# SEEKING THE GOOD, THE TRUE AND THE BEAUTIFUL AS A WAY OF LIFE: A COMMENTARY ON PLATO'S *PHAEDRUS*

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The *Phaedrus,* a dialogue from Plato's middle period, provides us with a holistic look into the general orientation of Plato's philosophy—his understanding of the philosopher as a real person who is actually living the philosophical way of life—as well as specific focuses on various aspects of his philosophical thinking up to that point in his life when he penned this astounding text. Metaphysics, Epistemology, Psychology, Ethics are all being juggled and investigated simultaneously (and with Plato's usual good sense of humor) around a central concern to understand the human situation and the best way to go about living our life here on earth, especially in regard to dealing with issues around sex, relationships, and material success--our ethical orientation, in other words.

Everything is happening all at once in the *Phaedrus*, often oddly and ironically: for example, there is Socrates going out into the country, out of the polis, something he never does! He is a creature of the rational state; outside the walls of the rational precinct of the city, the countryside is wild with myth and fancy and madness, nymphs and gods fluttering all about and buzzing like cicadas, capable of transporting one, carrying one away on the wings of madness, beyond the rational—a danger for the reasonable, safety-of-the-city-dweller: Socrates; and yet there he is in the country! Eros dwells in the wild country more openly than in the rational polis. But eros is only part of what is happening in the *Phaedrus.*

Socrates is going off into the country with his friend, Phaedrus, to exchange *speeches* on erotic love. What!? This is very unlike the Socrates we know and love so well. Plato's contemporaries must have chuckled at Plato getting Socrates to go out to the country for this odd purpose; out of the rational city to consider the madness of love; very odd for Socrates. Here's why. First of all, it is odd just because Socrates is going out of the city; second, he is going to listen to and make speeches, something he has always been strongly against, being a dialectician and master of the question and answer method of inquiry--the conversational method to which speeches, especially rhetorical speeches, are an antipode and contrary! The

speechifying of the sophists and the rhetoricians, their long-winded contrived oratory meant to persuade you to see things their way, to convince you using every trick in the book regardless, especially using long, highly involved flowery persuasive speeches….these rhetoricians and persuasive orators were a longstanding and familiar target of Socrates' philosophical criticism. Two lifestyles are butting heads here; two different orientations to living your life: the way of persuasion, personal interest, subjective moral relativism (rhetoricians) versus the way of reason and virtue (philosophers).

This is a very momentous event in the development of western European/American consciousness twenty-seven hundred years ago. The voice of reason was emerging over and against the older voices of myth and the mystification of mytho-poetic-religious consciousness as a source of understanding metaphysical, epistemological, psychological, and ethical questions about the world and our place in it. The dawn of a very new era, the era where reason was challenging the old 'gods', an era which continues to exert an influence on western consciousness today.

It is highly ironic and playful of Plato that Socrates is made to give, first, a mocking false speech, and then a grand speech amounting almost to a treatise on erotic love and the nature and destiny of the human soul. Still, it is odd that Socrates, the dialectician, should be giving such a speech at all! Perhaps this reflects Plato's own personal questioning of the very idea of to what extent speeches can possibly speak truly, to what extent there might be a true rhetoric, a common ground between philosophical argument and rhetorical persuasion. Plato is a philosopher; he is questioning….

Remember that papyrus and even the inscribed word itself is still a somewhat recently discovered/developed technology of the day in 5$^{th}$ century B.C. Athens and thus still somewhat controversial, perhaps not unlike what is happening with the development of the electronic digitalization of the word today. Is it good or bad? Oral speech goes right to your soul according to Socrates—who wrote nothing-- and the speaker is there to defend his or her speech, unlike the written word. Of course, oral speech that is written down and then read is also different from free style oral speech; what might amount to, in fact, good rhetoric if it is directed by a love for the truth and not merely a desire to persuade.

Lysias is a rhetorician. And Phaedrus thinks Lysias' clever little speech about how it would be better for the beloved boy to give his favors to the man who is not mad with love for him is so wonderful! Socrates is mocking this cleverness of the rhetorician in his mock response speech in the mock-style of the rhetoric of Lysias. Now Phaedrus becomes really ga-ga over Socrates; Phaedrus is the typical person who is led this way or that easily, and Socrates is playing with him a bit. Socrates' whole apology for his hideous first false speech--in perfect rhetorical form nevertheless--is a thinly veiled poke at the ethical inadequacy of the subjective moral relativism of the rhetoricians. It is very ironic and no doubt clear to everyone in Plato's day, that Socrates' apology for lapsing into the mode of the supposed-sophist in his first speech is ironic--arguing successfully for something he totally does not believe. Quite unlike Socrates! This is total mocking (by Plato) of the moral relativism of sophist rhetoricians like Lysias, and, in other dialogues, Gorgias and Protagoras.

If you wanted to be successful in the world of 5th century Athens (or even today), what you would have done is to go study rhetoric and oratory and the art of persuasion: how to convince others (individuals, small groups, and large groups) to see things your way; how to speak in such a way that your audience is convinced of the truth of what you say, even though you, yourself, may well know that you could construct a persuasive speech that would be just as convincing to the other side of the argument. What bothered Socrates about this was that it was the rhetorician's personal skill (techne) at persuading--guided by subjective self-interest--that steered the process, i.e., moral relativism. This was accompanied by the flat-out rejection of being committed to discovering or pursuing the truth for its own sake, free of personal interest (the sophists charged a fee for their services; not Socrates!) which *necessarily* distorts the discovery of truth or even the clear search for truth.

The supposed 'logos' of the rhetorician is all self-promotion and self-interest, and his/her technē is totalitarian manipulation of reality with no true moral regard for the other. This is what bothered Socrates: the subjective power of rhetoric did not insure wisdom, and thus true happiness. To be led astray by the rhetoricians was to risk losing the good life. For Socrates the good life was the reflective and self-reflective life, the life of the philosopher lived in accordance with reason—although not devoid of a little madness occasionally tarrying with Dionysius or Aphrodite.

You do not have to be a full-time philosopher to benefit from the philosophical way of life … the way of life of those who have a love of wisdom and seeing truly. All paths lead to this true philosophical end anyway, in Plato's view. Even erotic love--that most common yet incomprehensible experience--in its best form, is geared toward the ultimate end of human growth and development for Plato: the contemplation of pure reason (freed from the constraints of the restrictive body) gazing at the perfect truth in its shining forth, loving this shining forth of the truth, and being totally fulfilled in this ecstasy forever, after ten thousand years of incarnations and reincarnations, of course. Such was Plato's vision of the eternal life of the soul—several centuries before Christianity arrived on the scene.

The *Phaedrus* makes it clear that Plato's philosophy is not an abstract, bloodless reflection on idealized otherworldly entities incomprehensible to and beyond the concern of most (an elitist vision that has come to us today through the interpretive lens of later Christianity), but, rather, Plato's pagan vision is a very worldly vision of what it means to live a life of the highest and best kind possible for a human beings, here and now, in this world—with an eye to the next world, to be sure (Are we not immortal?)--devoted to questioning the things that many others take for granted, putting into question what you do not really know insofar as you do not know it, even if many others seem to think they do know it; challenging current superstitions and mytho-poetic versions of reality and all prejudice or pre-judging; questioning authority and not taking things for granted; and, above all seeking the true and the beautiful and the good everywhere and in all things at all times in this world of becoming, living a life oriented in this way toward virtue and our final end…to be one with the true and the beautiful and the good forever….

This is the ecstatic and mystical vision of the philosophical way of life Plato is thinking about, once again, in the *Phaedrus.*