

Persuasive Definition in Plato's *Phaedrus*

Plato's *Phaedrus* is often taken to undervalue the written word—sometimes even to disregard it—as a vehicle for allowing ascent to an understanding of the forms. Written discourse can provide no “great certainty and clarity” (277d7); these are attainable only through face-to-face oral communication represented by the process of dialectic.

Commentators differ on whether the written word has any value at all in the philosophical enterprise, but almost all seem to agree to the common-sense proposition that writing and oral dialectic represent two distinctly different forms of philosophical activity. Despite maintaining a clear distinction between written and oral discourse throughout most of the dialogue, Socrates seems to muddy the waters, so to speak, in the dialogue's final pages, when he twice claims that dialectic “writes in the soul of the learner” (276a4-6; 278a).

These two remarks have received scant attention from commentators. Yunis, (2011: 231), for example, has little to say, beyond characterizing them as “playful” metaphors. I argue, rather, that Socrates' description of dialectic as a form of writing is essential for a proper understanding of Socrates' argumentative strategy through the dialogue. Socrates is employing what philosopher Charles Stevenson first described as the process of “persuasive definition.”

Stevenson (1944: 210) showed that terms used in everyday conversation have both a denotative and a connotative (or emotional) meaning. The connotative meaning of a term refers to the emotions or attitudes (either positive or negative) aroused by the use of the term. According to Stevenson, it is often possible to alter the denotative meaning of a term but leave the connotative meaning intact. An example he uses is the word

“culture.” Merriam-Webster defines “culture” (denotatively) as the set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes an institution or organization, so that a person of culture possesses a proper understanding of and adherence to these values and practices. Attempting a persuasive definition of the term “culture,” one might argue, Stevenson says, that the possession of qualities like imaginative sensitivity and originality are the true measure of the possession of culture. In such an argument, the positive emotional coloring of the term is left intact, while the denotative meaning has shifted. Socrates employs a persuasive definition when he argues that writing is not really what is written in black water, sown through a pen with words that cannot offer a defense for themselves (276c). Rather writing is what is written in the soul of a learner through the process of dialectic (276e). Socrates, fully aware of Phaedrus’ enthusiasm for rhetoric, the written word as exemplified in the speech of Lysias that began the dialogue, shifts the denotative meaning of the word “writing” to something else entirely: dialectic. But he leaves the emotive meaning of the term intact in order to persuade Phaedrus to give up his enthusiasm for rhetoric and turn to philosophy.

Bibliography

- Stevenson, Charles. 1944. *Ethics and Language*. Yale University Press.
- Yunis, H. 2011. *Plato; Phaedrus*. Cambridge University Press.