Betsy DeVos:

The Modern-Day Lysias

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Dialogue and dissemination. I learned the importance of these two forms of communication as a little girl, sitting in my parents' classrooms at Beloit Memorial High School. From the back of the classroom, I would watch my parents as they taught. Along with teaching, they also engaged in communication with students individually through the student raising their hand to ask a question or setting up a time to meet individually. My parents are examples of how to use both dialogue, the type of communication that incorporates only two people, and dissemination, which includes one speaker and many audience members. After observing their classrooms, I was introduced to the importance of engaging in large lectures, as well as intimate conversations. From my parents, I was also able to witness the significance of a strong public education. Therefore, when I first heard speeches from Betsy DeVos, our new Secretary of Education, I became enraged at how she criticized public school districts, like the one that employed my parents. Her ignorance on the topic she disseminates about labels her as a modern-day Lysias, a character from Plato's, the *Phaedrus*. Through this relation, DeVos' rhetoric is paired to the standards of what Plato's character, Socrates, would consider good rhetoric. From there, we can further analyze the techniques that DeVos uses to manipulate the education system into what she wants: a vision of education that will end up demolishing the jobs of many dedicated educators and ruin the education of young students. A vision that easily could be re-arranged if DeVos was willing to engage in dialogue with a public educator. This practice would then help inform her before she

participates in any form of dissemination because both dialogue and dissemination are needed for effective communication in our society.

Socrates used dialogue to share his belief of what responsible rhetoric entails. He first shared with his student, Phaedrus, the importance of the speaker knowing the truth about the topic he is talking about.[1] Within that, the speaker must also know the meaning of each word in his definition, until they are "indivisible."[2] After knowing the truth of the subject, the speaker must cater the speech so it resonates with each and every soul, which can be accomplished if the speaker knows the "nature of each soul."[3] Socrates believed that if a speaker contained these qualities in their speech, the rhetoric will be artful in "directing the soul." He also used guidelines of good rhetoric to critique the work of speakers who used their knowledge of rhetoric to manipulate others. That is, the speakers had no knowledge of the truth, just their opinion; however, "they know very well everything about the soul."[4] This kind of rhetoric would be declared as an "artless practice" because there is "no genuine art of speaking without a grasp of truth."[5] Therefore, stating that an argument used by someone who is not passionate or educated on the topic, but rather is using the rhetoric to manipulate the audience will result in an artless and empty subject matter.

When on the topic of artless speakers, Socrates began to critique the work of Lysias as being incorrect and manipulative to the audience. The same unknowledgeable, yet highly opinionated manner can not only be seen in Lysias, but also in DeVos. Similar to Lysias, DeVos is very uneducated on the topic that she speaks about. For one, DeVos demotes public schools from her own personal opinion despite the fact that she has no information to back her opinions up. She is unqualified to speak out on the subject of public education because she has never worked in the education system as a teacher. She has never seen the benefits that children get from their public education. According to Valerie Strauss in her article, "Problems with Charter

1 Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff. *Plato: Phaedrus*. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1995), 277C.
2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid, 261A.
5 Ibid, 271C.

Schools that you won't Hear Betsy DeVos Talk About," public education is a place that is accepting of all students, despite their reading level, behavior, race, gender, ethnicity, or sexuality.[6] Instead of looking at the benefits of public education, DeVos decided to propose a plan that Scott Sargrad said in his article, "An Attack on American Schools," would terminate the salary of "35,000 teachers," and eliminate "$1.2 billion for after-school programs."[7] From those immense budget cuts from public education, she plans to put more money into charter schools so children can have "school choice."[8] However, the so-called "perks" of school choice also come with some negative effects that could ultimately discriminate against the students who are so eager to learn. For example, Jennifer Bendery reported in her article, "Betsy DeVos: If States Discriminate Against LGBTQ Students, It's Cool By Me," that DeVos claimed schools should be allowed the "flexibility to decide whether [they can] discriminate against LGBTQ students—even if those schools get federal money."[9] Openly allowing schools to deny the education of students based on their sexual orientation, despite the well-known fact that someone's sexuality does not determine their intelligence or right to an education. DeVos' naïve nature relating to these topics of education connects to Lysias and his outspoken attitude towards an argument. From this, I believe that both DeVos and Lysias use only their personal opinions to support their remarks, creating very unreliable and absurd arguments.

One of the main critiques Socrates had of writing is that it allowed people an alternative to memorization skills. Instead of trying to memorize what they can hear from their teacher, they can rely on writing, which will then "enable them to hear many things without being properly taught, and they will imagine that they have come to know much while for the most part they know nothing."[10] While this may be a reliable resource, people could then start a habit where they rely so much on

6 Scott Sargrad. "An Attack on America's Schools." *U.S News*. 23 May 2017. Web. 10 Sept. 2017.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Jennifer Bendery. "Betsy DeVos: If States Discriminate Against LGBTQ Students, It's Cool By Me." *Huffington Post*. 24 May 2017. Web. 10 Sept. 2017.

10 Nehamas, *Plato: Phaedrus*, 275B.

the given information that they no longer attempt to comprehend it, eliminating any potential of actual knowledge of that subject. Along with that, writing cannot defend itself at a time of question; rather, it needs "father's support."[11] By this Plato means that the writing cannot participate in any form of dialogue, instead, it is left only to be interpreted by the reader. Similar to how a written paper cannot defend itself, DeVos struggles with engaging in dialogue when people attempt to challenge her. This further proves the point that she is unknowledgeable on the topic of education, sticking only to what she has written on her paper. This can be shown especially when she was questioned by Katherine Clark, about the discrimination of LGBTQ students in a certain school district. During this dialogue, DeVos did not directly answer the question she was asked and kept referring to the situation as if it was hypothetical, when in fact the situation was real.[12] From this incident, as well as many others, it can be inferred that DeVos' perception of education is clouded by her own ignorance.

Her belief that she is qualified to control the education of millions of young children can also be connected to a man in one of Socrates' stories—in this story, the man boasted to a musician about how he was a master of harmony because he could play the lowest and highest notes of the strings.[13] However, the man knew "nothing about the subject."[14] The man is then respectively informed by the musician that he has not mastered harmony, but rather put down the groundwork, still having much to learn. DeVos is in need of a conversation like this one. One where she could speak to and learn from a public educator. Unfortunately, DeVos will most likely never be enlightened because she participates mostly in dissemination. Her choice of communication with the public is quite ironic, considering that from dissemination she cannot learn from others. Instead, Alastair Jamieson shares in his article, "Betsy DeVos Cites Grizzly Bears During Guns-in-Schools Debate," that DeVos gets to continue with her speech, manipulating people and misinforming the public about absurd topics like the need

11 Nehamas, *Plato: Phaedrus*, 275E.
12 Bendery. "Betsy DeVos."
13 Nehamas, *Plato: Phaedrus*, 268E.
14 Ibid.

for guns in school because of possible grizzly attacks.[15]

Although it may appear as though I am bashing dissemination, just like Socrates did, I also believe that dissemination plays an important role in education and society once the speaker is educated on their topic. Like many aspects of life, instead of everything being either black or white, I believe there needs to be a gray area. This belief is also supported by John Durham Peters, in his piece called *Dialogue and Dissemination*.[16] In his text, Peters evaluates the beliefs and anxieties that Plato has Socrates, address. Durham Peters also acknowledges Socrates' main reasoning against dissemination: the inability for the "coupling between person and person, soul to soul, body and body" to occur.[17] However, Durham Peters notes that both dialogue and dissemination are needed for their own individualized purposes—dialogue for love and dissemination for justice.[18] In order to show the true benefit of both, Peters even refers to the parables of Jesus to represent dissemination, exemplifying how both forms of communication can send love and spread valuable knowledge toward the receivers if they are used properly.[19] Like the suggestions of Durham Peters, DeVos does use both forms of communication. Although she typically only participates in dialogue during required hearings or conversations with her peers. Not to mention that she converses with people who most likely share the exact same uneducated opinion as her. Then, during dissemination, DeVos shares her plans without any empathy for the young children or public educators that will be affected by her decisions. In order to solve this issue, DeVos needs to take part in an "intimate interaction that is uniquely fit for each participant, where she can have a respectful conversation with a public educator and learn more about their experiences and beliefs.[20] This would be the conversation uniquely fit for her. From this intimate conversation,

15 Alastair Jamieson. "Betsy DeVos Cites Grizzly Bears During Guns-in-Schools Debate." *NBC News*. 18 Jan. 2017. Web. 10 Sept. 2017.

16 John Durham Peter. "Dialogue and Dissemination." *Speaking into the Air* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

17 Peter, "Dialogue and Dissemination," 37.

18 Ibid, 59.

19 Ibid, 51.

20 Ibid, 47.

DeVos could become more educated on the topic before she begins her dissemination to the public. Dialogue and dissemination are needed for successful communication in our society. This also resonates how communication occurs in the public schools. For DeVos, she needs to participate in dialogue first to become more educated on her topic and hear the personal experiences of educators or children that have benefitted from public education. In doing this, she will gain more knowledge from both sides of the spectrum, influencing how she then engages with the public. However, if the conversations with educators do not work and DeVos continues trying to eliminate public schools, we need to remind ourselves of the story that Socrates told of Isocrates: "it seems to me that by his nature he can outdo anything that Lysias has accomplished in his speeches; and he also has a nobler character,"[21] meaning that we are stronger than DeVos' words and proposals. As long as we continue to be respectful in our remarks and unite, we can prevail from DeVos and her implications.

To conclude, I identify as a proud sister of a special education teacher, a proud daughter of two public educators, and a proud graduate of a public school district. From my personal identification, I will not let my family, friends, fellow classmates, or school be bullied by a woman who opposes all of the values and qualities that a diverse education provides. I encourage others to start the conversation, whether it is intimate or in a group, about what they would like to see happen in education. After all, these two opposing forms of communication were formed to help us communicate and share our beliefs for the benefit of society and most importantly, the future.

21 Nehamas, *Plato: Phaedrus*, 279A.