Ancient Philosophy 44 (2024)

Among the Boys and Young Men: Philosophy and Masculinity in Plato's *Lysis*

Yancy Hughes Dominick

Near the middle of his first discussion with Lysis, Socrates asks an odd question—he asks if Lysis' mother lets him play with her loom or touch her woolworking tools (208d1-e2).[1] It is one of many odd questions, of course, but it is odd nonetheless. Odd, and also funny: it is the one of just two comments in the book that makes Lysis laugh.[2] Also strange is that although this charming dialogue has received much scholarly attention, almost no one seems to have noticed this unusual bit.[3] In what follows, I spend some time with this unnoticed oddity—partly in the hope of seeing what it might reveal about some more notorious oddities in the text, but also partly because, as Lysis noticed, strange questions are fun. This question, I argue, reveals the profound depth of Socrates' inquiry about Lysis' views about himself and his loved ones. Indeed, the challenge is so profound that at first the only response is laughter. One aspect is a challenge to certain ideals of masculinity, and so I briefly discuss Athenian conceptions of gender and masculinity, along with some Platonic questioning of these conceptions.[4] Reading the Lysis through the lens of gender reveals not only the continued relevance of such a lens, but also the intensity of Socrates' work, which calls into question basic social structures and markers of identity, like gender, in its pursuit of a liberatory turn to philosophy.

Socrates follows up his question whether Lysis' parents love him and wish him to be happy by asking whether Lysis has free rein over things such as the family mules and chariots. It turns out, of course, that Lysis' father does not let him take

[1] When I mention Socrates, I mean only the character in the *Lysis* and other works by Plato. Translations of Plato are all from Cooper ed. 1997, with minor changes.

[2] The other is 207c6, when Lysis and Menexenus both laugh when Socrates asks whether they argue over which of them is better looking.

[3] A note in Vann 2006 mentions the difference in this particular question, and credits Elizabeth Belfiore. As far as I can tell, however, neither Belfiore nor anyone else has spent time discussing this in print.

[4] When I refer to Athenian conceptions of masculinity and Plato's challenges to them, I am largely confining my focus to Athenian masculinity in Plato's works. Of course, much of what shows up in Plato parallels other texts from the time, as for example the discussion of women and men's roles and abilities in Xenophon's *Oeconomicus* 7. See also Shaw 1975 for a discussion of transgressive women in Greek literature and the gender norms they transgress. Townsend 2017, 109-130 offers a recent and illuminating discussion of Plato's characters' attitudes toward Athenian gender norms in *Republic* and *Laws*. For further discussion of gender norms in Classical Athens, see Fantham, et al. 1995, 68-127 and Patterson 2007, 167-174.

charge of these, nor even of his own time, and instead sensibly entrusts them to trained drivers, teachers, and so on. Socrates goes on:

> 'It looks like your father has decided to put quite a few masters and dictators over you. But what about when you come home to your mother, does she let you do whatever it takes to make you happy, like playing with her wool or her loom when she's weaving? She doesn't stop you from touching the blade or the comb or any of her other wool-working tools, does she?'
> 'Stop me?' [Lysis] laughed. 'She would beat me if I laid a finger on them.' (208d1-e2)

In this one case, we see something different from all of the other things that Lysis is not allowed to do on his own. He might someday learn to drive a chariot, and he will obviously have more freedom to choose how he spends his time when older, but it is unlikely that he will ever do any weaving, or spend any time with wool-working tools: Athenians and other Greeks, as Plato's unnamed Athenian explains in the *Laws*, '"concentrate our resources", as the expression is, under one roof, and let our women take charge of our stores and the spinning and wool-working in general' (805e4-7). Indeed, weaving is the paradigm of women's work in ancient Greek life.[5] Lysis will grow up to be a man in Athens, and so it is not just odd to ask if his mother lets him play with her loom: it is laughable.

Lysis is not free to play with the loom, in part because his gender restricts his choices. Lysis does not recognize the constraints of masculinity, and, more importantly, Lysis does not understand what freedom means. As we see over the course of the text, what is at stake in the dialogue is the pursuit of genuine liberation—liberation in general, and in particular here liberation from ordinary Athenian masculine expectations. Within the *Lysis*, in other words, we find a challenge to received views and social norms that appears throughout Plato's works. Brown 1988, 603 captures this theme nicely in describing the work of Socrates and Plato: in order to turn us toward philosophy, they 'must break the conservative hold of the present and incite us to envision an order of existence and values utterly unlike our own yet identifiably human and livable'. The funny question about weaving, therefore, can also be seen as a gesture toward this larger Platonic pursuit of liberation through philosophy.

This liberation cannot take place through discourse alone—instead we need to see Hippothales blush (222a-b), we need arguments that lead to absurdity. Liberation also requires liberation from discourse:

> In this regard, Socrates and Plato know what many theorists of revolution after them may have inadequately appreciated: People are never moved to become revolutionaries through logic alone because it is not solely the reasoning part of us that feels and knows what is wrong with this world nor yearns for a different one. (Brown 1998, 603)

[5] Blondell 2005, 67 states that it 'was the signature activity of women in Greek ideology, and the overwhelming preponderance of such work was performed by female labour in the home'.

This yearning for a different world appears in many Platonic texts, and it also accounts in part for the continuing appeals to Plato from a variety of perspectives. We may observe this, remarkably, in Battle 2011 and 2019, which claims that JAY-Z should be seen as a present-day Philosopher King. Battle 2019, 377-381 argues that JAY-Z can only engage in his anti-racist work by also seeking escape from restrictive conceptions of masculinity: not rejecting masculinity altogether but seeking 'a countervailing model of Black masculinity' (379). Likewise, throughout the *Lysis*, Socrates makes some subtle and some less subtle challenges to Athenian ideals of masculinity. Both Socrates and JAY-Z may push their listeners to reimagine masculinity and thereby to gain liberation.

What view of masculinity is Socrates challenging? In examining this, I also analyze some moments in the text where philosophical discourse and masculinity come to the fore. Socrates occasionally challenges and subverts expectations related to discourse and thereby masculinity itself. We gain insight into his challenge to Athenian understanding of masculinity by observing the way that Socrates' argumentation undermines much of it, and we more fully appreciate Socrates' arguments if we see that they intend to subvert gendered expectations. The setting of the dialogue, the questions Socrates asks, and the responses from Lysis all reinforce that what is at stake in the text is Lysis' character, including his masculinity.

I. Unmanly Philosophy

In the *Gorgias*, Callicles reprimands Socrates for his unseemly, persistent interest in philosophy, saying,

> when I see an older man still engaging in philosophy and not giving it up, I think such a man by this time needs a flogging. For, as I was just now saying, it's typical that such a man, even if he's naturally very well favored, becomes unmanly (ἀνάνδρῳ) and avoids the centers of his city and the marketplaces…and, instead, lives the rest of his life in hiding, whispering in a corner with three or four boys, never uttering anything well-bred, important, or relevant (ἐλεύθερον δὲ καὶ μέγα καὶ ἱκανὸν μηδέποτε φθέγξασθαι). (485d1-e2)

Of course, many things are happening in Socrates' conversation with Callicles, but there is a sense in which he seems to be right at least about the seemingly unmanly nature of Socrates' project. Scholars have pointed to a handful of significant challenges to Athenian ideals of masculinity in Plato's work.[6] Socrates often engages in cooperative rather than more competitive sorts of agonistic discussion;[7] the conversations often point to inclusive rather than

[6] I am relying mainly on Brown 1988 and Saxonhouse 1984. Much remains uncertain regarding the extent to which wealthy, citizen women were secluded in the home, yet scholarly consensus agrees that men rather than women in Classical Athens should strive to excel in politics (see, e.g., Fantham et al. edd. 1995, 74-80; Patterson 2007, 171-174; Townsend 2017, 109-130).

[7] For the view that Socrates moves away from competition and toward cooperation in the *Lysis*,

exclusionary models of politics and philosophy (see, e.g., Saxonhouse 1984, 12-13); many arguments challenge the idea that rational discourse is the ideal route to truth (see, e.g., Brown 1988, 598-600 and Gadamer 1975, 367-370); and Socrates seems to embody a kind of self-sufficiency and disregard for wealth, honor, and ordinary political activity that is out of step with Athenian norms.[8] Callicles' criticism of Socrates embodies many of these critiques, and calls attention to Socrates' failure to excel in public, masculine spaces or to say 'anything well-bred, important, or relevant' (ἐλεύθερον δὲ καὶ μέγα καὶ ἱκανὸν μηδέποτε φθέγξασθαι, 485e1-2).[9] To say that Plato's work challenges masculine ideals is not to imply that Plato's characters have one clear alternative in mind;[10] likewise, my reading of the *Lysis* will not suggest that a non-masculine or post-masculine version of the title character emerges in the dialogue. Reading the *Lysis* with those challenges to masculinity in mind, however, can illuminate important aspects of the dialogue.

II. Wrestling with Masculinity

The opening moments of the *Lysis* quickly draw attention to masculinity: the conversation takes place at a new palaestra, and it takes place during the festival of Hermes. Wrestling schools are the exclusive domain of men and boys in Athens, and they are spaces in which Athenians engage in masculine models of competition and military training. Additionally, during the Hermaia 'participants in the gymnasium competed in the *euexia*, a contest judging the beauty and form of the naked body', and specifically the naked male body (Perriello 2009, 277). There is no reason to think this contest is taking place at the time of our dialogue, but this background again points to a heightened concern for masculinity.[11] One other feature of this festival warrants attention: under normal circumstances a

see Gonzales 1995, esp. 71 and 87; Belfiore 2012, 83-84; and Rider 2011, 44-45. For the more general claim that this movement is distinctive of Plato's Socrates, see Brown 1988, 595-597. Of course, discussing the role of competition and cooperation in Plato's works leads to a multitude of fascinating perspectives and disagreements. For a recent and lively look at some of that conversation, see Reid 2020.

[8] See, e.g., Brown 1988, 611 and Scott 2000, 67. Socrates does nevertheless engage in many expected tasks in Athens, for example his military service; my thanks to Sam Flores for the reminder of that fact.

[9] Buzzetti 2005, 31 sums up Callcles' view of masculinity as 'the ability to take care of oneself and one's own', which implies a commitment to many of the Athenian expectations for men outlined above—competition, e.g., seems implied by Buzzetti's reading, as does a role exclusively set aside for men, a role that involves political obligations that cut against Socrates' apparent self-sufficiency.

[10] At times the 'alternative' appears to be femininity (e.g., in Diotima's speech in the *Symposium*; or in Socrates' complaints about his friends' weeping at *Phaedo* 117d-e; or in our weaving examples); at others, as in Callicles' screed in *Gorgias* 485d-e, masculinity is opposed to childish immaturity. Accepting that there is no univocal alternative to masculinity, my main argument is that Socrates in the *Lysis* pushes the title character toward a different understanding of what it might mean for him to grow up and become a man.

[11] Indeed, in some descriptions of the ideal body, which would be judged at the *euexia*, there is a preference for bodies that appear 'masculine and not feminine' (Perriello 2009, 279).

strict separation of younger and older males would be observed. During the festival of Hermes, however, 'the younger and older boys are mingled together' (206d1-2). Indeed, on many accounts, a man like Socrates would not normally be allowed into a school like this, but since many stories about Hermes involve a 'topsy-turvy' spirit, those normal rules are suspended during the festival.[12]

Clearly Plato's reader is invited to consider the ways in which masculinity is being practiced and transgressed in this text, especially considering the age of the title character. Lysis, widely seen as the youngest interlocutor in Plato's dialogues, is so young that he is still referred to by his father's name (204e3-5).[13] Furthermore, there is reason to believe that the Hermaia involves a sort of coming-of-age ritual, being perhaps the first time that '*paides* performed their first sacrifice as *hieropoios*, thus being initiated into a ritual of central importance to the polis'.[14] Thus our dialogue involves a rare opportunity for Socrates to speak directly with a boy who is near the threshold of adulthood during a festival that celebrates masculinity, competition, and transgression. How perfectly appropriate as well as surprising, therefore, that in this setting Socrates asks Lysis about playing with his mother's weaving.

The reason that Socrates engages with Lysis—Hippothales' attempts to seduce Lysis framed in terms of capture and conquest, and his poems about Lysis focusing on the family's 'wealth and their stables and their victories…in the chariot and horseback races' (205c2-5)—reinforces the relevance of masculine performance. Socrates proposes to show Hippothales how to 'carry on a conversation with him instead of talking and singing', a perfect illustration of the move from a competitive, agonistic model toward a cooperative one.[15] Lysis and Menexenus are certainly in a competitive mindset when they begin talking with Socrates: when Socrates asks Menexenus which of them is older, he says, 'we argue about that' (207c2).[16] Within a few lines, however, Socrates already begins to move things in a different direction. He says that he will not ask which of them is richer, because they are friends, 'and friends have everything in common'

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[12] See Planeaux 2001, 66. For further discussion, see Perriello 2011, 219-220.

[13] Lysis and Menexenus, of course, argue about their age (207b8-c2); Scott 2000, 52 guesses that they are both 12 or 13, but whatever Lysis' age, he is certainly an adolescent.

[14] Perriello 2011, 224. Perriello 2009, 280 and see 283 also speaks of a typical member of a gym as 'on the cusp of his entrance into the community of citizens'.

[15] Gonzales 1995, esp. 71 and 87; Belfiore 2012, 83-84; and Rider 2011, 44-45—among others—all note that a key part of Socrates' goal with Lysis is to shift the focus from competition to cooperation. See also Thaning 2012, 135. For a rich and varied discussion of Plato's Socrates' efforts to move agonistic discourse away from a zero-sum model focused on victory, see Reid, et al 2020, and in particular Kenyon 2020, esp. 61-64, Zovko 2022, Coulson 2020, and Zoller 2020. It is Zoller 2020 with whom I agree most of all, and her comment that 'Plato's Socrates defends humility, cooperation, justice, harmony, and peace so consistently that at times he is ridiculed by his interlocutors' (226) is a perfect statement of the character that I see present in the *Lysis*.

[16] Some readers are puzzled by this sort of argument about something factual (e.g., Rider 2011, 44 and Penner and Rowe 2005, 13n1); I would encourage those readers to ask my sister why she has continued to check whether she is taller than me every year for the last twenty years. She is not.

(207c10). We do not learn whether Lysis and his friend argue about their justice and wisdom, since Menexenus gets called away by his (masculine?) ceremonial duties. A movement has already started, though, from the competitive spirit of the boys' friendship to a different kind of relationship.

III. Cooperation, Competition, and Discourse

I take the move toward cooperation and away from competition as also a movement toward philosophical discourse. The fact that the text problematizes discourse itself opens up some even more intriguing questions. I hope to show how the moments where discourse falters in the *Lysis* can also be seen as moments where the text subverts masculinity. On my reading, these patterns appear in three stages.

First, as Brown 1988 reminds us, for all his subversive ideas about gender, Plato is not abandoning masculinity, but instead 'he repeatedly defines, refines, and defends [masculine] virtues' (379). The first thing I note in the *Lysis*, then, are moments where the characters defend rational discourse, even as they move towards challenging that same discourse.

Second, for all that argumentation can accomplish, myth and poetry possess an unparalleled power. Brown 1988, 603 puts it nicely: 'The storyteller reaches and moves places inside human beings that will forever elude the analytic philosopher' (see also Nightingale 1995 and Morgan 2000). I am especially interested in the moments where arguments run aground and other modes of communication appear. Although this dialogue does not contain the kinds of myths or extended images found in other Platonic texts, there are moments where Socrates' narrative shifts from reporting discourse to describing nonverbal behaviors and reactions—those moments are key to my reading.

Finally, there are many reasons why Plato's conception of philosophical reasoning has held people's attention for thousands of years, but the connection to liberation, the intellectual freeing coming from liberal education, has to be among the most important. It is no accident that the intriguing connection between Plato and JAY-Z indicated above depends on a reading of the allegory of the cave and its story of liberation. In the *Lysis*, I want to show more than that masculinity gets slightly unsettled as the characters encounter the limits of rational discourse. I hoping to show that both the challenge to traditional masculinity and the limits of rational discourse gain their meaning because both speak to the goal of liberation.[17]

A. Hippothales and the Power of Discourse

Consider Hippothales, since his crush on and ineffectual courtship of Lysis, mocked by Ctessipus, leads Socrates to give a 'demonstration of how to carry on a conversation with [Lysis] instead of talking and singing the way your friends here say you've been doing' (ἃ χρὴ αὐτῷ διαλέγεσθαι ἀντὶ τούτων ὧν οὗτοι

[17] Scott 2000, 53 also understands the *Lysis* as being about liberation, and also connects it with the cave allegory.

λέγειν τε καὶ ᾄδειν φασί σε, 206c5-7). The dialogue, then, moves away from ineffective song and speech and toward philosophical discourse, toward dialectic (διαλέγεσθαι). As Nightingale 1993, 116 argues, the 'dialogue…does not simply illustrate the Socratic method by showing the philosopher in action. Rather, it defines and legitimates this method by setting it in opposition to another brand of "discourse offered to the young"' (see also Thaning 2012, 116 and 118). From the start, therefore, a reader should expect to see philosophical discourse play a central role in the text.

This move toward philosophical discourse reveals both an embrace of masculinity and a reimagining of masculinity. In suggesting that Socrates can help Hippothales become a more effective flirt, the text reaffirms masculine ideals of romantic pursuit and victory; likewise the use of speech, which is coded as masculine in ancient Athens, again reinforces the manliness of Socrates' project. Insofar as the model of discourse is collaborative and inclusive, however, we can see in the *Lysis* some ways in which Plato's characters are offering a new understanding of masculinity.

Things take another interesting turn when Socrates returns later to the topic of his demonstration for Hippothales. After roundly refuting Lysis' understanding of his own parents' love, Socrates imagines saying, but does not quite say, 'This is how you should talk with your boyfriends, Hippothales, cutting them down to size and putting them in their place, instead of swelling them up and spoiling them, as you do' (210e2-5). This obviously fits nicely with Nightingale's point that the text privileges Socratic dialectic over encomia, but it also helps explain that point. As Nightingale 1993, 115 says, Plato's characters prefer dialectic because it 'does not aim at gratification or glory, nor does it promulgate falsehoods that instil in the auditor a proud and stubborn ignorance. On the contrary, it encourages self-knowledge in the boy by robbing him of his false conceits.' The value of philosophical discourse, in other words, hinges on its superior ability to liberate people.[18]

One further piece shows up in this imagined aside, one that takes us back to the connection between discourse and masculinity. Part of what his friends mock in Hippothales is that he is bad at seducing his beloved. In the context of Plato's Athens, that might be seen as rather emasculating mockery. This mockery makes sense in this context, since in being bad at seduction, Hippothales falls short of Athenian ideals of masculinity. And in offering to help Hippothales do better by showing him how to cut Lysis down to size, Socrates is arguably offering a way for Hippothales—again, through the use of philosophical discourse—to reassert

[18] One might here wonder whether this approach to seduction, which focuses on cutting the beloved down to size, differs in any notable way from conventional seduction; indeed, the speeches that open the *Phaedrus* follow a similar pattern. While it is true that what Socrates says about seduction here in the *Lysis* is not unique, it does still seem quite distinct from the conventional approach, according to which a lover will win praise in Athens even when he 'went to his knees in public view and begged in the most humiliating way', as Pausanias describes it in *Symposium* 183a4-5. Indeed, the first speech in the *Phaedrus* itself is usually seen as rhetorically interesting precisely because it 'cleverly reverses the conventions of Athenian pederasty' (Yunis 2011, 97).

his masculinity; we might say, to man up.[19] Both in its setting at a palaestra during the festival of Hermes, then, and in its insistence on the power of philosophical discourse, the *Lysis* centers a masculine model of talking and thinking.

B. Discourse and its Limits in the *Lysis*

Hippothales shows up one more time in the dialogue, near the very end. This curtain call marks the second main theme I unpack: Hippothales cannot keep up with Lysis and Menexenus, nor with their argument, which shows not only that Hippothales still has much to learn, but also that an important feature of the dialogue involves an encounter with the limits of philosophical discourse.[20]

Attempts to explain friendship in terms of a desire for the good have fallen short, and so Socrates offers one final account of friendship. Love, on this account, signals belonging. Menexenus agrees with Socrates, but Lysis falls silent (221e7-222a4). Finally, both boys—frequent targets, we imagine, of erotic pursuit—grow quiet as Socrates concludes the argument:

> 'Then the genuine and not the pretended lover must be befriended by his boy.'
>
> Lysis and Menexenus barely managed a nod of assent, but Hippothales beamed every color in the rainbow in his delight (222a6-b2).

Thanks to Socrates' narrative, readers can enjoy the chance to think through this fascinating range of non-verbal reactions to Socrates' reasoning. (And notice already how philosophical discourse here gives way to Plato's artistic imagery.)

What is happening in this intriguing argument, and how should we make sense of the characters' range of responses to Socrates? To unpack this moment, we need to get clear on: the silence of the two boys, the multicolored glow of Hippothales, and the fact that the final argument of the dialogue is greeted with inarticulate gestures rather than discourse. Hippothales seems the easiest to dismiss here: obviously unable to digest what Socrates and the boys have discussed, he misses the point and assumes that he is the 'genuine lover'. His failure to engage in philosophical discourse, or to even 'come out of hiding and

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[19] Note that Hippothales' masculinity is not in question because of his attraction to Lysis, as it might be in contemporary American contexts; rather, the problem is that he is bungling the seduction. Although Socrates challenges many Athenian ideals of masculinity, he never seems to doubt that it is manly to pursue good looking men. On whether or not Plato's characters challenge various aspects of male eroticism in Athenian culture, see Tafolla 2018, 290, which argues that rather than challenging the hierarchical model at work in Athens, in Socrates' ideal case 'the lover is consistently portrayed as the more active partner'. Thanks to Jeremy Reid for first asking about this point.

[20] For a similar approach to the second half of the *Lysis*, see Lockwood 2017, esp. 329-331, which argues that Gonzalez 1995 errs in presenting a univocal reading of the *Lysis* that resolves too many of the dialogues *aporiai*. On Lockwood's view, Socrates' equivocal use of terms such as *oikeios* is central to the experience of the text, and any attempt to offer discursive statements explaining the relationship between *philia* and the *oikeion* loses something. In other words, there are philosophical insights offered by the text that cannot be translated into discourse.

encounter Lysis' (Gonzalez 1995, 85), returns us to the point of his opening discussion with Socrates—if he cannot replace his singing with real conversation, he will never befriend Lysis. His joyful blushing here merely confirms how severely he has missed the point.

Meanwhile, Lysis and Menexenus barely manage to nod in agreement: whereas Hippothales misses the point, the two boys see the point so clearly it leaves them speechless. Readers generally agree that the silent nod indicates grudging acceptance: acceptance since the reasoning seems sound; grudging since it is now clear that Lysis and Menexenus do not have this sort of friendship, the sort that instead involves an older 'genuine' lover and his boyfriend. Not, of course, Hippothales and Lysis; but perhaps Socrates and Lysis? Socrates satisfies a key criterion for genuine love, since he seems to want Lysis to become wise (210a9-d4), and therefore to do well (see, e.g., Gonzalez 1995, 85; Penner and Rowe 2005, 168-170).

All well and good, but then why do the two, and especially Lysis, seem reluctant? Is this not good news? As Penner and Rowe 2005, 168-169 says, 'neither of the boys should really be hesitating at Socrates' conclusion; or at any rate Lysis has no cause to hesitate'. Indeed, in the end this is good news for Lysis, since on the view of love at play here, 'loving someone involves wanting that person to be happy' (Penner and Rowe 2005, 169). Wolfsdorf 2007, 247 reads this passage slightly differently, and to my mind also offers a convincing interpretation: 'once Socrates makes the distinction between a genuine and an inauthentic admirer, this reveals to Lysis the possibility that he need not feel bound to reciprocate Hippothales' affection since Hippothales may not be a genuine admirer'.

The silent nod, then, does not show Lysis' reluctance here; rather, it shows his relief. Back in 222a4 Menexenus agrees with Socrates and Lysis is perfectly quiet—for fear, on Wolfsdorf's reading, that he is going to be told to accept Hippothales. Now that the distinction between the genuine and the pretended lover enters the equation, though, he nods in relief.

If the reactions of at least Hippothales and Lysis seem clearer, a third question remains: why suspend the discourse in this way?[21] Why give us imagery instead of simply letting Lysis and Hippothales articulate their responses in words? For one thing, this quick sentence conveys quite a lot in just a few words. More substantively, this passage vividly brings home an important point as the characters approach the end of their conversation: if Socrates' reasoning here is sound, then there is more at stake than words.[22] To be loved as he deserves must mean to seek wisdom; and to attempt philosophy must mean that Lysis will have

[21] I am setting Menexenus aside, though I will note that unlike the eristic described earlier (211b), Menexenus by the end of the dialogue is speaking in unison with Lysis—perhaps a sign that he too has begun to move from competition toward cooperarion?

[22] And again, as Lockwood 2017, esp. 329-331 argues, any attempt to express the dialogue's conclusions directly or univocally would undermine Plato's Socrates' 'multi-faceted and philosophically aporetic use' of key terms.

to change his life. He will have to change his values, reevaluate his understanding of love and family, and reconsider all of his friendships. Quite a lot to take in, and no wonder Lysis cannot here speak.

Finally, as our young title character cannot offer an articulate reply, in a culture that associates men with speech, at a wrestling gym that glorifies masculinity, during a festival possibly marking the transition to manhood, I also submit that in the reply to Socrates' final argument we also see a moment where masculinity becomes unsettled. If Hippothales goes wrong in giving too little credence to discourse, we are also in danger if we think that all of the philosophy in the *Lysis* resides in the arguments. If Hippothales is not man enough, we must also be careful of the hypermasculine. What philosophy demands, instead, is not more masculinity, but rather more than masculinity. Because, of course, philosophy demands everything.

C. Discourse and Liberation

Those demands of philosophy, and Socrates' framing of them, lead to a suspension of discourse in that final argument—and it is noteworthy that something similar appears in the first argument with Lysis. This earlier moment with Lysis, again, points us to the ultimate goal, the goal of liberation. As Socrates and Lysis test a simple understanding of liberty as complete license, Lysis is moved towards genuine liberation.[23] Part of this liberatory move involves an unsettling of gender and a movement away from stereotypical masculinity. I offer a reading of the argument that highlights these connections to liberation and ideals of masculinity.

As this first argument with Lysis develops, it reaches such a pitch of absurdity that—at least within the text itself—it is hard to see any possible way forward. As we saw, Socrates opens the conversation by asking whether Lysis' parents give him complete freedom because of their love for him (207d-e). By the end of this section, Socrates is claiming that with enough learning under his belt, Lysis will be given the freedom to throw handfuls of salt into the Great King's soup (209d-e), and within a page we have reached the conclusion that Lysis' parents do not love him after all (210c). Again, something quite silly has happened here.

Readers have examined a variety of possible targets for this apparent *reductio*, ranging from the concept of friendships of utility (Curzer 2014, 354-355) to the belief that happiness comes from doing what you want (Rider 2011, 58; Penner and Rowe 2005, 31-32). I suppose that there is more than one answer here, but the reading that is most helpful to my project is that of Scott 2000, 64, which claims that one main target of Socrates' argument here is the 'commonsense view of freedom as the liberty to do whatever one wishes'. In other words, at stake in the first argument with Lysis is the possibility of liberation.

[23] Although Lysis is of course a free Athenian as opposed to being an enslaved person, the liberation I refer to here is something only found in philosophical life. If Lysis attends to Socrates' challenge, he might gain freedom from prejudice and convention—and that, in turn, might free him to pursue genuine wisdom and friendship.

Liberation becomes an explicit focus of the argument near the end, when Socrates discusses the connection between wisdom, trust, and freedom of action:

> Then this is the way it is, my dear Lysis: in those areas where we're really wiser (ἃ ἂν φρόνιμοι γενώμεθα), everybody—Greeks and barbarians, men and women—will trust us, and there we will act just as we choose, and nobody will want to get in our way. There we will be free ourselves (αὐτοί τε ἐλεύθεροι ἐσόμεθα ἐν αὐτοῖς), and in control of others. There things will belong to us (ἡμέτερά τε ταῦτα ἔσται), because we will derive some advantage from them. (210a9-b6)

According to Socrates, freedom depends on wisdom. Lysis will not gain greater liberty because of his parents' love or because of his social standing in Athens; rather, he will become free only as he becomes wise. And how striking that Socrates describes all of this in the future tense, as if to stress the fact that they are currently neither wise nor truly free.

It is also noteworthy that the wisdom Socrates speaks of here will be recognized by 'Greeks and barbarians, men and women' (210b1-2). Indeed, on Scott's reading, the model of liberation here is Socrates, and his is a freedom that stands as a clear challenge to Athenian gender norms: Socrates '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' (Scott 1995, 29). Lysis here encounters a sort of autonomy and liberty that replaces doing whatever one wants with wanting only what enriches the soul; to pursue this sort of liberty means letting go of stereotypical masculinity.

For Lysis here, the point seems to be to spur him toward philosophy—and it seems to take, since after his ideas about freedom and happiness lead to the absurd conclusion that his parents do not love him, Lysis does not get frustrated or disappointed, but instead immediately asks Socrates to tell Menexenus these same things (211a).[24] The argument reaches an absurd conclusion, and when that happens, it awakens a love of wisdom in Lysis. Note, though, that although philosophical discourse makes this result possible, it is the breakdown of discourse into absurdity that provides the final push. As Scott 1995, 32 puts it, the 'incisive questioning Socrates carries out is designed to produce a disruptive effect…in his interlocutor'. The disruption of gender and of Lysis' simplistic views of freedom comes about through the disruptions in the argument itself.

This raises, as Rider 2011, 58 notes, some questions: 'Is Lysis being tricked into desiring wisdom? How good a start is Socrates giving Lysis in philosophy if he introduces the boy to it by means of bad arguments?'[25] Returning to a

[24] As Rider 2011, 61 puts it, 'Lysis' reaction fits a boy who has been beaten in an enjoyable game, not one who has been told off or humiliated by an elder.'

[25] Of course, there is much more to be said about so-called 'bad arguments' and their role in Plato's dialogues. Two promising lines, both of which work well with my view in this section, are that such arguments feature in Socratic pedagogy because they help the interlocutors improve their

previous theme, what should we make of the fact that the final spur to philosophy involves arguments that run aground? Why not simply make a reasonable case for philosophy instead? One popular answer points to the propaedeutic role of such arguments, which might spur the interlocutor to improve their own reasoning (see esp. Parker 2021). I believe a more interesting answer here involves the claim we saw earlier in Brown 1988, 603: just as there is more to a person than their intellect, true philosophy needs more than arguments. As Rider 2011, 59 reminds us, 'Socrates is trying to *change* Lysis' life'; that requires more than arguments, it also requires the drive to engage in 'the *activity* of philosophy'.[26]

Moving Lysis toward philosophy accords with liberation. If Lysis will rethink his beliefs and values, if he will engage in philosophy, that must in part reflect the fact that he is free to do those things. As Scott 2000, 54 puts it, 'the philosopher's approach seems to be designed to impel youths like these toward their freedom'. This account of philosophy shows up perhaps most clearly in the cave story of *Republic* vii 516d6-7, where the freed prisoner would 'go through any sufferings rather than share [the prisoners'] beliefs and live as they do'. Liberation, for many of Plato's characters, is less about license and more about removing narrow cultural constraints.[27] Lysis begins with one conception of freedom—total license; once this leads to absurdity, Lysis must 'rethink his assumptions about parental love, freedom, and happiness' (Rider 2011, 59).

This rethinking, though, is not only an intellectual exercise: in rethinking freedom, Lysis may find genuine liberation (see Scott 2000, esp. 74). Socrates' questions encourage Lysis to recognize the limits of his conception of freedom, but that recognition can also spark a larger reevaluation of his beliefs and of the ways that cultural norms are limiting his thinking. In that liberatory work, furthermore, Lysis might encounter some limits of traditional Athenian gender roles. Someone might ask him about joining his mother's weaving; someone might even compel him to value a life not defined by 'the material and political things by which men in classical Athens commonly appraised one another' (Scott 2000, 67). To follow Socrates, in other words, must mean leaving many things behind, including traditional ideas about masculinity.

Returning, therefore, to the status of the argument with Lysis, although I agree

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own logical skills (e.g., Parker 2021) or because they help move the interlocutor toward a therapeutic care of the self (e.g., Delorme 2019). Thanks to my anonymous reviewer for raising this question.

[26] The view I am working out here may appear to conflict with Socrates' 'Intellectualism' as defined, e.g., in Penner and Rowe 2005, 216-230. I cannot address the merits of the arguments for intellectualism here, but I would note that defenders of intellectualism such as Brickhouse and Smith 2012, 328 also agree that 'Socrates recognizes that sometimes arguments fail to turn the soul around and, when this happens, psychic improvement can be achieved only through means aimed at positively affecting our emotions and desires rather than replacing false beliefs with true ones.'

[27] See again Battle 2019, 378-379 who describes JAY-Z's progress in terms of the cave allegory and in terms of freedom from 'the irrationally constructed culture of toxic masculinity'. My thanks to the editor for the suggestion of this connection to *Republic* vii.

that the argument is more than verbal trickery designed to chasten Lysis,[28] I side with the readers who see a *reductio* at work here, and in particular it appears that a certain conception of freedom has been challenged in this argument. In addition, on my reading, another aspect of masculinity is at stake. Plato's Socrates often appears to embody and promote a sort of self-sufficiency that runs counter to Athenian ideas of masculinity. Socrates does not measure himself by wealth, power, or honor. This self-sufficiency is part of what Callicles attacks when he calls Socrates unmanly for avoiding the agora in *Gorgias* 485d1-e2, and some readers see a reference to this in this first discussion with Lysis (see, again, Scott 1995, 29). I am arguing, in other words, that what is absurd here is the idea that the way to measure a person's knowledge or wisdom is by seeing how many things are entrusted to that person by their parents or by the Great King. Part of Socrates' argument, on my reading, can be seen as a *reductio* of a model of love too dependent on Athenian values, including masculine values.

IV. Discipline and Love

The challenge to certain conceptions of masculinity appears again at the close of this first discussion with Lysis. Just as the argument reaches its conclusion, Socrates nearly gives Hippothales away by explaining his purpose out loud: 'This is how you should talk with your boyfriends, Hippothales, cutting them down to size and putting them in their place (ταπεινοῦντα καὶ συστέλλοντα), instead of swelling them up and spoiling them (χαυνοῦντα καὶ διαθρύπτοντα), as you do' (210e2-5). He stops himself from actually saying those things, but in a culture that viewed submissiveness as a key feminine virtue it seems clear that this summary again serves as a defense of a philosophical attitude that also happens to threaten Athenian masculinity.

Hippothales, out to conquer Lysis, does indeed seem threatened by the discussion, and appears 'struggling and upset (ἀγωνιῶντα καὶ τεθορυβημένον)' (210e5). Yet, Lysis immediately begins encouraging Socrates to do the same thing to Menexenus. 'Then Lysis turned to me with a good deal of boyish friendliness (μάλα παιδικῶς καὶ φιλικῶς) and, unnoticed by Menexenus, whispered in my ear: "Socrates, tell Menexenus what you've been saying to me"' (211a2-5). Menexenus is the paradigm of the competitive male friend, and now Lysis wants him to share in his move away from traditional Athenian masculinity—to share in this experience of defeat rather than victory.

> 'Well, I guess I'll have to, since it's you who ask. But you've got to come to my rescue if he tries to refute (ἐλέγχειν) me. Or don't you know what a debater (ἐριστικός) he is?'
> 'Sure I do—he's very much one. That's why I want you to have a discussion with him.'
> 'So that I can make a fool of myself?'

[28] Rider 2011, 58-60. For extreme contrast, see Evangelou 2020, who argues that all of the *Lysis* is a warning against sophistic education, and that Socrates plays the part of a sophist throughout, making nothing but flawed and deceptive arguments.

> 'No, so you can teach him a lesson! (ἵνα αὐτὸν κολάσῃς)' (211b7-c3)

Perhaps part of the lesson involves coming to see that success should not be defined in terms of victory in a competition, but instead by becoming the sort of person who might be self-sufficient enough to feel comfortable engaging in a shared, cooperative inquiry.[29] At the very least, the fact that Lysis embraces his defeat and responds with friendliness suggests that he is open to different ways of measuring success.

The concept of teaching someone a lesson or chastising them (κολάζειν) shows up again in the discussion with Menexenus. Socrates asks whether friends are the ones loving or being loved, and although this line of inquiry never seems to bear fruit, Socrates does call attention to one interesting feature of the parent-child relationship: 'Small children, for example, who are too young to show love but not too young to hate, when they are disciplined (κολάζηται) by their mother or father, are at that moment, even though they hate their parents then, their very dearest friends' (212e6-213a3). Being loved sometimes involves being chastised, and Socrates' arguments here seem in part designed to invite both young friends to see this aspect of love. Indeed, as Lysis encourages Socrates to talk with Menexenus, Ctesippus interrupts, asking whether they are having a private party or if the others 'get a share of the conversation' (211c11-d1). Without a moment's hesitation, Socrates says, 'Of course you get a share!' (211d2). Socrates' project is shared, an inclusive project that values a common pursuit of understanding rather than a competitive pursuit of honor or other rewards.

V. Love and Self-Sufficiency

Earlier I argued that part of the Socratic challenge to masculinity comes from Socrates' self-sufficiency: unlike stereotypical male Athenians, Socrates does not care about much about honor or money, but instead seems sufficient unto himself. I argued that this seems to offer a promising way of reading the first discussion with Lysis—the assumption that leads to the absurd conclusion (Lysis' parents do not love him) is the assumption that the way to measure love is in terms of honors or responsibilities bestowed. Someone less stereotypically masculine, someone more self-sufficient, would not need their parents to turn over their estate to them to know that they are loved.

Later, however, Socrates argues that someone who is self-sufficient has no need for other people, and so cannot be anyone's friend (215a-b). If that is right, how can we make sense of the discussion with Lysis? For one thing, being uninterested in money or political office is hardly the same thing as being perfectly good and self-sufficient. Furthermore, a person who can recognize that

[29] Rider 2011, 61 offers a similar account, stressing the ways in which Socrates 'taps into Lysis's affinity for eristic argument and his competitive friendship with Menexenus in order to instigate the boys to begin to practice real philosophy'. I see slightly more here, however. Socrates is not only appealing to Lysis' interest in eristic, he is also subverting it, and showing the ways in which eristic leads to incomplete conclusions.

shared inquiry outweighs the value of wealth and power can enter into a different sort of friendship. As Gonzalez 1995, 86 states, 'Socrates and the boys can establish a reciprocal friendship by seeking together that good that belongs to all of them but of which all of them are deprived.'. Instead of friendships of conquest or utility, there might be a friendship of shared philosophical inquiry.

Maybe none of that will convince Lysis' mother to let him help with the weaving, and maybe it is still laughable to think he would even ask. Unmanly as he may be, Socrates alone cannot undo the role of masculinity in Athenian culture. On my reading, nevertheless, the conversation has opened up some space for a more cooperative and less competitive pursuit, for less concern for manly achievements. And the momentary rupture of discourse has opened the possibility of liberation.

VI. Love and Kinship

Perhaps we can now see that in a way the text suggests that Lysis could or even should learn to weave! As Plato's readers know, dialogues such as the *Statesman* 279a-283a and *Sophist* 259e-262e speak of politics and thinking in terms of weaving.[30] If Lysis indeed turns to philosophy, then presumably he will soon engage in these sorts of weaving. And I also would not put it past Socrates and Lysis to get hold of some wool and do some literal weaving as well. Of course, that assumption might be surprising in the hyper-masculine setting of the palaestra during the Hermaia, but I do not see why that would stop our transgressive and unmanly Socrates. To take things that way would, if nothing else, reaffirm the degree to which all of Lysis is at stake in this conversation: philosophy may require a break from many norms, including gender norms.

Perhaps there is also a hint that an account of love or friendship in terms of knowledge and utility must remain incomplete. I would note that thinking beyond utility points to another way to read the mention of weaving: the person who would be trusted with Lysis' mother's wool and tools would need both knowledge and something else—that person would have to be someone for whom weaving is appropriate, someone fit for weaving. In Athens of course that means a woman, but to generalize we might say that people will trust someone if that person has the appropriate knowledge.

Picking up a thread from the end of the dialogue, in fact, maybe what the trustworthy, lovable person has is something that is οἰκεῖον, that belongs to them.

> 'Then it is what belongs to oneself, it seems, that passionate love and friendship and desire are directed towards, Menexenus and Lysis.'
> They both agreed.
> 'And if you two are friends with each other, then in some way you naturally belong to each other.'

[30] For a helpful discussion of weaving in the *Statesman*, see Blondell 2005, esp. 49-71. For a small sample of ways readers have engaged with the weaving imagery in the *Sophist*, see Benardette 1993 and Noriega-Olmos 2012.

'Absolutely,' they said together. (221e3-7)

Given the final arguments in the text, we have good reason to think that friendship involves more than usefulness. Likewise, parents love their children at least in some sense because the children belong to them—as Socrates' examples seem to imply, part of the reason that Lysis' parents keep him from doing things like driving chariots is that they care for him and are trying to take care of him.[31] Of course, they also prevent him from weaving, and in that case the issue seems more tied to expectations of masculinity, and the response from Lysis is accompanied by laughter at Socrates' silly question.

Underneath that silly question, however, is a quite radical thought: when Socrates and Lysis discuss freedom, trust, and wisdom, Socrates says that in areas where they are truly wise 'everybody…will trust us'. And when that happens, 'things will belong to us (ἡμέτερά τε ταῦτα ἔσται), because we will derive some advantage from them' (210a-b). In other words, Socrates' view here seems to imply that Lysis could actually become someone fit for weaving, someone whose wisdom makes even a feminine activity like weaving his own.

Conclusion

I have tried to show that the *Lysis* centers masculinity, even as masculine discourse runs aground in the dialogue. We can make some sense of the failures of discourse by heeding the power of other modes to move us in ways masculine-coded, rational discourse cannot. Likewise, perhaps if we heed the ways that discourse falls short, we will be called to see the ways in which conventional masculinity falls short. And if we can do that, then perhaps we can again find in Plato the energy to push ourselves to seek change in ourselves and justice in our communities. In other words, in seeking a Platonic understanding of love and friendship, we should seek liberating love.[32]

Department of Philosophy
Seattle University
Seattle WA 98122

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[31] Penner and Rowe 2005, 34 recognize this; cf. *Republic* i 330c, where Socrates and Cephalus discuss the fact that people who have made their own money are serious about it: 'just as poets love their poems and fathers their children, so those who have made money take their money seriously both as something they have made themselves and—just as other people do—because it is useful'. My thanks to the editor for the reminder about this passage.

[32] I would like to thank Nicholas Smith and Sam Flores for their comments on early versions of this article. Thanks also to Thomas Tuozzo, my anonymous reviewers at *Ancient Philosophy*, and Ron Polansky for their many helpful suggestions. I am responsible, of course, for all errors and infelicities.

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