



On the Aporetic Nature of Plato's Lysis

Al Vincent ST* and Rosalyn GM

University of Santo Tomas, Philippines

***Corresponding author:** Al Vincent S. Tumlos, Faculty of Ecclesiastics, University of Santo Tomas, Espana Blvd., Manila, Philippines, Email: akosialvincent@gmail.com

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Abstract

Centering on the early Platonic dialogues, this paper delineates the importance of considering Plato's *Lysis*' as rightful inclusion to Jan Szaif's proposal of "core group" of aporetic dialogue. This paper highlights a synoptic presentation of the development of *Lysis*'s reception by modern scholars of Plato (Platonic scholars) at the beginning of this discourse to establish a compelling argument for its aporetic nature. It then proceeds with a revisit to Szaif's article *Socrates and the Benefits of Puzzlement*. The first section, considering its importance, emphasizes the evident possibility of opening his list of 'core group' of aporetic dialogue to *Lysis* benefitting the said dialogue. This exposition concludes with the philosophical nature of friendship, even love, must neither begin in Plato's *Phaedrus* and *Symposium* nor in Aristotle's conception of friendship in *Nicomachean Ethics*. Alternatively, cognizant of the aporetic tradition followed and practiced by Plato, all studies on the said topics may begin with *Lysis*.

Keywords: Plato; *Lysis*; Aristotle; Aporetic dialogue; Jan Szaif

Introduction

In the article *Socrates and the Benefits of Puzzlement*, Jan Szaif proposes a 'core group' of Plato's aporetic dialogues "to enable a better understanding of the philosophical and ethical significance of *aporia* as a cognitive state of mind induced by Socrates in his interlocutors."¹ In the said 'core group,' he omitted *Lysis*, arguing that he fails to find the close thematic connections and the characteristic balance between personal examination and engagement with philosophical problems, unlike his selections (*Laches*, *Charmides*, *Euthyphro*, *Protagoras*, and the first part of *Meno*). However, Terrence Irwin, a scholar in Plato, argues that *Lysis* belongs to the shorter early dialogues and falls on ethical topics whose

list is the same as Szaif's 'core group' following the style and language, character, philosophical content, and convergence of the said dialogues.²

Given the following, this article aims to answer whether *Lysis* should belong to the 'core group' that Szaif proposes by pointing out the *aporias* in the dialogue based on the reception of the Platonic scholars in the last two decades that emphasized the aporetic nature, even citing their location in the dialogue. After arguing that *Lysis* must be considered in the 'core group' by demonstrating its content and reception, the paper, following Szaif's argument on how he presents what is an *aporia*, will reemphasize the value of this short dialogue and, thus, the possible inclusion. At the outset, the reader should note that this paper relied on the translated

1 Jan Szaif, "Socrates and the Benefits of Puzzlement," in *The Aporetic Tradition in Ancient Philosophy*, edited by George Karamanolis, & Vasilis Politis, 29-47, (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 29.

2 T.H. Irwin, "The Platonic Corpus," in *The Oxford Handbook of Plato*, edited by Gail Fine, 63-87, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 77-78.

works of Plato, and, hence, the word friendship is used loosely.

Reception of Plato's *Lysis*

Christopher Rowe and Terry Penner made the most recent revisit on Plato's *Lysis* in almost two decades.³ Contrary to those who view *Lysis* as a failure⁴, both view *Lysis* as "a piece of virtuoso philosophical writing, a miniature when set beside other grander, and acknowledged masterpieces, but nevertheless showing the 'divine' Plato at the very top of his form"⁵ by proposing that *Lysis*' thesis – on what is friendship, so understood, and under what conditions that it exists – sets the agenda "not just for *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, but even for Aristotle in his treatments of *philia* in his *Eudemian* and *Nicomachean Ethics*."⁶ Among their many proposals and arguments in their reconstruction, they consider the significance of the element of *aporia*⁷ in the dialogue. For them, there is no Platonic dialogue that is 'genuinely aporetic.' They suppose that "Plato's general aim, when writing in 'aporetic' mode, is that we come to see for ourselves the kinds of ideas that *he* wishes, at the time, to promote, to have us adopt, absent any decisive arguments for our not adopting them."⁸ In other words, Plato's dialogues, which may be considered aporetic by nature, offer ideas that a thinker can consider a starting place or something to develop on. However, Penner and Rowe are not the first to highlight the aporetic nature of *Lysis* and its consequence.

In *The Challenge of Plato's Lysis*, Lorraine Smith Pangle attempted to arrive at Plato's concrete notion of friendship. In such attempt, one element she considers, contrary to those many scholars who have maintained that *Lysis* teaches,

in the end, nothing positive at all and that the 'shipwreck' of *Lysis*'s arguments leaves only lumber for later dialogue, is the positivity of the *aporia*. She followed a different path by following scholars who argued persuasively that "a positive teaching can be found if one pays careful reading to the drama of the dialogue,"⁹ which is evident in the *Lysis* (212b-213c, 216c-221d). As such, aware of the problems of Socrates's theses on friendship, Smith Pangle mustered her own articulation of the said thesis based on *Lysis* alone. Following the dialogue, her thesis exhorted that *bad people are incapable of friendship and good ones will not need it, whatever is neither bad nor good become a friend of the good because of the presence of an evil, and the real friend cannot be the being we love or seem to love because of the good it procures for us, but instead the true or 'first friend' must be the good thing for whose sake we love its provider* (*Lysis* 214a-15c, 216c-217b, 219c-d).¹⁰ What is of interest is how she concluded the section by immediately jumping to Aristotle as the one who will provide an exhaustive account on friendship which will show the importance of mutuality, "the mutual cherishing of two excellent souls," and what it brings to friendship. This conclusion, however, may not be the case. In contrast to this are Dimitri El Murr's and Mary Nichols' reading and analysis on *Lysis* that, though *Lysis* may stand on its own, it supports the arguments of other Platonic dialogues, even those that qualified as "late."

Focusing on the benefits of human association, Nichols in *Who is a Friend?*¹¹ devotes a section that discusses the significance of the friendship between Menexenus and *Lysis* and the *aporia* in the dialogue, mainly how it ended. Nichols believes that Menexenus and *Lysis* are the youngest interlocutors in the Platonic corpus and, thus, follow they affect the dialogue's conclusion. Since it ended with the friends leaving Socrates, Nichols proposes that the problems or concerns about friendship become a concern of the community by alluding to its relationship and affinity to other Platonic dialogues that follow *Lysis*. Some of these dialogues are *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*.

Like Nichols, El Murr follows the same line of thought. In *Philia in Plato*¹², he points out the gap between the Platonic conception of love and friendship by arguing that

3 For a substantial earlier work on Plato's *Lysis* see David Bolotin, *Plato's Dialogue on Friendship: An Interpretation of the Lysis*, with a New Translation (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1979). This is the oft-quoted book by most scholars who worked on their articles and reflection on *Lysis*. For an example, see Mary Nichols "Friendship and Community in Plato's 'Lysis,'" *The Review of Politics* 68, no. 1 (2006): 1-19.

4 For a detailed discussion of the reception of *Lysis* from 19th Century until the time of Penner and Rowe that presents *Lysis* as spurious, failure, written for Aristotle, and some other angles on *Lysis*, see Gabriel Evangelou, "The Role of Socrates, *Lysis*, and Menexenus in Plato's *Lysis*" *Filozofia* 75, no. 3 (2020): 195-211.

5 Penner and Rowe, *Plato's Lysis*, xii.

6 *Ibid.*

7 "An *aporia* is, essentially, a point of impasse where there is puzzlement or perplexity about how to process... It is a point where one does not know how to respond to what is said." For a detailed discussion on *aporia* in the early Greek Philosophy, see John Palmer, "Contradiction and *Aporia* in Early Greek Philosophy," in *The Aporetic Tradition in Ancient Philosophy*, edited by George Karamanolis & Vasilis Politis, 9-28, (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

8 Penner and Rowe, *Plato's Lysis*, 184.

9 Lorraine Smith Pangle, *Aristotle and the Philosophy of Friendship* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 20.

10 *Ibid.*, 22-23.

11 Mary Nichols, *Socrates on Friendship and Community: Reflections on Plato's Symposium, Phaedrus, and Lysis* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 194.

12 Dimitri El Murr, "Philia in Plato," in *Ancient and Medieval Concepts of Friendship*, edited by Suzanne Stern-Gillet, & Gary Gurtler, 1-34, (Albany: SUNY Press, 2014).

the former is one of the most debated issues in the Platonic canon and leads the latter to suffer underexposure. To “open a fresh understanding” of Plato’s notion of friendship, he returns to a short passage in the Book VIII of the *Laws*. The work, however, is filled with the different elements of *Lysis*. Hence, in the discussion, though not the sole focus, El Murr also considers *aporia* as one of the elements that further Socrates’s argument, particularly friendship from likeness (214e). Evident in *Phaedrus* (Phdr. 254e; 255a; 256b) and *Symposium* (210a-212a)¹³, as El Murr presents, though *aporia* may just be an element, *Lysis* seems to be indispensable.

From these synoptic summary and review, one can deduce that most scholars in Plato agrees on the aporetic nature of *Lysis*. Given this presentation and discussion on the reception of *Lysis*, it is now time to review Szaif’s paper that proposes a ‘core group’ of Platonic aporetic dialogues.

Jan Szaif and the *Lysis*

In *Socrates and the Benefits of Puzzlement*, Szaif’s aims “to enable a better understanding of the philosophical and ethical significance of *aporia* as a cognitive state of mind induced by Socrates in his interlocutors.”¹⁴ In the article he selects textual reference for his investigation which he calls the ‘core group’ of aporetic dialogues. In the selection, *Lysis* is not included because it lacks the thematic connections and a characteristic between personal examination and engagement with philosophical problems. The criterion for a Socratic dialogue to be counted 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.”¹⁵ Furthermore, when he proposes his ‘core group,’ the criteria are style, content, purpose. The article has its own merits and furthers the discussion of the significance of *aporia*.

Looking at *Lysis* and the discussion of the second part of this paper may qualify and concur with the criteria of Szaif’s. Going back to the last part of *Lysis*, Socrates admitted that they failed to understand friendship after many proposals (*Lysis* 223b). Moreover, apart from the ending, there are parts of an impasse between the interlocutors and Socrates (213d; 216c).

In support of this argument, it is important to compare the observation that comes from the third section of Szaif’s

article after presenting the sample refutations from the ones he chose to belong to the core group with the discussion concerning the reception of *Lysis* in the third part. Szaif penned:

I surmise that such sample refutations were meant to benefit the readers (or, at the fictional level, Socrates’ audience), *first*, by raising awareness of the shaky foundations of our accepted notion and our trust in experts, and *secondly*, by engaging us with questions and puzzles that could serve as starting points for further inquiry. Finally, these dialogues also warn us about the how the potential benefits of *aporia* can be wasted if interlocutors don’t ‘don’t hang on’ and don’t interpret their situation correctly.¹⁶

Following the presentation above, does Socrates fail to shake the foundation of the friendship between Menexenus and *Lysis*? Does the *Lysis* provide a particular conclusion which scholars follow? Moreover, based on the dialogue, the arriving and leaving of characters and the ending, is it correct to say that the characters from Hippothales to *Lysis* cannot interpret their situations? Szaif even mentions a passage in the *Lysis* (218ab) which he deems “its upshot is that the philosophical state of mind is a condition in which one is affected by something bad (ignorance) without being bad, i.e., without being bad,”¹⁷ is worth considering.

Aware that the Greeks consider friendship an ethical concern, all these elements are inevitable, and the necessary inclusion of *Lysis* as a dialogue belonging to the ‘core group’ could perhaps help further the discussion on friendship, especially its ethical and philosophical significance. As such, though a revival on the discussion on friendship occurred during the 17th century¹⁸, it is no wonder that most works on friendship, though all discussion on friendship would usually begin with Aristotle, would mention *Lysis* from time to time.

Conclusion

The strength of the early Platonic dialogues lies in their aporetic nature. Szaif illustrated it virtuously in his discussion, employing what he considered as the ‘core group’ of aporetic dialogues. As discussed explicitly on this paper, and highlighting the aporetic nature, Plato’s *Lysis* may be a part of the “core group” setting off new possibilities on how to perceive friendship.

13 For a brief and an in depth discussion on Plato’s conception of love, see David Brink, “Eudaimonism, Love and Friendship, and Political Community,” *Social Philosophy & Policy Foundation*, 1999: 252-289 and A. W. Price, *Love and Friendship in Plato and Aristotle* (United States of America: Oxford University Press Inc., 1989; 2004).

14 Szaif, *Socrates and the Benefits of Puzzlement*, 29.

15 *Ibid.*, 30.

16 *Ibid.*, 42—43.

17 *Ibid.*, 45.

18 For a thorough discussion on friendship as a philosophical concern, see Neera Kapur Badhwar, ed. *Friendship: A Philosophical Reader* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993).

By writing a dialogue that resonates, not just in his other dialogues (*Symposium* and *Phaedrus*) but to the works of other philosophers that followed him, especially Aristotle, on the notion of friendship, side-by-side Szaif's arguments, the possibility of Plato's *Lysis* qualification to the group may still be considered a topic of debate among scholars. Furthermore, what other elements that Szaif might have not seen in *Lysis* as a failure to belong to what he considers the 'core group,' only scholars can locate, leading to support and validate or interestingly, refute his proposal.

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