ἀrchaí

AS ORIGENS DO PENSAMENTO OCIDENTAL

THE ORIGINS OF WESTERN THOUGHT

ARTIGO I ARTICLE

Aporetic Discourse and Protreptic in Plato's *Lysis*

Jan Szaif [i]
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7648-3577
jmszaif@ucdavis.edu

[i] University of California – Davis – United States.

SZAIF, J. (2022). Aporetic Discourse and Protreptic in Plato's Lysis. In: JENNINGS, D.; SZAIF, J. (eds.), *Studies on Plato's Lysis*, special issue of Archai, 32, suppl. 1, e-03237.

Abstract: In the *Lysis*, Socrates claims to be looking for an account of what kind of quality in another person or object stimulates friendship or love (*philia*). He goes through a series of proposals, refuting each in turn. In the end, he throws us back to the point from where the arguments started, declaring an aporetic outcome. What is the purpose of this apparently futile and circular inquiry? Most interpreters try to reconstruct a theory of friendship or love from the

arguments of this dialogue. Against such a doctrinal reading, this essay defends an “aporetic reading” of the dialogue and connects it to its protreptic function. Starting with a preliminary discussion of what defines an aporetic dialogue and what distinguishes indirect protreptic from explicit protreptic discourse, the essay then analyzes the aporetic method of the *Lysis*, distinguishing it from aporetic discourse in some of his earlier dialogues. Finally, it analyzes how, and for what kind of audience, the *Lysis* functions as an indirect protreptic. This includes a comparison with the protreptic use of aporetic argumentation in the *Euthydemus*.

Keywords: Plato, aporia, protreptic, friendship, dialogue.

Dicaearchus, a collaborator of Aristotle and Theophrastus in the old Peripatos, is our oldest clearly identifiable source to comment on the protreptic quality of Plato’s writings.[1] After highlighting the innovations in Plato’s literary technique (col. 1.1-6), he adds the surprising assessment that his dialogues were the cause not only of the greatest growth, but also the greatest ruin for philosophy.[2] The excerpt preserved by Philodemus is in a ruinous state, but we can still gather a central element of Dicaearchus’ criticism: While Plato’s writings have converted many to the pursuit of philosophy (προετρέψατο, col. 1.11-12), they have also misled some of his readers into practicing philosophy in a merely ostentatious and superficial way (col. 1.15-18). Such people count themselves among the philosophers but lack the kind of learning that it takes to become a genuine philosopher (col. 1.21-26). We may assume that for the Peripatetic author the learning that produces genuine philosophers

[1] Cf. Verhasselt’s (2017) reconstruction of the Dicaearchus excerpt in the *Historia (*or *Index) Academicorum* (PHerc. 1021); cf. White, 2001 for further context. The *Clitophon*, a text that seems to take aim at the argument of book One of the *Republic*, can also be read as a critique of Platonic protreptic, but its purpose remains as uncertain, as its date and author are contested.

[2] Col. 1.8-11: πλ̣[εῖστον] δὴ τῶν πάντων [ἀνθρ]ώπων οὗτος εὔξησε[ν φ]ιλ̣οσοφίαν καὶ κατέλυσ[ε]ν̣·

relates to natural science and the study of ethical, cultural and political phenomena.[3] The main point of his criticism would then likely be that Platonic protreptic can have the effect of encouraging a style of philosophy that idles in dialectical puzzles and paradoxical ethical claims at the expense of serious science and useful practical guidance. As we will see, the *Lysis* would be the kind of dialogue to fit this charge particularly well.

I am going to paint a more favorable picture of Plato's aporetic method and its protreptic potential in the *Lysis*. With this goal in mind, we need to discuss, first, what an aporetic dialogue is and how it should be interpreted, and then, second, distinguish between direct and indirect protreptic. After these preliminaries, section 3 will analyze the aporetic method used in the *Lysis*, distinguishing it from aporetic conversation in certain earlier dialogues such as the *Laches* or the *Charmides*. Section 4 will then elaborate how, and for which audience, the conversation in the *Lysis* serves as a form of "indirect protreptic." This will involve a comparison with the explicit protreptic in the *Euthydemus*. I'll conclude with a tentative response to Dicaearchus' criticism.

1. The aporetic form and three interpretative approaches

Many of Plato's dialogues profess that they have at least partially resolved their guiding question or questions. We may call them "constructive." Certain other dialogues, by contrast, end with an acknowledgement of ἀπορία. This term indicates the absence of a πόρος (*passage, pathway, means for achieving something*) and can, hence, mean that one is caught in an *impasse* and sees no *way out*, or

[3] If Verhasselt's (2017) tentative reconstruction of the word μαθήματα after μεμαθηκότας (l. 22) is correct, Dicaearchus could be referring more narrowly to mathematical knowledge as what those ill-prepared philosophers lack. But since he is critiquing Plato from the viewpoint of his own understanding of proper philosophical training, it is justifiable to interpret this phrase in light of a Peripatetic curriculum.

also that one suffers from a *lack of resources.* In the context of a Socratic dialogue, it means that all options have apparently been exhausted and one sees no way to give the investigation a successful turn. The following factors, however, complicate the classification of a dialogue as constructive or aporetic: On the one hand, constructive dialogues don't necessarily present the results they reach as definitive or beyond any doubt. In fact, one can argue that none of the dialogues of Plato speaks in such a dogmatic voice. Even the *Phaedo* or the *Republic*, which we read as vehicles of the philosophical doctrines of Plato's "middle period," emphasize that the subject-matter needs further examination or that the conversation has produced only a *preliminary* kind of clarification concerning the topics under investigation. On the other hand, dialogues that signal an aporetic outcome have often been interpreted as not genuinely aporetic, because, it is alleged, they point to the correct solution under an aporetic guise. Such assessments are, however, a matter of interpretation and go beyond the question of the literary or dramatic *form* of a dialogue. In order to obtain a clear and objective criterion of the aporetic form, it is best to look at how the dialogue itself describes the outcome. When Socrates' interlocutors are at a loss, they don't always admit that they have fallen into a state of ἀπορία. The key is how Socrates assesses the outcome. Accordingly, we should count a dialogue as aporetic *if (and only if), as by Socrates' admission, it has failed to produce an answer that can stand* (*at least) as a preliminary result* (cf. Szaif, 2018, p. 30).

Among the definition-centered dialogues, the *Laches*, *Charmides*, *Euthyphro*, *Hippias major*, *Lysis*, and *Theaetetus* satisfy this criterion.[4] Since it can also be applied to a self-contained part of a dialogue, one can add the aporetic first part of the *Meno* (70a-80d). The criterion works less neatly for non-definitional dialogues, but Socrates' protreptic discourses in the *Euthydemus* (278a-282e, 288b-

[4] Cf. *La.* 200e, *Chrm.* 175a-176b, *Euthphr*. 15e-16a, *Hp. ma.* 304c-e, *Ly*. 222e, 223b, *Tht*. 210a-c.

293a), taken together, clearly satisfy it. I also include the *Protagoras*[5] since Socrates concludes the discussion with a hint at the untrustworthiness of the results and the aporetic state they are in.[6]

This formal criterion does not tell us how we should approach the interpretation of an aporetic dialogue – an issue linked to the more general question of how the literary form of a Platonic dialogue bears on determining its philosophical content. It has long been recognized that in Plato's case the dialogue form is more than just a mode of presentation employed for pragmatic (for instance, didactic) reasons. Since Plato uses the dialogue form in several substantially different ways, one shouldn't start with an attempt to characterize the Platonic dialogue as such. Only a complete survey of the different types of dialogue in Plato's oeuvre could provide a basis for, perhaps, finding a common denominator. This essay will discuss only the aporetic type of dialogue and the form it takes in the *Lysis*. Debate about how to approach and evaluate the arguments in the *Lysis* is not just a concern for modern interpreters. It can be traced as far back as the early 3rd century BC.[7] Without an understanding of the function of

---

[5] Cf. Politis, 2012, p. 212*f*. One may also include the *Hippias mi.* since it likewise characterizes the outcome as puzzling and untrustworthy; cf. Wolfsdorf's (2008, p. 198) list based on his notion of "dramatic aporia;" the list of "plainly aporetic dialogues" in Brickhouse/Smith, 1994, p. 4, n. 3; and Kahn's (1996, p. 98) list of "formally aporetic dialogues" (without the *Hippias mi.*).

[6] Cf. 360e-361d: Socrates disavows the outcome of the argument, first, because of the need for a prior clarification of the essence of virtue and, second, because he and Protagoras have switched their standpoints and such a "topsy-turvy" course of argumentation inspires little trust. He also hints at *aporia* by comparing their performance to the foolish ways of Epimetheus that put Epimetheus in a state of ἀπορεῖν (361d together with 321c).

[7] Cf. Colotes, *Against Plato's Lysis* (*PHerc.* 208; cf. Crönert, 1965, p. 162-172). To judge from the remaining fragments, this student of Epicurus objected to Socrates' opinion-based argumentation and use of language in the *Lysis*, using this also as a pretext for attacking the Cynic Menedemus and the Stoic Zeno (cf. Kechagia, 2010. p. 146-154), apparently because he saw a connection between arguments in the *Lysis* and his opponents. This offers a glimpse at a larger debate (cf. Long, 1988) involving three parties: followers of Epicurus, who considered the quest for definitions idle and reprimanded the alleged sophistry of Socratic refutations; Zeno, who is likely to have appealed to arguments such as *Euthd*. 278e-282d and *Ly*. 207d-210d for his doctrine of indifferents and the supremacy of

the aporetic form we cannot tell to what extent the arguments in such a dialogue entitle us to draw inferences about the philosophical views held by Plato the author or Socrates the lead speaker. I am going to distinguish three approaches to the aporetic dialogues:

First, there is the skeptical reading. We may assume (despite the rather scanty evidence) that the skeptical Academy, beginning with Arcesilaus, viewed these dialogues as one of their primary sources of inspiration. Some contemporary scholars, too, have explored the viability of a skeptical reading of these and other Platonic dialogues.[8] According to this reading, an aporetic dialogue serves the cathartic function of ridding us of the illusion of knowledge so as to make us realize the limits of our understanding, this realization being a kind of "human wisdom" in the words of the *Apology*. In critical response to such a reading, it has been noted that the aporetic definitional dialogues argue on the basis of several quite substantial assumptions concerning the nature of knowledge and the distinctness of a definiendum in relation to its particular instances – assumptions that Socrates himself introduces and seems committed to. This sets Socrates' approach apart from that of a fully-fledged skeptic, who would grant such assumptions only "dialectically" (cf. Woodruff, 1986).

The skeptical reading stands in direct opposition to what we may call the "doctrinal approach," which seems to be favored by the majority of scholars.[9] This approach aims to identify Plato's intended

---

wisdom; and Arcesilaus, who saw in Socrates' elenctic and aporetic discourse a model for his skeptical strategies.

[8] Cf. Annas, 1994; Vogt, 2012. The Academic view that Plato, as a student of Socrates, embraced an (at least moderately) skeptical standpoint (cf. Cicero *Fin.* II.2, *Acad*. I.46; also Diogenes Laertius III.49-51, Anon. *Proleg.* 10-11, Sextus Empiricus *PH* I.221) needs to be distinguished from the more plausible view of the Middle Platonists that only some of his dialogues are non-doctrinal (cf. n. 11 below).

[9] Nicholas Smith has suggested to me that Aristotle too might be cited as evidence for a doctrinal reading of Plato's Socratic dialogues (including those with an aporetic ending). An example would be his reference to Socrates' denial of akrasia (*EN* 1145b23-27, *EE* 1246b34), alluding to the *Protagoras*. However, Aristotle might rely on an oral tradition about the main tenets of the historical Socrates and

solutions for the aporetic puzzles by taking cues from recurrent themes, hints, easy-to-spot mistakes, and gaps or loose ends in the refutation. A question the doctrinal approach has to answer is why Plato, in some of his dialogues, chooses to present his ideas in the form of a riddle, while in others he uses a more straightforward mode of presentation. The answer could be, for instance, that these dialogues exemplify the Socratic *elenchus* in line with the programmatic statements in the *Apology*, but that Plato also wanted to hint at what he, at the time of writing, thought were the right answers, such that the careful and attentive reader would be able to extract these answers.

A critique of this doctrinal reading has to argue that it is not the case that an aporetic dialogue points to just one specific answer to the leading question. This cannot be discussed here at length, but let's give an example: In the *Euthyphro*, at 13d-14a, we seem to be approaching an adequate solution to the question what piety is (viz., a part of justice, exercised as correct service to the gods; cf. 12e). This proposal is, strictly speaking, not refuted; only Euthyphro's subsequent misconstrual of this proposal is. Yet this tentative solution would have to face its own dilemmas if pursued further. If piety is a part of justice (i.e., a part of a part of virtue), defined as the right kind of *service* to the gods, the question arises how we can serve the gods, given that they are not in need of anything, as Socrates points out at 13c. Presumably by collaborating in their good work through our own virtuous activity? But then piety might turn out to be identical with the whole of virtue (cf. Taylor, 1982). This shows that further examination of the possible solution would confront us with at least two options, forcing us to decide whether piety is just a part or, in some sense, the whole of virtue. Clarification would require an exploration of what virtue is and what it means for virtue

---

allude to arguments in Socratic dialogues only when they agree with this tradition. For instance, while he hints at the denial of akrasia in the *Protagoras*, he does not mention Socrates as a hedonist despite Socrates' apparent embrace of hedonism in the same dialogue (cf. Tarrant, 2000a, p. 48*f*). This leaves open the question of how he understood the overall purpose of such a dialogue.

as such to comprise several more specific virtues.[10] In the *Protagoras*, Socrates addresses the issue of the unity of virtue and the status of its parts with a more capable interlocutor. As part of a refutation, he tentatively develops a theory that would underpin a strong version of the unity of virtue, using a certain type of intellectualist analysis of virtue to make his point. But he concludes the conversation by highlighting the futility of any theorizing about virtue that isn't grounded in a clear understanding of the nature of virtue. A correct account of virtue might result in a very different notion of the unity and division of virtue (as we see in the *Republic*).

A third approach – the one I am going to employ here – may be referred to as the "aporetic-maieutic reading," or "aporetic reading" for short. It views such dialogues as philosophical challenges that serve to undercut the trust in our habitual concepts and judgments in order to free us from our conceit of knowledge, arouse our interest in further inquiry, train our investigative ability, and provide starting-points and seeds, so to speak, for future solutions. To read an aporetic dialogue aporetically rather than doctrinally means that we don't assume that it advocates for one specific solution to the leading question, if in a concealed form, and that it only takes an attentive reader to unearth the solution. This approach differs also from a skeptical reading since it maintains that these dialogues don't just deconstruct the idea that we know but aim to get us onto a trajectory of philosophical investigation that, if sustained and assisted by the right kind of guidance, will advance us toward the firm grasp of a genuine solution. It has some close affinity with the hermeneutics of the Middle Platonists and more specifically with their notion of a "gymnastic" class of dialogues that serves to prepare and train the reader for future philosophical study by cleansing away the illusion

---

[10] McPherran, 1996, p. 30, argues against reading the *Euthyphro* as "merely a peirastic inquiry" without a constructive outcome. Yet while I would concede that the *Euthyphro* is strongly suggestive of a rationalist theology, it is still true that it does not resolve its main topic, the question of the essence of piety.

of knowledge ("peirastic") and awakening and purifying the seeds of understanding in their souls ("maieutic").[11]

There is, to be sure, no need to assume that Plato wrote such dialogues as a faithful record of his own puzzles at the time of writing. He crafted them artfully so as to serve the purpose of this literary form, but likely already had (at least tentative) solutions in mind. But this is not to say that he uses this format to play a game of hide-and-seek. If we as readers seek for a solution with the help of the starting-points provided in the dialogue, we do, in a way, exactly what Plato wants us to do: namely, engage in a genuine philosophical investigation of the question at hand. Yet in doing so we move beyond the task of textual interpretation since the aporetic form does not intend to predetermine the solution.[12]

2. Direct versus indirect protreptic

A dialogue can serve different goals with respect to different audiences. For my aporetic reading of the *Lysis*, I am going to acknowledge a distinction between an expert and a non-expert audience and argue that this dialogue serves a cathartic and protreptic function with respect to a non-expert audience, while it has a different kind of utility for readers that are already competent at, and

---

[11] Cf. Albinus *Prol.* 3, Diogenes Laertius III.49, Sextus *PH* I.221; see also Albinus *Prol.* 6 on a corresponding program of study (cf. Reis, 1999, for text and analysis); see also Mansfeld, 1994, p. 74-97; Tarrant, 2000, p. 67-73, 77-80; Bonazzi, 2004, p. 240-245; F. Ferrari, 2022 for further discussion and context. For Plato's own views on refutational practice as a necessary catharsis on the path toward philosophical enlightenment, cf. *Tht.* 149a-151d, *Sph.* 226a-231b.

[12] Cf. M. Frede, 1992, p. 209-12, 219, on why Plato's use of the aporetic format implies that he does not commit to endorsing any of the arguments used. The proleptic (or ingressive) type of interpretation revived and elaborated by Kahn (1996) is a variation of the doctrinal reading since it assumes that the aporetic dialogues hint at specific solutions (in anticipation of the arguments of certain later dialogues; e.g., the *Symposium* in the case of the *Lysis* [1996, p. 267]). While I agree with Kahn's assessment that these dialogues function as a kind of aporetic prelude to constructive dialogues, my approach emphasizes that they don't preempt one specific solution. Note also that the puzzles concerning reciprocal *philia* in the *Lysis* are not fully resolved in the *Symposium* since the focus shifts to *eros*.

committed to, philosophical inquiry. The next step toward this result is to clarify the criteria for identifying philosophical protreptic.

Qua genre of discourse,[13] philosophical protreptic can be defined as speech or writing that explicitly promotes engagement with philosophy as a way of life and that addresses those who haven't yet made this choice. It is not only, but most fittingly directed at young people who are facing the crucial question of how to shape their adult lives. Since philosophy is promoted as a life-altering choice, such exhortation comes with the promise of true excellence (*arete*) and a truly prospering life (*eudaimonia*). It also has an "apotreptic" aspect, as it aims to turn the addressee away from a wrong path in life that would not lead to true excellence.[14]

Aristotle's *Protrepticus* is the classical text that seems to have served as a model for this genre in the Hellenistic era and beyond. Yet the oldest extant example of protreptic speech that also refers to itself as protreptic (προτρεπτικοὶ λόγοι 282d6) is provided by Socrates' discourses in the *Euthydemus*. In line with the exigencies of the nascent genre,[15] Socrates emphasizes that the goal of a protreptic speech should be to demonstrate that one ought to strive after, and pursue, wisdom and virtue (*arete*) – with the understanding that this is the key for the realization of a eudaimonic life.[16] The

---

[13] Cf. Görgemanns, 2006, and the definition of "philosophical protreptic in the stricter sense" in Slings, 1999, p. 60.

[14] Cf. Collins, 2015, p. 4-5, 39-40, 82*ff*; Chance, 1992, p. 14-5, 19-20 (on the combination of protreptic and apotreptic in the *Euthydemus*).

[15] Cf. Collins, 2015, p. 16-34. The title *Protrepticus* is documented for the Socratic authors Antisthenes and Aristipp (Diogenes Laertius VI.1 and 16; II.85), roughly contemporaries of Plato, but Antisthenes' *Protreptici (libri)* may have been just such a general exhortation to virtue, as their alternate title "About Justice and Courage" suggests. The pseudo-Platonic *Clitophon* uses the language of προτρέπειν and προτροπή (408b-409a, 410b-d), as does a remark in Xenophon's *Memorabilia* I.4.1 that mentions criticism of Socrates' protreptic activity somewhat reminiscent of the argument of the *Clitophon*; but here too the reference is to a general exhortation to virtue and justice. The promotion of philosophy as the path to virtue has to be distinguished from general exhortation to virtue.

[16] Cf. 275a1-2: "to urge on (προτρέπειν) toward the care for wisdom and pursuit of virtue;" 307a2: προτρέπειν ἐπὶ φιλοσοφίαν; 278d2-3: προτρέπειν should aim to

dialogue throws Socratic protreptic into relief against how the two sophists try to attract young disciples.

In the case of protreptic through written dialogues, we have to distinguish between the interaction at the dramatic or fictional level and the reception of the dialogue as a literary work. This corresponds to two different target audiences, the one external to the dialogue, the other internal or fictional.[17] Socrates' protreptic discourses in the *Euthydemus* are directed at Clinias. It would require an extra argument to show that this dialogue, as a literary work, is intended to serve a protreptic function also vis-à-vis the reader – and not, for instance, an apologetic function in response to the detractors of the Socratic method, who conflate Socrates' style of conversation with the sophistic practice of eristic disputation. Generally speaking, we can't take it for granted that the two levels of protreptic are always jointly present.[18]

While the formal criterion for protreptic as a mode of philosophical expression requires that the text or oral discourse explicitly argue that engagement with philosophy, or a specific style of philosophy, is the key to excellence and happiness, other kinds of written or oral communication too can have *protreptic force* if they attract an as yet uncommitted audience to philosophy by other means than direct exhortation. At the dramatic level, an obvious example for

---

demonstrate "that one needs to pursue both wisdom and virtue;" 278c5-6 (cf. 282d6): the corresponding exhortative skill as προτρεπτικὴ σοφία. On the connection with the quest for *eudaimonia* cf. 282a, c-d.

[17] There can be several levels of internal addressees, as when there is a frame dialogue. The *Lysis* is a narrated dialogue without a frame. Yet there are by-standers in the narrated scene who just listen. The role of such listeners is comparable to that of a reader (and also to that of a recipient of the narration in a frame dialogue).

[18] The *Symposium* and *Phaedo* emphatically advertise a life of philosophy, but does protreptic here also belong to the dramatic level? The friends gathered in the prison are already, to varying degrees, attracted to philosophy (but one could argue that Socrates tries to strengthen and consolidate their commitment for the time after his departure), whereas the fellow symposiasts in the *Symposium* (other than latecomer Alcibiades and perhaps Agathon) might not represent an adequate target audience for protreptic.

such *indirect protreptic*, as we may call it,[19] would be the use of the elenctic aporetic method in conversation with a young and still malleable interlocutor like Charmides. Thanks to the aporetic crisis, the young interlocutor is supposed to wake up to the fact that he is still confused about the most important concepts in life. Ideally, this will arouse a longing in his soul for elucidation through further philosophical investigation guided by Socrates. At the external level, it is fair to say that every aporetic elenctic dialogue[20] invites the readers to view themselves in the position of the interlocutor and to ask themselves if they would fare much better. In the absence of a Socrates (or Plato) who would examine them, they ought to start examine themselves (mutually among friends, or also individually).

Some have claimed that Plato's dialogues in general, if to varying degrees, have a "protreptic tendency" as they all serve to attract readers to the style of philosophizing that Plato aims to promote.[21] Such a statement can easily become vacuous since it could be said of almost any philosophical work that it wants to persuade the readers to pursue philosophy along the tracks laid by the author. To preserve the descriptive utility of this term, we need to emphasize that a written work or oral exchange can count as protreptic only if it specifically addresses readers, listeners, or interlocutors who aren't yet committed to philosophy. To be sure, a Platonic dialogue can appeal to different types of readers simultaneously. It can aim to attract the ones who are just curious but not yet committed to philosophy, and at the same time provide material for further discussion to those who already pursue philosophy. Not every

---

[19] Cf. Slings' notion of "implicit protreptic" (1999, p. 61*f*, 127-141), whose notion of the *elenchus* is, however, too broad. As Slings points out (p. 83*ff*), pseudo-Demetrius of Phaleron, *On Style*, 296-8 (possibly 2nd century BC) already describes the protreptic function of the *aporia*-inducing *ad hominem* elenchus.

[20] Not all dialogues that practice the classical *elenchus* (i.e., the refutation of a thesis proposed by an interlocutor based on premises the interlocutor has agreed to) are also aporetic. In the *Io*, *Crito*, and *Gorgias*, such refutation turns into a presentation and justification of Socrates' own views.

[21] Cf. K. Gaiser, 1959, p. 17, 221; 2004, p. 13-4, whose approach influenced a number of European scholars.

Platonic dialogue, however, is suitable for protreptic purposes. Dialogues such as the *Parmenides*, *Sophist*, or *Politicus*, while introducing to certain new methods of philosophical exercise and enquiry, are clearly not written to win over non-philosophers. No one who isn't already seriously interested in the kind of research carried out in the Academy would be won over by such a work. It would likewise be wrong to attribute a protreptic intention to all of Socrates' exchanges *at the dramatic level*. The presence of protreptic at this level depends on the dramatic role of Socrates' interlocutor and the dynamic of their exchange. In the *Protagoras*, for instance, Socrates is certainly not so delusional as to think that he could win over Protagoras to his kind of philosophizing, while his exchange with young Hippocrates at the beginning of the dialogue is a plausible instance of protreptic.[22] In Socrates' exchanges with young and malleable Interlocutors, protreptic often also exemplifies a specifically Socratic (or Platonic) model of erotic pursuit, an aspect that is distinctly present in the dramatic setting of the *Lysis*.

3. The aporetic method in the *Lysis*

Turning now to the *Lysis*, the first step will be to analyze its style of aporetic discourse. I am going to elaborate why it exemplifies a new kind of aporetic method that differs from the personalized (*ad hominem*) aporetic discourse in dialogues such as the *Laches*, *Charmides*, *Euthyphro*, and *Meno* 70a-80d. Personalized *aporia* is associated with the classical Socratic *elenchus*, which is not only the examination of a thesis but also of a person and the state of their ethical understanding. This method has been intensely discussed in the literature since Vlastos' seminal contributions.[23] It seems to be widely agreed that in this kind of examination the interlocutors have

---

[22] More precisely, this should count as an example of the "apotreptic" aspect of philosophical protreptic mentioned above (cf. n. 14): the act of cautioning someone against a wrong approach to self-improvement.

[23] Cf. Benson, 2000, p. 17-95, on the Socratic *elenchus*; cf. Wolfsdorf, 2013, for a review of the debate initiated by Vlastos.

to commit to a thesis which is supposed to capture their understanding of the subject-matter. They then have to validate their understanding by successfully defending the thesis. If they fail (as they typically do), and especially if they fail repeatedly, this leads to a crisis, leaving the interlocutor puzzled and silenced. Since the topic is typically virtue or some specific virtue, this outcome is supposed to show that the interlocutors have no true understanding of the virtue in question and, possibly, that they cannot yet have this virtue since understanding it might be a condition for having it.[24] In order to confirm that the *Lysis*, for the most part, is not an example of this kind of *ad hominem* examination (as duly noted by Vlastos),[25] we need to look at the main parts of this conversation one by one.

After a stage-setting prelude, involving Socrates, Ctesippus, and Hippothales, the dialogue presents three scenes in which Socrates engages the two young boys Lysis and Menexenus. In the first scene he talks to Lysis exclusively (207d-210e), in the second to Menexenus (211d-213d), whereas the conversation in the long third scene addresses both boys (notwithstanding the fact that Menexenus gives most of the answers). The first scene is introduced as a showpiece (ἐπιδεῖξαι 206c5) for the benefit of Hippothales on how to properly approach one's love-interest. Hippothales pursues his enthusiastic but unsuccessful courtship of Lysis by means of old-fashioned love poetry. Socrates points out that such flattery is not only self-serving, but in this case also counterproductive as it makes the "prey" harder to catch (205d-6b). The lover's first move should be to humble (ταπεινοῦν) the boy and cut his ego down to size

---

[24] For further discussion cf. Szaif, 2018, p. 30-35, 43-46.

[25] Cf. Vlastos, 1994, p. 29-31; Adams, 1992, p. 3-4. Vlastos concludes that Plato no longer believed in the philosophical value of the personal *elenchus* at the time when he wrote the *Lysis*, *Euthydemus*, and *Hippias ma*. This claim would have to be modified since *Meno* 81e-84c and *Sophist* 226a-231b affirm and analyze the educational value of the *aporia*-inducing personal *elenchus*. Adams insists that Socrates' refutations in the *Lysis* don't use fallacious sophistic arguments, whereas I will show that sophistic trickery is a significant element in this dialogue, notwithstanding its overarching protreptic goal.

(συστέλλειν) (210e).[26] Socrates demonstrates how such humbling can be attained by using his skill at refutation. Lysis, unsurprisingly, believes that his parents love him very much, yet the *elenchus* forces him to concede that his parents, to the extent that he is still an ignorant and hence useless person, can't love him yet. We should note that, unlike the typical examples of *ad hominem* refutation in earlier definitional dialogues, the "thesis" allegedly refuted is a truism that Socrates himself will later endorse (219d5-7). This is a strong indication that Socrates himself cannot take this refutation of parental love seriously (*Pace* Vlastos, 1981; cf. Price, 1989, p. 2-3). The argument still has some resemblance to a protreptic *logos* in that it draws a connection between the acquisition of knowledge or wisdom and the realization of Lysis' wish to be free, powerful, and loved. Yet the conclusion that primarily matters for the dramatic progression is the one reached immediately afterwards. Lysis has to admit that his concession of ignorance implies that he can no longer think highly of himself (210d4-8).[27] As a consequence, he has been "humbled." The argument employed, though preposterous, alerts the readers to the question of the real motives of parental love and, more generally, to the question of how love and benefit are connected. It also sets the tone for this dialogue, which continues to create puzzlement and paradox instead of settling for credible answers.

Lysis doesn't appear to be upset by his humbling, but wishes to see his buddy Menexenus receive the same kind of whacking. Socrates encourages Lysis to memorize the refutation and try it out for himself on Menexenus. But upon Lysis' urging he agrees to

[26] The humbling of the beloved youth is here framed as if it were merely an expedient stratagem for a pederastic lover. The idealized pederastic courtship advocated in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* sheds a different light on the rejection of flattery. The situation of a youngster is still one of undeveloped natural predispositions and thus of deficiency. Flattery harms its recipient by concealing the need for moral and intellectual growth.

[27] Socrates concludes with a wordplay according to which Lysis cannot be μεγαλόφρων (i.e., think highly of himself) as long as he οὔπω φρονεῖ, i.e., still lacks insight and understanding (210e). This directly harks back to Socrates' admonition not to fill the boy with φρόνημα ("presumption" 206a4).

"chastise" Menexenus too, if through a different argument (211a-c). He continues to focus on *philia* as the general topic for the remainder of the dialogue. It is, however, difficult to give a precise formulation to the leading question. Roughly speaking, the debate is about what it means to befriend or love someone or something and how such an attitude or relation arises. But Socrates shifts between the substantival and adjectival uses of *philos/philon*: Employed as a noun, ὁ φίλος means a "friend," and friendship between people is typically understood as a reciprocal relation (cf. Robinson, 1986, p. 65-69; Price, 1989, p. 3-4). Used as an adjective (φίλος/φίλη/φίλον), it can have a passive sense and designate something or someone loved by, or dear to, someone else, or the active sense of someone who is fond of or well-disposed toward someone else or something else. These adjectival senses don't require reciprocity. In Greek, the boundaries between substantival and adjectival uses are, however, fluid since the adjective can be used like a noun (τὸ φίλον) and the form φίλος could be the noun or the masculine form of the adjective. It also matters that the adjective and noun are both cognates of the verb φιλεῖν, "to love."

Socrates' "chastising" of Menexenus (212a-213d) trades on these ambiguities.[28] It begins with the following question: Assuming that A loves B, who is to be called φίλος? Is it A, or B, or both A and B since it makes no difference (212a8-b2)? Socrates leaves the choice to Menexenus, who picks the last of the three options, but this does not amount to an original contribution or substantive commitment that would influence the outcome. Socrates will go through all the

---

[28] Bordt, 1998, p. 149-157, also reads this passage as an eristic prelude, a reading vehemently rejected by Penner and Rowe (2005, p. 51-63), who look out for philosophical depth in a passage that, as argued here, has a very different function for the architecture of this dialogue. They highlight 212b3-5, a passage where Menexenus agrees to a formulation of the third option that could be construed as consciously combining the active and passive adjectival senses: If A loves B, A is a φίλος in the *active* and B in the *passive* sense. But the example of a relation in which the A loves B, but B hates A, then *unnecessarily* convinces him that this third option has to be a symmetric relation of mutual loving. This tells us that he can't see through these ambiguities.

options, and Menexenus will be refuted regardless of which option he picks first because of how Socrates can exploit the ambiguities of the term φίλος. Initially, he steers the argument to the substantival sense of φίλος ("a friend"), which points to a symmetric relation (212d1-5). Then he brings up non-symmetric cases of φιλεῖν (horse-lovers, wisdom-lovers), for which the symmetric sense of φίλος is not suitable. Finally, he plays off the two adjectival meanings of *philon*, "dear to" (213a4-5) and "fond of," against each other (b5-6).

This has much in common with the style of eristic argumentation practiced by the two sophists in the *Euthydemus* and known as the method of "inescapables" (ἄφυκτα, *Euthd*. 276e5, cf. 275e). However, unlike the two sophists, Socrates is not content with refutation for its own sake but formulates a structured aporetic outcome: If neither the lover, nor the loved one, nor both the lover and the loved one are φίλοι, we have nothing left to say as to how anyone could become a φίλος (213c5-8). This neatly describes the "impasse" or *aporia* that occurs when all options have apparently been exhausted, and no other route toward a solution is available. Menexenus acknowledges it when he says: "οὐ πάνυ εὐπορῶ" (213c9). Despite his fondness for contentious debates (ἐριστικός, 211b8), he is incapable of formulating a critique of Socrates' ruses that would compare to how Socrates exposes a fallacy of equivocation in *Euthydemus* 277e-278b. Socrates makes no effort to sort it out for him. We may assume that the readers are expected to debate this exchange among themselves and to try to identify the source of the confusion. Bringing to light the ambiguities hidden in a term is a crucial prerequisite for avoiding entanglement in verbal fallacies.

When Socrates observes that the investigation seems to have pursued a wrong route, Lysis exclaims that he feels the same way about it, only to immediately feel embarrassed by his outburst. Lysis is generally quite shy, and unlike Menexenus, who is fond of disputations, he prefers to listen (206c10). But Socrates takes his outburst as an opportunity to draw him back into the conversation,

which marks the beginning of the third scene.[29] At 216a, Socrates allows Menexenus to resume the role of respondent, but Lysis will remain present not only as an attentive listener but also as an occasional respondent. Interpreters have often singled out Menexenus as the interlocutor, but Socrates speaks to both boys in this part of the dialogue, as is also indicated by his occasional use of the address ὦ παίδες ("boys!") even when only one of them is giving the answers (217a3, 219b5; cf. 222a1, d1).

This new aporetic discourse, unlike its sophistic prelude in scene two, addresses substantive questions, but continues to avoid the personalized *elenchus*. A look at some of the key junctures in this conversation will corroborate this: At 213de, Socrates helps himself to a fresh start by suggesting that the lead of the poets might open a more promising path. Addressing the question, raised by himself, of who the people are that become friends, he – and not Lysis or Menexenus – cites Homer to introduce the idea that "the like is friend to the like." This proposal, he claims, has the support not only of Homer but also of the writings of certain naturalist philosophers. He then partially refutes this proposal, pointing out that bad people, insofar as they are bad, are like each other, but cannot be friends since, being bad, they will do injustice to each other. He then reinterprets the meaning of the initial "Homeric" proposal with the help of an additional argument about why bad people, in fact, aren't alike (viz., because a bad person will always be conflicted within himself and hence not even be alike to himself). The true meaning of the Homeric proposal is, hence, that only the good can be alike and be friends – a thesis that he, again, refutes, using two arguments. The first argument claims that friendship cannot be grounded in likeness, since people cannot be useful to each other insofar as they are alike.

---

[29] *Pace* Bordt, 1998, p. 149, and Penner and Rowe, 2005, p. 61-63, I see no sufficient basis for the claim that Lysis' outburst indicates that he has a better understanding of the flaws of this argument than Menexenus. Lysis agrees that this can't have been the right approach, but this is obvious from the puzzling outcome and does not entail an understanding of what has gone wrong. Socrates' taking pleasure in Lysis' φιλοσοφία (213d7) relates to how Lysis shows a strong desire for finding a better approach.

The second argument relates to the idea that the good, qua good, are in a state of perfection and hence have no needs. It follows that, qua good, they also have no need for friendship.[30] Next, Socrates suddenly suggests that this approach to the phenomenon of friendship via the notion of likeness is misguided. He evokes an anonymous authority who argues that things or people that are alike are hostile to each other and that attraction arises between opposites, both in nature and in human life. This solution he then also criticizes, citing arguments that certain experts at finding contradictions (οἱ ἀντιλογικοί 216a7) could bring forward to reduce this proposal to absurdity.

We note that Lysis and Menexenus have at no point so far contributed any proposals or objections of their own. Even Socrates does not always speak *in propria persona*, but it is still his initiative when he cites poets and other thinkers. To be sure, some of the ideas that he uses as refutational resources have considerable weight and will be elaborated in the *Republic*; for instance, the idea that a bad person cannot be anyone's friend, not even his own friend, or the connection of goodness and perfection. Yet here these ideas remain undeveloped, and there is no indication that Socrates favors any one of these proposals.

At this juncture, Socrates expresses his "dizziness" caused by the aporetic state of their investigation (ὑπὸ τῆς τοῦ λόγου ἀπορίας 216c5-6). Taking a hint from an adage in Theognis (l. 17), he gets the investigation moving again by proposing that the neither-good-nor-bad is friend of the good. This new proposal is backed by a brief piece of reasoning that pretends to prove that the addition of an *intermediate* between the good and the bad creates room for new combinations, but that only one of them remains viable once we apply the previous arguments (216d5-217a2): The combinations

[30] The point here is not that good people cannot have unsatisfied needs and hence cannot be friends, but that goodness, understood as perfection, cannot be what grounds friendship, since friendship responds to need. For similar reasons, likeness cannot be what grounds friendship. The whole debate is about what quality in a person or object grounds its being a *philon*.

mentioned and dismissed before were good-to-good, bad-to-bad, and good-to-bad. Of the new options, the combination intermediate-to-bad has to be dismissed in light of the arguments that showed that nothing could be the friend of what is bad. The combination intermediate-to-intermediate would be an instance of like-to-like, which the previous argumentation rejected as well. The only option left, he claims, is that the intermediate be friend of the good. – This reasoning has some serious gaps (cf. Szaif, 1998, p. 35*f*): The preceding arguments targeted *philia* as a reciprocal (or "symmetric") relation of friendship. But now we are entering the territory of *philein* (loving, desiring) as a one-directional, non-symmetric relation. For the intermediate-to-good relation of *philein* has to be one-directional since Socrates still maintains that the good is not friend (in the active sense) of anything else. Not only does he thus surreptitiously change the topic (without explaining how the two topics might supplement each other); he also fails to acknowledge that once we transition to talk about *philein* in this non-symmetric sense, there are more possible combinations than the six he has listed (namely, nine altogether[31]). Worse, it has not been established that the arguments directed at symmetric *philein* are still valid with respect to non-symmetric *philein*. For instance, it has not been shown that the bad could not love the good under the guise of what appears good to them, such as money or pleasure.[32] This transition relies, hence, again on the kind of argumentative trickery that someone more experienced in the art of argumentation than the two boys could fairly easily expose.

After this problematic transition, the dialogue enters its philosophically most interesting stretch. What began as an investigation of interpersonal *philein* and its relata morphs into a discussion of the object and motivating ground of desire. We don't

---

[31] Viz.: good to good; good to intermediate; good to bad; intermediate to good; intermediate to intermediate; intermediate to bad; bad to good; bad to intermediate; bad to bad. Of these, good to intermediate, bad to intermediate, bad to good are not mentioned in 216d-e.

[32] An argument for why the bad could not love the good is given soon afterwards, at 217bc; but the issue of the apparent good as an object of desire remains unexplored.

need to trace the course of this complex and much-discussed argument.[33] Suffice it to say that Menexenus and Lysis continue to follow the course of Socrates' *logos* attentively through all its twists and turns, but again don't provide any suggestions of their own.[34] As before, they seem satisfied when an interim solution is reached (214d8-e1, 216a1-4, 218b6-c3, 221e2-7), and are surprised when Socrates brings up new objections or doubts. The final twist starting at 221e contains another fallacious transition. Socrates surreptitiously reverts from *philein* as a one-directional relation[35] to *philein* as a reciprocal or symmetric relation (and also exploits an ambiguity of the word *oikeion*) in order to argue that the *philon* cannot be identified with the *oikeion*. This allows him to appeal to arguments from the first stage of the exchange (213e-216b) that aimed at the notion of *philia* in the sense of reciprocal friendship, thus leading the interlocutors back to the beginning in a circle.[36] A reader who has

---

[33] Segment 218d-220e ends with another example of Socrates creating paradox by exploiting the vagueness and ambiguity of the concepts involved; viz., when he infers that the primary good and *philon*—which, according to the preceding argument, is the ultimate for-the-sake-of-which (οὗ ἕνεκα) and the only genuine good and *philon*—is desirable only "for the sake of some inimical thing" (ἐχθροῦ ἕνεκα, 220e4), i.e., for the sake of some evil. This paradox is facilitated by Socrates' failure either to stick to his clear terminological distinction between the οὗ ἕνεκα and the διὰ τί or to use the phrase "for the sake of *ridding oneself* of some evil."

[34] At 217e1-4, Socrates seems to give Menexenus a choice, but this is just to check if he has understood the argument.

[35] In the preceding arguments (218c-221e) concerning the πρῶτον φίλον and the cause of its desirability, the word φίλον was used both in the active adjectival sense for the thing that loves and in the passive sense for the corresponding thing loved. 222a6*f* contains the claim that the loved thing or person needs to love back, which reintroduces reciprocity and thus prepares the ground for the subsequent refutation that targets reciprocal affinity as the cause of *philia*.

[36] Commentators have noticed that the conversation at 222cd neglects to explore the option that "the good is the *oikeion* of everything," suggesting that this conspicuous omission points in the direction of the intended solution (cf. Bordt, 1998, p. 229-32; Penner and Rowe, 2005, p. 173-84). But if the boys had opted for this proposal, Socrates could have easily refuted it on the basis of their previous agreements, since "everything" includes things or people that are genuinely bad, but these, according to 217a-218a, could not relate to the good as their *philon* and *oikeion*.

seen through the ambiguities underlying the sophistic prolegomena in 212a-213c would not fall for this maneuver. By Socrates' own admission, his argumentation has made them all "drunken" (μεθύομεν, 222c2). But the reader has reason to suspect that Socrates knows perfectly well what he is doing and that it is his intention to make the boys dizzy through the circular course of his argumentation. The exchange ends with a statement of the aporetic outcome: Socrates sees no way to continue this line of argumentation since all options have been exhausted (222e). It is their shared belief that they are friends, but they don't know what it means to be a friend (223b).

In sum, the claims and arguments are Socrates' work entirely. At each step, it is he who makes a proposal, provides some justification for it, and then refutes it. His interlocutors are satisfied with every interim result reached by Socrates, until Socrates himself raises an objection. In contrast with the situation in a personal *elenchus*, they are not invested in the argument like someone who has to defend his or her own thesis.[37] But they are also more than just passive witnesses of the argument since they are its addressees and have to confirm through their answers that they are closely following each step and turn in the argument.[38] While the argument attains a higher level of

---

[37] At the conference, it was proposed that Lysis' silence at 222a4 shows that this dialogue does, after all, function like a personal *elenchus* (since personal examination leading to *aporia* reduces interlocutors to a state in which they no longer know what to say; cf. Meno's comparison of Socrates with a paralyzing torpedo-fish; *Men*. 80a). However, Lysis' silence at 222a4 and reluctant nod shortly afterwards seem to have a pragmatic rather than philosophical reason: A teasing Socrates has given the argument a turn so as to make the boys agree that they ought to give in to a truly enamored suitor. But Lysis does not want to encourage his suitor Hippothales who is closely watching (cf. Wolfsdorf, 2008, p. 70). The awkward moment passes quickly. Both Menexenus and Lysis continue to give answers. For a different account of his silence, cf. Comstock and Anderson, 2022, in this volume.

[38] At 218c, one of those junctures where Socrates has reached an apparent solution, he tells us that he rejoiced like a successful hunter gladly holding his prey, characterizing himself, not the interlocutor, as the hunter. At *Laches* 194b, by contrast, the interlocutor is described as the hunter trying to capture and subdue the concept he is chasing. Socrates' narrative in the *Lysis* goes on to describe how shortly afterwards he was overcome by doubt and exclaimed: "We seem to be like people who have become rich in their dream only." He switches to the "we" to

complexity as it progresses, every new proposal is promptly refuted. Some very potent notions and questions are introduced that will be taken up in constructive dialogues such as the *Symposium* and the *Republic*. But every time we seem to see some light, the path forward is quickly obscured and a new path seems to open up, only to be obscured again, until at the end we are thrown back to where the investigation started. The apex of the dialogue, the theory of highest object of attraction (πρῶτον φίλον), leads into paradox, and the question of how this theory, if salvaged, could inform an account of interpersonal relationships remains unresolved. Interpreters who try to identify an underlying coherent theory of *philia* have to cherry pick among pieces of argumentation or rely on later dialogues in order to identify those pieces that represent Plato's (or Socrates') "real view." They thus import determination into a dialogue that purposefully leaves the correct answers undetermined.

In his pursuit of the argument through all its twists and turns, the Socrates of the *Lysis* creates a complex aporetic framework that can help to structure future investigation.[39] In this respect, there is some palpable affinity with how Aristotle, in some of his treatises, lays out a set of connected philosophical *aporiai* through arguments and counter-arguments in order to structure the field of investigation. The aporetic introductions to Aristotelian treatises, however, include only *bona fide* philosophical arguments, whereas the *Lysis* resorts to argumentative trickery especially in the transitions in order to create the illusion of a continuous argumentative progression that exhausts all options.

---

include his interlocutors among the intended beneficiaries of the solutions the argument might produce. They are not fellow searchers ("hunters"), yet still fellow beneficiaries.

[39] The distinction between *ad hominem* aporetic discourse and the kind of systematic and problem-focused aporetic laid out in the *Lysis* is usefully compared with V. Politis' distinction between kathartic and zetetic *aporia* (e.g. 2006, p. 89).

4. Protreptic in the *Lysis*

How does the aporetic discourse in the *Lysis* serve a protreptic purpose (if at all)? A comparison with the protreptic in the *Euthydemus* will provide us with some important clues. We should note, first, the close similarity between the style of aporetic discourse in the *Lysis* and the second protreptic discourse of the *Euthydemus* (288b-293a). While the first discourse in the *Euthydemus* (278a-282e) ends with the kind of conclusion that is to be expected from a protreptic discourse – namely, that one needs to pursue wisdom in order to realize a happy life – the second discourse, which tries to delineate the nature or content of this wisdom, ends aporetically. In the *Euthydemus*, Clinias is the boy who acts as the respondent and confirms through his answers that he follows each step in the course of the argument. Just like Lysis and Menexenus, he does not propose an initial thesis or contribute his own ideas during the investigation.[40] In other words, both dialogues use a style of aporetic argumentation that is not *ad hominem*, yet still engages the interlocutor in the unfolding of an aporetic *logos*. The stage-setting for the two dialogues also correlates in significant ways. The *Euthydemus*, just like the *Lysis*, is set in the “undressing-room” (ἀποδυτήριον) of a *palaistra*. The *palaistra* of the *Euthydemus* is located in the Lyceum, whereas the *palaistra* of the *Lysis* is a new structure that Socrates chances upon when he is “on his way to the Lyceum.” In a homoerotic context, an “undressing-room” is, obviously, a place of erotic tension, and this is reinforced in both dialogues by the presence of popular handsome boys and their suitors (ἐρασταί). While the *Lysis* highlights Hippothales’ inept courtship for Lysis, Ctesippus, who has a minor role in the *Lysis*, becomes a central figure in the *Euthydemus* as the suitor of Clinias. In both dialogues, the suitors are themselves still young, in their late adolescence.[41] Both dialogues

---

[40] At 289d, Socrates starts to attribute to Clinias some very enlightened answers. But the meta-level exchange between him and Crito at 290e-291a reveals that Clinias cannot have said these things.

[41] In the *Lysis*, Hippothales and Ctesippus are introduced as νεανίσκοι (according to the most plausible construal of 203a3-5; for a possible different translation cf.

also suggest an analogy between skilled physical fighting and the style of disputation practiced by the experts of eristic disputation (ἐριστική).

In light of these close connections in aporetic technique and stage-setting it becomes even more urgent to ask whether the aporetic conversation in the *Lysis* serves a specifically protreptic purpose as it does in the *Euthydemus*. To be sure, the *Lysis* can't be a protreptic work in the formal sense since its topic is not why we ought to pursue philosophical wisdom, but what it means to be a *philos* or *philon*.[42] Yet one can make a good case for the claim that it provides an example of what I have called *indirect protreptic*, and this not only at the external level, vis-à-vis the reader, but also at the dramatic level, for the benefit of Lysis and Menexenus. Socrates has picked a

---

Penner and Rowe, 2005, p. 6, n. 10). The term can denote adolescent youths, but also young men. Nails (2002, p. 317) tries to pin down the age of Lysis to 13 and that of Hippothales to 15 or 16 (partly supported by an argument about courtship between coequals in Dover, 1989, p. 85-87). In view of how Lysis and Menexenus on the one hand (cf. 207b8-c2), Ctesippus and Hippothales on the other, are grouped together as two pairs of coequals with different roles, it seems more likely that the age difference is greater and that the latter pair is at the end of their adolescence (cf. Bordt, 1998, p. 111*f*). It is part of their transition to manhood that they try to emulate the role of grown-up suitors. They might belong to the ephebes (aged about 19 or 20), who mix with younger boys at wrestling schools during the Hermaea, celebrated on the day of this conversation. (For some perspective on the philosophical significance of the stage-setting, cf. Gonzalez, 2003.)

[42] *Ly*. 207d-210e has been interpreted as a προτρεπτικὸς λόγος (e.g. Gaiser, 1959, p. 65-6, 134-7; Renaud, 2002, p. 196; Stump, 2017, p. 163-173). Yet the protreptic force of this exchange is, at best, very limited since it does not mention or demonstrate the specifically Socratic way of pursuing knowledge or wisdom by investigating our core evaluative and epistemic concepts. When Socrates suggests that Lysis memorize this argument and try it out on his friend Menexenus, he entices him to practice a rather eristic style of argumentation (something Menexenus is said to be fond of, 211b8). The dramatic point is to highlight malice as an element of common *philia*. The conversation enters a properly Socratic path of protreptic only with the introduction of the "What is...?"-question regarding *philia*. As for Hippothales, his dramatic role as a clueless, timid, and unsuccessful lover is to provide a comical contrast to how Socrates approaches, attracts, and engages young interlocutors. There is no suggestion on Socrates' part of any future follow-up with Hippothales. (On aspects of comedy in the *Lysis* prologue, cf. Trivigno, 2011, p. 67-73.)

topic that is of particular relevance for the two youngsters in the current phase of their lives. It is apt to draw them into the mode of philosophical inquiry and arouse their interest in a continued pursuit of philosophy. While they don't have to contribute their own proposals or defend their own theses, their close participation in the progression of Socrates' reasoning assures that they also experience the sense of puzzlement the aporetic discourse aims to elicit. Indeed, the very fact that they seem satisfied with each of the interim results, but then have to witness how this result succumbs to new objections, is liable to trigger this sense of puzzlement. At the same time, they are not put to shame like those interlocutors that have to undergo a personal elenchus. Shame is, after all, a double-edged sword: It can make you realize how insufficient you still are, but it can also trigger some form of denial, emotional resistance, and even hostility, which would get in the way of the protreptic goal.[43] It is in the spirit of such a gentler style of aporetic conversation that Socrates' concluding remark will state that they are parting *as friends* (223b7), if without an answer yet to the question what it means to be friends.

At the conclusion of his argument in 217a-218c, Socrates hints at how a theory of *philia* could explain the protreptic force of aporetic discourse. Commenting on the "philo-sophical" (i.e., wisdom-loving) condition of a soul, he describes it as a condition in which one has become aware of one's ignorance and, as a consequence, starts to feel a longing for genuine knowledge or wisdom (218a-b). When we think that we know but don't know, our soul is in a bad condition that sets us in opposition to true wisdom.[44] But once we have realized our ignorance, we also recognize how this condition is something alien and bad for the soul. This is a clue to how he thinks he can justify his way of interacting with the boys: By drawing them into an aporetic discourse capable of destroying any illusion they might have of truly

---

[43] Socrates usually tries to blunt the humiliating effect of *aporia* on the interlocutor by emphasizing his own ignorance and puzzlement, but various psychological factors militate against the intended positive effect; cf. Szaif, 2018, p. 40-43.

[44] Cf. *Men*. 84a-c, *Sph*. 229c-d, 230a-e on conceit of knowledge as the initial obstacle to any serious commitment to philosophical inquiry.

understanding the phenomenon of *philia*, and by feeding them with pointers for how to continue the investigation, he tries to raise them from ignorance to the condition of being "philo-sophical." To draw those who aren't yet immersed in philosophical questions onto a path of philosophical enquiry (and thus also onto a path toward true virtue and happiness), this is the defining purpose of a protreptic conversation. It is worth noting that in real life Socrates seems to have had some success at least with Menexenus. *Phaedo* 59b lists him among the friends of Socrates that attended his last conversation on the day of his death.

The analysis of the protreptic force of the *Lysis* also helps us to better understand the aporetic turn in the explicit protreptic of the *Euthydemus*. We have seen that Socrates' first exchange with Clinias exemplifies the basic format of a protreptic discourse as conventionally understood. Socrates then passes the baton to the two sophists (282d-e), asking them either to demonstrate their own, "more artful" protreptic lessons, or to continue Socrates' lesson. The eristic showpieces that follow are, of course, inadequate for this task. Yet Socrates' own attempt at bringing his protreptic to a successful conclusion lands him in an impasse (*aporia*). Do we have to conclude that his protreptic has failed? Not if we realize that drawing the interlocutor into the unfolding of a philosophical puzzle, while showing them how important a solution would be for them, is itself a valid form of protreptic – and, for that matter, a specifically Socratic one.

The aporetic mode is, to be sure, not the only strategy of indirect protreptic in Plato; his *Phaedo*, for instance, a non-aporetic dialogue, aims at a broad audience and very powerfully advertises for a conversion to the philosophical mode of life. Protreptic is here linked to the affirmative exposition of substantive philosophical views. In the *Lysis*, by contrast, protreptic operates as a form of cathartic, destroying our conceit of knowledge and provoking a desire for real answers.[45] Yet, beyond its cathartic function, it also offers a number

---

[45] Cf. *Sph*. 226a-231b on this kind of protreptic catharsis.

of interesting thoughts and arguments that will become useful in future constructive research. It helps, moreover, to structure future investigations thanks to the organized way in which it lays out alternative suggestions followed by arguments and counterarguments. This explains why it has relevance also for a philosophically advanced audience, notwithstanding the sophistical character of some of its arguments. It is no accident that Aristotle's treatises on friendship repeatedly hark back to the *Lysis*.[46]

In light of these results, let's conclude by revisiting Dicaearchus' criticism of Plato's protreptic. I have emphasized that Plato's writing exhibits great variation in form and purpose, which is why any general characterization of his dialogues is liable to mislead. Some, not all of them, have a protreptic quality, and among those some, but not all, use the aporetic style of conversation. However, with respect to a work such as the *Lysis*, Dicaearchus' criticism of the ambivalent, and potentially harmful, effects of Platonic protreptic might seem to have a point. It is true that the *Lysis*, instead of providing some good advice on *philia*, backed up by conceptual analysis, a value theory, and an explanatory psychological account, shows a Socrates who entangles his young interlocutors (and the readers with them) in a series of arguments that lead into an apparently unproductive circle. Worse, the transitions that tie the pieces into a complex aporetic web repeatedly exploit the ambiguities of the term *philos/philon* in a sophistic manner. The text is also not free of paradoxical claims, such as the claim that Lysis' parents can't love him since his youthful ignorance makes him useless, or the interim result at 220e that the highest good is desirable only thanks to the bad. Yet the function of such a dialogue is both therapeutic and preparatory. It is therapeutic in that it aims to heal us from the conceit of knowledge which is the key obstacle to any genuine intellectual and ethical progress. It is

[46] Price (1989, p. 9-10) lists the passages in Aristotle that build on the *Lysis*. Diotima's speech in Plato's *Symposium* also draws on the *Lysis* (cf. Kahn, 1996, p. 266); topics that resurface: the question of the ultimate object of desire; the intermediate position of *philosophia* between good and bad; the link between the notions *agathon* and *oikeion*.

preparatory because the study of philosophical puzzles and of still inconclusive or even paradoxical arguments train our philosophical skills and provide useful starting-points for philosophical inquiry. The attraction that Plato's aporetic works have exerted on many students of philosophy until this day testifies to the relevance of a method of philosophical initiation that does not yet advocate for certain specific answers, but sharpens our awareness of the philosophical puzzles worthy of a quest for answers. However, as with any tool, the aporetic format won't have the desired effect if the reader makes improper use of it.[47]

Bibliography

ADAMS, D. (1992). The Lysis Puzzles. *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 9, p. 3-17.

ANNAS, J. (1994). Plato the Sceptic. In: VANDER WAERDT, P. A. (ed.), *The Socratic Movement*. Ithaca, Cornell University Press, p. 309-340.

BENSON, H. (2000). *Socratic Wisdom*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

BORDT, M. (1998). *Platon: Lysis. Übersetzung und Kommentar*. Göttingen, Vandenhoek & Ruprecht.

BRICKHOUSE, Th.; SMITH, N. D. (1994). *Plato's Socrates*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

BONAZZI, M. (2004). Tra scetticismo e dogmatismo: Il «Liside» nell' antichità. In: TRABATTONI, F. (ed.), *Platone: Liside*, vol. II. Milano, LED, p. 233-245.

CHANCE, T. H. (1992). Plato. *Plato's* Euthydemus. Berkeley, University of California Press.

[47] My discussion of Platonic protreptic grew out of a debate with Evan Rodriguez, whose as yet unpublished draft I commented on. His arguments helped to sharpen my own thoughts about protreptic in the *Lysis*. My thanks also go to Nick Smith and David Jennings for their helpful comments on my paper.

COMSTOCK, R.; ANDERSON, T. (2022). "Cutting them down to size: Humbling and protreptic in Plato's *Lysis*. In: JENNINGS, D.; SZAIF, J. (eds.), *Studies on Plato's* Lysis, special issue of *Archai* 32, suppl. 1.

COLLINS II, J. H. (2015). *Exhortations to Philosophy: The Protreptics of Plato, Aristotle, and Isocrates*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

CRÖNERT, W. (1965). Kolotes und Menedemos. Amsterdam, Hakkert (reprint of the 1906 edition).

DOVER, K. (1989). Greek Homosexuality. London, Duckworth.

FERRARI, F. (2022). A Middle-Platonist Plato: Introductory *Schemata* and the Construction of a System in Diogenes Laertius. In: MOTTA, A.; PETRUCCI, F. M. (eds.), *Isagogical Crossroads from the Early Imperial Age to the End of Antiquity*. Leiden, Brill, p. 33-48.

FREDE, M. (1992). Plato's Arguments and the Dialogue Form. In: KLAGGE, J. C.; SMITH, N. D. (eds.). *Methods of Interpreting Plato and his Dialogues*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, p. 201-219.

GAISER, K. (1959). *Protreptik und Paränese bei Platon*. Stuttgart, Kohlhammer.

GAISER, K. (2004). Platon als philosophischer Schriftsteller (1984). In: GAISER, K. *Gesammelte Schriften*. St. Augustin, Academia Verlag, p. 1-72.

GÖRGEMANNS, H. (2006). *Protreptik/Protreptics*. In: CANIK, H.; SCHNEIDER, H. (eds.). *Der Neue Pauly/The New Pauly* (online version). Leiden, Brill.

GONZALEZ, F. J. (2003). How to Read a Platonic Prologue: *Lysis* 203A-207D. In: MICHELINI, A. *Plato as Author. The Rhetoric of Philosophy*. Leiden, Brill, p. 15-44.

KAHN, C. H. (1996). *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

KECHAGIA, E. (2010). Rethinking a Professional Rivalry. Early Epicureans Against the Stoa. *Classical Quarterly* 60, p. 132-155.

LONG, A. A. (1988). Socrates in Hellenistic Philosophy. *Classical Quarterly* 38, p. 150-171.

MANSFELD, J. (1994). *Prolegomena. Questions to be Settled Before the Study of an Author, or a Text*. Leiden, Bill.

MCPHERRAN, M. (1996). *The Religion of Socrates*. University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press.

NAILS, D. (2002). *The People of Plato.* Indianapolis, Hackett.

PENNER, T.; ROWE, C. (2005). *Plato's* Lysis. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

POLITIS, V. (2006). Aporia and Searching in the Early Plato. In: JUDSON, L.; KARASMANIS, V. (eds.). *Remembering Socrates. Philosophical Essays*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, p. 88-109.

POLITIS, V. (2012). What do the Arguments in the *Protagoras* Amount to? *Phronesis* 57, p. 209-239.

PRICE, A. W. (1989). *Love and Friendship in Plato and Aristotle*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

REIS, B. (1999). *Der Platoniker Albinos und sein sogenannter Prologos*. Wiesbaden, Ludwig Reichert.

RENAUD, F. (2002). Humbling as Upbringing: The Ethical Dimension of the Elenchus in the *Lysis*. In: SCOTT, G. A. (ed.), *Does Socrates Have a Method?*. University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002, p. 183-198.

ROBINSON, D. B. (1986). Plato's *Lysis*: The Structural Problem. *Illinois Classical Studies* 11, p. 63-83.

SLINGS, S. R. (1999). *Plato: Clitophon, ed. with introd., transl., and comm*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

STUMP, J. D. 2017. *Socratic Method and Moral Motivation*. Doctoral dissertation, University of Toronto.

SZAIF, J. (1998). Strebensnatur und Interpersonalität in Platons Konzeption von *philia* (*Lysis* 213D-222D)," in DREYER, M.; FLEISCHHAUER, K. (eds.). *Natur und Person im ethischen Disput*. Freiburg/München, Alber, p. 25-60.

SZAIF, J. (2018). Socrates and the Benefits of Puzzlement. In: KARAMANOLIS, G.; POLITIS, V. (eds.). *The Aporetic Tradition in Ancient Philosophy* (eds.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 29-47.

TARRANT, H. (2000). Where Plato Speaks: Reflections on an Ancient Debate. In: PRESS, G. A. (ed.). *Who Speaks for Plato? Studies in Platonic Anonymity*. Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, p. 67-80.

TARRANT, H. (2000a). *Plato's First Interpreters*. Ithaca, Cornell University Press.

TAYLOR, C. C. W. (1982). The End of the *Euthyphro*. *Phronesis* 27, p. 109-118.

TRIVIGNO, F. V. (2011). Philosophy and the Ordinary: On the Setting of Plato's *Lysis*. *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 51, p. 61–85.

VERHASSELT, G. (2017). Philodemus' Excerpt from Dicaearchus on Plato in the *Historia Academicorum* (PHerc. 1021, coll. 1*-1-2). Edition, Transl., and Comm. *Cronache ercolanesi* 47, p. 55-72.

VLASTOS, G. (1981). The Individual as an Object of Love in Plato. In: VLASTOS, G. *Platonic Studies*, 2nd edition. Princeton, Princeton University Press, p. 3-42.

VLASTOS, G. (1994). *Socratic Studies*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

VOGT, K. (2012). *Belief and Truth. A Sceptic Reading of Plato*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

WHITE, S. (2001). *Principes Sapientiae*: Dicaearchus' Biography of Philosophy. In: FORTENBAUGH, W. W.; SCHÜTRUMPF, E. (eds.). *Dicaearchus of Messana*. New Brunswick NJ, Transaction, p. 195-236.

WOLFSDORF, D. (2008). *Trials of Reason: Plato and the Crafting of Philosophy*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

WOLFSDORF, D., (2013). Socratic Philosophizing. In: BUSSANICH, J.; SMITH, N. D. (eds.). *The Bloomsbury Companion to Socrates*. London, Continuum, p. 34-67.

WOODRUFF, P. (1986). The Sceptical Side of Plato's Method. *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 40, p. 22-37.

Submitted in 10/03/2022 and accepted for publication 17/07/2022

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Do you wish to submit a paper to *Archai* Journal? Please, access http://www.scielo.br/archai and learn our *Submission Guidelines*.