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Shame and conflict – Lysis’s philosophical akrasia

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I

At one stage in Plato’s Lysis, Socrates is questioning Lysis’s friend, Menexenus. When they have reached another dead end, Socrates asks him

“Is it perhaps, Menexenus,” I said, “that we weren’t inquiring in the right way at all?”

“I think so, Socrates,” said Lysis, and blushed as he said it;

Here Lysis is breaking in on Menexenus’s conversation, although perhaps, Socrates’s question being about the way they have been proceeding, the conversation is more or less over by now, and we should not consider the foul too serious. In any case, Lysis shows a lack of restraint in responding the way he does, which is also emphasized in the comment that the narrator makes about Lysis’s being ashamed – this narrator happens to be Socrates:

for it seemed to me that the words escaped without his wanting them to, because of the intensity with which he was paying attention to what was being said, and it was clear that it was the same, too, all the while he was listening.¹

And having said this, Socrates tells us that he went on questioning Lysis, because he wanted to give Menexenus a break. It is with Lysis’s comment, his reaction, and Socrates’s explanation of both that we will be concerned.

We will be concerned with these things because understanding Lysis’s behaviour is an important part of interpreting the dialogue. Rather than being one of the ‘dramatic stretches [that] are so uncunningly tacked on to the interrogation-stretches’,² this episode shows Lysis’s progress under Socratic questioning. This merits careful interpretation especially in a Platonic dialogue, where the relation between narrated arguments and narrated action is always significant but seldom clear.³

What we will see on closer inspection is a conflict within Lysis between his newly stimulated love for wisdom and his habitual self-restraint. Born and raised an aristocrat, Lysis experiences conflict when his mind is enticed outside its wonted limits. What he experiences is, in fact, shame of himself: he notices that part of him falls short of the ideal he has been brought up with and to which part of him still adheres. His is a philosophical akrasia.

¹213d1-5: ‘ara mê, ên d’ego”, o” Menexene, to parapan ouk ortho”s ezêtoumen? – ouk emoige dokei, o” So”krates, ephê ho Lusis kai hama eipo”n êruthriasen: edokei gar moi akont’auton ekpheugein to lekhthen dia to sphodra prosekhkein ton noun tois legomenois, déloun d’en kai hote êkroato houto”s ekho”n.’ I use the translation by Penner & Rowe.


³ ‘[A]ll aspects work together, and none is fully intelligible without the others’, Penner & Rowe: xii; Gadamer speaks of a ‘Doric harmony’ between logos and ergon (passim; the Doric harmony comes from Laches 193d11-c2). Other studies of the Lysis that have focused particularly on the action aspect of the dialogue include Hoerber, Haden (both not convincingly), Tindale, Gonzalez 1995.
In approaching a passage like this, one is easily misled by what we think nowadays that emotions look like, and what behaviour can be expected of young people. For this reason it seems useful to start with the considered view of an ancient Greek, that is, Aristotle’s description of what it is to be ashamed. Central features of his analysis allow us to identify Lysis’s case as broadly a case of shame. However, it will also become clear that Aristotle’s is not the last word on the matter, since he has hardly any room for the notion of feeling ashamed before oneself, rather than before others. The Lysis portrays what Democritus advocated as a moral principle: that one should above all be one’s own judge, and feel shame in one’s own regard rather than in others’. Against the background of these other two ancient texts on shame, we will be able to return to the Lysis passage.

In order not to have to consider the subtle differences specific to English between, for instance, ‘embarrassment’ and ‘shame’, I treat ‘shame’ as a thin notion that covers such differentiations.

II

Since W.W. Fortenbaugh’s 1970 article, it has become common practice to refer to the definitions of emotions in Aristotle’s Rhetoric as reliable guides to what the ancient Greek considered these emotions to be. In the case of shame, Aristotle says what it is, and towards whom it is felt. The core of it is as follows:

Let shame, then, be a kind of pain or disturbance in connection with those evils that appear to pertain to disrepute, whether present, past or future.\(^4\)

A little later on Aristotle gives a more expanded version:

And since shame is an imagination connected with disrepute, and felt for its own sake and not for its consequences, and none considers reputation except through those who confer it, one must needs feel shame before those whom one holds in regard.\(^5\)

In both formulations the focus of the emotion is a perceived disrepute (adoxia). Since repute is conferred by others, he says, this emotion is felt before others.\(^6\)

Aristotle says that the things we feel ashamed about, the grounds of shame, involve moral weakness. He mentions examples of cowardice, greed, weakness, intemperance. Because of this essential connection between bad character and shame, there can be no place for shame in the life of a good man, he says in a brief section in the Nicomachean Ethics. In this section he also observes that shame makes one turn red, a useful physical marker that we can use to recognize what Aristotle calls shame in other texts and contexts.

In Aristotle’s view, then, as he has outlined it in the Rhetoric, shame is felt at flaws of character before the reputation-conferring regard of others. This is fair enough as far as

\(^4\) 1383b12-13: ‘esto” de aiskhune lupe tis e tarakhe peri ta eisadoxian phainomena pherein to”n kako”n, e paronto”n e gegonoto”n e mellonto”n […]’ The translation is Lawson-Tancred’s.
\(^5\) 1384a24-6: ‘epei de peri adoxias phantasias estin he aiskhune, kai tautes autes kharin alla me to”n apobainonto”n, oudeis de tes doxes phrontizei all’e dia tous doxazontas, anagke tous aiskhunesthai ho”n logon ekhei’
\(^6\) Cf. Konstan 103-4. One could read 1384a24-6 as an analytic statement that specifies that for any attribution of reputation, there must be an agent to do the attributing, and subsequently subsume the self under the agents that are capable of doing the attributing. This would attenuate the degree to which Aristotle’s account focuses on the focus on others. There is no mention, however, of this type of subsumption in the rest of Aristotle’s story. I take it as the most natural reading of this passage that it concerns other people.
it goes, but it does not go far enough. As will emerge in my discussion of the *Lysis* episode below, Lysis primarily feels shame before himself, not others.

The phenomenon of feeling ashamed before oneself is not alien to the ancient Greeks. In three of the surviving fragments of Democritus, shame before oneself is recommended as a moral rule. The most expressive of these fragments (B 264) says:

Do not feel more shame [*aideisthai*] before men than before yourself; be no more willing to do evil if no one is to find out than if all men are to know. But show respect [*aideisthai*] above all before yourself and establish this law for your soul, so as to do no unseemly act.\(^7\)

Democritus here sets up an internal ideal against which a good man should measure his conduct. Falling short of that ideal is a reason to be ashamed, even if no one else is there to watch you; you are your own judge. To be sure, the standard situation in the background of this piece of advice is one in which you feel shame before others, but that is hardly surprising. All the same, as Douglas Cairns puts it, ‘in exhorting his audience to experience self-directed *aido*s he is clearly not urging them to do the impossible’.\(^8\) Moreover, in selecting shame (*aido*s and *aiskhune*) to frame these maxims, Democritus chooses an internal emotional disposition as a guide to behaviour, rather than simply rational calculation of the best consequences.\(^9\)

An emotional response of precisely this kind is what we see in Lysis’s case, as well as an instance of the kind of morally commendable behaviour that distinguishes the well-bred aristocrat from the man in the street.

III

Let us try to get to know Lysis a little better, so we also understand his emotions better. We might start with his family. In the dialogue we hear that Lysis was called by his patronymic, son of Democrates, ‘because his father is so widely known’.\(^10\) We also hear, when Ctesippus mocks Hippothales, who is in love with Lysis, that Hippothales went around singing ‘about Democrats, and Lysis, the boy’s grandfather, and about all the boy’s ancestors, things like wealth and racehorses and victories at the Pythian and Isthmian and Nemean Games with the four-horse team and the single horse and rider’\(^11\); the popularity of Lysis the grandfather seems to be confirmed by a large number of red-figure vases with the inscription ‘*Lusis kalos*’, which are dated to the 470s and 460s.\(^12\) This family was from the deme of Aixone, to the south of Athens, where there was a cult of Heracles. When Ctesippus continues he says something about that: ‘It was the reception given to Heracles that he was going through in some poem the day before yesterday – how because of their kinship with *Heracles* their ancestor received *Heracles* as a visitor, the ancestor

\(^7\) *Meden ti mallon tous anthro"pous aideisthai heo"tou mede ti mallon exergazesthai kakon, ei mellei medeis eidesein e hoıı pantes anthro"poi: all’heo"ton malista aideisthai, kai touton noman tei psukheıı kasthestai, ho"ste meden poiein anepitedeion*’ (Trans. Kahn) The other relevant fragments are 84, 244.
\(^8\) Cairns: 370.
\(^9\) Ibid.: 368.
\(^10\) 204c3-5: ‘*eti patrothen eponomazetai dia to sphiadra ton pateria gigno"skesthai autou*’
\(^11\) 205c6: ‘*ha de he polis hole aidei peri Demokratous kai Lustidos tou pappou tou paidos kai panto"n peri to"n progono"n, ploutous te kai hippotrophias kai nika kai Isthmioi kai Nemeia tethrippois te kai kelesi, tauta poiei te kai legei, pros de toutous eti touto"n kroniko"tera*’
\(^12\) Nails: 195
being himself descended from Zeus and the daughter of the founder of the deme’;\textsuperscript{13} it is tempting to infer that Lysis’s family were priests of the cult at Aixone.\textsuperscript{14}

Clearly, then, Lysis was a high-born youth, and apparently a very beautiful one too. ‘How noble and dashing a love this is that you’ve discovered!’\textsuperscript{15} Socrates compliments Hippothales. He is certainly worth a guardian’s constant protection, in any case, as Socrates learns with feigned wonder when he questions Lysis.\textsuperscript{16} Such high standing and great beauty call for exceptional restraint, the virtue \textit{par excellence} for young people.\textsuperscript{17} And not only can we expect Lysis to share this ideal of how a young boy should be, it seems that he pretty much embodies that ideal. His is a model character, ‘worth talking about not just for his beauty but for his beauty-and-goodness’,\textsuperscript{18} as Socrates observes at entering the palaestra. Lysis is standing with some others, forming a circle around yet others who are playing knucklebones. When Socrates and Ctesippus sit down to have a chat, with the non-evident but very explicit intention of seducing Lysis to come sit with them, he looks at them every now and again, but stays where he is, ‘hesitating to come over to us on his own’.\textsuperscript{19} Later, when responding to Socrates’s questions is becoming rather risqué, Lysis is the first to fall silent.\textsuperscript{20}

So this is the Lysis that becomes involved in a dialectic conversation with Socrates. And this is the Lysis who responds to his own words by feeling ashamed of himself. The blushing episode shows us, on the micro level, what conversation with Socrates is doing to him. Two other episodes in the dialogue are worth mentioning at this point, as they illustrate the same point on a more macro level. The first is the talk Socrates has with Lysis when Menexenus is called away for a while to do some sacrificing; this is before the blushing episode. When Lysis agrees with Socrates that in order to be happy, you must be able to do anything you want, Socrates asks him why there are so many things that his parents won’t allow him to do. Lysis’s first answer is that he has not come of age yet. But Socrates rejects this answer, and makes Lysis do so too. Instead, Socrates says, it is wisdom that you must go after. For if you are wise, everything and everyone will belong to you. This appeal to Lysis’s vanity is turned on its head when Socrates points out that this is evidently

\textsuperscript{13} 205c6-d2: ‘\textit{ton gar tou} Herakleous xenismon pro"ten hemin en poiemati tini dieiei, ho"s dia ten tou Herakleous suggeneian ho progonos auto"n hupodexaito ton Heraklea, gegeno"s autos ek Dios te kai tes tou demou arkegetou thugatros [...]’
\textsuperscript{14} ‘Probable’: Nails: 196. Lysis’s father-in-law was to be one Isthmonicus, probably the same Isthmonicus who was among the signatories to the Peace of Nicias. Lysis’s gravestone has been found, for which see Stroud.
\textsuperscript{15} 204e9-10: ‘ho"s gennaion kai neanikon touton ton ero"ta pantakhei aneures’
\textsuperscript{16} 208c-d.
\textsuperscript{17} In this context, ‘\textit{aido"s}’ in the sense of the disposition not to do shameful things and ‘\textit{so"phrosune}’ are closely related. A key text is the \textit{Charmides} (with as one of Charmides’s proposed definitions of \textit{so"phrosune} precisely \textit{aido"s}, 160e2-5), which is a close kin of the \textit{Lysis} in terms of content, style, and method. The theme can be traced back to Telemachus (\textit{Od.} 3.24, 4.158-60). The \textit{EN} passage referred to above states that \textit{aido"s} befits young people, but not the old (1128b16-8). See also Cairns: 104, 314-5, 373.
\textsuperscript{18} 207a2-3: ‘\textit{ou to “kalos ei, nai”monon axios akousai, all’hoti kalos te kagathos}’ (Penner & Rowe read eijnai).
\textsuperscript{19} 207a5-7: ‘\textit{peristrephomenos onu ho Lusis thama epeskepeito hemas, kai delos en epithumo"n proselthein. teo"s men oun eporei te kai o"knei monos prosienai [...]’
\textsuperscript{20} 222a4.
not the case now. So you are not wise, he says to Lysis, and therefore your parents do not love you either.\(^{21}\) Socrates makes parental love fundamentally dependent on the child’s wisdom, and rejects traditional heredity in favour of sophistic, knowledge-based property claims.

The second episode that shows the conflict between Socrates’s influence and the traditional order is at the end of the dialogue. The guardians of Menexenus and Lysis enter to take them home; Socrates and the others try to prevent them doing so, and, significantly, Menexenus and Lysis do not wish to go. In the end the guardians win, but the gathering has not made the boys more obedient.\(^ {22}\)

In this context, *philosophia*, the desire for wisdom, is something that upsets the traditional order.\(^ {23}\) It is also in these terms, I contend, that we should understand Lysis’s shame. In this case, the conflict becomes internal. Lysis has made his society’s ideas about virtue and proper behaviour his own; but Socrates’s conversation incites other desires in him. What he is offered here is so appealing that he cannot but be spell-bound. And then he blurts out:

“I think so, Socrates,” said Lysis, and blushed as he said it; for it seemed to me that the words escaped without his wanting them to, because of the intensity with which he was paying attention to what was being said.\(^ {24}\)

It is his love of wisdom that both delights Socrates, as he says in the immediate sequel, and conflicts with Lysis’s habitual self-control.\(^ {25}\) He did not want it to happen, but it did. In effect, we have here a case of *akrasia*, as it were; the pleasures of wisdom have proved too strong. Or, if this image captures the situation better, Lysis’s traditional view of himself has been lulled asleep or otherwise by the better Marsyas, to paraphrase Alcibiades,\(^ {26}\) only to wake up startled when he hears himself say something he did not plan on saying.

To be sure, it also requires restraint to be a man that Socrates would recognize as good, but the type of restraint is different from the traditional one. Consider what Socrates says in the *Charmides*, in response to Charmides’s idea that temperance (*sôphrosunê*) consists in doing things quietly (*hêsuchêi*); that would mean, Socrates protests, that it is temperate to understand and investigate slowly (*hêsuchêi*) as well, but that cannot be right (159b-60b). Even if his refutation in part depends on what is traditionally held to belong to temperance (as when he praises swiftness of body), the direction Socrates takes makes clear...
that he regards mental acuity as much more virtuous than the traditional emphasis on knowing your place as a young person.

In Lysis’s case we see this conflict acted out within one young person’s mind. His shame, I suggest, is the response of one part of Lysis to another part of Lysis; or it is Lysis in his composed mode versus Lysis as he is when enticed by dialectic. Many interlocutors of Socrates complain that he is a torpedo fish and that they are left numb; in Lysis’s case the companionship with Socrates makes him too quick to catch himself. He sees in himself a discrepancy between the ideal that he has set up as his standard and the reality of his behaviour. Meeting in this way Democritus’s demand to consider himself his most important judge, he shows himself a paragon of traditional virtue, who is at the same time being attracted away from that towards Socratic virtue.

IV

In Socratic eyes it is not corruption of the young to show them the way to wisdom, but it is clear that this way brings new values with it, which at times conflict with the traditional values of Athenian society. Plato visualizes this conflict in Lysis’s shame. It shows the limitations of an appeal to Aristotle as the authority on Greek emotions that in relying on his formulations only we would have missed the internalist aspect of what Lysis experiences. Ironically, it is in his traditional role that Lysis is most self-conscious, even if the Socratic virtue that he is being enticed towards is notoriously self-concerned, with its emphasis on the care of the self and on being aware of one’s ignorance. Half-way between the opening of the dialogue and the final scene, in which the boys join Socrates in active resistance against their guardians, the conflict that manifests itself in Lysis’s emotion shows us how Socratic questioning is causing in Lysis a love for wisdom that is growing beyond his control.

Bibliography


27 Perhaps, in Kaster’s terms, other interlocutors should/can be ashamed because of a retraction of self, where Lysis is ashamed because of a discreditable extension of self (31, 42-7).
28 The influential treatment of Piers (Piers & Singer: 23-4) puts shame in these terms, distinguishing shame from guilt by associating the former with goals and failure, and the latter with rules and transgressions. The centrality of his own judgment does not imply that Lysis’s experience could have taken place in an empty room, but it does mean that the reputation-conferring regard of others is not the focus of his shame. On the difficult issue of the exact role of an audience, real or imagined, in instances of shame, see Taylor 57-68.
29 Reservations about Aristotle’s account from a rather different perspective in Cairns: 426-31.