Appearance and Reality in Plato’s *Phaedrus*

Lecture for HUMA 1600, October 28, 2008

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Pre-Introduction: Dialogue Outline

- First speech (written by Lysias, delivered by Phaedrus); theme: why you should prefer a non-lover to a lover
- Second speech (Socrates); theme: why erotic love is bad
  - love is a form of madness: desire for pleasure overcomes our judgment
  - the lover will prefer the beloved to be ignorant, cowardly, slow-witted, soft, etc.
- Third speech (Socrates); theme: true love is good, not bad
  - love is a form of divine madness
  - the nature of the soul: charioteer, white horse, black horse
  - the soul’s experience in heaven
  - the lover is reminded of the form of beauty by a beautiful boy
- Discussion of rhetoric
  - can rhetoric be an art, and if so how?
  - the true rhetorician would need to know the truth about his subject, and about the souls of his audience
- Discussion of writing: a good thing or a bad thing?
Introduction: Two Questions

1. what genre is this?
   - uses myth, but isn’t simply a myth
   - resembles a play, but no real plot or action
   - involves historical figures, but not a work of history

2. what is the subject of the dialogue?
   - love
   - madness
   - the nature of the soul
   - rhetoric
   - speaking vs. writing
“What is in [the place beyond heaven] is without color and without shape and without solidity, a being that really is what it is, the subject of all true knowledge, visible only to intelligence, the soul’s steersman. …On the way around, [the god’s mind] has a view of Justice as it is; it has a view of Self-Control; it has a view of Knowledge — not the knowledge that is close to change, that becomes different as it knows the different things which we consider real down here. No, it is the knowledge of what really is what it is. And when the soul has seen all the things that are as they are and feasted on them, it sinks back inside heaven and goes home.”

There is a metaphysical view that is only hinted at here, but that is crucial for understanding the *Phaedrus*. (It is developed further in the *Republic*, the *Phaedo*, and to some extent the *Symposium*, and treated critically in the *Parmenides*.) This is what is often called “Plato’s Theory of Forms.”
## Visible and Intelligible Worlds

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<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Visible World</strong></th>
<th><strong>Intelligible World</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>contains physical objects</td>
<td>contains Forms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>physical objects are changing, impermanent</td>
<td>the Forms are unchanging, permanent</td>
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<tr>
<td>we perceive physical objects by means of the senses</td>
<td>we perceive the Forms by means of reason</td>
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<tr>
<td>our bodies are part of the visible world</td>
<td>our souls are part of the intelligible world</td>
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Now for the crucial twist.

So far it sounds as though there are literally two worlds.

But they are not really distinct. The visible world is not fundamentally real. Rather, it is the *appearance* of the intelligible world.

The physical world is only real to the extent that it participates in the forms.

So we cannot truly understand the physical world until we understand the Forms. When we do, we see that the Forms are the fundamental reality that underlies the visible world: they are the reality of which the visible world is only the appearance.
Example: Circularity

• It may be easiest to see what Socrates has in mind with a mathematical example.
• There are many circular objects: shields, chariot wheels, etc.
• We recognize that they are similar, and use the same word, ‘circular’, to describe them.
• This must be because there is something they all share, namely the property of circularity – we might say, the Form of the Circle.
• This form is not itself a physical object. (A circle is a set of points equidistant from a given point: but points are dimensionless, and can’t have a physical existence.)
• Moreover, the Form of the Circle is the only thing that is perfectly circular. Circular physical objects are only imperfectly circular.
Forms Mentioned in the Phaedrus

• Justice (247D)
• Self-Control (247D)
• Knowledge (247D)
• Beauty (250B)
• Wisdom (250D)
A Key to the Dialogue?

So we apparently have two worlds, the visible and the intelligible. But it turns out that the visible world is mere appearance, and the deeper reality that it intimates is the intelligible realm of the Forms. The dialogue as a whole uses this distinction over and over.

1. The three speeches: the false or apparent lover vs. the true lover
2. The discussion after the speeches: False or apparent rhetoric vs. true rhetoric
3. The end of the dialogue: False or apparent writing vs. true writing

Moreover, in each case the false or merely apparent side of the dichotomy is concerned with metaphysical appearances, with the visible world, while the true or real side is concerned with reality.
The Apparent Lover

Lysias’s speech: why you should prefer someone who is not in love to someone who is.

- The speaker presents himself as a “non-lover”, i.e. someone who is not in love with the boy the speech is for. This is deceptive: he is actually just as much in love as the boy’s other suitors.
- The speaker argues that the non-lover is superior to the lover. As we see later, Socrates thinks this is incorrect: the speaker is making the weaker argument appear the stronger.
- Why doesn’t the speaker simply present himself as he is (a lover), and present sound arguments for the superiority of love? –Because he needs a way to distinguish himself from other suitors.
Socrates’ first speech: why a relationship with a (false, apparent) lover is harmful.
The lover wants his beloved to be dependent on him, so he will want him to be ignorant, cowardly, an ineffective speaker, and slow-witted. He will keep the boy away from philosophy. He will want the boy to be soft and pretty, not muscular and fit. He will want him to have no possessions. And so on.
The false or apparent lover never gets past the attraction to physical beauty. As Socrates says in his second speech, “[A] man who was initiated long ago or who has become defiled is not to be moved abruptly from here to a vision of Beauty itself when he sees what we call beauty here; so instead of gazing at the latter reverently, he surrenders to pleasure and sets out in the manner of a four-footed beast, eager to make babies; and, wallowing in vice, he goes after unnatural pleasure too, without a trace of fear or shame” (250E).
Socrates’ second speech: (true) love is good after all.

Love is initially prompted by the physical beauty of the loved one. But this physical beauty is merely the appearance of the form of beauty.

The true lover realizes that physical beauty is merely the image of something higher and more real. “When he sees the beauty we have down here and is reminded of true beauty[,] then he takes wing and flutters in his eagerness to rise up, but is unable to do so; and he gazes aloft, like a bird, paying no attention to what is down below — and that is what brings on him the charge that he has gone mad” (249D).
The true lover will want what is best for his beloved (not what is merely to his own advantage). He is attracted not so much to the beloved’s physical beauty as to the beauty of his soul, and not so much to the actual beauty of his soul as to its potential, to the ideal beauty which it points toward but doesn’t realize. And so he will try to help the beloved achieve this ideal beauty.

“They take their god’s path and seek for their own a boy whose nature is like the god’s; and when they have got him they emulate the god,convincing the boy they love and training him to follow their god’s pattern and way of life . . . . They show no envy, no mean-spirited lack of generosity, toward the boy, but make every effort to draw him into being totally like themselves and the god to whom they are devoted” (253B).
“What I have actually heard about this, Socrates, my friend, is that it is not necessary for the intending orator to learn what is really just, but only what will seem just to the crowd who will act as judges. Nor again what is really good or noble, but only what will seem so. For that is what persuasion proceeds from, not truth” (259E-260A; cf. 272D-E).
True Rhetoric

• The art of rhetoric is “a way of directing the soul by means of speech, not only in the lawcourts and on other public occasions but also in private” (261A).

• The usual conception is that rhetoric enables us to “direct the soul” to believe or do what we want it to.

• Socrates begins by arguing that we can more effectively trick people into doing or believing what we want if we know the truth about the subject, and the nature of the souls of the audience (262A).

• But the argument quickly becomes more radical. Socrates suggests that the relation between rhetoric and the soul is like the relation between medicine and the body (270B). The implication seems to be that true rhetoric would aim at the health of the soul, just as medicine aims at the health of the body.
Thamus to Theuth: “You have not discovered a potion for remembering, but for reminding; you provide your students with the appearance of wisdom, not its reality. Your invention [writing] will enable them to hear many things without being properly taught, and they will imagine that they have come know much while for the most part they will know nothing. And they will be difficult to get along with, since they will merely appear to be wise without really being so” (275A-B).
Socrates: Now tell me, can we discern another kind of discourse, a legitimate brother of this one? Can we say how it comes about, and how it is by nature better and more capable?

Phaedrus: Which one is that? How do you think it comes about?

Socrates: It is a discourse that is written down, with knowledge, in the soul of the listener; it can defend itself, and it knows for whom it should speak and for whom it should remain silent.

Phaedrus: You mean the living, breathing discourse of the man who knows, of which the written one can be fairly called an image.

Socrates: Absolutely right.

(276A)
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Apparent/False/Bad</th>
<th>Real/True/Good</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Metaphysics</td>
<td>visible world</td>
<td>intelligible world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love</td>
<td>love of appearances (beautiful bodies, and other worldly things)</td>
<td>love of reality (beauty itself, and other Forms: goodness, justice, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhetoric</td>
<td>giving the appearance of the truth; “making the weaker argument appear the stronger”</td>
<td>presenting the truth itself; presenting genuinely strong arguments</td>
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<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>writing on paper: gives the appearance of knowledge</td>
<td>writing on the soul: represents genuine knowledge</td>
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I’ll conclude by returning to the two questions I began with.

These were:

1. What sort of work is this? What genre?
2. What is the subject of the work? (Erotic love, or rhetoric?)

I will consider them in reverse order.
Subject: Love or Rhetoric?

- **(My) answer:** True Love = True Rhetoric = Philosophy
- **Love.** The false lover is the lover of the physical appearance of beauty (generalized: of appearances, of the visible world). But the true lover is the lover of the forms, of the intelligible world, i.e. the philosopher
- **Rhetoric.** False rhetoric tries to give the appearance of the truth, but without concern for the actual truth. But true rhetoric must above all be concerned with reality, i.e. must be philosophy.
- **Philosophy.** At the beginning of the discussion of rhetoric, it appears that the discussion will have nothing to do with the subject matter of the speeches, only with their form. This exemplifies the (false) idea that rhetoric is concerned only with form, not with substance. By the end of the discussion, it’s clear that form and content cannot be divorced; the ideal rhetorician turns out to be identical with the ideal lover; and both are in fact philosophers, lovers of wisdom.
Genre?

We have a name for the genre of this work: a philosophical dialogue. But we still have trouble knowing how to read such a work. (Plato’s readers would have had trouble also; the philosophical dialogue was virtually invented by Plato.) Above all, we should not take it too seriously. (If you are a philosopher, you should be able to “yourself make the argument that your writing is of little worth” (278C).) It doesn’t present knowledge; it isn’t to be “recited in public without questioning and explanation” (277E).

The concluding pages tell us exactly how to regard this genre. The written dialogue is an image or appearance of real dialogue. The written dialogue is to real dialogue as physical beauty is to the Form of beauty. The best the author can hope for is that the written dialogue may remind us of, and inspire a passion for, real dialogue, just as physical beauty may remind us of and inspire a passion for the Form of beauty.