

PHAEDRUS

Phaedrus is commonly paired on the one hand with Gorgias and on the other with Symposium—with the former in sharing its principal theme, the nature and limitations of rhetoric, with the latter in containing speeches devoted to the nature and value of erotic love. Here the two interests combine in manifold ways. Socrates, a city dweller little experienced in the pleasures of the country, walks out from Athens along the river Ilissus, alone with his friend Phaedrus, an impassioned admirer of oratory, for a private conversation: in Plato most of his conversations take place in a larger company, and no other in the private beauty of a rural retreat. There he is inspired to employ his knowledge of philosophy in crafting two speeches on the subject of erotic love, to show how paltry is the best effort on the same subject of the best orator in Athens, Lysias, who knows no philosophy. In the second half of the dialogue he explains to Phaedrus exactly how philosophical understanding of the truth about any matter discoursed upon, and about the varieties of human soul and their rhetorical susceptibilities, is an indispensable basis for a rhetorically accomplished speech—such as he himself delivered in the first part of the dialogue. By rights, Phaedrus' passionate admiration for oratory ought therefore to be transformed into an even more passionate love of philosophical knowledge, fine oratory's essential prerequisite. Socrates' own speeches about erotic love and his dialectical presentation of rhetoric's subservience to philosophy are both aimed at persuading Phaedrus to this transformation.

In his great second speech Socrates draws upon the psychological theory of the Republic and the metaphysics of resplendent Forms common to that dialogue and several others (notably Phaedo and Symposium) to inspire in Phaedrus a love for philosophy. By contrast, the philosophy drawn upon in the second, dialectical, half of the dialogue is linked closely to the much more austere, logically oriented investigations via the 'method of divisions' that we find in Sophist, Statesman, and Philebus—where the grasp of any important philosophical idea (any Form) proceeds by patient, detailed mapping of its relations to other concepts and to its own subvarieties, not through an awe-inspiring vision of a self-confined, single brilliant entity. One of Socrates' central claims in the second part of the dialogue is that a rhetorical composition, of which his second speech is a paragon, must construct in words mere resemblances of the real truth, ones selected to appeal to the specific type of 'soul' that its hearers possess, so as to draw them on toward knowledge of the truth—or else to disguise it! A rhetorical composition does not actually convey the truth; the truth

is known only through philosophical study—of the sort whose results are presented in the second half of the dialogue. So Socrates himself warns us that the ‘philosophical theories’ embodied in his speech are resemblances only, motivated in fact by his desire to win Phaedrus away from an indiscriminate love of rhetoric to a controlled but elevated love of philosophical study.

Phaedrus is one of Plato’s most admired literary masterpieces. Yet toward its end Socrates criticizes severely those who take their own writing seriously—any writing, not just orators’ speeches. Writings cannot contain or constitute knowledge of any important matter. Knowledge can only be lodged in a mind, and its essential feature there is an endless capacity to express, interpret, and reinterpret itself suitably, in response to every challenge—something a written text once let go by its author plainly lacks: it can only keep on repeating the same words to whoever picks it up. But does not a Platonic dialogue, in engaging its reader in a creative, multilayered intellectual encounter, have a similar capacity for ever-deeper reading, for the discovery of underlying meaning beyond the simple presentation of its surface ideas? Knowledge is only in souls, but, despite the Phaedrus’ own critique of writing, reading such a dialogue may be a good way of working to attain it.

J.M.C.

This is the end of the dialogue. Socrates and Phaedrus have been relaxing under a tree during a hot summer day, talking about what is the nature of (erotic) love. Throughout their discussions, they reflected on the fact that the form of a discourse has an impact on the way contents of what is being said, and whether it is perceived as truthful by the listener.

They then embark on a discussion on what is a good discourse.

- d SOCRATES: Since the nature of speech is in fact to direct the soul, whoever intends to be a rhetorician must know how many kinds of soul there are. Their number is so-and-so many; each is of such-and-such a sort; hence some people have such-and-such a character and others have such-and-such. Those distinctions established, there are, in turn, so-and-so many kinds of speech, each of such-and-such a sort. People of such-and-such a character are easy to persuade by speeches of such-and-such a sort in connection with such-and-such an issue for this particular reason, while people of such-and-such another sort are difficult to persuade for those particular reasons.

- e The orator must learn all this well, then put his theory into practice and develop the ability to discern each kind clearly as it occurs in the actions of real life. Otherwise he won't be any better off than he was when he was still listening to those discussions in school. He will now not only be able to say what kind of person is convinced by what kind of speech; on
272 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 he had learned about in school—to 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—when, in addition, he has grasped the right occasions for speaking and for holding back; and when he has also understood when the time is right for Speaking Concisely or Appealing to Pity or Exaggeration or for any other of the kinds of speech he has learned and when it is not—then,

and only then, will he have finally mastered the art well and completely. But if his speaking, his teaching, or his writing lacks any one of these elements and he still claims to be speaking with art, you'll be better off if you don't believe him. b

"Well, Socrates and Phaedrus," the author of this discourse might say, "do you agree? Could we accept an art of speaking presented in any other terms?"

PHAEDRUS: That would be impossible, Socrates. Still, it's evidently rather a major undertaking.

SOCRATES: You're right. And that's why we must turn all our arguments every which way and try to find some easier and shorter route to the art: we don't want to follow a long rough path for no good reason when we can choose a short smooth one instead. c

Now, try to remember if you've heard anything helpful from Lysias or anybody else. Speak up.

PHAEDRUS: It's not for lack of trying, but nothing comes to mind right now.

SOCRATES: Well, then, shall I tell you something I've heard people say who care about this topic?

PHAEDRUS: Of course.

SOCRATES: We do claim, after all, Phaedrus, that it is fair to give the wolf's side of the story as well.

PHAEDRUS: That's just what you should do. d

SOCRATES: Well, these people say that there is no need to be so solemn about all this and stretch it out to such lengths. For the fact is, as we said ourselves at the beginning of this discussion,⁶⁰ that one who intends to be an able rhetorician has no need to know the truth about the things that are just or good or yet about the people who are such either by nature or upbringing. No one in a lawcourt, you see, cares at all about the truth of such matters. They only care about what is convincing. This is called "the likely," and that is what a man who intends to speak according to art should concentrate on. Sometimes, in fact, whether you are prosecuting or defending a case, you must not even say what actually happened, if it was not likely to have happened—you must say something that is likely instead. Whatever you say, you should pursue what is likely and leave the truth aside: the whole art consists in cleaving to that throughout your speech. e

PHAEDRUS: That's an excellent presentation of what people say who profess to be expert in speeches, Socrates. I recall that we raised this issue briefly earlier on, but it seems to be their single most important point.

SOCRATES: No doubt you've churned through Tisias' book quite carefully. Then let Tisias tell us this also: By "the likely" does he mean anything but what is accepted by the crowd? b

PHAEDRUS: What else?

60. At 259e ff.

SOCRATES: And it's likely it was when he discovered this clever and artful technique that Tisias wrote that if a weak but spunky man is taken to court because he beat up a strong but cowardly one and stole his cloak or something else, neither one should tell the truth. The coward must say that the spunky man didn't beat him up all by himself, while the latter
 c must rebut this by saying that only the two of them were there, and fall back on that well-worn plea, "How could a man like me attack a man like him?" The strong man, naturally, will not admit his cowardice, but will try to invent some other lie, and may thus give his opponent the chance to refute him. And in other cases, speaking as the art dictates will take similar forms. Isn't that so, Phaedrus?

PHAEDRUS: Of course.

SOCRATES: Phew! Tisias—or whoever else it was and whatever name he pleases to use for himself⁶¹—seems⁶² to have discovered an art which he has disguised very well! But now, my friend, shall we or shall we not say to him—

d PHAEDRUS: What?

SOCRATES: This: "Tisias, some time ago, before you came into the picture, we were saying that people get the idea of what is likely through its similarity to the truth. And we just explained that in every case the person who knows the truth knows best how to determine similarities. So, if you have something new to say about the art of speaking, we shall listen. But if you don't, we shall remain convinced by the explanations we gave just before: No one will ever possess the art of speaking, to the extent that any
 e 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. 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 as much as possible. Wiser people than ourselves, Tisias, say that a reasonable man must put his mind to being pleasant not to his fellow
 274 slaves (though this may happen as a side effect) but to his masters, who are wholly good. So, if the way round is long, don't be astonished: we must make this detour for the sake of things that are very important, not for what you have in mind. Still, as our argument asserts, if that is what you want, you'll get it best as a result of pursuing our own goal.

PHAEDRUS: What you've said is wonderful, Socrates—if only it could be done!

b SOCRATES: Yet surely whatever one must go through on the way to an honorable goal is itself honorable.

PHAEDRUS: Certainly.

61. Socrates may be referring to Corax, whose name is also the Greek word for "crow."

62. Literally, "is likely."

SOCRATES: Well, then, that's enough about artfulness and artlessness in connection with speaking.

PHAEDRUS: Quite.

SOCRATES: What's left, then, is aptness and ineptness in connection with writing: What feature makes writing good, and what inept? Right?

PHAEDRUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: Well, do you know how best to please god when you either use words or discuss them in general?

PHAEDRUS: Not at all. Do you?

SOCRATES: I can tell you what I've heard the ancients said, though they alone know the truth. However, if we could discover that ourselves, would we still care about the speculations of other people? c

PHAEDRUS: That's a silly question. Still, tell me what you say you've heard.

SOCRATES: Well, this is what I've heard. Among the ancient gods of Naucratis⁶³ in Egypt there was one to whom the bird called the ibis is sacred. The name of that divinity was Theuth,⁶⁴ and it was he who first discovered number and calculation, geometry and astronomy, as well as the games of checkers and dice, and, above all else, writing. d

Now the king of all Egypt at that time was Thamus,⁶⁵ who lived in the great city in the upper region that the Greeks call Egyptian Thebes; Thamus they call Ammon.⁶⁶ Theuth came to exhibit his arts to him and urged him to disseminate them to all the Egyptians. Thamus asked him about the usefulness of each art, and while Theuth was explaining it, Thamus praised him for whatever he thought was right in his explanations and criticized him for whatever he thought was wrong. e

The story goes that Thamus said much to Theuth, both for and against each art, which it would take too long to repeat. But when they came to writing, Theuth said: "O King, here is something that, once learned, will make the Egyptians wiser and will improve their memory; I have discovered a potion for memory and for wisdom." Thamus, however, replied: "O most expert Theuth, one man can give birth to the elements of an art, but only another can judge how they can benefit or harm those who will use them. And now, since you are the father of writing, your affection for it has made you describe its effects as the opposite of what they really are. In fact, it will introduce forgetfulness into the soul of those who learn it: they will not practice using their memory because they will put their trust in writing, which 275

63. Naucratis was a Greek trading colony in Egypt. The story that follows is probably an invention of Plato's (see 275b3) in which he reworks elements from Egyptian and Greek mythology.

64. Theuth (or Thoth) is the Egyptian god of writing, measuring, and calculation. The Greeks identified Thoth with Hermes, perhaps because of his role in weighing the soul. Thoth figures in a related story about the alphabet at *Philebus* 18b.

65. As king of the Egyptian gods, Ammon (Thamus) was identified by Egyptians with the sun god Ra and by the Greeks with Zeus.

66. Accepting the emendation of *Thamoun* at d4.

is external and depends on signs that belong to others, instead of trying to remember from the inside, completely on their own. You have not discovered a potion for remembering, but for reminding; you provide your students with the appearance of wisdom, not with its reality. Your invention will enable them to hear many things without being properly taught, and they will
 b imagine that they have come to know much while for the most part they will know nothing. And they will be difficult to get along with, since they will merely appear to be wise instead of really being so."

PHAEDRUS: Socrates, you're very good at making up stories from Egypt or wherever else you want!

SOCRATES: But, my friend, the priests of the temple of Zeus at Dodona say that the first prophecies were the words of an oak. Everyone who lived at that time, not being as wise as you young ones are today, found it rewarding enough in their simplicity to listen to an oak or even a stone,
 c so long as it was telling the truth, while it seems to make a difference to you, Phaedrus, who is speaking and where he comes from. Why, though, don't you just consider whether what he says is right or wrong?

PHAEDRUS: I deserved that, Socrates. And I agree that the Theban king was correct about writing.

SOCRATES: Well, then, those who think they can leave written instructions for an art, as well as those who accept them, thinking that writing can yield results that are clear or certain, must be quite naive and truly ignorant of Ammon's prophetic judgment: otherwise, how could they possibly think
 d that words that have been written down can do more than remind those who already know what the writing is about?

PHAEDRUS: Quite right.

SOCRATES: You know, Phaedrus, writing shares a strange feature with painting. The offsprings of painting stand there as if they are alive, but if anyone asks them anything, they remain most solemnly silent. The same is true of written words. You'd think they were speaking as if they had some understanding, but if you question anything that has been said because you want to learn more, it continues to signify just that very same
 e thing forever. When it has once been written down, every discourse roams about everywhere, reaching indiscriminately those with understanding no less than those who have no business with it, and it doesn't know to whom it should speak and to whom it should not. And when it is faulted and attacked unfairly, it always needs its father's support; alone, it can neither defend itself nor come to its own support.

PHAEDRUS: You are absolutely right about that, too.

276 SOCRATES: Now tell me, can we discern another kind of discourse, a legitimate brother of this one? Can we say how it comes about, and how it is by nature better and more capable?

PHAEDRUS: Which one is that? How do you think it comes about?

SOCRATES: It is a discourse that is written down, with knowledge, in the soul of the listener; it can defend itself, and it knows for whom it should speak and for whom it should remain silent.

PHAEDRUS: You mean the living, breathing discourse of the man who knows, of which the written one can be fairly called an image.

SOCRATES: Absolutely right. And tell me this. Would a sensible farmer, who cared about his seeds and wanted them to yield fruit, plant them in all seriousness in the gardens of Adonis in the middle of the summer and enjoy watching them bear fruit within seven days? Or would he do this as an amusement and in honor of the holiday, if he did it at all?⁶⁷ Wouldn't he use his knowledge of farming to plant the seeds he cared for when it was appropriate and be content if they bore fruit seven months later?

PHAEDRUS: That's how he would handle those he was serious about, Socrates, quite differently from the others, as you say.

SOCRATES: Now what about the man who knows what is just, noble, and good? Shall we say that he is less sensible with his seeds than the farmer is with his?

PHAEDRUS: Certainly not.

SOCRATES: Therefore, he won't be serious about writing them in ink, sowing them, through a pen, with words that are as incapable of speaking in their own defense as they are of teaching the truth adequately.

PHAEDRUS: That wouldn't be likely.

SOCRATES: Certainly not. When he writes, it's likely he will sow gardens of letters for the sake of amusing himself, storing up reminders for himself "when he reaches forgetful old age" and for everyone who wants to follow in his footsteps, and will enjoy seeing them sweetly blooming. And when others turn to different amusements, watering themselves with drinking parties and everything else that goes along with them, he will rather spend his time amusing himself with the things I have just described.

PHAEDRUS: Socrates, you are contrasting a vulgar amusement with the very noblest—with the amusement of a man who can while away his time telling stories of justice and the other matters you mentioned.

SOCRATES: That's just how it is, Phaedrus. But it is much nobler to be serious about these matters, and use the art of dialectic. The dialectician chooses a proper soul and plants and sows within it discourse accompanied by knowledge—discourse capable of helping itself as well as the man who planted it, which is not barren but produces a seed from which more discourse grows in the character of others. Such discourse makes the seed forever immortal and renders the man who has it as happy as any human being can be.

PHAEDRUS: What you describe is really much nobler still.

SOCRATES: And now that we have agreed about this, Phaedrus, we are finally able to decide the issue.

PHAEDRUS: What issue is that?

SOCRATES: The issue which brought us to this point in the first place: We wanted to examine the attack made on Lysias on account of his writing

67. Gardens of Adonis were pots or window boxes used for forcing plants during the festival of Adonis.

speeches, and to ask which speeches are written artfully and which not. Now, I think that we have answered that question clearly enough.

PHAEDRUS: So it seemed; but remind me again how we did it.

SOCRATES: First, you must know the truth concerning everything you are speaking or writing about; you must learn how to define each thing in itself; and, having defined it, you must know how to divide it into kinds until you reach something indivisible. Second, you must understand the nature of the soul, along the same lines; you must determine which kind of speech is appropriate to each kind of soul, prepare and arrange your speech accordingly, and offer a complex and elaborate speech to a complex soul and a simple speech to a simple one. Then, and only then, will you be able to use speech artfully, to the extent that its nature allows it to be used that way, either in order to teach or in order to persuade. This is the whole point of the argument we have been making.

PHAEDRUS: Absolutely. That is exactly how it seemed to us.

SOCRATES: Now how about whether it's noble or shameful to give or write a speech—when it could be fairly said to be grounds for reproach, and when not? Didn't what we said just a little while ago make it clear—

PHAEDRUS: What was that?

SOCRATES: That if Lysias or anybody else ever did or ever does write—privately or for the public, in the course of proposing some law—a political document which he believes to embody clear knowledge of lasting importance, then this writer deserves reproach, whether anyone says so or not. For to be unaware of the difference between a dream-image and the reality of what is just and unjust, good and bad, must truly be grounds for reproach even if the crowd praises it with one voice.

PHAEDRUS: It certainly must be.

SOCRATES: On the other hand, take a man who thinks that a written discourse on any subject can only be a great amusement, that no discourse worth serious attention has ever been written in verse or prose, and that those that are recited in public without questioning and explanation, in the manner of the rhapsodes, are given only in order to produce conviction. He believes that at their very best these can only serve as reminders to those who already know. And he also thinks that only what is said for the sake of understanding and learning, what is truly written in the soul concerning what is just, noble, and good can be clear, perfect, and worth serious attention: Such discourses should be called his own legitimate children, first the discourse he may have discovered already within himself and then its sons and brothers who may have grown naturally in other souls insofar as these are worthy; to the rest, he turns his back. Such a man, Phaedrus, would be just what you and I both would pray to become.

PHAEDRUS: I wish and pray for things to be just as you say.

SOCRATES: Well, then: our playful amusement regarding discourse is complete. Now you go and tell Lysias that we came to the spring which is sacred to the Nymphs and heard words charging us to deliver a message to Lysias and anyone else who composes speeches, as well as to Homer

and anyone else who has composed poetry either spoken or sung, and third, to Solon and anyone else who writes political documents that he calls laws: If any one of you has composed these things with a knowledge of the truth, if you can defend your writing when you are challenged, and if you can yourself make the argument that your writing is of little worth, then you must be called by a name derived not from these writings but rather from those things that you are seriously pursuing. d

PHAEDRUS: What name, then, would you give such a man?

SOCRATES: To call him wise, Phaedrus, seems to me too much, and proper only for a god. To call him wisdom's lover—a philosopher—or something similar would fit him better and be more seemly.

PHAEDRUS: That would be quite appropriate.

SOCRATES: On the other hand, if a man has nothing more valuable than what he has composed or written, spending long hours twisting it around, pasting parts together and taking them apart—wouldn't you be right to call him a poet or a speech writer or an author of laws? e

PHAEDRUS: Of course.

SOCRATES: Tell that, then, to your friend.

PHAEDRUS: And what about you? What shall you do? We must surely not forget your own friend.

SOCRATES: Whom do you mean?

PHAEDRUS: The beautiful Isocrates.⁶⁸ What are you going to tell him, Socrates? What shall we say he is?

SOCRATES: Isocrates is still young, Phaedrus. But I want to tell you what I foresee for him. 279

PHAEDRUS: What is that?

SOCRATES: It seems to me that by his nature he can outdo anything that Lysias has accomplished in his speeches; and he also has a nobler character. So I wouldn't be at all surprised if, as he gets older and continues writing speeches of the sort he is composing now, he makes everyone who has ever attempted to compose a speech seem like a child in comparison. Even more so if such work no longer satisfies him and a higher, divine impulse leads him to more important things. For nature, my friend, has placed the love of wisdom in his mind. b

That is the message I will carry to my beloved, Isocrates, from the gods of this place; and you have your own message for your Lysias.

PHAEDRUS: So it shall be. But let's be off, since the heat has died down a bit.

SOCRATES: Shouldn't we offer a prayer to the gods here before we leave?

PHAEDRUS: Of course.

SOCRATES: O dear Pan and all the other gods of this place, grant that I may be beautiful inside. Let all my external possessions be in friendly harmony with what is within. May I consider the wise man rich. As for c

68. Isocrates (436–338 B.C.) was an Athenian teacher and orator whose school was more famous in its day than Plato's Academy.

279c gold, let me have as much as a moderate man could bear and carry with him.

Do we need anything else, Phaedrus? I believe my prayer is enough for me.

PHAEDRUS: Make it a prayer for me as well. Friends have everything in common.

SOCRATES: Let's be off.