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PHILOSOPHICAL EROS

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ABSTRACT: This paper, originally read on the site of Plato's dialogue *Phaedrus*, attempts to show how the two seemingly distinct themes of this dialogue, eros and rhetoric, are really one. Socrates there employs rhetoric, in which his decent but somewhat dull interlocutor, Phaedrus, takes great pleasure, in order to persuade the latter to assume philosophical eros, inclining his soul to truth. This aim contrasts vividly with the nihilistic one pursued by the greatest of the Sophist rhetoricians, Gorgias. Ultimately, philosophical eros conduces to intimations of immortality. This could be demonstrated, if more time were available, by exploring certain works of contemporary literature and philosophy; for example, in his *Totality and Infinity*, Emmanuel Levinas cites the *Phaedrus* more frequently than any other text.

It is glorious to be back here in Athens, this time at the very location of Plato's *Phaedrus* on the banks of the Ilissos River. Unpleasant as sweaty northern European Philhellenes, like myself, may find it, it is also important to be here during the intense summer heat that so defines the *Phaedrus*. Indeed, the climate of the dialogue influences it more than any other text by Plato that I know. Such is the heat of eros described by Sappho,

Sweat pours down me, I shake
all over, I go pale as green
grass. I'm that close to being dead.

In this heat, with this jet lag, I know how she feels. It is only when the heat subsides a little at the end of the dialogue that the *Phaedrus* closes with its abrupt final words, 'Let's be off,' which is just one word in ancient Greek, *iomen*.

During summer, the cicadas—children of the Muses—sing overhead. If cicadas are a mimesis of the Muses—as Socrates suggests when conceding that the excessive style of his Second Speech on eros in the *Phaedrus* was due to the inspiration

of the local gods (262d)—then philosophers are a mimesis of cicadas. The difference between philosophers and cicadas is that we don't sing so beautifully or so constantly . . . , although we get to live a little longer.

All we need now to complete the scene is a broad-leaved plane tree, a *platanos*, a Plato-tree, like the one under which Socrates and Phaedrus lounge. As is well known, the *Phaedrus* is unusual because of the amount of natural and climatic detail that it contains. But I do not think that it is mere accident that the shade that provides the shelter for the dialogue is broad-shouldered Plato—*platanos*, from *platys*—the tree in which the Socratic cicadas sing.

As is also well known, and here we approach the vast and fascinating theme of today's symposium, what makes the *Phaedrus* unusual is that it is the only time in the Platonic dialogues that Socrates leaves the city of Athens (the trip to Piraeus in the *Republic* is still legally within the long walls of the polis). Phaedrus remarks that Socrates appears 'to be totally out of place.' (230d). In leaving the city, he seems to leave himself behind, to become beside himself, to become ecstatic, erotic, manic. *Eros*, as Socrates insists, is *manike*, a madness.

We might speculate here as to whether *eros* is a force that compels philosophy, a force that is somehow outside the self, but towards which the soul can incline itself, what Socrates calls a god, a force that perhaps even compels the philosopher to leave the cave. Of course, it is not at all clear how the first prisoner in the cave in the *Republic* becomes free, emancipates himself. He frees the others, but who frees him? It is not clear and remains unexplained. Perhaps *eros* is the force that shapes philosophy and moves the philosopher to break free from the cave and move towards the light.

If this speculation has any merit, then it is peculiar indeed that the condition of possibility for freedom is a force that compels: a compulsion, a necessity. Unconditional freedom appears to be conditioned by what contradicts it. *Eros*, in making philosophy possible, somehow turns the freedom of the philosopher inside out, back to front. It is a nice, if totally incidental, peculiarity that the numerals of this year, 2013, looked at backwards and with a slight squint, spell *eros*. Perhaps we can only see *eros* back to front, in the form of indirect communication, like a dialogue.

But how are we to understand the nature of *eros* as it appears in Plato's *Phaedrus*? And here we approach the central enigma of the dialogue. For it appears to deal with two distinct topics, rather than one: *eros* and rhetoric. My angle of approach is deliberately very simple: I will try and suggest that these twin themes of *eros* and rhetoric are really one.

If *eros* is a force that shapes the philosopher, then rhetoric is the art by which the philosopher persuades the non-philosopher to assume philosophical *eros*, to incline their soul towards truth. But to do this does not entail abandoning the art of rhetoric or indeed sophistry, which teaches that art, although it does so falsely. Philosophy uses true rhetoric against false rhetoric. The philosopher is not just the anti-sophist, but the *true* sophist. Which means that the *philosophos* is not *sophos* or wise, in the sense of *possessing* wisdom, but loves it; in other words their soul is directed towards wisdom. But love in its very weakness, I would suggest to you, is stronger than possession.

For the ancient Greeks, there was obviously a close connection between the passions or emotions, like eros, and rhetoric. We need only recall that Aristotle's discussion of the emotions is in the *Rhetoric*. The Greek concept here is *pathos*, and emotion was linked to rhetoric, for Aristotle, because it could influence judgment, in the legal, moral or political senses of the word.

Of course, in classical Athens, those two groups of people capable of stirring up huge emotions, were the tragic poets and the Sophists. Tragedy, again in Aristotle's sense, stirs up pity and fear in a way that leads to their *katharsis*, understood as purgation or, better, sublimation. Let me say a few more words about the Sophists, who exert such a powerful negative influence on Plato across a whole range of dialogues. The Sophists exploited the link between emotion and rhetoric in order to teach the art of persuasive speech that was central to the drama of law and litigation. As you all doubtless know, classical Athens was a very litigious place, but mercifully did not have lawyers. Therefore, men (and it was just men) had to defend themselves, and Sophists taught those who could pay a fee how to do it.

Socrates's inability to defend himself in the lawcourt and how such an inability is the defining criterion of the philosopher, recurs in dialogue after dialogue, in the *Apology* obviously, but with particular power in the *Theaetetus*. In the latter, the philosopher is presented as a kind of madman or fool, like Thales, who falls into ditches because he is contemplating the stars. This is why the Thracian maid laughs. The philosopher is continually contrasted with the pettifogging citizen who speaks in the lawcourt. Where the latter is skilled in speaking in court against the clock, the *klepsydra* or water-clock that quite literally steals time, the philosopher has no sense of time and consequently takes his time, but uses it badly. The philosopher's inability to defend himself persuasively in the law court leads directly to being found guilty and sentenced to execution. Such is arguably the primal scene of philosophy. Socrates is the tragic hero whose death moves the drama stage of the Theater of Dionysos on the south slope of the Acropolis into the heart of the city. In this transfiguration of tragedy, the city and its alleged democracy stand indicted.

The greatest of the Sophists, in my humble opinion, is Gorgias. In his exquisitely beautiful demonstration speech or *epideixis* in defense of Helen, he declares that,

Speech (*logos*) is a powerful lord . . .
It can stop fear and banish grief,
And create joy and nurture pity.

The linguistic turn begins with Gorgias. For him, speech is a kind of incantation, witchcraft or magic. He continues,

The effect of speech upon the structure of the soul
Is as the structure of drugs over the nature of bodies.

It hopefully goes without saying that eros is the most powerful drug of all.

I emphasize the example of Gorgias in order to show what I think Socrates is fighting against in the *Phaedrus*, particularly in his subtle and slow demolition of the vapid sophistry of Lysias's speech. Gorgias wrote an encomium of Helen in order to show how the indefensible can be persuasively defended. But Gorgias

makes it perfectly clear that he has absolutely no investment in Helen, but simply wrote the speech, as he confesses in its final words, as ‘an amusement for myself.’

Furthermore, Gorgias also wrote an extraordinary parody of the somber metaphysical pretensions of Eleatic philosophers to speak about being as either one or many or anything at all. In the short fragment, ‘*To me on,*’ ‘the not-being,’ ‘the non-existent,’ or ‘what is not,’ Gorgias gives us a set-piece example of Sophistic *antilogia* or contradiction. He argues three theses:

1. Nothing exists.
2. If anything exists, it is unknowable or inapprehensible by humans.
3. If anything is apprehensible by humans, it is incommunicable to one’s neighbor.

Thus, the only thing that is, is what is not.

The argument is exquisite and also very funny and the effect of its satirical force is an exuberant and radical nihilism that would even have Nietzsche fleeing into the shadows. It is a little like Freud on the logic of the borrowed kettle:

1. That he had returned the kettle undamaged.
2. That it was already damaged when he borrowed it.
3. That he had never borrowed it in the first place.

According to the biographer of the Sophists, Philostratus, there was even a verb in Greek, *gorgiazein*, to Gorgianize, to embellish one’s speech in an excessive manner.

If speech is indeed a powerful lord, and if it can arouse such strong but false emotion, then the question becomes clear: how can the philosopher employ speech in order to refuse its Gorgiastic, nihilistic possibilities? How might there be a true speech, in other words a dialectic, which refuses the corrosive effects of rhetoric? This brings us back to the *Phaedrus*.

The purpose of Plato’s *Phaedrus* is to arouse an emotion, specifically a philosophical eros, in the rather unphilosophical Phaedrus. And we have to be honest about Phaedrus. Who is he? Phaedrus is not the kind of feisty, angry and highly intelligent opponent that Socrates finds in the Gorgiastic Callicles, or even in Thrasymachus, let alone the superior intellect of the Stranger from *The Sophist* whose stunning dialectical ability reduces Socrates to silence. Phaedrus is a more simple soul. We might define him as a being who lives in order to receive pleasure from listening to speeches. (He is like someone who compulsively watches TED talks). So Socrates gives him that pleasure in order both to please and persuade him. Not just once, but twice. Indeed, the sheer length of the Second Speech on eros might arouse our suspicion for we know from Plato’s *Gorgias* that Socrates hates long speeches, even delivered by the most eloquent of Sophists. Why is Socrates doing what he hates?

I am not suggesting that Phaedrus is stupid, but he’s perhaps not the brightest spark in Athens. There appear to be many facts of which he is unaware, such as the laws of Palamedes, which would have been basic to an Attic education of the time (261b–c). He also keeps forgetting Socrates’s argument and needs constant

reminders: 'So it seemed,' he says at 277b, 'but remind me again how we did it.' And this is during a discussion of recollection versus reminding. Phaedrus forgets the argument during a discussion of memory. Much of Socrates's rather obvious and extended passages of irony in the dialogue seem to pass him by completely. Occasionally, Phaedrus will burst out with something like, 'Socrates, you're very good at making up stories from Egypt or wherever else you want' (275b). Phaedrus is nice but a little dim.

Rehearsing a definition already given by Gorgias in Plato's eponymous dialogue (*Gorgias*, 452), rhetoric is defined as inducing persuasion in the soul of the listener. Socrates goes further and defines rhetoric as a *techne psychagogias*, an art of leading or directing the soul, a kind of bewitchment that holds the listener's soul spellbound (261a). Of course, the irony here is that it is precisely in these terms that Socrates criticizes the effects of tragic poetry in the *Republic*, which is why all forms of poetic mimesis cannot be admitted into a philosophically well-ordered city.

However, Socrates's speeches in the *Phaedrus* are precisely this kind of *psychagogia*. Phaedrus, who loves speeches, is completely entranced. His soul is conjured by Socrates with complete success. The dialogue brings Phaedrus to love philosophy by loving philosophically. It might appear on a superficial reading that the question of eros disappears in the second half of the *Phaedrus*. But this is deceptive, for the forensic discussion of Lysias's speech on eros leads to a definition of artful or true speech that we will see presently. The dialogue culminates in a definition of the philosopher as the true lover or lover of truth (278d), by which point Phaedrus is completely persuaded by Socrates.

The intention of the *Phaedrus* is thus to persuade Phaedrus. Nothing more. The purpose of the dialogue, as Alexander Nehamas has persuasively suggested, is to inflame a philosophical eros in him that gives him the ability to distinguish bad rhetoric, of the kinds found in Lysias's speech and in Socrates's first speech, from true rhetoric, of the kind found in the second speech and then analyzed in the second half of the dialogue, using the techniques of division and collection that would be extended in intricate detail in the *Sophist*. True rhetoric passes over into dialectic.

What does this suggest about philosophical dialogue? I think it leads us to the view that each dialogue is radically singular, as singular as a proper name of its title. This is why the dialogue is called in Greek *Phaidros*. The dialogue is addressed to a specific and named interlocutor. It meets Phaedrus on his ground (it even walks out with him into the countryside) and brings him to philosophical eros. It meets him in his own terms, namely in terms of his questionable estimation of the high importance of speeches. It meets him by accepting his preferences, his sense of what matters, and then slowly turning his sophisticated delight in speeches into a commitment to philosophy.

Philosophy is addressed to a specific and existent other, not the empty personification of some particular virtue or vice (which is arguably the error of the dialogues of philosophers like Berkeley and Hume). Dialogue is the attempt to persuade that other in terms that they will understand and accept, whatever

it is that they believe. Otherwise, philosophy is building castles in the air with its systems and formal axiomatics which go right over the head of someone as unphilosophical as Phaedrus. In philosophy, we have to meet the other on their ground and in their own terms and bring them around, slowly, cautiously and good-humouredly. Socrates does not say how awful he finds Lysias's speech and he shouldn't. It would mean that the dialogue had failed and we should note that Platonic dialogues do sometimes fail. For example, Callicles simply refuses to play Socrates's dialectical game and the *Gorgias* ends up as a crazed monologue of Socrates talking to himself.

But the *Phaedrus* is a success in that Socrates completely persuades his interlocutor. We might want to say that a dialogue is like a case study in Freud, which also sometimes fail, like the cases of Dora, the Wolf Man and the unnamed female homosexual. Such case studies might be *exemplary* and thereby exert a general claim, as the *Phaedrus* unquestionable does, but each dialogue is a singular and highly specific case. Let me try and show you what I mean in a little more detail.

Very close to the end of the long discussion of artfulness and artlessness in relation to public speaking, Socrates specifies the conditions that any rhetoric must meet in order to be a philosophical rhetoric capable of engendering eros. If rhetoric is a kind of *psychagogia*, or soul-leading, then a philosophical rhetoric must be based on knowledge of the nature of various kinds of soul and which sorts of speeches would appeal to which sort of souls. Socrates then goes on,

On meeting someone he will be able to discern what he is like and make clear to himself that the person actually standing in front of him is of just this particular sort of character . . . that he must now apply speeches of such-and-such a kind in this particular way in order to secure conviction about such-and-such an issue. When he has learned all this . . . then, and only then, will he have finally mastered the art well and completely. (272a–b)

Of course, this is an exquisite meta-commentary on the very situation in which Socrates finds himself during the *Phaedrus*. He has to make his speech address 'the person actually standing in front of him.' Namely, Socrates has to speak to Phaedrus in terms that he will accept 'in order to secure conviction.' He will have to say the right thing in the right way at the right time to the person right in front of him.

The sheer reflexivity of the *Phaedrus* is astonishing. It is not only a piece of the most beautiful writing that denounces writing, or denounces writing's importance. It is also an enactment of the very conditions of true philosophical rhetoric theorized in the dialogue. It is the enactment of theory as practice. The opposite of a self-contradiction, the *Phaedrus* is a performative self-enactment of philosophy.

The subject matter of the *Phaedrus* is rhetoric, true rhetoric. Its intention is to show that true eros, as opposed to the kind of vulgar pederasty that Socrates criticizes and which was the Athenian specialty of the time, is both subject *to* true rhetoric and the subject *of* true rhetoric. Philosophical eros is the effect of rhetoric, of language used persuasively. As Sappho says, Persuasion (*peithō*) is the daughter of Aphrodite. The question is to what extent the daughter engenders the mother.

This might also lead us on, in a more psychoanalytic register, to the question of the relation of language and affect, where debates among different psychoanalytic orientations tend to get stuck on the following question: which comes first, language or affect? This seems to me a rather pointless chicken and egg situation. We have language. We have emotions. It would appear that we didn't always have language. It was acquired. But we didn't also always have the emotions we feel now or have felt in the past. Whatever the relation between rhetoric and *pathos*, or language and emotion, it is clear that the rhetorical force of language can shape, form and articulate the affect, and this is what Socrates is doing in the dialogue: trying to transform Phaedrus's love of speeches into a philosophical eros. For that, what Gorgias calls the mighty lord of language needs to be invoked.

I'd like to read Socrates's conclusion about the nature of true or artful speech, as it will allow me to reach my own conclusion.

No one will ever possess the art of speaking, to the extent that any human being can, unless he acquires the ability to enumerate the sorts of characters to be found in any audience, to divide everything according to its kinds, and to grasp each single thing firmly by means of one form [*idea*]. And no one can acquire these abilities without great effort—a laborious effort a sensible man will make not in order to speak and act among human beings, but so as to be able to speak and act in a way that pleases the gods [*theois*]. (273e–274a)

To which the ever-so-slightly dull Phaedrus exclaims, 'What you've said is wonderful, Socrates—if only it could be done' (274a). But what needs to be emphasized here is that the huge effort involved in speaking well is not made, as it is with Sophists or with people who speak in a lawcourt, in order to please human beings, but in order to please those who are truly wise, namely the gods.

We are here brought face to face with a persistent theme in Plato, and which also appears elsewhere in ancient Greek philosophy, the Hellenistic schools, Neo-Platonism and which could be said to resurface in modernity (Empedocles, Aristotle, Epicurus, Plotinus, Spinoza and—finally—Hegel, as when Spirit is defined in the *Phenomenology* as God appearing amongst those who possess absolute knowledge). Man is not the measure of all things. Such is sophistry. The philosophical measure (the measure *of* philosophy) is divine. Philosophy's highest ambition is the life of the gods or the divine life.

This is what Aristotle calls in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1177b15 ff), *ho bios theois*. There is indeed another passage in the *Metaphysics* (1072b) where Aristotle uses *zoe* rather than *bios*, to refer to the life of pure actuality or *nous* as God. In this context, one might say that one gets a theology or theiology, whereas in the *Nicomachean Ethics* one gets an understanding not of divine life as such, but a divine element within the human making his life more than human.

In the famously enigmatic 'digression' in the *Theaetetus*, Socrates suggests that philosophy is not the accumulation of knowledge aiming towards a unified, systematic theory of everything (172a–177c). Philosophy is a singular practice of dialogue that does not claim to know. We might say that the philosopher is radically ignorant and his process of questioning is designed to frustrate our desire for

synthesis and system, for absolute knowledge. Specifically, to quote Seth Benardete, who, like Socrates claims that philosophers are possessed of a four-fold ignorance:

1. They do not know the way to the marketplace or any other common gathering place in the city.
2. They neither see nor hear the so-called unwritten laws and decrees, i.e., the mores and laws and conventions that govern public life. This is why they get into such political trouble with charges of impiety towards the gods.
3. It does not occur to them to join a political club or party. The philosopher is not a politician.
4. They are unaware of the high or low birth of anyone in the city. The philosopher is oblivious of all questions of rank and status. In a deep sense, Socrates begets Diogenes.

As Socrates says in *Theaetetus*, the philosopher's body alone dwells within the city's walls. In thought, they are elsewhere. The philosopher lives by another measure, what Plato calls a divine measure, the life of the gods. Something more than human or humanist in any sense.

In a world governed by the Scylla of rampant scientism, to which the usual response is the Charybdis of New Age obscurantism, nothing would appear easier to dismiss than the idea that philosophy, in its highest expression, for Aristotle the *bios theoretikos*, might bring us to the life of the gods, divine life or blessedness.

My closing question—scandalous as it doubtless sounds—is the following: might the philosopher still entertain the idea of divine life, whatever that could mean? I am aware that this must sound almost comical, but I am deadly serious. I swear that I am expressing no irony at all. Whatever divine life might mean, it is articulated in *Theaetetus*, *Phaedrus* and elsewhere in clear opposition to Protagoras and all of Protagoras's many children, among whom we find our contemporary humanists, relativists and atheists. But the philosopher is not concerned with the human measure, which is the concern of the sophist, the lawyer or the politician. He is concerned with another measure. Eros, as Socrates insists in the *Phaedrus*, is a god, and to direct one's soul towards that god is philosophical eros. Eros is that refinement of passion that leads us towards the life of the gods. The question is: does this make sense to us anymore? And if it does, are we capable of such an effort? I would like to answer both questions in the affirmative.

There was much more that I wanted to say but, unlike the pettifogging lawyer, I lack the time. I would have liked to speak about Thomas Mann's deployment and inversion of the story of the *Phaedrus*, seen through an explicitly Nietzschean, Dionysian camera obscura in *Death in Venice*. Mann powerfully exposes the deathly, pederast desire repressed by the ideal of philosophical eros. I would have liked to speak about the transfiguration of eros in Joyce's *Ulysses*, especially the language of Molly Bloom's Soliloquy, where the language of homosocial desire between Stephen Daedalus and Leopold Bloom ends up beneath the roof of Molly's radical

language of desire and enjoyment. How does the homosociality of philosophical eros approach the question of feminine sexuality? I would also have liked to address the extraordinary itinerary of eros in the work of Emmanuel Levinas. Thanks to the posthumous publication of his notes, especially the *Cahiers de guerre*, it is now clear that during his captivity in the Stalag, Levinas planned to write a novel called *Eros*, which was abandoned after the catastrophe of the Second World War. We might also note that the text which is most often cited in Levinas's magnum opus, *Totality and Infinity*, is not *Being and Time* or the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, nor is it the Bible or the Talmud; it is Plato's *Phaedrus*. We might note that the entire adventure of Levinas's philosophy in its opposition to Heidegger turns on the question of eros, which permits fecundity, plurality and the exit from the Parmenidean theatre of being. Philosophy is the engendering of eros in a specific other in an absolutely singular relation. This opens the possibility of a future which is not my future, something beyond mortality and finitude that does not return to me—an intimation of immortality.

NOTE

A final word: In the WCP program, my affiliation is listed as UK/US. If I can be said am in any way to 'represent' my country of birth here in Athens, then let me use the occasion to say that it remains an injustice, a wrong and an abomination that the Parthenon Marbles are still in London and not housed in their proper and beautiful new surroundings at the Acropolis Museum. Bring the Parthenon marbles back to the Parthenon, back to Athens, back to Greece!