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Alkibiades and the *Phaedrus*: the Politics of the Appetites

Doug Al-Maini

The career of Alkibiades puts in sharp relief several civic problems that gained momentum throughout the rise of Athenian imperialism in the fifth century. One of the dilemmas he brings to a head is the challenge of satisfying the appetites within a stable political context. The Athenians of his period of ascendancy were being made increasingly aware of an uneasy relationship between these two factors in the community: as the citizenry increases its penchant for gratifying the appetites, so too the polis becomes increasingly unable to provide the basic safety and stability requirements for normal social relations. The *Phaedrus*, with its reference back to Alkibiades and his extreme policies, is Plato's re-examination of these issues. In this paper I wish to outline the original conceptual parameters within which the classical debate between the appetites and the stability of the

community took place, show how Alkibiades pushed the debate to some of its logical conclusions, and finally explicate the *Phaedrus*' presentation of the human psychology necessary to circumvent the tension, thereby supplying this issue with the theoretical grounding for an inherently stable political community.

Origins of the Debate: The *Physis/Nomos* Controversy

In fifth-century Athens, the conflict between state stability and the satisfaction of the appetites gets its clearest and most explicit expression in what has come to be called the "*physis/nomos* debate".¹ Ordinarily, *physis* is translated as "nature" or "reality", and *nomos* as "law" or "custom".² *Physis* and *nomos* represent the leading normative theories

¹ The phrase is famous enough to serve as a chapter heading in W.K.C. Guthrie, *The Sophists* (London 1971), Kerferd (1981), and R.D. McKirahan, *Philosophy before Socrates* (Indianapolis 1994); see also Ostwald (1986), 260-73, and de Romilly (1992), 112-33. Guthrie writes that *physis* and *nomos* were "catch words" of the fifth and fourth centuries, which came to be regarded as "opposed" and "mutually exclusive" (Guthrie *op.cit.*, 55), and de Romilly adds that "the Sophists' critique of justice proceeded by way of a basic distinction between nature and law. In a quite remarkable fashion which testifies to the importance of the role played by the philosophers, that intrinsically abstract distinction reappears in many of the texts of the day, even the least philosophical, leaving its mark there like a powder trail": de Romilly (1992), 148-49.

² H.G. Liddell and R. Scott, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford 1980), 535, 876; see also Kerferd (1981), 111-12, Guthrie *op.cit.*, 55, and McKirahan, *op.cit.*, 391-92.

of the times in which the *Phaedrus* takes place.³ According to the *physis* thesis, ethical standards are connected to human nature, specifically to natural human appetites. All people have a desire for food, drink, and to reproduce; the *physis* thesis asserts that it is natural to try to satisfy these desires, and the satisfaction of desire provides the justification for behavior.⁴ It is important to note the psychological stance taken here: in its opposition to *nomos*, the *physis* account of human motivation amounts

to nothing more than the individual's pursuit of self-interest and gratifying the appetites.⁵ As we shall see, this one-dimensional explanation plays an important role on both sides of the *physis/nomos* debate.

The problem with such a limited view of human nature is that it contains no mechanism for facilitating harmonious social interaction, should social harmony be shown to be a desirable state of affairs. In other words, there is nothing intrinsic to the individual's

³ Here I must make some mention of the seemingly intractable problem of the dramatic date of the *Phaedrus*. For my purposes, it is only necessary to assert that the dialogue occurred later on in Socrates' adult life. For this, Socrates himself provides some evidence when he exclaims in praise of Lysias, "I wish he would write that you should give your favors to a poor rather than to a rich man, to an older rather than a younger one – that is, to someone like me and most other people", 227c-d, translation by A. Nehamas and P. Woodruff, *Plato: Phaedrus* (Indianapolis 1995); all others by D. Hackforth, *Plato's Phaedrus* (Cambridge 1993). This is, broadly speaking, the time period and place where the *physis/nomos* debate shows up in the literature.

⁴ Plato himself points again and again to unfettered appetitive gratification as the ultimate end of the *physis* thesis. So argues Callicles in the *Gorgias* (482e-484c introduces the *physis/nomos* debate; the resolution into the satisfaction of the appetites occurs at 491e), and Glaucon in the *Republic* (359c-360d): in the famous allegory of the ring of Gyges, preceded by an introduction of the *physis/nomos* tension, Glaucon argues that any user would invariably employ the ring to satisfy appetites normally restricted by society. And when in book Nine (571b-573b) of the *Republic* the discussion turns to a figure arguably beyond the control of society's laws, the tyrant, Socrates gives a chilling portrait of a character enslaved to the process of satisfying a continuously expanding repertoire of desires. In the *Phaedrus* we are presented with an attempt to circumvent societal customs through privacy, and it is done for the sake of gratifying the erotic appetite (see below). In the pre-Platonic literature the most sustained theoretical examination of this aspect of the *physis/nomos* debate is Antiphon's *On Truth*. Therein Antiphon specifically links the suppressing effect of the laws to human nature, which culminates in the restriction of the desires (fr. 44c; for the translation, see T.J. Saunders, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 78 (1978), 218-19). Thucydides, at the end of his description of the revolution in Corcyra, writes that "In the confusion into which life was now thrown in the cities, human nature, always rebelling against the law and now its master, showed itself ungoverned in passion" (3.84.2). In Aristophanes' *Clouds*, the Wrong Logic argues against established laws so that a boy might with free conscience indulge in licentious behavior (1019-1042). Later, the Wrong Logic will "notice now the wants/ by Nature's self implanted" (1075) that must be serviced, which turn out to be base appetites.

⁵ Of course, there are other accounts of human nature in the literature of the time that do not conform to this picture, as Ostwald (1986), 263-64, points out. However, these statements occur with no mention of the *nomos* thesis or the broader themes involved in the *physis/nomos* debate, and as descriptions of a psychological *physis* are all limited in scope to an individual nature, as opposed to the more generally human claims we see in the *physis/nomos* literature.

motivational calculus barring the usage of others, should such usage promote the appetitive satisfaction of the individual doing so. Thus, as other commentators have pointed out, far from providing even a theoretical guarantee of safety within a community, individual interest offers an (arguable) justification for sabotaging such safety. The *nomos* thesis, the only real contemporary theoretical alternative to the normative dictates of *physis*, relies on the same basic psychological principle to ground human behavior. That should cue the political analyst to the fact that ultimately, the tension between *physis* and *nomos* cannot be resolved in the limited psychological context presented here. What the *nomos* thesis must demonstrate, and the reason why it is able to stand as a viable political alternative to *physis*, involves the necessity of considerations of a stable community in the formulation of a normative theory. *Nomos* accomplishes this through an appeal to the empirical realization that some degree of community is essential to human survival.⁶ Humans simply cannot survive individually, and the

community, made manifest to the ancients through the family and, by extension, through the polis, is the guarantor of continued human existence. Any useful normative theory will have to take the condition of stable social relations into consideration. If it does not, then prescribed behavior has no guarantee of producing conduct that will not cause the breakdown of the community and with it, the ensuing eradication of the population. *Physis*, in championing the appetites, is particularly susceptible to this charge, as the contemporary debate between self-interest and “acting morally” (i.e. not directly harming others) was making clear.⁷

This empirical appeal to survival comes with its own set of conditions. Even if the concept of survival being used here were limited to a purely biological context, it would at least entail two basic constituents, what modern liberal theorists have come to call positive and negative freedoms.⁸ First, considerations of survival would in some sense have to promote freedom from harm, under the rubric of negative freedom. The community must

⁶ Justifying the broader community through survival seems originally to have been Protagoras' contribution; it is a famous premise in the great myth of Plato's *Protagoras* (322b), and there is tentative agreement that Plato would not put such words in the Sophist's mouth had he not really said them (see Kerferd (1981), de Romilly (1992), 162, and especially A.W.H. Adkins, *JHS* 93 (1973) 3-12; J.P. Maguire, *Phronesis* 22 (1977), 103-22 and Nill 1985, 14-22 on the general faithfulness of the Platonic text); adding to this is the fact that one of the titles of Protagoras' treatises that have come down to us is *On the Original State of Man*. There are other texts from the pre-Platonic period which can be interpreted along these same lines, most notably that of the Anonymous Iamblichus, who writes that “if men were by nature unable to live alone, but yielding to necessity, formed an association with one another, discovered a way of life and skills related to it...” (fr. 6.1, see R.K. Sprague, *The Older Sophists* (Columbia 1972), 275), and Democritus, “the well run polis is the greatest source of safety and contains all in itself; when this is safe, all is safe, when it is destroyed, all is destroyed”: fr. 252, see Freeman (1966), 115.

⁷ The term is Nill's; see Nill (1985), 1-2.

⁸ Most famously termed as such and elucidated by Berlin (1969), 118-72.

provide for the safety of its members.⁹ Second, the community must in some way facilitate the satisfaction of the appetites. Gratification of hunger, thirst, and sexual desires is no less necessary to survival than safety, and, even if only nominally, a polis is thus committed in some sense to the appetitive claims of its populace.

Problems emerge for the polis when these two requirements work against each other: an obvious example of such a conflict occurs when the appetites of one individual contravene the safety requirements of another, and contemporary political theorists did make an attempt at dealing with the problem of treating another person instrumentally within society.¹⁰ The *nomos* thesis itself gains much of its prescriptive force from this conflict, for the solution proposed is the institution of a system of laws which will restrict conduct which is seen as transgressing safety requirements. However, it needs to be pointed out that such a conflict is in no way logically entailed from the two abovementioned requirements placed on the city. Indeed, it only be-

comes necessary when the impoverished psychology affirmed by the *physis* thesis is accepted as true human nature and placed within the confines of the city.

To show this, one only has to envision a well-functioning, stable society that lacks the need to restrict the behavior of its constituents. On this view, citizens are not naturally predisposed to infringe upon the safety requirements of other citizens, and the point of a conflict between appetites and safety is moot. One low level example of such behavior can possibly be found in the social insects: members of a hive need no "laws" working against their natural dispositions to ensure the continued existence of the hive itself and their own safety within it. Instead, it is their nature to act in a socially responsible manner. Furthermore it is at least arguable that, at a human level, there are individuals that gain no pleasure from using others instrumentally, and who do not do so; for these people the laws serve no direct purpose in determining their own conduct. Any group made up entire-

⁹ The question of whether the community must provide for the physical safety of *all* its members remains unanswered in this formulation. This does leave the way clear for a society that chooses to enact great cruelty on a chosen segment of its population in the name of overall safety, thereby achieving a gruesome balance between the appetites and community stability, a balance in which the appetites of those able to treat others instrumentally is allowed great compass while the safety of that appetitive individual suffers no noticeable impairment. Furthermore, both populations in that society survive, for without the underclass the appetites of the predatory could not be satisfied. However, as the example of Spartan culture (within which the Helot population was regularly subjected to Spartan predation while at the same time ostensibly "surviving" in that society) was making clear, such a two tiered society was in no way inherently stable, for there was always a part of it (and in Spartan culture this population was the majority who did on occasion revolt) whose members could not count on the community to provide for their physical safety. Hence one of the basic requirements of the community is lacking for that population, and given the opportunity, they will seek at least the restructuring of the political parameters of that society, if not its dissolution.

¹⁰ See Nill (1985), *passim*.

ly of such like-minded individuals has no need of legal protection from each other, and in everyday circumstances it is common enough for such casual relations to prevail. The understanding of human nature according to *physis* gives no explanation for the motivation of individuals who have the opportunity to further gratify their own appetites without later sanction, possibly at the expense of others, but choose not to do so. That fact in itself should signal the less-than-satisfactory account of human nature given by the *physis* thesis. The *nomos* thesis, with its recourse to a system of laws, does not in fact challenge the *physis* thesis on this premise. Instead, it seems to be accepted as a given that humans will try to treat each other harmfully, and that laws are necessary to limit such behavior. Clearly, faced with the need for a community, the theorist who makes a claim as to the necessity of such laws could do so on further empirical grounds. However, a real reliance on observed behavior would also have to provide a motivational account of behavior where laws are unnecessary. The fact that the *physis* thesis is not challenged on understanding appetitive satisfaction as the only psychological motivation for individual behavior requires *nomos* to accept an ever present ten-

sion between the citizen and the state.

For by accepting the *physis*-psychology, *nomos* is driven to the position that the community is required to take on the responsibility of enforcing restrained behavior onto itself, and it does this through the system of laws and customs that gives the thesis its name. In such circumstances, the individual feels a social pressure to behave in a socially acceptable manner, rather than be self-policing. Indeed, in the eyes of the law, the individual's responsibilities are diminished to being merely appetitive, appetites that the laws must seek to hold in check. In essence, this amounts to removing temperance as a quality of the individual.

Alkibiades and the Ends of the Argument

One method by which the ancients seek to deal with the seemingly intractable tension between the appetites and social stability involves positing a compromise of bifurcating the individual into private and public personas.¹¹ A possible *modus operandi* that can be gleaned from such a compromise is the dictate that in public, community standards of conduct must be upheld, but in private, the passions are allowed full

¹¹ This is clearly one possible interpretation of Antiphon's *On Truth*: "Accordingly a man would use justice to his own best advantage if he regarded the *nomoi* as overriding in the presence of witnesses, but regarded as overriding the things of nature when no witnesses were present" (44a). For a somewhat legalistic interpretation of this passage, see M. Reesor, *Apeiron* 20 (1987), 210-14. Nill calls this the "escaping-notice issue" (1985), 57, and notes that in addition to Antiphon, it was brought up by Critias and Democritus, as well as Plato and Xenophon later on. Writes Nill, "Given the fragmentary nature of our knowledge of early Greek moral theory, the comparatively frequent mention of the escape-notice issue strongly suggests that it played a central role in the moral theory of the time" (57).

sway. In a sense, this position involves a re-entrenchment of the scope of the individual within a society: on this view it is asserted that even when living in a community, the individual must be afforded some degree of privacy, and how the individual behaves while occupying the private space can be fully given over to the satisfaction of desires. The community has no influence on behavior in these circumstances, otherwise the situation would cease to be truly private.¹² The issue turns on whether or not the compromise achieved here insures behavior on the part of the citizenry that promotes the safety of the state and those within it. As we shall see, the classical theorists had good reason to believe it did not; the individual who was to make manifest the limits to which this compromise could be pushed was Alkibiades.

Along with his much vaunted love of glory, in his personal life Alkibiades is

every bit the incarnation of an appetitive nature.¹³ The ancient testimonia regarding his life make continuous mention of the various permutations of his licentiousness: from stories of his clever manipulation of the personal beauty that in his youth was a great arousal to the adult male population of Athens,¹⁴ to the drunken debaucheries of symposia (especially those of 415 BC),¹⁵ to the seduction of a Spartan queen,¹⁶ Alkibiades is a virtual poster boy of hedonism. In particular, his eroticism is cited as an outstanding personal quality, and Plato himself highlights this quality in the intimate portrait we get of Alkibiades in the *Symposium*.¹⁷ However, his private hedonism seems to be matched by a deft flair for promoting the interests of the state. Thucydides' description is telling:

“Alarmed at the greatness of the license in his own life and habits, and at the ambition which he showed in all things whatsoever that he undertook, the mass of people marked him as an

¹² And, interestingly, Berlin brings up a very similar point in his modern reworking of this issue: “It follows that a frontier must be drawn between the area of private life and that of public authority. Where it is to be drawn is a matter of argument, indeed of haggling. Men are largely interdependent, and no man’s activity is so completely private as never to obstruct the lives of others in any way”: Berlin (1969), 124.

¹³ It might be argued that “appetitive” is too broad a term to be used in describing Alkibiades. Instead it would be more appropriate to concentrate on his being a signifier for carnal relations, and recently he has been described as “one of the most sexualized figures in fifth century politics”: Wohl (1999), 352. While I agree with this characterization, it is a unique example of his more broadly appetitive nature: in the *Symposium* Plato portrays him as especially drunk (212d-e), Thucydides writes of him as “exceedingly ambitious” of a command that would bring him wealth, and that “the position he held among the citizens led him to indulge his tastes beyond what his real means would bear, both in keeping horses and in the rest of his expenditure” (6.15.2-3). Apparently, these tastes included a craving for rich dress (Plutarch, *Life of Alkibiades*, 16.1).

¹⁴ Plutarch, *Life of Alkibiades*, 4-6.

¹⁵ Thucydides, 6.28.1-2.

¹⁶ Plutarch, *Life of Alkibiades*, 23.7.

¹⁷ The *Symposium*, 217a-219d. Note the extent to which Alkibiades reverses the standard coupling of the older, sexually aggressive male with the younger, passive partner, a trait already latent in Thucydides' portrait of Alkibiades (see below).

aspirant to the tyranny and became his enemies; and although in his public life his conduct of the war was as good as could be desired, in his private life his habits gave offence to everyone, and caused them to commit affairs to other hands, and thus before long to ruin the city". (6.15.4).

Thucydides compresses the general's career here, but the salient point for our discussion is the extent to which Alkibiades embraces the distinction between public and private. Alkibiades certainly spares himself no personal pleasure, and it is clear that he is also a gifted statesman. He could argue that his extravagances offer no direct threat to state security, for it is the polis itself that provides the conditions necessary to living the way he does. Thus Alkibiades has a vested interest in benefiting the public good, and this he does through his career as a general. The citizenry should applaud his handling of foreign affairs, and take his private indulgences as proof of his willingness to abide by societal conventions. This the public does not do.

As Thucydides points out, the public's reasoning for not endorsing the Alkibiadean approach to life in the city centers on the fear of tyranny. Unfortunately the public/private distinction encourages individuals to pursue this objective, because the assimilation of the polis into one's conception of self allows for the advancement of the city to be interpreted in a myriad of ways on a personal level as well. Scholars have noted the extent to which Alkibiades identifies

himself with the state,¹⁸ and, by equating the public and private good, Alkibiades causes the triumph of Athens to be a necessary condition for the satisfaction of his appetite for personal glory. However, there is nothing intrinsic to the equation keeping him from realizing that his scope of behavior within the city can be expanded to predatory proportions once he equates Athens' interests with his own. Such a perspective has disastrous consequences for the public/private distinction, for in the person of the tyrant they are collapsed into the same entity, and any normative precepts that can be engendered from their difference vanish from view. All this follows from Alkibiades making the necessary adjustment in perspective from interpreting the city as that which restricts his appetites to that which provides the means of servicing them. In fact all citizens should be driven to this goal under these conditions, since their motivational endpoint is the servicing of appetites, and the manner this can be accomplished to the greatest extent is through the acquisition of the tyranny. Under the conditions of the *physis/nomos* debate, the tyrannical society is the ideal state for its single member, for there the appetites can be serviced to the greatest extent humanly possible and the survival benefits of a community are in place.

To the extent that the political community is shared, the state does in fact differ from the individual, and a complete identification between the

¹⁸ In particular, Forde (1989), 79-81, 92-95, and 196-199, but see also D. Gribble, *Alcibiades and Athens: a Study in Literary Presentation* (Oxford 1999), 59-60.

public interests of the state and the private interests of the citizen remains to a greater or lesser extent unreal. What the populace fears in its assessment of Alkibiades is the polar extreme of this argument that comes in the form of the tyrant. From the broader community's perspective, both basic safety requirements and appetitive claims may be severely compromised in such circumstances, while (superficially at least) not contradicting the prescripts of the public/private compromise, and the population under the tyrant loses the presumed benefits of entering into a city. Tyrannical regimes face a fundamental political dilemma because of this inability to provide assurance of the basic requirements of a polis to any of the population living within it, excepting the tyrant himself. Alkibiades merely exposes the susceptibility of the public/private distinction to facilitate the development of a tyranny.

Feeding into this theoretical attack on the public/private distinction's ability to sustain a balance between the appetites and civic stability is Alkibiades' very real private attitude and behavior towards the cult of Eleusis. For the profanation of the Mysteries of Eleusis that occurred in 415 BC, and of which Alkibiades was found guilty of performing on no less than three separate occa-

sions, was a private mockery and indeed sabotage of what was in many ways a very public cult.¹⁹ Virtually anyone could be, and was, initiated into the Mysteries: citizens, metics, women, and slaves were all equally permitted to undergo the rites.²⁰ It was arguably one of the most public aspects of Athenian life, but it enforced the prescription that its rites could not be performed outside the sanctuary. To profane the Mysteries then, was to be a person who publicly was an upstanding citizen taking part in the ceremonies, but who privately indulged his desire for sacrilege and exclusive behavior. Indeed, such duplicity on the part of the profaners is a necessary condition for their impious act: one could not perform the rituals in private without having a prior knowledge of them, and the only manner in which they could be learned was by becoming initiated into the Mysteries themselves. With such activities, Alkibiades shows himself to be a man who has an ambiguous acceptance of the divide established between the communal and private spheres: he makes a private act out of a public one, while at the same time collapsing their distinction in his own person.

Alkibiades represents a further culmination of the *physis/nomos* tension wherein the pressure to satisfy the ap-

¹⁹ For a historical survey of the events that transpired and how they related to the career of Alkibiades, see W.M. Ellis, *Alcibiades* (New York 1989), 58-62; for the political significance of the affair itself, see D.M. MacDowell (ed.), *Andokides. On the Mysteries* (Oxford 1962), 167-71, 181-93; Ostwald (1986), 537-50, and W.D. Furley, *Andokides and the Herms: a Study in Fifth Century Athenian Religion* (London 1996), *passim*.

²⁰ For an overview of the cult of Eleusis, see C. Kerényi, *Eleusis: Archetypal Image of Mother and Daughter* (London 1967), *passim*; G.E. Mylonas, *Eleusis and the Eleusinian Mysteries* (Princeton 1967), *passim*; W. Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Cambridge, Mass. 1990), 285-90.

petites within a stable social structure is diffused through imperialism. While this policy had been in place long before Alkibiades began to have an impact on Athenian politics, it is Alkibiades who showed Athenian ambition plainly for what it was, and took it to its logical conclusion. Thucydides' description of the Athenians' deliberation on their most substantial imperialistic undertaking, of which Alkibiades has convinced them, gives a stark picture of what motivates the legislature:

“And upon all equally there fell a sexually charged desire to sail—upon the elders, from a belief that they would either subdue the places they were sailing against, or that at any rate such a great force could suffer no disaster; upon those in the flower of their age, through a longing for far-off sights and scenes, in good hopes as they were of a safe return; and upon the great multitude and the soldiery who hoped not only to get money for the present, but also to acquire additional dominion which would always be an inexhaustible source of pay”. (6.24.3-4).

To put it bluntly, Alkibiades has made plain to the city an agenda that will at least partially satisfy the various desires resident in Athens: his own unrelenting quest for glory, a never-ending supply of pay for the multitude and army, security for the elderly, and the far off sights and scenes needed by the young. The general political climate of Athens presented in this picture is of a place where the satisfaction of desires is of the utmost legislative concern. In

other words, Alkibiades' zeal for the Sicilian expedition meets approval in the Assembly because of an appeal to the Assembly's appetitive nature, and it all culminates in a metaphorical sexual desire for the island.²¹ Now, as we have seen, an initial premise of the *nomos* thesis is that civil society cannot endure the unfettered imperatives of the appetites, the reasoning being that the appetites will eventually clash and destabilize relations in the community. The Alkibiadean response is to emphasize imperialism's effectiveness in channeling the appetitive nature of the citizenry outside the city. The respectful nature of relations between citizens is demanded by *nomos* as a necessary condition of the stable polis; however, Alkibiades finds a population that, according to this dichotomy, deserves no such respect because it exists literally outside the city. Faced with such a population, the *nomos* thesis becomes manifestly inapplicable, and thus no conceptual framework exists which might protect that populace. Foreign cities are fair game as recipients of the city's appetites, and Alkibiades capitalizes on this fact.

He does it through an appeal to Athenian erotic sensibilities. As other scholars have noted, Alkibiades was to a great extent associated with eroticism, and it needs to be emphasized what this connotation would

²¹ Forde (1989), 31-43, does an exceptional job of explicating the political use of the word *eros* in Thucydides, and brings out the point that it is with Alkibiades' success in promoting the Sicilian expedition that the term is finally applied to Athens in its longing to dominate an external populace; prior to this (and starkly contrasting with it), Pericles had tried to focus the Athenians' *eros* inwards, in a love of their own city (2.43).

have meant in the political field.²² For all its democratic fervor, classical Athens was in fact a deeply stratified community socially, and that is reflected in what we know of its sexual practices. References to erotic encounters invariably describe relationships that were committed between political unequals, and in the case of homoerotic occurrences, to an elder/youth pairing that entailed a power disparity our own society finds unacceptable.²³

Furthermore it was expected that, at least in the case of homoerotics, the younger male derived no pleasure from the act itself, and was considered the submissive and passive partner to the active and dominant older male. We do hear mention of the younger partners gaining an educational benefit from the relationship and usually this is expressed in terms of learning to be a proper citizen. This portrayal of a citizen is hardly democratic: instead we have a model for instrumentally using another for the satisfaction of one's own sexual needs.²⁴ For an Athenian citizen normal sexual practice embraced a deep political imbalance, citizens associating

with non-citizens, power with the powerless.

If the longing that the Athenians had for Sicily is understood in these terms, it becomes clear how apt Thucydides' sexual metaphor is. The erotic relationship that the Athenians hope to consummate with the Sicilians is the one of the older, politically able male's relationship to the feeble other, and it is expounded in those terms in Alkibiades' speech. The sexual metaphor is further intensified in the debate leading up to the expedition by verbal sparring between Alkibiades and Nicias that can easily be explained in terms of sexual politics within the citizenry. Nicias warns the older members of the Assembly of being cowed in fear or shame by their younger associates, i.e. not to play the submissive role in determining state policy (6.13.1). He emphasizes this point specifically with reference to Alkibiades, whom he calls "too young to command" (6.12.2). With Alkibiades' erotic reputation in mind, Nicias hints at Alkibiades' causing the elders to take on the inverse of their normal power position in relation to younger men (Alkibiades in particu-

²² Most recently, Wohl (1999); see also B.S. Strauss, *Fathers and Sons in Athens: Ideology and Society in the Era of the Peloponnesian War* (Princeton 1993).

²³ The study of classical homosexuality is a burgeoning field in its own right, and any reference here will be necessarily incomplete; still, for support of the view of orthodoxy expressed above, see K.J. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality* (Cambridge, Mass. 1978), 60-109; M. Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure* (New York 1985), 215-25; D. Cohen, *Past and Present* 117 (1987), 3-21; D. Halperin, *A Hundred Years of Homosexuality* (New York 1990), and J. Winkler, *The Constraints of Desire* (New York 1990); for an opposing view within the field, see Hindley in C. Hindley and D. Cohen in *Past and Present* 133 (1991), 167-94, although even Hindley does not seem to argue the point that the relationship did involve a power imbalance between partners, and see Cohen's response to Hindley (*ibid.*). For the unacceptability of this relationship to modern sensibilities, see E. Bloch, *The Journal of Men's Studies* 9 (2001), 183-204.

²⁴ The point is forcefully made by Bloch, *ibid.*

lar), and the sexual overtones must have been an affront to their sensibilities. Alkibiades' response to this challenge is quickly to reassert traditional sexual morality, by asking the Assembly to make use of him while he still is in the flower of his youth (6.17.1). Thus he seemingly puts the elders of the Assembly back in the power position. In his presentation, Alkibiades is merely the conduit between the Assembly and Sicily, providing the former with the latter.

In the *physis/nomos* context, eroticism provides the classical Athenian mind with perhaps the most obvious and direct connection between the appetites and regard for other human beings: it is *the* fundamental physical pleasure derived from an other person. More than any other desire, eroticism as the Athenians understood it signified this correlation, and it stands at an extreme pole in the tension between the appetites and civil society that originally presents itself in the *physis/nomos* debate; eroticism makes appetitive satisfaction depend upon dominance and aggressiveness affirming themselves over passivity and submission. For Thucydides, the Sicilian expedition marks the zenith of this attitude in city politics, and it is Alkibiades who brings the city to that zenith.

However, the unity that imperialism brings to the city cannot be counted upon as a formula for inherent stability, as it comes with the price of ensured enmity within one's own social context. Imperialism forces an external population into submission, but also forces that external population into some degree of assimila-

tion. In other words, the process of imperialism causes that population to be no longer purely external. Instead, the oppressed are forced into a quasi-membership into the community. The two communities are no longer disjunctive because of all the ties between oppressor and oppressed that imperialism enforces. They are also never fully integrated, as integration incurs the loss of the perceived benefits of imperialism for the original aggressors, in this case the satisfaction of the appetites coupled with an internally unified and stabilized community. Yoking another population to such terms signals an inherent instability in the overall system, as the hostage populace always will seek a dissolution or even reversal of the relationship, because of the infringement on both the safety and appetitive requirements of that populace.

After all, the foreign community is forced into submission so that it can be used as an outlet for the appetitive needs of the dominant society. Similarly, the erotic model being canvassed here in its homosexual form cannot be expected to sustain itself, since the rules of engagement demand that the passive partner eventually seeks the dissolution of the relationship. This is because of the degree to which the affair turns on issues of dominance. If passive partners are ever to receive the appetitive satisfaction understood in the *physis/nomos* debate to be the primary motivator in individual human conduct, then the situation needs to be reversed, and this leads to an intractable conflict, both partners seeking to assert dominance over the

other. It is important to note that the supposed benefit to the youth, namely an education in citizenship, feeds back into the breakdown of relations, for the lesson is that pleasure comes through the dominance of another, and being dominated shuts down the prospects of that benefit. Traditional eroticism as a metaphor or basis for understanding political relationships leads to the conclusion that there is no possibility for an inherently stable state, as all members are driven to seek dominance and find submission intolerable.

Plato's *Phaedrus*

Plato's *Phaedrus* is a direct conversation between Socrates and Phaedrus, son of Pythocles, of Myrrinous.²⁵ Any reader of the Platonic corpus without knowledge of fifth century Athens would still be able to see Alkibiades in the background of this dialogue, merely from the fact of Phaedrus' role of interlocutor: Phaedrus occurs in three of Plato's works, and Alkibiades is present in two of the dialogues.²⁶ Thus from a purely statistical point of view, it is odd that Alkibiades is not physically present in our dialogue. Even more germane to the discussion here is the extent to which the religious institution of the

Mysteries of Eleusis pervades their discussion. Our Phaedrus is one of the profaners of the Mysteries in 415, and he provides the link to the Mysteries necessary to explaining a whole constellation of literary and dramatic effects employed in the dialogue named after him. As has been stated, Alkibiades was far and away the most famous of the perpetrators of the profanations, and Plato's brazen reference back to that cabal would have drawn up the memories of all the tensions that were syncretizing around Alkibiades at the time of the impieties. Plato's original audience would have had less of the difficulty that confronts modern commentators in perceiving these references, and in so doing that audience would have understood the context that this constellation invokes. Not only would all the conceptual ramifications of Mysteries themselves be at hand, but perhaps more provocatively, the religious and political significance of their profanations would also loom large.

With an awareness of this Alkibiadean background to the dialogue, the progression of psychologies presented in the speeches of the *Phaedrus* look like a Platonic summary of and rejoinder to the *physis/nomos* controversy. In the first

²⁵ Who is conspicuously enunciated as such at 243e. One possible reason for Socrates giving Phaedrus' father's name and deme is that Plato wanted everyone to know just exactly who was being spoken to here: Phaedrus' name, just as we have it written here would also have been viewable to any Athenian making the trek between the Acropolis and the Agora by the Panathenaic Way: Phaedrus' name was inscribed on stelai found in the remains of the Eleusinion, put there to commemorate the sale of property of the profaners of 415. For the stelai themselves, see W.K. Pritchett, *Hesperia* 22 (1953), 225-99. The stelai inscribed with Phaedrus' name are numbers 2 and 6.

²⁶ The other two dialogues being the *Protagoras* and the *Symposium*.

speech's attempt at the seduction of a youth, we are presented with the sole motivation of looking out for one's own interest. This point is made at both the opening and close of the speech (231a, 234b), and the broader concerns of the community are not considered as directly germane to the discussion. The community is the enemy in the first speech, as it may disapprove of the impending seduction, and take steps to block the consummation of the affair. The content of one's own interest is never directly confronted in the first speech, but the purpose of acquiring the erotic satisfaction of the speaker is straightforward enough and it reinforces the general Alkibiadean backdrop to the setting. Clearly, the Lysianic speech presents us with a subject whose motivation cannot be far from the satisfaction of personal appetites.

Within this context, Lysias' speech highlights the difference between public and private. The distinction is first mentioned as a source of possible shame to the youth. The lover will proudly proclaim his triumph to all and sundry, should the boy acquiesce to his advances (231e-232a). Because "established conventions" (i.e. *nomos*) will disapprove of this kind of behavior, the boy can expect public "odium" to follow his choice of a lover (232a). Conversely, the non-lover will keep the affair out of the public eye (232a). The nonlover is thus offering the boy an opportunity to circumvent public morality in the satisfaction of desire. The speech even goes so far as to make the claim that secretive nonlovers "will prefer to do what is best rather than shine in

the eyes of their neighbors" (232a). What is being offered here as "best" is the fulfillment of the seduction and, if it can only be accomplished in private, it stands in contradiction to the public perception of the good. Again, the distinction and conflict between public and private would have been especially fitting for a profaner of the Mysteries to be elucidating, and its sexual use here recalls Thucydides' famous characterization of Alkibiades quoted earlier.

In the first oration the affair is portrayed as an example of behavior considered corrupt by society at large, yet privately desired on the part of the lover and the nonlover. The interests of the city and the individual conflict on this matter, and the Lysianic solution is to conduct the affair in private. Much as in the *physis* response to the restrictions placed upon human nature by the demands of the polis, the Lysianic speech has noticed that if the public remains unaware of such behavior, the public will not move to interrupt or punish its manifestation. Hence Lysias' man makes clear his offer of a private consummation of the affair: no one else is to know or even guess that the two are plotting an erotic encounter. This reply is a product of the Lysianic speech's inability to confront the appetites themselves. For Lysias' man the response to the upsurge of desire is to try and satisfy it, by whatever means necessary. Control is understood to apply not to the desires themselves but to the management of the circumstances surrounding their fulfillment. Hence control of the desires is relegated to the city's responsibility, as Lysias'

man has given up on any attempt to control the appetites from within. By perceiving the relationship between desire and control in this manner, he accepts the distinction between public and private interests, and his thinking is a product of the conflict between them.

Socrates' speech on behalf of the nonlover adds a degree of restraint to the contemplation of the individual, but it all too clearly resembles the artificial restraint erected by the city over the natural inclinations of its citizens. Socrates' nonlover gives a twofold picture of human motivation: "one is an innate desire for pleasure, the other an acquired judgment that aims at what is best" (237d). From the *physis/nomos* perspective, Socrates' statement encapsulates the dilemma faced by citizens pulled between their natural appetitiveness and the realization that the community cannot stand on those appetites being the sole motivating force within it.

He states that "when judgement guides us rationally towards what is best, and has mastery, that sort of mastery is called *sophrosyne*" (237e). The reasoning referred to here can plausibly be explained as the understanding of the perilous standing of the polis, faced with this one-dimensional "innate" urge. Citizens that have made such a realization might be able to control themselves, but it is only through an act of will, and on this account they act against their innate makeup. It is illuminating to contrast the different meanings of the word "best" being signified in the Lysianic and Socratic speeches. In the first address, what is

best is the private gratification of the seducer's desires, and this reflects his straightforwardly appetitive understanding of human motivation. Possibly the city is considered a necessary evil to overcoming the disadvantage humans face in contrast to the rest of the animal world, but an evil to be sabotaged if the proper opportunity presents itself.

In fact, Lysias' man covertly works to undermine the city's restrictions. Socrates' non-lover at least takes the interests of the city seriously, considering the moderate course best, even while realizing that such moderation frustrates his innate nature. What is lacking is any rationale that might harmonize these two interests. As the situation stands, citizens in this dilemma are frustrated no matter what course of action they decide on taking, and Socrates in his first speech can provide no real solution for when these interests conflict. He simply lists the facts that sometimes people act with self-control, and at other times give themselves over to their passions (237e-238a).

The opposition that runs through the history of this argument, and which Socrates develops here between appetitive needs as "innate" and moderation as "an acquired judgement", prejudices the conflict into a question of naturalness and artificiality. In the third speech of the *Phaedrus*, Socrates will not countenance the opinion that base appetitive pleasure is the only natural consideration for behavior. In the psychology presented in the palinode, the impetus for moderate behavior is an equally natural trait of the soul, and is even able

to overcome and contain the appetites in the internal war of determining conduct. In the palinode this struggle is linked to the erotic urge incited by beauty. Here Plato has to reformulate conventions in order to make them conform to the conditions necessary for good social relations: erotic love cannot be a one-sided affair whereby the power-partner is gratified through the performance of the other. Such a scenario is the correlate of an appetitively driven and understood narrative of the world.

In narrating the sequence of events involved in a courtship between a true lover and beloved, Socrates likens the soul of the lover to a chariot. Upon seeing the beauty of the boy, the appetitive black steed in the soul is overcome with lust and moves to engage in what can be described as a conventional erotic relationship with the beloved. However, the driver and white steed immediately work to counteract this force, and a metaphorical battle to determine behavior ensues. The fact that Plato has the black, appetitive steed faced by both the driver and the white horse indicates a willingness to oppose what the *physis* thesis would characterize as our “natural” appetitive inclinations with a restraining force of an equally “natural” type. Not only is the rationality of the driver given as a part of this picture, and hence its assertions grounded in the nature of the soul itself, but Plato has gone to the pains of including a white horse that is defined as “a lover of glory but with temperance and modesty” (253d).

Thus, in the Platonic picture, the appetites are paired off with a moderating force of their own kind, and it follows that in this context the appetitive urge is faced with a restraining urge that is every bit as visceral as the desire. There is no boundary to be placed between the two horses according to criteria of naturalness or artificiality; instead shame, the lover of honour, and moderation are presented as of the same type as the appetites. What remains to be shown is the process whereby the two forces are harmonized, for in this picture we merely have the conflict between the individual and the city expounded in the *physis/nomos* debate writ small. Reason provides the tools whereby the tension with the appetites may be subdued.

The reconciliation of the disparate elements vying for control within the soul is explained through the example of true eros. In the case of the true lover, the moderating forces prevail. Each time the beauty of the youth affects the lover, a similar internal battle takes place:

“And so it happens time and again, until the evil steed casts off his wantonness; humbled in the end, he obeys the counsel of his driver, and when he sees the fair beloved is like to die of fear. Wherefore at long last the soul of the lover follows after the beloved with reverence and awe”. (254e).

For Plato, the appetitive nature of the relationship is prohibited before interaction even begins. What is more, the power imbalance is addressed through an emphasis on the similarity, even identity in some respects, which exists between the two partners. Socrates stresses that in the best kind of love, souls are attracted to their own type:

thus the philosophical sort who follow Zeus tend to appreciate the qualities expressed in others of a similar bent, and the regal kind who follow in the train of Hera are in a like manner inclined (252e-253c). When the partners begin to explore their relationship, it turns into a mutually beneficial act whereby the two are a mirror image of each other:

“That flowing stream which Zeus, as the lover of Ganymede, called the ‘flood of passion’, pours in upon the lover; and part of it is absorbed within him, but when he can contain no more the rest flows away outside him; and as a breath of wind or an echo, rebounding from a smooth hard surface, goes back to its place or origin, even so the stream of beauty runs back and re-enters the eyes of the fair beloved; and so by the natural channel it reaches his soul and gives it fresh vigor, watering the roots of the wings and quickening them to growth, whereby the soul of the beloved, in its turn, is filled with eros”. (255c-d).

In this description we find the two constantly trading roles. First beauty flows from the beloved into the lover, but then it rebounds back from the lover to the beloved. Both are thus the source of each other’s fulfillment, a situation that traditional Athenian eroticism cannot abide. In this Plato is proposing a revolution in the mindset of the Athenian citizen: be prepared to be the source of satisfaction for the other. Left to the usual appetitive understanding, the revolution would be untenable, but Plato’s conception of eros is not primarily concerned with physical passion: the best relationships that Socrates describes are left unsummated physically.

The primary focus of eros in the *Phaedrus* is its educative value. In

the first instance, beauty and eros serve as the proving ground wherein moderate behavior asserts its role in the soul, but it also provides the opportunity of undergoing an anamnesis process whereby the rational infrastructure of the universe is confronted in the most direct manner possible.

Socrates states that upon perceiving beauty, the lover’s soul is suddenly overcome with an intuition of the rational apparatus necessary to becoming human (250a-e), and this apparatus turns out to be the Formal constituents of reality. In other words the perception of manifested beauty leads to a mental confrontation with beauty itself. Here erotic progress is equated with the progress of a rational understanding of the world. Plato’s revolutionary approach comes in the suggestion that each gains the same benefits as his partner. Because the lover becomes the love-object of the beloved, the relationship involves both undergoing the effects of beauty, both being rationally stimulated as to the nature of things.

The process is also necessarily social. In the *nomos* formulation of the genesis of the city, emphasis rests on the need to become political. Abolition of political relations amongst humans means a return to an animal state, and an ensuing eradication of the population due to an inability to compete with animals for survival. The comparison can be reduced to the statement that animals are able to survive non-politically, whereas humans are not. We could hypothetically postulate that were it not for the competition that beasts provide, humans could sur-

vive in non-political circumstances.²⁷ The social construct of the city is not, strictly speaking, natural. On this account, humans are forced to live in cities, and, as we have seen, this justification of the city leads to problems in governing the conduct of individuals. Plato begins the concluding psychology of the palinode by stating three times that the essential difference between humans and animals is the rationality that comes as a result of the soul's pre-natal contact with the Forms (248d, 249b, 249e). This rational nature, coupled with the fact that it takes an *anamnesis*-type experience to make the population's understanding of the Forms manifest to themselves, makes social relations a natural part of the development of humanity's own rationality. In the Platonic narrative, humans are not forced together due to external conditions but actively seek it out as the fulfillment of their own nature.²⁸

The tripartite psychology of the palinode does allow for the conventional understanding of eroticism, but gives strong indications that this does not in fact constitute *human* eros. Having stressed repeatedly that what sets humanity apart from the rest of the animal world is a former

cognition of the Forms, he illuminates a process whereby the Forms can be recognized post-natally, the best examples of which involve no physical satisfaction of the desire. The eros of intellectual awakening is the truly human one. On the other hand, Plato writes that the one who has trouble making the leap between a perception of beauty and a remembrance of the Forms, i.e. one who cannot make manifest a truly human nature, "surrendering to pleasure he essays to go after the fashion of a four-footed beast, and to beget offspring of the flesh" (250e). Plato even gives emphasis to the appetite's appropriate biological function, a trait common to all members of the animal kingdom, and gives it an appropriately animalistic motivation: reproduction. Plato inverts traditional human eros by making it involve the suppression of physical pleasure in favour of intellectual development.

The educational value received from this erotic relationship is also different in kind from the traditional lessons in citizenship, for the learning that occurs involves a remembrance of ideals, and, as the palinode explicates, "reason alone, the soul's pilot, can behold it, and all true knowledge

²⁷ Kerferd (1981), 140-42 lists the various early theories of how human life started as "beast-like" and developed into fully political communities; he cites the *Sisyphus* fragment (fr.25 of Critias; see Freeman 1966, 157-58), Euripides' *Supplikes* 201 ff, the Protagorean archetype mentioned earlier, and others as evidence of a "Theory of Progress" (Kerferd (1981), 125) explanation of the rise of the city.

²⁸ In fact, in keeping with the imagery of the palinode, we may wish to extend this generalization further to assert that the more rational true lovers become, the more able they are able to control their own appetites. Since the perception of the beloved leads the soul back to a remembrance of the Forms, it would seem the part of the soul to benefit most directly from this process would be the most rational part, i.e. the charioteer, and so the process of falling in love would have a feedback effect on the charioteer's ability to control the soul's progress.

is knowledge thereof" (247c). It is through the perception of beauty that the intellectual elements of the soul gain access to reason, and all the benefits that accrue to humanity from the possession of reason are made the more useful because of it. Plato emphasizes that it is the pilot that gains in the re-cognition of the Forms, and in metaphorical terms the process strengthens the intellectual elements within the soul in the battle for control of conduct. Reason provides the tools whereby the tension with the appetites can be sublated. Plato describes the conflict between the appetites and moderation within the soul in graphically violent terms; however, the process inciting both of these competing aspects of the soul only leads to the expansion and growth of the moderating impetus. The more a person is affected by beauty, the more the soul's chariot is made aware of both its own rational nature and that of the world, and the more moderation is empowered by the process. In the traditional erotic relationship the youth is initiated into a context of pleasure through dominance that begs unstable social relations. Plato's eroticism invokes an initiation into reason itself, a "true" education, and a goal that supplants appetitive satisfaction as the primary motivation for naturally human behavior. With this psychological backdrop in place, social relations can consolidate safely, for the motivation and process of interaction being championed here involves no threat to others, but instead is a positive benefit to them.

To conclude by way of summary: with this reformulated awareness of

eroticism, Plato provides some of the fundamentals necessary to durable civic relations. The original context of the *physis/nomos* debate centers upon the thesis that the appetites are the only natural determinants of behavior. This leads to a bifurcation of interests in a social setting between the private and public individual, which has no theoretic protection from an eventual sabotage along Alkibidean lines. The Platonic response to this stage of the argument is to avow the naturalness of the ability to control the appetites as well; thus temperance serves as much a part of the soul as the appetites do. In this way restraints existent within a group can be as "natural" and every bit as justified as the appetites in determining the behavior of the citizenry. The Alkibidean refinement of the *physis/nomos* tension funnels the appetites of the polis outside the civic perimeter, thus allowing relations to momentarily stabilize within it and seemingly provide an outlet for the fuller expression of the appetites. He does this through an astounding appeal to the erotic sensibilities of the Athenian citizenry. However, his refinement also provides the theoretical tools necessary to a further unbalancing of the social order, and the eroticism that he invokes proves to be a defining feature of the instability of his model. In order to affirm the natural coherence of the polis, Plato has to provide a picture of an eros that engenders positive social interaction rather than usury. This we get in the *Phaedrus*. The upshot of a political use of the erotic metaphor present there would necessarily include a non-appetitive attitude to the other, re-

ardless of whether the other is an individual or city. Since the benefits of the erotic relationship are co- equivalent, the necessarily hierarchical and asymmetrical structure of the imperialist agenda perish in the interests of the more educative and enculturating expression of true human nature.

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