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The *Proton Philon* and Forms in Plato's *Lysis*

Critics have long argued over whether the *Lysis* reveals any traces of the ontology usually assigned to Plato's middle period and in particular whether the *proton philon* (*Ly.* 219c5-d5) should be identified as a Form (of beauty or goodness). Glaser (1935) and Schoplick (1968) maintained that the *proton philon* must be a Form, an equation that Glidden (1981) called "folly." Vlastos (1981 and 1991) and Mackenzie (1988) have added their authority to dismissing any such identification. The present paper has two aims: 1) to present substantial evidence for identifying the *proton philon* as the highest ontological being, and 2) to suggest why such a reference to a Form is not more clear.

When Socrates defines the *proton philon* as an *arche* that does not depend on anything else (219c6-d2, 220b67), he seems to be referring to something that *sounds* like a Form (e.g., cf. *Smp.* 211d3-212a7), but the real question is whether the rough language Socrates uses to describe the *proton philon* matches the descriptions of Forms found in other dialogues. If we examine three short, key passages in the *Lysis* (219c5-d4, 220b1-3, 220d4-e1), we find the following diction and distinctions: 1) the *proton philon* is the final goal or destination of the search (some form of *teleutan* or *telos*); 2) it is *that very thing* (*ekeino auto* or equivalents) that is sought; 3) the *proton philon* is distinct from its counterfeits or images (*eidola*); 4) it is *for the sake of* this ultimate objective that all the other objects have *also* been sought (*hou heneka kai*); and 5) the *proton philon* is in *absolute reality* and *truth* the ultimate goal (forms such as *alethos* and *toi onti*). As will be demonstrated, this same diction appears in the *Symposium* and *Republic* in regard to Forms. Further, the whole argument in the *Lysis* about the *proton philon*, where the emphasis is on the need to discriminate between that which is desired for its own sake and that which is sought for the sake of something else (*heneka heterou philou*), is duplicated in the *Philebus*, a dialogue that almost all critics assign to Plato's last period.

Why does Sokrates not openly mention Ideas in the *Lysis*? One answer is that the interlocutors are two boys with whom it might be premature to discuss ontology, but Plato could have chosen older interlocutors. More relevant is the sub-genre, an aporetic dialogue. *Pace* Kahn (1996), I would like to make this presentation another demonstration that aporetic dialogues do not necessarily lack maturity or sophistication. Silences in these dialogues are due not necessarily to undeveloped doctrine but to the pedagogical requirements of this medium. As students at the Academy advanced through more complex studies, they recognized increasingly exalted doctrine in the aporetic texts they had been reading all along.