lysis* will be disappointed. Many other scholars have seen (what we take as being) *parts* of what Plato is about in the *Lysis*, without grasping (what we take to be) the whole; such readers, we claim, resemble

the characters Lysis and Menexenus in the dialogue. The two boys understand what is going on, to slightly different degrees, but then finally lose it, reverting to the position they first started from without at the same time wanting to give up what they have agreed on since. (The dialogue is thus partly *about*, and *speaks to*, different levels of understanding; and insofar as these different levels of understanding represent different positions, it is also a dialogue *between positions* as much as it is a dialogue between interlocutors.) So Lysis and Menexenus see something, but not enough to allow them to see *what it amounts to*. The case of many modern interpreters seems to us analogous: since they lack a grasp of the whole to which the parts relate, and which *explains* the parts, their readings tend to run into the sand, taking the dialogue along with them. The consequence is that in a high proportion of cases, while our own interpretation may seem to overlap with that of others, the overlap is in a way accidental rather than substantial; and where we think others get the *Lysis* wrong, the best response is in any case to expound our view of the whole. So even if our brief had not been to offer a fresh and independent approach to the dialogue, we would still have engaged in relatively little open conversation with other interpreters.

Now in case this should sound like arrogance on our part, we should not hide the fact that on innumerable occasions – as we tried to tease out Socrates' development of his argument – we felt ourselves close to giving up, and just throwing in the towel. The sheer length of the analysis in Part I is some testimony to our struggle with the text; many parts of a dialectic now aimed at the reader started life as arguments with ourselves or each other. The friends of Lysis' lover Hippothales complain that he deafens them with repeating his darling's name; Rosemary Penner and Heather Rowe have had something of the same problem with us, as we wrestled with the *Lysis* day after day (and not infrequently during sleepless nights). We are grateful to them for not giving up on *us*. Meanwhile, we take the eventual agreement between the two of us on the interpretation of each detail, and the whole, of the dialogue to be some small evidence that that interpretation is viable.

Even our bibliography will be selective. We have included only (a) those items to which we specifically refer in the main text and the footnotes, and (b) those items which we can actually remember having found helpful, either in a positive sense or because they helped us crystallize our own rather different understanding of the text and its complexities. At the same time we have been helped by discussions with numerous individuals and audiences: in, among other places, Toronto, on the Irvine and San Diego campuses of the University of California; in Athens (where we attempted,

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but failed, to follow the course of the walk Socrates was taking from the Academy to the Lyceum when he got diverted into the conversation of the *Lysis*, Delphi, and at the Olympic Centre for Philosophy in Granitseiika (Pyrgos); in Naples and Piacenza; in London, Paris, and Louvain-la-Neuve; and always in Durham (UK) and Wisconsin–Madison. We offer our warm thanks to all our *philoï*, including our wives, for their help and support; to one other special *philos*, Mary Margaret McCabe, for being the model editor, permissive about deadlines but sharp as ever about the important things; and to the Leverhulme Trust, who – in the shape of a Personal Research Professorship – provided Rowe with vital time to help complete a project that might otherwise have taken another four years, in addition to the four or more it actually took, to reach closure.