

“PLAY” AND PHILOSOPHIC DETACHMENT IN PLATO

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In a phrase which sums up the parable of the cave in the *Republic*, Socrates virtually defines philosophy as “conversion of the whole soul” (518C). In simplest terms conversion comes about when reason assumes control over the sub-rational parts of human nature, which to a large extent shape conventional society and its values. Plato never tires of insisting upon the primacy of reason. Yet along with his insistence goes a lively interest in certain activities which are tied to the lower parts of human nature and which accordingly figure prominently in conventional life. The pre-eminence of reason is only one aspect of a complex balance among all parts of human nature; Plato can speak about conversion *of*, as well as conversion *from* lower impulses. From this point of view philosophy works not so much as an alien force simply hostile to ordinary experience and attitudes; instead it may open new dimensions by sympathetically accepting and extending old ones. His approach to politics is a prime instance of how the old and the new intersect. His treatment of aesthetic experience is another, and it is this which will concern us. Plato often returns to the subject of “the beautiful,” and more often than not speaks with alarm about the powerful influence exerted by poetic or erotic beauty, which naturally works through sensuous media. And yet he felt that there could be interplay and not merely conflict even between rational insight and the response to sensuous beauty, though erotic beauty in particular posed fascinating problems. Our discussion will for the most part concentrate upon his treatment of love in the *Phaedrus* and upon the way in which “play” serves as a bridge between the rational and sensuous spheres.

By embedding rational *erôs* in the familiar *erôs* which uses sensuous

media, Plato secures an immediate tactical advantage. The more sensitively and sympathetically the atmosphere of erotic situations could be evoked, the more compelling a philosophic reinterpretation of them might be. In the *Phaedrus* we are told of a class of lovers who only occasionally indulge in excessive intimacy. They are not living a philosophic life; Plato calls it merely "vulgar." Yet despite this they have begun to "become winged" and "carry off a considerable prize for their erotic madness" (256C-D). The affinity even of such love to higher love is persuasively suggested by the use of the image of the wing, which has been associated particularly with philosophic love. The decisive factor, however, here as elsewhere, is strategic, not tactical. *Erôs* is far more than an inviting analogy to philosophy. It provides a most revealing insight into the dynamic balance between the soul's parts. What is more, it is not merely a function of the soul's lower parts, for a genuine intuitive contact with true being can occur in it. In the *Phaedrus* Plato defends the paradox that *mania* is a great blessing, and permits himself a rich, at times overwrought, imagery in order to underscore the complex interplay between various levels of human nature. As a result, while the conventional vocabulary of love which he freely uses takes on new meaning, it still carries with it much of its old meaning. So insistent is he on this point in the *Phaedrus* that Socrates far outdoes Lysias—the spokesman for conventional love—in using the language of sensuous *erôs*. It is true that such candor highlights Socrates' conviction that *erôs* can be redirected. The contrast with Lysias' own evasive treatment of love is especially significant on this score, and Socrates' banter with youths in other dialogues makes the same point. But Plato is not in the first instance concerned to make so simple a point. His primary aim is to show that since familiar erotic phenomena can be philosophically saved they need not be denied. He carefully avoids the danger that philosophic *erôs* be misinterpreted as an elaborate metaphor for purely rational "passion" and that the philosophic life be seen as a life of graceless asceticism.

In both the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus* Plato makes it clear that the personality of Socrates was of critical importance for his own view of love. More specifically, maintenance of the delicate poise between purely sensuous and purely rational *erôs* depended in large measure upon Socratic "irony." Plato never really defines "irony" and has

little to say about it as such. "Play" (*paidia*) comes up more frequently, and we will use it as the focus for our discussion. The various ideas clustering around "play" are not always fully developed and brought into connection with each other, and so any consideration of this direction of his thought is bound to be tentative at many points.¹ In some passages the word "play" appears explicitly; elsewhere it is a convenient label for certain features of the dramatic level of the dialogues, or for certain tendencies in his thought.

We may begin by noting some of the ramifications of "play" in the *Phaedrus*. In one way or another it goes with each of the things treated in the dialogue: rhetoric, religious feeling, philosophic thought itself, *erôs*. Contemporary readers familiar with "toy" speeches (*paignia*), arguing paradoxical propositions, would have appreciated the point of Socrates' reference to his own defense of the proposition "*mania* is a blessing" as a "playful, mythical hymn by which we have celebrated Eros" (*mythikon tina hymnon prosepaisamen . . . Erôta*, 265c; cf. *paidiai pepaisthai* in the same passage). The rhetorical sense of "play" here also includes a touch of ironic detachment, for the depreciatory tone (cf. "tricks of the rhetorical trade," 266d) reminds us that even the most stylish rhetoric is not (*pace* Isocrates) intellectual activity at its highest. *Prospaizein* also has the religious meaning of "celebrate." Socrates' second speech is an act of genuine piety toward Eros (upon whose divinity he insists), and *prospaizein* carries on the persistent religious motif in the dialogue.² Moreover, since Socrates has been speaking as a philosopher, the phrase also shows that philosophic thought itself can assume the form of "play," or as he also puts it, of "myth." Finally, in the context of his conversation about love with the young Phaedrus, it glances at the erotic "game" in which Socrates is engaged. As we shall see, the "playfulness" of *erôs*, of myth, and of rhetoric embodies the connection of all three with a lower, sensuous level of aesthetic activity. We will be concerned especially with erotic play.

In a very general sense of the word, love is a "game" because the

¹ For a detailed study of play and irony in Plato see G. J. De Vries, *Spel bij Plato* (Amsterdam 1949). Cf. also P. Plass, "Philosophic Anonymity and Irony in the Platonic Dialogues," *AJP* 85 (1964) esp. p. 256, note 6.

² For rhetorical *paidia* see M. Pohlenz, *Aus Platos Werdezeit* (Berlin 1913) 350 ff.; K. Mras, "Platos Phaedrus und die Rhetorik," *WS* 36 (1914) 316. For *prospaizein theous* = "celebrate," cf. *Epinomis* 98ob.

lover competes to win affection and sees love as a means to excellence in virtue. Looked at from this point of view it is one of the many agonistic forms of Greek culture, and its play element would have been familiar to Plato's readers without reference to the ironic twist given to erotic play by Socrates.³ The relationship between competition for excellence and the inspiring effect of erotic beauty was deeply rooted in the history of pederasty.

The kind of *paidia* portrayed in the dialogues arises from the *erôs* that went with education. Since an education was to be had by moving about in intellectual circles and coming under the influence of a teacher or simply under the more informal influence of a friend, *erôs* was often a factor in it, too. "Alcibiades, no one cares for the birth, upbringing and education of you or of any other Athenian—unless you happen to have a lover" (*Alcibiades I* 122B). The dialogues provide numerous examples of couples whose love is tied to intellectual activity in one form or another. In the *Symposium* (217A) Alcibiades points up the connection of love and education with characteristic frankness when he says that he had hoped to learn what Socrates knew in return for his own "favors." Such *erôs* could become relatively refined; its very connection with education offered opportunity for embedding it in the context of wider aesthetic experience. We see this in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, where *erôs* is linked to sensitivity, to poetry, and to rhetoric. We can also see that in Plato's eyes sophisticated play was in danger of becoming mere modish cleverness, all the more objectionable because it could pervert education by putting up a façade to further its aims.

For detailed pictures of sophisticated erotic *paidia* we must turn to the

³ On the role of play in culture see J. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (London 1949). Plato makes the most of the competitive side of erotic situations in the dramatic structure of both of his dialogues on love. Moreover, in both he brings rhetoric, another prominent agonistic element in Greek life, into connection with *erôs*. In the case of pederasty the notion of a code guiding the "players" is especially important because even conventional pederasty was respectable only in so far as it adhered to a code. In the *Symposium* (182B ff.) Pausanias occasionally speaks of *erôs* as a contest, in which neither lover nor beloved may have an unfair advantage. In cities where the former has no skill in persuasion, the latter must offer no resistance. In Athens (where skill in persuasion is presumably common) custom "establishes a contest" (*agónothetôn*, 184A) which obliges the *erastês* to prove himself in the course of his pursuit of the youth. In the *Gorgias*—the most agonistic of the dialogues—philosophy itself is called an *agôn* (526E).

Charmides, the *Euthydemus*, the *Symposium* (notably its treatment of Socrates' relationship with Alcibiades), and the *Phaedrus*. Since the *Phaedrus* is the most sustained and subtle portrayal of erotic play, we will limit ourselves to it. The dramatic level of the dialogue is of particular importance for our purposes. When Plato says that "beautiful words" are a mark of true love, he has in mind primarily their content. But he also mentions "beautiful activities"; his portrayal of *how* a man sensitive to beauty acts and *how* he speaks supplements the theoretical treatment of love.⁴

Since Plato proposes to deal with the role that *erôs* can play in intellectual life, he builds the dialogue around a typical erotic situation: Phaedrus, Lysias, and Socrates make up a triangle in which Socrates and Lysias match persuasive powers over Phaedrus. On the day before his conversation with Socrates, Phaedrus had heard Lysias give a speech on love:

Lysias has described one of the handsome youths being "persuaded"—but not by a lover, and that is just the point on which he is so clever. For he says that one ought not to yield to a lover but to a non-lover (227c).

Once upon a time there was a youth, or rather a lad, very handsome and surrounded by very many lovers. One of them was clever; though he loved the youth as much as anyone, he had been trying to persuade him that he did not love him. And once when he was propositioning him he tried to persuade him on just this point: that one should have relations with a non-lover rather than with a lover (237b).

In both passages "the lover" and "the youth" can simply be imaginary people; nothing is said which unambiguously identifies the lover with Lysias, the youth with Phaedrus. Yet such an identification does, in fact, seem to be intended. Lysias' speech was directed to the entire group; Socrates asks Phaedrus whether Lysias was feasting "you" (plural). But he also refers to "your [singular] and Lysias' session" (227b) and frequently speaks of their relationship in erotic terms.⁵ He calls Phaedrus a youth or young man (257c, 267c). At

⁴ Beautiful words may, of course, be independent of physical beauty: "When a man speaks well he is handsome" (*Theaetetus* 185e). But physical beauty often stimulates beautiful talk ("giving birth in beauty," *Symposium* 206c).

⁵ F. Blass actually regarded the plural "you" as an interpolation in light of the singular "your," which he took to mean that no one else was present (*Die Rhythmen der attischen Kunstprosa* [Leipzig 1901] 127).

one point he then asks, "Where is the youth to whom I was speaking? I want him to hear this too so that he does not have relations with the non-lover before he hears the other side of the issue" (243E).⁶ In the second sentence the "youth" is identified with the youth *about* whom Lysias spoke. In the first he is identified with Phaedrus *to* whom Socrates and Lysias speak. For Phaedrus takes literally the invitation to hear the other side. He assumes that Socrates has him (Phaedrus) in mind and replies, "He is here next to you, always very close whenever you want him." The direct addresses to the "youth" which Socrates uses in the course of his presentation of the other side (252B, 256E) then refer to Phaedrus, while the possibility of taking them to refer to an imaginary youth is part of the game which Lysias has begun. Phaedrus had also remarked that Lysias' speech was "somehow or other erotic" (227C). Socrates is commenting on that statement when he says (237B) that the speaker was really a lover attempting to trick the youth, and in view of the exchange at 243E he is probably also hinting that *Lysias* is the real lover. Moreover, Phaedrus is called Lysias' lover (257B), Lysias is called Phaedrus' beloved (*paidika*, 236B, 279B), or they are simply paired (266C). The language again points to an erotic relationship, but in these passages the situation is complicated by the difficulty that Phaedrus, not Lysias, is the lover.

In view of this, Hackforth in his commentary on the *Phaedrus* dismisses "the assertion that Lysias was the *erastês* (in the primary sense) of Phaedrus" as "quite unfounded"; one "need not trouble to discuss it." He notes that the "reverse relationship is asserted at 236B and 279B, but only in jest." The identification of the youth with Phaedrus in 243E he regards as nothing more than "playful."⁷ But "play" is a complex, important element in the economy of Platonic dialogue as well as in love. It is true that Plato does not emphasize the idea that Lysias' persuasive speech about (non)love delivered to the young Phaedrus is itself part of an actual erotic situation. In this case, however, it seems legitimate to suppose that he need not emphasize the point precisely because it was so familiar. For unless he has something of the sort in mind it is difficult to see the point of Phaedrus' identifying himself with the youth (in 243E), especially since "playfulness" of this

⁶ Cf. P. Friedländer, *Platon*² (Berlin 1960) 3.208.

⁷ R. Hackforth, *Plato's Phaedrus* (Cambridge 1952) 9, 53.

kind could so easily be misinterpreted by a public sensitive to the sophisticated verbal play that was part of actual erotic persuasion. The dramatic setting of the dialogue is firmly embedded in contemporary manners, and if the relationship of Lysias and Phaedrus is itself seen in terms of the actual use of rhetoric for erotic persuasion, the exchange at 243E arises naturally from the situation.

If, from this point of view, the assertion that Lysias is Phaedrus' *erastês* has in fact some foundation, there still remains the difficulty that Phaedrus is also spoken of as his lover. Phaedrus appears also in the *Symposium* and *Protagoras*. In the latter he has no important role. He is probably in his 'teens, and if as commonly supposed the dramatic date is around 432, in the *Symposium*—whose dramatic date is usually placed around 416—he would be about thirty or thirty-five. If the dramatic date of the *Phaedrus* is then placed at 410, he would be thirty-five or forty, Lysias about fifty, Socrates sixty.⁸ But quite apart from the difficulty of determining the ages of characters in the dialogues, Plato seems not to have been very much concerned about chronology. Moreover, words for "youth" are flexible enough to span a relatively wide range of ages,⁹ and in any case they may be descriptions of character.

In view of this it seems best to regard the *Phaedrus* as "en dehors de toute histoire."¹⁰ Plato is not interested in precise dates; he is portraying a typical situation and a typical young man. Like Agathon in the *Symposium*, Phaedrus embodies a particularly interesting kind of immaturity. As for the difficulty in his relationship to Lysias, while Plato is uninterested in a precise dramatic date, he can hardly be careless about chronology to the point of making Phaedrus literally at once youth and lover. When Lysias is said to be his *paidika*, Plato is using a familiar metaphor which points to the many different kinds of passionate interest which are included in *erôs*. Phaedrus is his lover because he is a lover of rhetoric. Socrates uses the same language when he expresses preference for Isocratean over Lysian rhetoric by speaking of

⁸ For discussions of chronological problems in the *Phaedrus* see J. and G. Roux, "À propos de Platon," *Revue de Philologie* 35 (1961) 210–24; J. Hatzfeld, "Du Nouveau sur Phèdre," *REA* 41 (1939) 313–17.

⁹ Cf. the use of *neos* in Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 1.2.35; A. Delatte, *Études sur la littérature Pythagoricienne* (Paris 1915) 182–83.

¹⁰ L. Robin, *Platon, Oeuvres Complètes: Phèdre* (Paris 1933) x.

Isocrates as though he were his own *paidika* (278E). When a youth is led to aggressive action because of his passion for whatever he hopes to receive from his lover, he can himself wittily be called the "lover" (cf. *Meno* 70B, *Protagoras* 317C, *Euthydemus* 276D). The metaphor is, of course, all the more appropriate in view of the actual erotic feeling that could attend passion for learning. As is shown by the behavior of Alcibiades toward Socrates (*Symposium* 218) or of the youth who feels *anterôs* (*Phaedrus* 255B), the erotic element in the young "lover's" attachment can become quite prominent, and Alcibiades does in a way actually assume the role of "lover" vis-à-vis Socrates.¹¹

Lysias, then, can properly be called a lover of Phaedrus, and if we look at Plato's play with erotic motifs against this background, the tactics used by Lysias and Socrates stand out more sharply. Whether or not Plato is himself the author of Lysias' speech, from his point of view its "urbanity" (242E) is really a sophisticated cover for something close to exploitation of the young. Lysias' use of veiled language is the occasion for a great deal of play with grammatical ambiguity and double meaning. For example, at one point the non-lover says, "If you are persuaded by me, in the first place I shall be with you *not* [only] out of interest in immediate pleasure *but also* out of interest in the benefit that will be in the future" (233B). By dropping "only" Lysias de-emphasizes, but does not deny, his interest in immediate pleasure—an interest which he slyly hints at in the phrase "but also."

In satirizing Lysias, Plato is rejecting the merely ingenious verbal play which is part of a merely vulgar erotic *paidia*. Nevertheless, a highly complicated kind of play—intellectual, verbal, and erotic—has its place in philosophic activity. The *Lysis* includes a scene in which Socrates himself plays with various meanings of *philon* in such a way that his young friend is left speechless (222A ff.). Again, in the *Euthydemus*, Plato draws a detailed picture of a youth exposed to the crudest fallacies, so crude in fact that the element of play threatens to turn the arguments into mere jokes designed to paralyze resistance. The youth is accompanied by his *erastês*, whose anger at the abuse of his young friend keeps in view the "unloveliness" of such dialogue. In the

¹¹ Such complications offered an excellent opportunity for Socratic irony. In *Symposium* 213D Socrates is said to be the lover; in 222B Alcibiades says that Socrates frequently pretends to be a lover but actually assumes the role of the *paidika*.

Phaedrus (255B–56A) Plato vividly portrays the time of simultaneous physical and intellectual awakening which was especially vulnerable to clever “play.”¹²

As we have seen, for the purposes of the dialogue Plato treats *Phaedrus* psychologically as a typical youth, full of the naïve enthusiasms which can too easily be misguided. Socrates sees him as representative of “you young people” (275B) and thinks of him as the kind of “cultured person” who ought to know what the “gift of the locusts” is (259B). *Phaedrus* is beyond the initial stage of inarticulate admiration for teachers (255B ff.), but he is not yet very seriously committed to any particular kind of *erôs*. Yet we can see that his passion for Lysias’ rhetoric has genuinely erotic overtones, when Socrates cautions the “youth” against hastily “having relations with the non-lover before he has heard the other side” (243E). He has been excited by Lysias’ speech to the point of eagerly memorizing it, and as he rereads it to Socrates his face “beams” (234D) in delight.¹³ Socrates supposes that he had “ordered” Lysias to read it to him several times and that Lysias had been delighted to obey (228A)—a touch which again indicates a relationship more intimate than one might expect if *Phaedrus* had merely attended a performance by Lysias. The imperious youth reappears when *Phaedrus* vows that “Lysias will be forced by me” to write and Socrates replies, “I can believe it, as long as you are the person you are” (243D).¹⁴

The motif of nature’s beauty which dominates the opening scene of the *Phaedrus* is designed to reinforce Plato’s contention that the true lover is aware of a divine presence and experiences a “seizure” at its hands. It also serves to delineate the character of *Phaedrus*. It is he who initially seems more open to nature’s beauty; Socrates, we are

¹² Those who love properly “do not love children, but wait until the youth’s mind begins to develop and that happens when the beard begins to grow” (*Symposium* 181D). The scholiast on *Alcibiades I* 121E gives fourteen as the age of mental awakening. Aristotle (*Historia Animalium* 581B) notes that fourteen is an age of especially strong passion, which he describes in terms that recall the *Phaedrus*. On the scope of the desire to “know” in this context, cf. E. Faguet, *Pour qu’on lise Platon* (Paris 1905) 208–9.

¹³ The reference to *Phaedrus*’ “beaming” admiration may play upon his name (“Bright”), which itself suggests the commonplace about the “brightness” of youthful beauty (cf. 250B, D; 254B).

¹⁴ For the imperious youth see *Meno* 76A–B, *Symposium* 213D; Aeschines, *Against Timarchus* 76.

told, is usually not interested in such things. But Socrates does not at all hang back. On the contrary, to Phaedrus' surprise he quickly displays a far greater sensitivity to nature, the importance of which becomes apparent when it turns by stages into religious possession and poetic inspiration. We can again see in this Plato's eagerness to bring a wide variety of emotional experience into the picture. In most dialogues Socrates manages in one way or another to capture the situation, despite his customary self-effacement. His responsiveness to nature is one of the more obvious ways in which he does so in the *Phaedrus*. His domination in this respect leads into his domination on the issue of rhetoric, and he dominates there because his rhetoric is far more vital than Lysias'. The vitality of philosophic rhetoric, in turn, is largely rooted in his concept of love, and that depends upon an understanding of the divine force which in its most obvious form is present in nature, that is to say, in Eros, Pan, and the nymphs who seize and inspire Socrates. Plato repeatedly draws attention to his return to a relatively "primitive" conception of divine inspiration to explain the response to beauty.

Phaedrus' attitude toward nature, on the other hand, is symptomatic of a weakness for what is clever and up-to-date. A little shrine in the countryside brings to his mind a facile rationalization of myth, and Socrates counters with a forceful statement of his own naïve attitude toward myth (229C-D). After the dialectic discussion of rhetoric has proceeded for a while, Socrates has to warn Phaedrus not to be lulled to sleep by the locusts singing in the trees above (259A). Like many others, Phaedrus finds Socratic dialogue difficult, and that is not particularly surprising. But Plato suggests that it *is* surprising that Phaedrus and all those like him have so little insight into the true scope of the art of persuasion—erotic as well as rhetorical—in which they are so interested. In a rare moment of harshness, Socrates criticizes speeches which "try to deceive little men and to appear important in their eyes" (242E). The remark hits both Lysias and Phaedrus, but it is really aimed more generally at the passion for cleverness current among the Athenian youth represented by Phaedrus.

Since the dialogue is written around the pattern of a "romantic" triangle, Socrates' own response to the situation has erotic overtones. One of the most striking instances of his entering into the form and

spirit of conventional erotic games is his response to Lysias' thesis that a non-lover rather than a lover should be indulged (227C):

I wish that he had written about indulging a poor man rather than a rich one, an old one rather than a young one. . . . Then his speech would really have been witty and "democratic."

He casually picks up the provocative language about "indulgence" and "love" and applies it to himself; *he* is the "old," "poor" man who would stand to gain from a "democratic" distribution of love. When he comes to speak about love in his second speech, he advances the even more provocative thesis that erotic *mania* is a good thing, and he speaks in a state of great exhilaration. His high spirits and free play of imagination are ultimately symptoms of specifically philosophic inspiration. But in the dramatic context of his speech they are also the familiar signs of emotional stimulation any man might feel in the presence of a youth.

Of his own accord he boasts that he is an expert in love and prays that his art be honored by the *kaloi* (257A; cf. *Symposium* 177E). The slightly unpleasant phrase about an "art of love" recalls remarks in Xenophon about his "art of match-making" or "procuring."¹⁵ Phaedrus is well aware of Socrates' reputation in this respect. At the beginning of the dialogue he assures him that he is just the man to hear Lysias' speech *because* it was erotic (227C). And when Socrates says that he will make Lysias look "wiser" (*sophôteros*) if he attempts to deliver a counter-speech (237B), or when he refers to Anacreon as the "wise" (*sophos*, 235C), he is using *sophos* in the sense of "skillful" in the art of love as well as of "skillful" in poetic technique.¹⁶ We are reminded by occasional vocatives in his speech that he is not analyzing love in purely theoretical terms; he is speaking to a *pais kalos*, "there beside him" (243E), and he uses various terms of endearment in

¹⁵ *Memorabilia* 2.6.28, 36; *Symposium* 4.56–57. One might also add in this connection the curious conversation which Socrates has with the hetaira Theodecte in Xenophon (*Memorabilia* 3.11).

¹⁶ In the *Lysis* Socrates discusses the technique of one who is *sophos ta erôtika* (206A). Cf. Anacreon's lines to a young girl: "Thracian filly, why do you look at me askance and heartlessly run away? Do you think that I am completely without skill (*sophon*)? Why, I would throw the bridle on you very nicely. . . ." Pindar speaks of "skillful persuasion" (*sophas peithous*, *Pythian* 9.39). With his "many devices" (*poikilomêchanos*) Eros himself is a skillful "plotter" against the young and handsome (*Symposium* 203D; cf. 217C–D).

addressing Phaedrus. He engages in good-natured banter, some of which—Phaedrus' threat to use "force" on him (236C, 242A)—may reflect conventional erotic play.¹⁷

The distinctive feature of all such familiar play is that Socrates turns it to unfamiliar ends. The circumstantial description of the place in which Socrates and Phaedrus speak about love has suggested that "many little points connected with the selection of the spot are now lost to us."¹⁸ If Plato's readers would recognize the banks of the Ilissus as a familiar meeting place for lovers, they would also recognize that he has transformed what is usually done and said there. Alcibiades explicitly makes that point in connection with Socrates' words and deeds in another situation of the same sort (*Symposium* 217B):

Then sending my servant away I spent time with him alone . . . and I thought that he would immediately talk to me about those things which lovers discuss with their youths in private. But he spoke on his usual subjects.

And Alcibiades also explicitly describes this response to his love as "ironic play" (216E). As we have seen, Socrates is speaking metaphorically when he mentions his "love" for Isocrates (279B). Even at that his language would be tactless if he looked upon himself as a rival of Lysias for Phaedrus' love in a purely conventional sense. But he has, in fact, been engaging in an elaborate erotic game of a different sort; his metaphor marks his detachment, and he can even couple his love for Isocrates with Phaedrus' continuing attachment to Lysias (279B).

¹⁷ Cf. *Charmides* 155C; *Symposium* 213C-D, 222E-23A. The threat to use force need be no more than a social pleasantry (*Republic* 327C, *Philebus* 16A), but in context it is part of the behavior of the imperious youth (above, note 14). A few other little dramatic touches are taken from the "ritual" of *erôs*. Socrates' veiling of his head (237A) is a gesture of shame which recalls vase paintings of veiled young men who embody *sôphrosynê* with specific reference to *erôs* (A. Greifenhagen, *Griechische Erosen* [Berlin 1957] 53-54). His reluctance to look at Phaedrus as he (Socrates) speaks about the advantages offered by a non-lover suggests the role of sight and the eyes in love according to popular Greek psychology. Averted eyes are again a conventional sign of *sôphrosynê* (Xenophon, *Lacedaemonian Constitution* 3.4-5).

¹⁸ W. Sewall, *An Introduction to the Dialogues of Plato* (London 1841) 186. The comic poet Theopompus mentions Lycabettus as a notorious trysting place (Frag. 29 Edmonds). Aristophanes seems to have an idealized picture of such a retreat in mind when he evokes the atmosphere of the Academy, where a youth should go with a "sober comrade" to hear "the plane tree whispering [like a lover] to the elm" (*Clouds* 1005-8).

Similarly the motif of inspiration, which underscores Socrates' own emotional involvement in the situation, is at the same time used by Plato to give proper direction to those strong feelings. According to the theory of love, physical beauty pours out of the youth into the lover (251B). Socrates' inspiration, however, is attributed to the local nymphs, not to Phaedrus, and emphasis falls upon its verbal expression. In one of his many "sublimated," latently sexual images, Socrates says that he is stimulated into the unusual "flow" of *words* (*europaia*, 238C), which figures so prominently in his theory of love and links erotic play to higher forms of activity.

The notion of different soul types and of the love between souls of the same type is serious enough, but Socrates can also use it with a touch of irony when he couples himself and Phaedrus as followers of Zeus (250B; cf. 265C). Phaedrus may indeed become a philosopher, a follower of Zeus; Socrates' prayer to Eros says as much (257B). But Phaedrus' initial enthusiasm for Lysias' rhetoric has not prepared us for so casual a statement that he is a follower of Zeus. Here again the dramatic situation gives added point to the "jest." As Phaedrus naturally assumes the role of *pais kalos* eager to hear talk about *erôs*, so Socrates naturally responds by applying to him something he has said about young men in general. The theory of predestined kinship between lovers is thus related to the concrete situation, yet the compliment remains more a playful gesture than a serious judgment about their compatibility.

If irony can take the form of such playful overstatement, it can work in the opposite direction as well: that is, it can playfully understate Socrates' involvement in *erôs*. Shortly after his second speech Socrates remarks that it was for the most part "play," though he does think that it provided an adequate statement of the principle of *synagôgê* and *diairesis* (265C-D). He is, he says, a "lover" of *synagôgê* and *diairesis* (266B). We have noted that Socrates' reference to his speech as "playful" has a depreciatory tone which reminds us that, for all the contribution *erôs* and rhetoric may make, the demands of pure reason are not fully realized in them. This is made the more explicit in the reduction of his speech to the singularly unimpassioned technique of *synagôgê* and *diairesis*. The balance between reason and *mania* is restored by a simple playful turn of phrase. In much the same way

Alcibiades' overwrought *erôs* was reduced by Socrates' "usual conversation" (*Symposium* 217B). Such reduction or understatement is ironic in so far as a demonstration of dialectic technique is not, in fact, the real and complete purpose of what Socrates has said. His play with poetry and rhetoric, his intense interest in love are, after all, highly serious.¹⁹

Socrates' relationship to Lysias shows the same interplay of involvement in and yet detachment from *erôs*. We are made conscious that he is competing with Lysias in an effort to influence a young man. Phaedrus has come directly from Lysias' speech to his conversation with Socrates. One of the worst aspects of pederasty was the crude jealousy into which it could degenerate when the lover contended with a rival. Lysias makes displays of jealousy a prominent target in his attack upon love, and Socrates is careful to insist that jealousy can have no place in true love either (247A). It is true that the portrayal of love in Socrates' second speech cannot be taken as a direct reflection of Socrates' own attitude, because love is described as a life-long attachment, and in the dialogues (e.g. *Charmides* 154B, *Symposium* 222B) Socrates appears as the lover of many. Nor does his feeling toward Phaedrus include the overt passion felt by the lover. At the same time, the theory of love in its main features is based upon Socrates' behavior in such situations, his encounter with Phaedrus does have an erotic

¹⁹ Socrates' detachment from Alcibiades is balanced by the involvement with him mentioned in the *Protagoras* (309A). Plato's own play with literary style shows a similar pattern of detachment and involvement. The poetic style of Socrates' speeches in the *Phaedrus* is a genuine release from the limitations of rational analysis and enables Plato to say things about which he is quite serious. At the same time this is balanced by the austere style of Socrates' statement about the soul's nature and his proof of its immortality (245C-E). The precise manner of the passage contrasts sharply with what surrounds it, and by its very style makes the point that the soul's activity includes far more than erotic *mania*, significant as that is. Cf. F. Solmsen, *Die Entwicklung der aristotelischen Logik und Rhetorik* (Berlin 1929) 284 ff. In the same way the earlier definition of *erôs* (238B) on the one hand embodies the careful definition of terms which Lysias ignored, on the other conveys in its excited syntax the *mania* which he had also ignored. Elsewhere Plato points more explicitly to the proper balance between dialectic and *erôs*. The role of *erôs* in philosophy leads him to say that Beauty is the Form most clearly visible on earth, while other Forms are less clear because they are grasped by "duller organs" (*Phaedrus* 250B-C). In the *Politicus* (285D-E) he says that the greatest and noblest things have no clear representations, and even in the *Phaedrus* he keeps beauty in proper perspective and makes amends for the remark about "duller organs" by observing that if other Forms could be seen, they would cause an even more fierce *erôs* (250D). Cf. N. Gulley, *Plato's Theory of Knowledge* (London 1962) 122-23.

element, and it is entirely as serious in its own way as a lover's permanent involvement with one youth. By the same token his good humor toward Lysias can be taken as an illustration of the true lover's lack of jealousy. The lover described by Socrates is free from jealousy because of a self-control which is based ultimately upon insight into metaphysical principles and which, at least in the case of Socrates himself, takes the form of a peculiar ironic detachment. The Lysian lover knows nothing of this, because his "non-loving" freedom from jealousy is simply insensitive detachment. As Socrates' ironic, good-humored attitude permits him to deal safely with the young, so in a situation which invites jealousy he avoids jealousy and undermines his "rival" with delicate irony. At the end of his second speech (257A-B) he first prays that his art of love be honored by the *kaloi* and then associates himself with Phaedrus against Lysias when he asks Eros to blame Lysias for anything that has been said amiss. Anyone interested in the tactics of conventional *erôs* could appreciate this as an urbane piece of counter-persuasion. But he would also see that there is really no personal conflict between Socrates and Lysias, for Socrates goes on to say that "Lysias' lover (i.e. Phaedrus) is hanging in the balance" between philosophic *erôs* and Lysias' vulgar *erôs*. Here, as at the end of the dialogue (279B), he tactfully and unenviously assumes that Phaedrus is still more or less attached to Lysias. He even prays for Lysias' conversion to philosophy—a prayer which again gracefully undermines Lysias' present status. Phaedrus concurs in the prayer, "if this be better for us." "Us" presumably means himself and Lysias, but how deeply he has been persuaded by Socrates is indicated by his admission that Lysias may feel inadequate to compete. The change which has taken place on the dramatic level of the dialogue in Phaedrus' attitude toward what is really attractive—in terms of rhetoric and of love—illustrates what is meant by "planting seeds in the souls of the young" (276E).

We may now sum up the features of Plato's thought which we have been considering and relate them to his broader treatment of aesthetic experience. In the *Phaedrus* we are told that a wise man will put his thought down in writing for his own amusement (*paidia*), to provide himself with an intellectual diary in his old age, and to help anyone

else who follows the same path (276D). When we turn to the dialogues we see that Plato devoted great care to evoking in highly concrete terms the atmosphere of dramatic play that goes with philosophy. We might suppose that this is what he means by "play" in the *Phaedrus*, while passages which analyze ideas formally are a more serious record for the writer and legacy for others. But play is not in fact distinguished from more serious aims of writing. Every aspect of written words is "play," and so there is nothing to support such a convenient distinction. To determine then, in what sense play—both playful literary recreation of dialogue and the play which accompanied actual dialogue—could merit Plato's interest, we have looked at it against the background of a basic principle in his thought: that two spheres of reality and of experience are open to man. On the one side is experience in the familiar phenomenal world, characterized by a wide range of fascinating, if often distracting, emotions and interests which make philosophic insight difficult. On the other side is the purely rational world of true being. Though this is the primary sphere of philosophy, many bridges lead to it from the phenomenal world, and erotic beauty is one of the most important of them. Quite apart from the expanded perspective in which the philosopher views things, a complex interplay of emotions and intentions naturally goes with *erôs*. And since from his point of view *erôs* spans two worlds, it is all the more complex and offers ample opportunity for the playful attitude which Socrates regularly shows in the dialogues.

Inasmuch as it reflects man's position in the two worlds, play is a species of Socratic irony, for that—at least as it is interpreted by Plato—also arises from the tension between the two worlds. In ethical situations, irony is an expression specifically of the tension between the philosopher's genuine interest in those things which ordinarily attract men and the detachment he must preserve if he is to reshape them. Only when either of these elements is removed can ironic tension be resolved. It may be that detachment is lacking. In that case life is a very simple matter of taking things as they seem to be. The prisoners chained in the cave can be entirely unaware of any substance behind the shadows they see; the gross lover who has entirely forgotten the Beauty he once knew sees *erôs* in simple terms (*Phaedrus* 250E). Or the tension may be resolved when the soul is at last freed from its human

body and lives a life of pure reason. The complex situations inherent in earthly life are irrelevant to such existence. And even while he is still on earth the philosopher in his "practice of death" is capable of going entirely beyond complex experience and "simplifying" himself, as the *Phaedo* (81A) puts it. As occasion demands, this is true also of *erôs*. The true lover can be virtually dead to physical beauty, as Socrates is to Alcibiades at a critical moment. Diotima assures him that, in comparison with "simple, pure, unmixed" Beauty, "gold, clothing, and handsome youths" are "full of human flesh, of colors and much mortal rubbish" (211D-E). True Beauty, which does not take the form of "beautiful faces or beautiful arms" (211A), gives meaning to life, for the vision of it "is a moment livable to man if he ever has one" (211D).

Such contempt for sensuous beauty, however, is only one side of ironic play. For the art of true rhetoric outlined in the *Phaedrus* is designed to allow the philosopher to accommodate himself to any character or situation he may meet. Socrates places special emphasis upon spontaneous, flexible use of words alive to the realities of human nature. His art of love is similarly designed to help press the search for truth in situations where pure reason cannot work. "Play," then, combines interested detachment with cautious engagement and enables the philosopher to give both the rational and sensuous worlds their due. The *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* show that such play is useful especially when the philosopher confronts beauty, which naturally tends to bind man more tightly to the sensuous sphere. Erotic beauty is uppermost in Plato's mind, but the beauty of words is hardly less prominent. This is true not only in the sense that erotic beauty is closely tied to "beautiful conversation." Since writing is for him "play," the remarkable display of literary style which he makes when writing about love becomes itself an instance of Plato's own play. He explicitly connects irony, *erôs*, and play, and uses them as a summary of the philosophic life. In reflecting upon his encounter with Socrates, Alcibiades concludes that he "spends his entire life in irony (*eirônēuomenos*) and play at the expense of men" (*Symposium* 216E).

The last step in our discussion will be to consider the similar role which play has in connection with other forms of aesthetic experience (i.e. with the good taste acquired through proper education in *mousikê*)

and with sensuous experience in the widest sense (i.e., with perception).

In the *Timaeus*, "play" directly reflects Plato's ontological and epistemological scheme. Only true being is fully rational and therefore truly knowable; phenomenal being has an irreducible element of irrationality and yields not knowledge but opinion (*doxa*). Study of the phenomenal world is, therefore, "play," and its results are "myth." It is a "harmless pastime," not to be taken with complete seriousness (28A-29D, 59C). Moreover, the philosopher himself is an object in the phenomenal world. He shares its imperfection, for he is a microcosm of the tension between being and becoming, reason and sensation. Occasional references in the *Laws* to philosophy itself or to human life in general as "play" make much the same point: in light of his present place in the scheme of things man should not be taken too seriously.²⁰

In all these passages man's simultaneous life in the two worlds is tied to "playful" detachment from the lower, sensuous world. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates marks his ironic detachment from rhetoric and love by saying that his speech was "playful" or "mythical" (265C). Since his speech also contains a great deal of eschatological myth about the structure of the visible cosmos and soul's place in it, "mythical" may well here carry some of the epistemological meaning it has in the *Timaeus*. Moreover, the link between "play" and the imperfection of earthly knowledge is directly relevant to *erôs*. For in the *Symposium* Plato exploits the etymology of "philosophy" in his discussion of love; the gods possess wisdom, but Eros and the man inspired by him can only desire it (204A-B). The ambivalent, middle position of *erôs* is explicitly connected with the contrast between pure and sensuous being or between knowledge and opinion which underlies the *Timaeus'* concept of myth and play. The etymology of "philosophy" is reinforced by the heredity of Eros. As the son of Poros and Penia (203C), he is by nature an ambivalent creature—incarnated in the playful, ironic Socrates. In the *Timaeus*, Plato places his usual emphasis upon the unstable flux of phenomenal existence. *Erôs* is singled out as an instance of the disturbance which it creates for reason and from which a man should be as detached as possible (42A, 69D). In the *Symposium*, we see *erôs* in a different light. In two passages which echo each other stylistically, we first see *erôs* through Agathon's eyes as

²⁰ *Laws* 644D-E, 685A, 688B, 712B, 769A, 804B.

something entirely positive (197D), then through Socrates' eyes in sharper focus as something which has both positive and negative sides (203D-E)—that is to say, as something with which the philosopher may “play.”

The contrast between Eros' strength and weakness is the psychological form of the contrast between the higher and lower worlds of existence. In both ontological and ethical terms the lower is significant only because it points to the higher. On the cosmic level, physics is significant because it points to metaphysics. On the microcosmic level, playful engagement in *erôs* is a serious matter because it points beyond itself. It does so when it is given direction by genuine education, and in the *Timaeus* Plato touches briefly on the relationship of education to the flux of sensuous existence: through education the motion of reason distorted by the body can be brought back into harmony with the rational motion of the cosmos (44A-B).

From this it follows that education (*paideia*) is a form of play (*paidia*). This is precisely how Plato justifies erotic play, but he also works out the connection between play and education in more general terms, especially in the *Laws*.²¹ The games children play should expose them to skills and moral values which they will later come to understand rationally:

I say that the man who is going to be good in anything must practice it from childhood both in play and in serious activity. For example, the man who is going to be a good builder or farmer must play at building playhouses or at farming, and his educator must provide him with play tools. The same is true about necessary preliminary knowledge (for example, the ability to measure); . . . it is necessary to guide the pleasures and desires of children by means of play toward their ultimate goal. In sum, I maintain that true upbringing is that which will lead the soul of the playing child into love (*erôta*) of that in which he will have to be perfectly proficient when he becomes a man (643B-C).

Much the same idea appears in the scheme of education in the *Republic*. The tie between *paidia* and *mousikê* must be taken seriously (424D; cf. *Politicus* 268B). At a stage prior to development of higher

²¹ On the theory of education in the *Laws* see G. Morrow, *Plato's Cretan City* (Princeton 1960) 297 ff.; P. Boyancé, *Le Culte des Muses chez les Philosophes Grecs* (Paris 1937) 155-65.

rational powers, citizens are molded by *mousikê* and *gymnastikê*. For example, youths are to be exposed to fine diction (*kalê lexis*) which goes with fine rhythm, grace, and harmony (400D-E). At this point Socrates is still speaking about the specific question of whether words or music should be primary. But he immediately takes up a larger moral issue when he argues that all such aesthetic qualities are aspects of truly good and beautiful character. *Kalê lexis* is virtually "good style," and its connection with ethical good taste foreshadows Plato's use of "good" and "bad" literary styles in the *Phaedrus* to express good and bad attitudes toward *erôs*. Socrates goes on (401D ff.) to discuss the role of aesthetic taste and of pederasty. The man whose taste in literature and music has been properly guided is the truly harmonious man (*mousikos*). He will love in a harmonious way (*mousikôs*) and will never be open to censure for lack of culture and of good taste (*amusias*, *apeirokealias*). Socrates then closes his argument by bringing music and *erôs* together: "music should end in a passionate attitude toward beauty" (*eis ta tou kalou erôtika*, 403C).

There are, of course, important differences between Plato's theories of love and of education. In the latter, *mousikê* and *gymnastikê* are media which provide a sensuous grasp of beauty; but apart from the present passage and a few other remarks (e.g. 468C), Plato makes no specific connection between education and *erôs* in the *Republic*. When not elaborating the theory of love he prefers not to press its paradoxical side. Moreover, the grasp of beauty which occurs through child's guided play or later through *mousikê* is to some extent unconscious; the philosophic lover's play with sensuous beauty, on the other hand, is guided by a highly conscious irony.

Nevertheless, the two lines of thought embodied in these two kinds of play do converge at a deeper point, because they arise from the same sector of Plato's thought, i.e. from his interest in the interplay between the rational and irrational sides of human nature and between the sensuous and non-sensuous levels of being. The form in which beauty is experienced at this stage in the educational system answers to the prominence of the non-rational, physically oriented level of human nature.²² And the educational scheme, like the *scala amoris*,

²² Like the early stages of love in the *Symposium*, the early stages of education remain close to conventional Greek education with its emphasis upon the physical expression

is specifically tied to Plato's ontological scheme. Both erotic and educational play are modes of dealing with the non-rational, sensuous experience inseparable from life in the phenomenal world.

"Play" is therefore relevant to adults' as well as children's activity. The philosopher's play with the physical universe, for example, is in principle much like the child's play with educational toys. Both are *play* because they are first steps; both are *serious* play because they are steps toward rational insight into things like numbers (*Timaeus* 47A).²³ Aesthetic experience (in the original sense of "*aisthêsis*") is the prime mode of experience in the phenomenal world, and in Plato's epistemology *aisthêsis* makes a positive contribution to the transition from phenomena to Forms. Aesthetic experience in the narrower sense of keen appreciation of sensuous beauty has an equally positive role in education. Yet Plato takes account of philosophic detachment from this sphere: the lover "plays," the cosmologist "plays," he himself "plays" when he writes dialogues. The conception of "play" goes a long way toward explaining how he could call philosophy *mousikê* and the philosopher *mousikos*, *philokalos*, *erôtikos* (*Phaedrus* 248D).²⁴

of virtue; cf. H. Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity*, trans. G. Lamb (London 1956) Ch. 4. Virtue is initially based upon proper guidance of pleasure and pain (*Laws* 653A-B; *Republic* 429C-D). While the body is the special province of gymnastic, all education at the earlier stage is psychosomatic. The young have an irresistible impulse to move (*Laws* 653D-E), which is satisfied in song and dance, for man alone can appreciate rhythm. Poetry is in effect traced back to a physiological basis (though Plato is careful to add that it is a gift of the gods); we "perceive" rhythm and harmony with "pleasure," and *choros* is derived from *chara* (delight). Much of this parallels Plato's treatment of *erôs*. In *Laws* 782E-83A he says that *erôs* and the desire for food or drink can be turned to good ends instead of to mere pleasure if they are controlled by fear, custom, and true reason helped by "the Muses and other festive gods."

²³ The child plays because he cannot yet enter the serious adult world, the philosopher because his insight into true being makes him unwilling any longer to be entirely serious about it. For Heraclitus' use of a formal proportion to locate man's middle position, and Plato's borrowing of the pattern, see H. Fränkel, "A Thought Pattern in Heraclitus," *AJP* 59 (1938) 309-37. Fragment 79 (Diels) uses the proportion "child:man::man:daimones" (cf. Frag. 78); in Frag. 70 human opinions are called "child's playthings." Cf. also Frags. 56 and 121.

²⁴ Cf. *Symposium* 187B-C for *mousikê* and *erôtikê technê*; for the fusion of the two in later pastoral tradition see H. Chalk, "Eros and the Lesbian Pastoral of Longos," *JHS* 80 (1960) 37, 51. For a study of *mousikê* from its earliest use as incantation to its place in stellar theology, see the book of Boyancé (above, note 21). Aristotle was sufficiently interested in fine points of good taste to remark upon the great-souled man's voice level and walking speed. In his commentary on the *Phaedrus*, Hermeias notes that the

outward power of *mousikê* makes one talk, act, or move *eurythmôs* and *emmetrôs* (91.16–17 Couvreur). Cf. *Charmides* 159B; Xenophon, *Symposium* 1.10. The bad reputation of the Boeotians in respect to pederasty may be linked to their reputation for a lack of refinement; cf. U. von Wilamowitz, *Pindaros* (Berlin 1922) 52–53. Marrou (above, note 22) 5 ff., 71, notes that the young men in Homer (*Iliad* 1.473) are singers and dancers, and compares early pederastic graffiti with *Laws* 654A–B, where Plato, in linking song and dance with human nature, says that a man who cannot dance is not educated. For the connection of good playing and dancing with *erôs* in early Greek inscriptions, see M. Bowra, *Homer and His Forerunners* (Edinburgh 1955) 7. Aeschines denounces prostitution (i.e. ugly, vulgar *erôs*) as the act of an “uneducated” person (*Against Timarchus* 137).

For the aesthetic element in the theory of Forms, see C. Wenzig, *Ideenlehre im Phaedrus* (Breslau 1883) 41 ff. Wenzig treats the vision of Forms beyond the heavens as simply a projection of man’s inner aesthetic experience. Cf. J. Stewart, *Plato’s Doctrine of Ideas* (Oxford 1909) 128 ff.; G. Mehlis, “Die platonische Liebe,” *Logos* 3 (1912) 320.

For a discussion of the relationship of play to aesthetic experience from a Freudian point of view, see H. Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization* (London 1956) 172 ff. Marcuse refers to Schiller’s *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*. In the introduction to his translation (London 1954) Reginald Snell summarizes Schiller’s thesis as follows: “The whole burden of the argument in these Letters is, in a single sentence, that Man must pass through the aesthetic condition, from the merely physical, in order to reach the rational or moral. The aesthetic condition itself has no significance—all it does is to restore Man to himself, so that he can make of himself what he wills. . . . Sensuous Man, then, must become aesthetic Man before he can be moral Man” (p. 12). The sequence sensuous–aesthetic–moral/rational and the relative worth of aesthetic experience parallel important parts of the pattern behind the sequence of three speeches in the *Phaedrus*. “In his theory of the two fundamental impulses, Schiller connects Man’s sensuous nature with the material impulse, and his reason with the formal impulse. The former, which rules him as a physical being, lays upon him the shackles of physical necessity, and seeks to make him (in Fichtean phrase) pure Object; the latter comes to his rescue from the Absolute, and is capable of leading him back to the Absolute. So Man is a creature of two worlds, urged in two opposite directions at once—to the empirical, the contingent, the subjective on the one hand, and to the free, the necessary (the necessity of the autonomous moral law), the objectively valid on the other. He has to satisfy the demands of both capacities and somehow bring them into harmony with one another; and this he does through the aesthetic, which unites matter and form, sensuousness and reason. Not until he has achieved that harmony is he free . . .” (p. 13). Snell’s comment (p. 14) on interpreting Schiller is pertinent to the *Phaedrus*: “No, it is not fair to criticize this work for what it is not; it is as much a piece of feeling as of thinking—a passionate attempt, by gazing at the opposites of reason and sensuousness, freedom and caprice, mind and Nature, duty and inclination, absolute and finite, activity and passivity, the formal impulse and the material impulse . . . to grasp the unity lying behind them. . . . As a piece of philosophical thinking they [the *Letters*] may be gravely faulty, as an essay in sustained argument they may be occasionally perplexing, but as an educational manifesto they are pure gold.”