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ABSTRACT

The *Phaedrus* depicts the Platonic Socrates’ most explicit exhortation to ‘philosophy’. The dialogue thereby reveals something of his idea of its nature. Unfortunately, what it reveals has been obscured by two habits in the scholarship: (i) to ignore the remarks Socrates makes about ‘philosophy’ that do not arise in the ‘Palinode’; and (ii) to treat many of those remarks as parodies of Isocrates’ competing definition of the term. I remove these obscurities by addressing all fourteen remarks about ‘philosophy’ and by showing that for none do we have reason to attribute to them Isocratean meaning. We thereby learn that ‘philosophy’ does not refer essentially to contemplation of the forms but to conversation concerned with self-improvement and the pursuit of truth.

Keywords: Socrates, *philosophia*, conversation, self-improvement, *Charmides*, *Protagoras*.

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I. INTRODUCTION

This paper concerns the way Plato presents what he terms ‘philosophy’ (philosophia). I argue that we have reason to reassess the Republic-inspired view that Plato believes philosophy simply to be contemplation of the forms. In many dialogues, he treats philosophy instead as a self- and other-improving mode of conversation and social engagement. Platonic forms may of course give a possible metaphysical or epistemological explanation for the benefit of such conversations. But this is consistent with the term ‘philosophy’ pertaining directly to an interpersonal practice concerned with mutual self-improvement. In this paper I can go only a short ways in reconsidering Plato’s attitudes toward ‘philosophy’. Yet Plato’s importance to the early definition of philosophy is so profound that I hope even this small contribution is valuable.¹

Plato’s Phaedrus ends in a reflection on the meaning and application of the term ‘philosopher’. Socrates tells Phaedrus to report to his dear Lysias the findings of the conversation depicted over the previous fifty Stephanus pages. Whoever can compose speeches knowing the truth, and then defend those speeches and show their minimal worth, Socrates says, we should call “philosopher”, or something like that’ (278b8–5; cf. καλεῖν, 278d3, προσερεῖς, 278e2).² Socrates suggests that Lysias the speechwriter does not yet deserve to be called by that name (ἐπωνυμία) but that Phaedrus should himself strive to deserve it. In response to Socrates’ judgment about his favorite, Phaedrus asks Socrates what kind of person they might call his favorite, Isocrates (φήσομεν εἶναι). In answer, Socrates praises Isocrates as by nature better than Lysias in speeches (λόγους), as more nobly blended in character, and as more promising than anyone now alive (279a3–7). Socrates adds that there is by nature within Isocrates’ mind (διανοίᾳ) some philosophy (τις φιλοσοφία), and because of this, a more-divine impulse could lead him to better things, if he should want so to be led.

In the course of the conversation with Phaedrus that leads up to these closing remarks, Socrates has already said much about the meaning of the name ‘philosopher’ that is to be relayed to Lysias. His mythical Palinode speech linked philosophers with truth-discovery, and he later outlined an argument that assumed that philosophizing involves knowing how things really are, not just how they seem to be (261a3–262c4). Socrates’ discussion of reading, and his continued request for answers and revised answers, shows the importance of defending one’s views (275d4–276a7). His doubt that he could ever give a proper account of the soul, or of himself, suggests that human existence calls for deep modesty and reserve (246a4–6, 266b3–c1).

We might wonder, however, about the philosophia mentioned in the dialogue’s closing lines as being by nature within Isocrates’ mind. Does it refer to the same philosophy that Socrates wants Phaedrus to recommend to Lysias, which includes investigating reality, giving reasoned arguments in support of one’s positions, and recognizing the meagerness of any written account? From one perspective, it seems it must. Socrates never posits a multiplicity of types of philosophy. Further, the proximity between the two remarks about philosophy suggest continuity in meaning between them. And even if it simply seems too ludicrous to identify Isocrates with philosophy, Socrates does not say that Isocrates exemplifies philosophy; he says only that Isocrates has tina philosophian, ‘some’ or ‘a kind of’ philosophy.³ From another perspective, however, it might seem that Isocrates’ philosophia must