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Plato's *Lysis* and the Erotics of *Philia*

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Abstract: This paper argues that the account of friendship (*philia*) present in Plato's dialogue the *Lysis* is rife with the disruptive and maddening force of *eros*. By its end it is no longer clear whether the familiar sorts of personal relationships that we typically count as friendships, and which Aristotle discusses with great sensitivity and appreciation in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, can be meaningfully sustained. To support this thesis, the paper analyzes each of the seven, relatively self-contained arguments Socrates offers. In

addition, it shows how the dramatic context in which these arguments are embedded foreshadows the dialogue's principal objective: to blur the distinction between *philia* and *eros* by allowing the latter to infect the former.

Key words: Plato, *Lysis*, friendship, *philia*, *eros*, desire, Aristotle.

About friendship a sober or commonsensical thinker, one who takes his philosophical bearings from what ordinary people do and say, might offer this: it is among the most valuable and widely shared of human goods, and perhaps is even the finest of them all. For without friends no one would choose to live. Friendship is a long-term, stable and personal relationship that requires mutual love and affection. We can count on our friends for they genuinely wish us well, as we do them. We enjoy their company and love them for who they actually are rather than for any ulterior motive such as pleasure or utility.

These remarks reflect some of the ideas that Aristotle articulates in *Nicomachean Ethics* Book VIII. But he did not get them from his teacher. For at least in the *Lysis*, the dialogue that most explicitly addresses the question of friendship (*philia*), Plato tells a different, less commonsensical and more disturbing story. This dialogue's account of friendship is rife with the disruptive and maddening force of *eros*, and so by its end it is no longer clear whether the familiar sorts of personal relationships that we typically count as friendships can be meaningfully sustained. To support this thesis, I will analyze each of the seven, relatively self-contained arguments Socrates offers. First, however, I will briefly discuss the dramatic context in which these arguments of the *Lysis* are embedded, for it foreshadows the principal objective of this dialogue: to blur the distinction between *philia* and *eros* by allowing the latter to infect the former.¹

¹ Gadamer is one of the few scholars who offers an interpretation of the dramatic prologue, but he does not go into sufficient detail. See Gadamer, 1980.

Before proceeding, some comments about terminology. Of the three Greek words cited above, only one can be comfortably translated: *epithymia* means “desire.” The other two are more complex. *Eros*, for example, means not only “love” but also “desire.” As Socrates puts it in the *Symposium*, not only is *eros* “of something” (*tinou*: 199e7) –in other words, it has an object –it desires (*epithymein*: 200a5) that something.² Naturally the most familiar object of erotic desire is another human being, but as Socrates goes on to explain (205c-d) it is hardly restricted to this. One may, for example, love one's city or mathematics or good cars. In each case, *eros* is a motive force. It energizes and drives the lover towards the object. The patriot desires to contribute to the wellbeing of the city, and so goes into politics. Someone who loves geometry spends days trying to solve a problem. The lover of cars longs to drive the one she wants.

The desiderative feature of *eros* entails another, one which will figure prominently in the argument below. Whatever its object, an erotic relationship may well be asymmetrical: what is loved need not love the lover back.

Philia and its derivatives, such as the noun, *ho philos*, the adjective *philos*, and the verb *philein* are difficult to render into English. Yes, sometimes *philia* does mean “friendship” and a *philos* is a “friend.” Such relationships tend to be mutual and are non-erotic, for one does not sexually desire his friend or want to possess him. But just as the meaning of *eros* can be extended beyond sexual desire, and thus be translated simply as “love,” so too are there various semantic possibilities for *philia*. For example, in both Greek and English, a “bibliophile” is someone who “loves” (*philei*) rather than “is friends with” books, and an “oenophile” loves wine. Using the adjectival form, one might also say that a book or a bottle of Zinfandel is *philos*; it is “dear.” And it does not love the lover back.

In their commentary on the *Lysis*, Penner and Rowe state that *philia* is “the umbrella” term under which other forms of “love” can

² References to Plato (including *Ly.*, *Sym.*, *Ap.*, *Rep.*, *Grg.*, etc.) advert to the text of Burnet, 1903. Translations are my own.

be subsumed, and they mention the “near interchangeability of *philia*, *eros* and desire” (2005, p. xii and p. 212). As I will show below, this statement needs significant elaboration.

The Prologue: 203a-207d

That Plato intends the reader to take the prologue to the *Lysis* seriously, and not simply as a literary ornament, is signaled both by its length –at approximately 4 Stephanus pages it represents some 20% of the dialogue –and the manner in which it exhibits in dramatic action the themes that surface in the arguments that soon follow. Hippothales, a young man of about 19, is erotically attracted to the boy Lysis, who is about 13. (Nails, 2002, ‘Hippothales’) His is a standard pederastic passion in which an elder partner or “lover” (*erastes*) desires sexual gratification from a youth, the “beloved” (*eromenon*) or “darling” (*paidika*), while the latter, who is sexually passive, looks forward to some tutelage in the ways of Athenian manhood.³ The pederastic relationship is asymmetrical. It is possible, even likely, that the youth will not indulge the elder. Important for the purpose of this essay is the fact that, as it so often does, sexual passion has driven Hippothales “mad” (*mainetai*: 205a8) with love for Lysis. He blushes at the boy’s name (204b5), babbles incessantly about him, and even composes poems and songs in his honor (204c-d). As Hesiod said, *Eros* is the “limb-weakener, who masters the mind and sensible counsel in the breasts of all gods and all men” (*Th.* 121-122). When we fall in love, when we are smitten or have a crush, we do stupid things.

In contrast to the asymmetry of the pederastic relationship, Hippothales and Ctessipus are what we would ordinarily call “friends.” They are of the same age and social class, they spend their free time together and clearly are on intimate and comfortable terms with one another (see 204d-205d). The same holds for Lysis and Menexenus. These two young boys play together (206e) and

³ An often cited overview of Greek pederasty can be found in Dover, 1980.

cheerfully banter with one another (see 207b-c and 211a.) Theirs appears to be a stable, non-erotic, non-epithumotic friendship. So when Socrates asks them, "you two are friends (*philo*), aren't you?" they answer in unison, "of course' (207c8-9).

Hippothales is unsure how to win Lysis' favors, and to this end solicits Socrates' advice. Because the older man claims expertise in the subject of *eros* he is glad to oblige and to "demonstrate" (*epideixai*: 206c5) how a lover should speak to his beloved.⁴ He offers to present a sample seduction speech, and the dialogue that follows putatively serves that purpose.

The prologue depicts what seem to be ordinary friendships between equals who know each other well, enjoy each other's company and reciprocate each other's good will and affection. As will become painfully apparent, however, under the brutal scrutiny of Socratic examination precisely this sort of relationship will be called into question. As if to signal this, Plato makes it clear that of the five characters who appear in the prologue, Socrates stands alone. He is connected to no one through love and later confesses that he has never had a friend (212a). The second point the prologue suggests is precisely the theme of this paper and perhaps an explanation of the first. *Eros* intrudes upon *philia* and in two ways: if Socrates helps Hippothales win Lysis, then Hippothales might well spend more time with his "darling" than with his friend Ctessipus. Someone in the throes of erotic passion often neglects old pals. And there is an additional wrinkle. If Socrates succeeds in demonstrating how Lysis can be seduced, then wouldn't Lysis favor him rather than Hippothales? If so, not only might Menexenus be abandoned but Hippothales would be disappointed and probably annoyed. In short,

⁴ In the *Lysis* Socrates states his qualifications in erotic matters: "although I am worthless and useless in other matters, this has somehow been given to me by god: I am able quickly to recognize a lover (*eronta*) and a beloved (*eromenon*)" (204b8-c2). See also *Sym.* 177e.

if Socrates succeeds, then the lives of all four of the characters in the prologue likely will be significantly disrupted.⁵

Argument One: 207d-210d

Socrates begins his first argument with Lysis by asking “do your father and mother greatly love (*philei*) you?” Of course they do, the boy replies. If so, Socrates continues, “they must wish you to be as happy as possible (*eudaimonestaton*).” He then asks, “does it seem to you that someone can be happy who is a slave and for whom it is not possible to do what he wants (207e2)?” Lysis thinks not, and thus he is puzzled when Socrates reminds him that in fact his own parents frequently hinder him from doing what he wants. They do not allow him, for example, to drive the chariot or the mule-cart, or to use the loom. Instead, they either assign these tasks to a trained worker or slave, or do them themselves. Socrates suggests that such prohibitions are not due simply to Lysis’ young age, but because he lacks the requisite knowledge or skill to perform them properly. To illustrate this point Socrates reminds Lysis that his parents do allow him to read or write or play the lyre, and this is because their son actually knows how to do these things well.

On the basis of these observations, Socrates offers Lysis a series of increasingly expansive, and finally quite exaggerated, generalizations.

(1) Lysis’ father, who now won’t allow the boy to drive the chariot, will “turn over himself and his belongings to you on the day that he supposes that you are more intelligent (*beltion ...phronein*) than he himself” (209c4-6).

⁵ As Miller, 2004, p. 43 puts it, the philosopher “may first appear as a destructive or rude or, at least, an alien presence.” Or as Gadamer, 1980, p. 11 says, Socrates’ question “destroys the youth’s understanding of friendship.”

(2) Lysis' neighbor "will turn over to you the management of his household when he supposes that you are more intelligent than he concerning household management" (209d1-3).

(3) When the Athenians realize that "you are sufficiently intelligent" (*hikanos phroneis*) they will turn over to you their affairs" (209d4-5).

(4) The king of Persia will allow us to prepare the royal soup if "we can show him that we are more intelligent (*kallion phronoumen*) than his son concerning the preparation of food" (209e2- 3). Socrates makes the same point about ophthalmology. If the king believed that "we were trained in medicine" (*iatrikous*: 210a2), he would allow us to treat his son's eyes.

(5) Next, Socrates makes this massive claim: "with respect to those matters in which we are intelligent, everyone, Greek and foreigner, men and women, will turn them over to us" (210b1- 2). Only then, Socrates announces, "will we be free" (*eleutheroi*: 210b4) and be able to rule over others. Only upon the attainment of such intelligence will the type of constraint placed upon his desires that Lysis now experiences at the hands of his parents come to an end. As a result, he presumably would be happy.

(6) Since the examples cited above invoke kinds of knowledge that have useful results –the expert in household management can profitably manage another's fortunes, a skilled cook can produce a delicious and healthy soup, and so on –Socrates returns to his initial topic, namely love, with this assertion:

"Will we be friends (*philo*) with someone and will someone befriend (*philesei*) us in those matters in which we are useless?"

Lysis answers no.

"Now, will your father or anyone else love (*philei*) you to the extent that you are useless?"

It doesn't seem so, Lysis responds.

“Therefore, if, my boy, you become wise (*sophos*) everyone will be your friend (*philoí*) and everyone will be kindred (*oikeioi*) with you, for you will be useful and good” (210c5-d3).

This argument is replete with questionable assumptions. First, even if it is true that Lysis’ father forbids him from driving the chariot because his son does not know how to manage the horses and reins – and might therefore injure either himself, the chariots or the horses – it does not follow that when the boy gains this knowledge his father will automatically turn the chariot over to him. What if the father is so attached to his horses, loves them so passionately, that he simply cannot bear watching them being handled by someone else, even if that someone is his own son who is well trained in horsemanship? People form strong and often irrational attachments to their beloved possessions. They love what is theirs simply because it is theirs.

Even if it were true that a father would turn his belongings (and himself) over to his son on the day he supposes the son is more intelligent, (2) is surely problematic. For instance, would Lysis’ neighbor really turn his investment portfolio over to him simply because he has a degree in finance? Perhaps, but only if he trusts greatly in Lysis’ willingness to act on his behalf rather than his own. Furthermore, and this is an equally pressing point, for the neighbor to turn over management of his portfolio to Lysis, he would have to recognize the boy’s superior knowledge. To state a version of Meno’s paradox, how would he be able to do this without possessing such knowledge himself? And if he does have such knowledge, then he would have no need of advice from Lysis.

On to (3): perhaps the Athenians would turn over their affairs to Lysis upon recognizing his superior intellect. But as everyday politics, both then and now, so forcefully suggest, this is anything but likely. Ordinary citizens are often quite ignorant, easily swayed by emotional appeals, and they typically vote on the basis of their own short-term interests. Only if the citizenry were thoroughly educated and capable of acting strictly on the basis of reasoned judgment would they both acknowledge Lysis’ intellectual superiority and

submit to his rule. Of course, the objection just mentioned in conjunction with (2) –that without already having such knowledge themselves, the citizens would be unable to recognize his superior knowledge, and with such knowledge they would have no need of him –again comes into play. Socrates' assertions in (4) and (5) are subject to the same sort of objection.

In (6) Socrates generalizes: if Lysis becomes wise, everyone will become his friend (*philos*). But as the questions raised above clearly indicate, this is hardly warranted by the argument. Even granting the unlikely possibility that Lysis' neighbor is sufficiently intelligent to recognize his superior knowledge of finance, and trusting enough of his character to authorize him to act on his behalf, it doesn't follow that in doing so Lysis becomes his friend. He may perhaps become "dear" (*philos*) to him, but only in the same way that a robust portfolio is dear, and this isn't "friendship" as normally understood.

Consider also this consequence of (6). If Lysis is intelligent, the argument suggests, he will be useful and therefore be loved by others. By contrast, if he is neither intelligent nor useful then, Socrates tells him, "neither your father nor anyone else will love (*philei*) you to the extent that you are useless" (210c7-8). But surely this is problematic. Parents often love even their useless children. Nonetheless, it is possible that the young and impressionable Lysis might now be wondering whether his parents love him only to the extent that he can write, read and play the lyre; to the extent that, in other words, he is useful to them. A rather disturbing thought.⁶

To sum up: this argument, which began with the simple observation that Lysis' parents, like most, occasionally restrain their son, introduces a possibility that, if taken seriously, would threaten to undermine not only Lysis' (putative) friendship with Menexenus, but his entire self-conception. For on this account the boy should love wisdom, for only by its attainment will he become someone lovable. Measured by ordinary experience, this is outrageous. On the other

⁶ See Penner and Rowe, 2005, p. 211-216 for an extensive discussion of (6).

hand, recall that Socrates is here offering an example of a seduction speech to Hippothales. On this level, the argument might be entirely effective. If Lysis truly believes that he requires wisdom in order to be happy, free and loved, he may well abandon Menexenus, ignore Hippothales, and consort only with the much older, and apparently wiser, Socrates.

Argument Two: 212a-213d

The second argument, which Socrates directs at Menexenus, begins with the following question:

when someone loves (*philei*) someone, which of the two becomes a friend (*philos*)? Does the one who loves (*philon*) become a friend of the one who is loved (*philoumenon*) or does the one who is loved become a friend of the one who loves? Or does it not matter? (212a9-b2).

Menexenus answers that it does not matter. He likely says this because friendship seems to him to require precisely the sort of reciprocal affection and good will that Aristotle identifies as being its essential attribute and calls *antiphilesis* (*EN* 1155b28).⁷ By contrast, Socrates, using the same word, seems to discard this requirement when he asks “isn’t it possible for the one loving (*philounta*) not to be loved in return? (*antiphileisthai*: 212b6)?” In fact, his original question –when X loves Y is X or Y the friend? –implicitly allows the possibility that *philia* not be mutual. The example Socrates uses in order to make his point is salient: “surely it seems that lovers (*erastai*) sometimes suffer this very condition” – namely, being loved without being loved in return –“in relation to their darlings” (*paidika*: 212b8). As mentioned above, in the standard pederastic relationship such asymmetry is a clear possibility. As Socrates says, lovers may “believe that they are not loved in return (*antiphileisthai*), and some

⁷ References to *EN* advert to the text of Baywater, 1894. Translation are my own.

even believe they are hated, but they nonetheless love (*philountes*) as intensely as possible" (212b8-c2).

By allowing *eros* to exemplify a case of *philia* Socrates distorts the ordinary sense of *philia*-as-friendship. He continues the process of distortion by citing the following examples: horse-lovers (*philippoi*), quail-lovers (*philortyges*), dog-, wine-, and sport-lovers are not loved in return by the object of their love. Of course, such relationships, despite being named by a variant of the word *philia*, are not friendships as ordinarily understood. Again, Aristotle understands this and so he explicitly excludes these sorts of love-relationships from the category of *philia*. Note that he does so by appealing to ordinary language: "for we don't say that the affectionate feeling (*philesis*) we have for [e.g.,] inanimate objects is friendship (*philia*), for the love is not reciprocated (*ou gar estin antiphilesis*)" (*EN* 1155b27-28). Socrates, by contrast, seems to disregard the testimony of such commonsense.

Note that among the examples of asymmetrical love-relationships Socrates includes those who "love wisdom" (*philosophoi*: 212d7). Wisdom does not love the philosopher back.

Socrates next proposes the following: if the one actively loving is not the friend, perhaps the "one loved" (*philoumenon*) is. This fails and for the same reason as did the first. If Y is loved by X, Y need not love X in return. In fact, Y may hate X. Therefore, to call Y the "friend" is to allow the possibility that an enemy, one who hates X, is X's friend. This seems to be wrongheaded.

To reiterate, the manner in which Socrates formulates his question assumes that non-mutuality is possible. And once that possibility is granted it is a short distance to propositions such as, "the friend is the friend to the enemy" (213b4). It seems, then, that an interlocutor more astute and mature than Menexenus could have objected to Socrates' formulation of the question by insisting at the outset that mutuality be a necessary condition of *philia*. Socrates himself might allude to this potential objection when, after the analysis has reached *aporia*, he asks whether "our inquiry has been

entirely incorrect?” (213d1). Lysis blurts out that he thinks it has. Then, in a manner appropriate for a young boy talking to his elders, he “blushes” (213d3) and falls silent. It is incumbent upon the reader to finish the thought that his blush intimates, and it should be this: as his examples of the pederastic lover and the oenophile make clear, Socrates has allowed eros, whose very nature allows for the possibility of asymmetry, to infect his analysis of *philia*.

Argument Three: 214a-215c

This section begins with a hypothesis: “like (*to homoion*) is necessarily always friend (*philon*) to like” (214b3-4). An objection surfaces immediately: this seems to allow two people who are similarly bad to be friends with one another. But, Socrates says, this is impossible since bad people will inevitably “do wrong to (*adikountas*)” and therefore harm one another and “it is impossible for those who have been wronged to be friends (*philous*: 214c3).”

Socrates next tries to save the hypothesis by restricting it to good people: only they, he says, “are similar to one another and are friends” (214c6-7). This move, however, is more problematic than it might initially appear, for it suggests that there are only two kinds of people: good and bad. Surely, however, two people who are neither good nor bad simpliciter, perhaps by being some sort of mixture of the two, can be similar. This point will return shortly.

Socrates begins his refutation by asking, “is a man friend (*philos*) to one who is alike to the extent that they are alike, and such a man is useful to the other?” (214e3-5). The expected answer is “yes,” since Argument One concluded that a friend is useful. But this move leads to problems when Socrates asks, “is it possible for anything that is alike to be beneficial to anything that is like, or to be harmful to it, which it could not be to itself?” (214e5-7).⁸ In other words, if X and Y are alike in being good, they cannot benefit one another since both

⁸ A problem: Socrates earlier said that two bad people can do injustice to and therefore harm one another. See 214c2.

are already good.⁹ In other words, "the good man, insofar as he is good, is to this extent sufficient (*hikanos*) unto himself" (215a6-7). On this exacting conception, to be good is to be perfectly or completely good, and hence in need of nothing additional. Since "one who needs nothing feels no affection (*agapoie*)...and the one who feels no affection does not love (*philo*)" (215a7-b2), there can be no friendship between two good people.

Three points: first, Socrates here assumes that *philia* requires one "to feel affection (*agapein*)," which in turn requires one to "need" something; that is, to experience a lack. In doing so, he has brought *philia* in line with *eros*, at least insofar as Socrates explains it in the *Symposium* (199c-200b). There he insists that if X feels *eros* for Y, then X "desires" (*epithymei*: 200a3) Y, and if X desires Y, then X must "be lacking in" (200b1) Y.

Second, as mentioned above, when Socrates asserts that to be good is to be "sufficient" and in need of nothing, he exaggerates the meaning of "good" such that it connotes "perfect." In doing so, he assumes what might be called the ontological sense of "good," whereby it means, as it sometimes does in Aristotle, having completely actualized a capacity or having reached the *telos* of one's being and thereby having become *teleion*, "complete" or "perfect." So, for example, a "good" table is one that needs no additional parts in order to be what it is. It is just fine as is. This is quite contrary to an ordinary understanding of "good" whereby a good person can and usually does try to become better.

Third, Socrates has exaggerated the meaning of "like" such that it connotes identity. Surely some X, say a carpenter, can be like Y, another carpenter, but still exhibit many differences as well. Y may be better with a saw, X with a hammer.

To sum up: Socrates rejects the notion that like loves like, that birds of a feather flock together, by distorting the ordinary meaning

⁹ Socrates quickly amends, this principle: perhaps, he suggests, "the good is friend to the good insofar as they are good, not insofar as they are alike" (215a4-5). But he does not elaborate.

of the terms he is using. In doing so, he distorts what Aristotle, and probably most people, would identify as the paradigm of a good friendship: one between two similarly good but not perfect people (see *EN VIII.4*.) He does, however, replace it, at least implicitly, with a view that might seem, at least to some people, to be an enticing possibility. If the good is counted as the perfect, then perhaps it, rather than other human beings, is what people should love most of all. As Penner and Rowe put it, “*philia* and *eros* are particular forms of, or particular species of, the desire for good” (2005, p. 212). If *Lysis* were to take this notion to heart, then Socrates could be understood to be fulfilling his promise to provide Hippothales with a seduction speech. Rather than playing with Menexenus, it might make sense for *Lysis* to sexually gratify an older and wiser man in the hope of receiving tutelage in the good. If so, it would make even more sense for him to spend time with the incomparable Socrates, a man *Lysis* may well conceive of as being perfect.

Argument Four: 215c-216b

Socrates next entertains a hypothesis the opposite of which he just refuted: like is hostile to like. Therefore, the good are hostile to the good. He cites Hesiod: “and potter is rival to potter, and singer to singer, and beggar to beggar.” But he misrepresents these lines, for with them the poet had friendly and mutually beneficial competition in mind; that is, just the type of friendly competitiveness exemplified in the relationship between *Lysis* and Menexenus. (See 207b-c and 211a.) In any case, Socrates next examines the principle that “opposite is especially friend (*philon*) to opposite” (215e3). On this account, “the poor man must be friend (*philon*) to the rich and the weak man to the strong for the sake of assistance, and the sick man to the doctor” (215d4-6). Here the ambiguity of *philon* is prominent. Surely a sick man is hardly a “friend” of the doctor. Instead, a doctor may be “dear” to the sick man who hopes to be healed, and the doctor may well be glad to see the patient who will pay his fee.

Despite the fact that Menexenus readily agrees to this proposition, Socrates repudiates it almost immediately on the grounds that it reproduces the problems encountered in Argument Two: it generates the possibility that someone who is an “enemy (*echthron*) be friendly (*philon*) to the friend (*philo*)” (216b3). So too must, on this account, the “just be friend to the unjust” (216b4) and “the good to the bad” (216b5), options that were eliminated as 213a.

Note that, once again, Socrates has exaggerated the meaning of several of his key terms. In Argument Three he used “like” (*homoion*) such that it became “identical” or “equal.” Here he implies that “unlike” means “opposite” (*enantion*). But this certainly doesn’t have to be the case. You and I may be good people, but we can still be rather unlike one another. Or so it would seem.

Argument Five: 216c –218c

To escape from the impasses of the previous two hypotheses – which foundered at the prospect of the good loving the good or the bad loving the bad (Argument Three), or that of the bad loving the good (Argument Four) –he here proposes that “what is neither good nor bad is friend (*philon*) of the beautiful and good” (216d3-4). (Note that at 216d2 he treats “good” and “beautiful,” *agathos* and *kalos*, as equivalent. Compare Sym. 204e.) Birds of a feather need not flock together nor must opposites attract. Instead, what is in-between (*metaxy*: 220d5) loves what is good. With these moves in place, the thesis of this paper comes into full view: in Plato's *Lysis*, *philia* is eroticized.

As Socrates explains at *Symposium* 199d-200b, eros has three salient features. First, it is intentional: to love is to love some object. Second, the one who loves lacks this object and so, third, desires it. He adds a fourth condition at 204a6: to desire an object one must not only lack it, but “be aware” that he lacks it. The hypothesis being entertained in Argument Five –what is neither good nor bad is friend of, or loves, the beautiful and good –implies that *philia* has all four features. Socrates clarifies by means of an example. A body, he says,

is neither good nor bad. When it is healthy it is not “friend (*philos*) to the doctor,” for it has no need of and gains no benefit from the doctor (217a1-6). But when it is sick and lacking health, it does become friend to the doctor and desires his company. Socrates then generalizes: what is neither good nor bad becomes a friend (*philon*) to the good “because of the presence of the bad (*kakon*)” (217b6). The body is friend to the doctor because of the presence of illness. There are, however, two kinds of “presence” (*parousia*). A young man’s hair, for example, may be dyed white. In this case whiteness is present in his hair, but only temporarily or partially. His hair is not truly white but only appears to be so. By contrast, until it falls out an old man’s hair is really white. It is the first sense of “presence” that applies to the principle being examined in Argument Five. The neither bad nor good loves the good because of the partial or temporary presence of the bad. For if the bad were present in the second, more robust sense, it would “deprive [the one suffering that presence] of the desire (*epithymia*) and love (*philia*) of the good” (217e8-9). On this account, a thoroughly bad person would lose all inclination to strive for the good. So, to return to the earlier example, a man in whom the presence of illness is chronic might lose the desire to live, and therefore no longer feel friendly towards either life or the doctor. It hardly needs mentioning that by introducing *epithymia* in the lines just quoted, Socrates again makes apparent his eroticizing of *philia*.

Socrates next illustrates the principle that what is neither good nor bad loves the good because of the partial presence of the bad with an all important example. A person who “loves wisdom” (*philosophein*: 218a3) lacks wisdom, for if she were already wise she would not love it. At the other extreme, a philosopher cannot be completely “ignorant” (*amathe*: 218a4). For if she were, she would not be aware of her own ignorance, and therefore would not strive to overcome it. As Socrates puts it at *Symposium* 204a6, “the one who does not believe he is lacking does not desire that which he does not believe he lacks.” The best description of true philosophers, therefore, is this: in them ignorance, which is bad, is present but only partially for they have “not yet been made by it thoroughly senseless

or ignorant, for they still believe (*hegoumenoi*) that they do not know (*eidennai*) what they do not know (*isasin*)" (218a7-b1).

Of course, this language is reminiscent of Socrates' description of "human wisdom" in the *Apology* (20d8). Unlike the politicians, poets, and technicians whom he examines, "I do not believe (*oiomai*) that I know (*eidennai*) what I do not know (*oida*)" (*Ap.* 21d7). Socrates is wisest only because he "has recognized (*egnoken*) that he is worth nothing when it comes to wisdom" (*Ap.* 23b2-4). He desires to know precisely because he recognizes his own deficiencies.

What is perhaps most interesting about this passage is what Socrates does not say. While he identifies the partial presence of the bad –namely, ignorance –as the cause of the love of wisdom, he neglects to mention that philosophy is unintelligible without a partial presence of the good as well. After all, someone entirely stupid would be entirely indifferent to the pursuit of wisdom. By contrast, philosophers "believe" or "suppose" (*hegoumenoi*: 218b1) that they "do not know (*eidennai*) what they do not know (*isasin*)," and this counts as epistemically positive.

Consider this example: I know that I do not know the outcome of last night's baseball game. This is why when the newspaper arrived at my doorstep in the morning, I picked it up and turned to the sports section: I wanted to find out the score. My doing so required not only the partial presence of ignorance –I don't know who won the game – but also a series of implicit knowledge claim that I can make. I must know, for example, that there was a game last night and that because a baseball game cannot end in a draw my question, who won the game?, is in principle answerable. I must also know that the sports section of the paper normally reports the outcomes of the previous night's games. Furthermore, I must also know something about myself: I want to know who won. But how do I know all this? In the *Lysis* Socrates does not address this question, nor does he even mention that in order to love the good not only must the bad (ignorance) be partially present but the good (knowledge) as well. Nonetheless, Socrates at first seems quite pleased with what he has accomplished in Argument Five.

Soon, however, his confidence wavers. “From where I don’t know, a strange suspicion (*hypopsia*) emerged that what we just agreed upon was not true” (218c5-7), he says. Before examining why Socrates suddenly doubts the preceding conclusion, note that this line captures perfectly the epistemological questions just raised. Socrates “suspects” that his conclusions are false. But what is such “suspicion,” and how did Socrates come to doubt that he actually had the answer right? He must have had some awareness of the defectiveness of the claim he is making, and a corresponding intuition that a better one is available. To cite a beautiful phrase from the *Symposium*, how is it that some answers “long for (*pothei*) a question” (204d8)? What positive awareness, what partial presence of the good, coupled with a partial presence of the bad makes possible the calling into question of one’s own convictions?

To make this same point, consider the metaphor Socrates uses here. He says that he fears that the conclusion of the previous argument, which seemed so promising, was but a “dream” (218c8). But to know that he was dreaming he must now be awake.¹⁰

Argument Six: 218c-220b

Socrates builds upon the hypothesis of Argument Five by insisting that all *philia*-relationships are structured teleologically. If, for example, a body is a friend to medicine it is so “for the sake of health” (219c1), which is construed as a good. As such, health too must be considered a friend. But as such a “friendship” with it must also be for the sake of something. Such a means-end sequence cannot proceed indefinitely, for if it did we would “become exhausted” (219c5). Therefore, it must terminate in a highest or “first friend” (*proton philon*: 219d1) that is loved for the sake of itself and for whose sake all other friendships are. In such a “first principle”

¹⁰ For an extended discussion of the role dreams play as epistemic metaphors in Plato, see Roochnik, 2001.

(*arche*: 219c6) all other friendships “come to an end” or “are completed” (*teleutosin*: 220b3).

Socrates' next move is shocking. He asserts that all friends other than the first friend are actually no more than “images” (*eidola*: 219d3), for only the first friend is true or “real” (*toi onti*: 220b4). And then he tell us what that is: only “the good” (*to agathon*: 220b7), that which terminates the means-end sequence, is *philon*. If he is right, then what most people esteem as their best relationships, such as the one Lysis has with Menexenus or Hippothales with Ctessipus, are in fact not really real, and what Calicles says to Socrates in the *Gorgias* would seem to apply: “if you are serious and what you say happens to be true, then the life of human beings would be turned upside-down” (481c5). (Also perplexing here is his claim that “it is because of the bad that the good is loved (*phileitai*: 220b7). This will be discussed shortly below.

Recall that Socrates is showing Hippothales what a good seduction speech is like. And his might work. Perhaps Lysis will abandon the company of Menexenus, rebuff the advances of Hippothales, and spend his days listening to Socrates converse in the agora.

Argument Seven: 220c-222d

In the final argument of Plato's *Lysis*, Socrates challenges the notion that “it is because of the bad that the good is loved (*phileitai*)” by proposing a thought experiment: what if the bad were to “go away” (220c3) or “be destroyed” (220e7)? Even so, he argues, it would still be possible to desire (and love) the good. For there are some desires that, even though they imply a deficiency or lack, are not themselves bad. Some forms of hunger and thirst, for example, are healthy, good and “beneficial” (221b2). This, he claims, shows that not the bad but “desire (*epithymia*) is the cause of *philia*” (221d3). And “someone who desires (*epithymounta*) and loves (*eronta*) loves (*philein*) that which he desires and loves” (221b7-8).”

The eroticizing of *philia* seems complete. Nonetheless, Socrates pushes forward. Since desire is of what is lacking, “what is lacking (*to endees*) is friend (*philon*) to that of which there is a lack” (221e1-2). He next assumes that since what is lacking is that which has been “taken away” (221e3), what one lacks is that which “belongs to someone” (*to oikeion*: 221e3) or what is “akin” to one. Again conflating the critical terms, he continues: “so, as it seems, *eros*, *philia* and *epithymia*, are of that which belongs to someone” (221e3-4). After saying this, Socrates turns to Lysis and Menexenus and cites them as examples of the principle he has just articulated. “Thus, if you two are friends,” he says, “you by nature belong to one another” (221e5-6). He does not, however, let this account of love stand for very long. Since what belongs to or is akin to someone is “like” (222b6) that someone, and since, as Socrates stated earlier, “the like is necessarily a friend (*philon*) to the like” (214b3-4), this account would allow two similarly bad men to be friends. This is impossible because bad men will “do wrong” (214c3) to and thereby harm one another and, as Argument One made clear, *philia* must be of that which is useful. (See 210c8.) Concomitantly, two good men cannot benefit each other because insofar as they are similarly good they are similarly “sufficient” (215a7) and hence have no need for and thus cannot “feel affection for (*agapoie*) one another; and the one who feels no affection does not love (*philo*)” (215b1-3). In Argument Seven Socrates generalizes the point: the like is “useless to the like insofar as it is alike” (222b8). Since the “akin” is like the “like” it is subject to the same objection.

Note that this line of thought is characterized by the same sort of exaggeration found in Argument Three. There Socrates transformed the “like” into the identical, which is what rendered like useless to like. Here he identifies “what is akin” with what is “like,” which in turn implies that it is useless. As Socrates moves towards the end of the *Lysis* this exaggeration proves to be crucial.

Before dismissing this account of *philia* –namely, that we love what is “akin” –Socrates introduces a tantalizing possibility. He asks,

should we assert that the good is akin to everyone, and the bad is foreign? Or, should we say that the bad is akin to bad, the good to the good, and that which is neither good nor bad is akin to that which is neither good nor bad? (222c3-7).

(Compare *Sym.* 205e6 where precisely this possibility is also raised, and also ignored.) The boys choose the latter option. By doing so they fail to pursue what is conceivably the most promising line of thought in the dialogue; what Miller calls the “reorienting insight” (1991, p. 7). Perhaps the good really does belong to all human beings insofar as it is the “first friend” loved by those who are best construed as erotic beings standing in-between the good (completeness) and the bad (nothingness). This proposition, so invitingly compatible with much of what Socrates says in the *Symposium*, can be maintained here in the *Lysis* if only Socrates' manifest exaggerations are curbed. Most important, the meaning of *to oikeion* need not assimilated to that of “the like” and the meaning of “the like” need not be stretched such that it becomes equivalent to the identical. If these corrections were made then it would be possible for *philia* to have “what is akin” as its object, and also to count “what is akin” as the good. For the good is like but not identical to the human being who loves or desires it. Socrates has already provided us with the resources to flesh out this claim. A human being is “in-between” (220d6) the good and the bad. Even if we are not entirely good we may continually strive to be good. To do so we may require an intimation or intuition of the good whenever we act. Socrates says as much in *Republic VI*: the good is that

which every soul pursues and for the sake of which it does everything. It divines (*apomanteuomene*) that it is something, but is at a loss and is not able sufficiently to grasp what it is (505d11-e2).

On this account, the good is partially present whenever we act: it is that for which we aim, whether we can identify it as such or not. We know it is there; we just don't know what it is. As such, we love it.

Conclusion

If the analysis above has any merit, then Socrates was being ironic when he pointed to Lysis and Menexenus and said that they belonged to one another. They do not. What belongs to them and is the proper object of their love is the good, a being that is complete, non-human and which does not love us back. Therefore, if Lysis or any of us readers should take the arguments of this dialogue seriously –and this means probing their presuppositions, seeking their interconnections, striving to supplement the obvious gaps by following all the many clues Plato provides –then we must acknowledge that we are erotic beings at our core. We strive, sometimes madly, and often in ways that are damaging to our ordinary relationships, to understand the Good.¹¹

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