

Reading Guide to Plato's *Phaedrus*

Merlin Philosophy Read-In Group

January 2020

The recommended translations of Plato's *Phaedrus* and *Symposium* (which will be our text in February) are both by Paul Woodruff and Alexander Nehamas, who do an incredible job of capturing the poetry of Plato's language, along with the philosophical nuance. These translations are available in the small paperback, ***Plato on Love, edited by C.D.C. Reeve (Hackett Publishing, 2006)***, and also in the larger hardcover, *Plato: Complete Works*, edited by John M. Cooper and D.S. Hutchinson (Hackett, 1997). While I strongly recommend getting one of these books, in order to have these particular versions, any other translation will also do.

In Plato's *Phaedrus*, we find Socrates in discussion with his friend Phaedrus—initially about love (and to whom we should give our love), and later about rhetoric, the power of writing, and other issues. This dialogue is one of Plato's most beautifully poetic works, and is the only dialogue in which we see Socrates outside the city of Athens, in a “natural” place.

Since we have two weeks for our discussion, I recommend the following strategy for reading:

- **Begin by reading through the entire text**, to get a feel for the structure and narrative flow. My preference is to skip the editor's introductory material, and go straight to Plato's own words, letting Plato speak for himself, as it were.
- **Then, for our first week**, go back and read again the sections that are specifically and directly about love and the lover:
 - The speech of Lysias, as read to Socrates by Phaedrus, and its critique.
 - Socrates' first speech, and his recanting of it. Note especially the progression, in 238d–240a, from oneself, to one's body, to one's possessions.
 - The palinode: Socrates' second speech, in praise of Love.

All of these together go from 230e to 257c in the marginal numbers (pages 93–122 in our paperback edition).

- Also note the helpful summary of the discussion on Love, which appears at 265a-c (page 134).

Some helpful **questions for our discussion of the first half**:

- The three speeches all focus on one particular kind of love: the erotic relationship between an older male and a younger male. (See pages xvi–xviii of Reeve's introduction.) But this is a very “unbalanced” kind of relationship—*not* something we'd be likely to call a “relationship between equals.” So...
 - To what extent, if at all, could any of these arguments apply to other kinds of love? For example: the love between two partners of the same age and social status; the love between spouses of different genders; the love between parents and children; the love between siblings or friends; etc.
 - Can these arguments apply to *friendship* in addition to love?
 - Are there any important lessons to be learned here, about hierarchy or the like?

- In some sense, it's obvious that Socrates' final word on these issues comes in his second speech, the palinode. But...
 - Are there any elements of the earlier speeches (Lysias' speech, and/or Socrates' first speech) which *Socrates* can or should still accept? That is, which (if any) of the earlier arguments are still consistent with the position Socrates puts forth in his final speech?
 - Are there any elements of the earlier speeches which *you* still accept, or which you think we as a group should accept? Which ones are they, and why?
- Throughout this dialogue, love is frequently described as a kind of madness, though of course there are other kinds of madness, too. (The Greek word used here for madness is *mania*, which has become an English word itself).
 - Are there any ways in which this discussion helps to shed light on contemporary discussions of madness, insanity, or the like?
 - In Plato, and in Greek thought more generally, self-control is normally considered to be one of the four cardinal virtues. So what's going on at 256b–257a, when Socrates seems to be very critical of self-control?
 - In the palinode, Socrates sets out to distinguish divine madness (which stands above reason) from base madness (which stands below reason), and to prove that love is of the former kind, not the latter. How successful is he at doing this?
- The ancient commentators Syrianus and Hermias describe the three speeches as reflecting *three* different characters:
 - The first speech, clearly, is that of Lysias.
 - The second speech, even though it comes from Socrates' lips, is actually the speech of *Phaedrus*. (See Socrates' remarks at 242d, 244a, & 257a, for justification for this.)
 - The third speech is the speech of Socrates himself.

With that in mind, how can these different characters give us insight into the speeches? Consider both the specific individual characters as we see them in this dialogue, and also each person as standing in for "characters" or types of human beings, in a more general or abstract sense.

For our second meeting, I recommend preparing the following:

- Review the entire text, in light of what we discussed the first week.
- Read closely the arguments in the last half, from 257c to the end.
- Go back and look at the framing section (in fancy terms, the proemium, or proem), from the beginning to 230e. The framing of Plato's dialogues often contains hints or hidden references to the important ideas of the dialogue, and that happens here in spades! See how many of those references you can spot, and what they indicate about the important themes of the text.

Some helpful questions for our discussion in the second week:

- Is rhetoric an “art”?
 - To answer this, we’ll need to get clear on Plato’s distinction between an art and an “artless practice.” What is that difference, and why should he (or we) care about it?
 - Even if not all rhetoric rises to the level of an art, could at least some rhetoric get there, at least some of the time?
 - What about Socrates’ palinode (his second speech)? Is this artful, in the sense we’re discussing?
- What’s Plato’s trouble with writing?
 - What criticisms of writing do we find, and how far to they go?
 - Surely Plato’s critique should also apply to his own work. Given what he says about writing here, does this change how we should think about Plato’s own writings?
- All throughout the last half of dialogue, we find frequent references to memory and recollection. What role do memory and/or recollection play, both in regard to learning and understanding, and in regard to love?
- In the opening section of the dialogue (including, but not only, the very first line), what hints do we have, about the larger themes of the text?
- When reading any Platonic dialogue, the ancient commentators always tried to find a single, unifying theme (called the *skopos*) which connects every part of the dialogue. What might that single theme be for the *Phaedrus*? How does all the different parts of the text relate to that theme?
- Throughout the text, we find copious references to specific Goddesses and Gods, who are mentioned by name. Is there any pattern, rhyme, or reason to this? Why these particular Gods, in these particular places?

And as ever, please feel welcome and encouraged to bring any other questions, comments, concerns, objections, connections, etc., which you would like the group to consider!