

# PLATO ON LOVE AND FRIENDSHIP

DAVID KONSTAN

**Abstract:** The terms *philia*, *philos* and *erôs* have several senses in Greek, and Plato, in the *Lysis*, exploits them all in order to demonstrate that their uses are inconsistent. In this paper, I combine an analysis of the Greek erotic vocabulary with a close attention to dramatic setting to show that the argument of the *Lysis* prepares the way for the transcendental account of desire in the *Symposium*.

Writing of the massive influence of Gregory Vlastos and of earlier contemporaries like Gilbert Ryle upon the study of ancient Greek philosophy in the United States and Great Britain, David Glidden notes how the analytic fashion they promoted tended to reduce interest in Plato to those passages that could be paraphrased in the form of precise logical propositions. “Soon”, Glidden observes, “propositional analysis became ubiquitous among scholars enamored of Anglo-American philosophy. The stage-setting of Plato’s dialogues, the imagery Plato was so fond of were typically dismissed” (Glidden 1997: 135). Yet a dialogue like the *Lysis*, with its carefully composed narrative frame, continues to invite critical attention to the implications of its dramatic context, as well as to the brilliant and even overingenious logical arguments which enchant and sometimes infuriate readers today.

The dialogue begins as Socrates, proceeding from the precinct of the Academy to that of the Lyceum – the future seats of the schools of Plato and Aristotle, respectively – encounters along the way a group of young men including Hippothales and Ctesippus. They persuade Socrates to join them in visiting a newly-built gymnasium nearby. When Socrates inquires of Hippothales which of the boys in the gymnasium are handsome (*kalôs*: the word can also mean noble or well-bred), Hippothales blushes, thereby

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David Konstan é professor na Brown University (Dep. of Classics), USA., ex-presidente da Sociedade Internacional de Estudos Clássicos.

revealing that he is enamored of one of them. As Socrates says: “O Hippothales son of Hieronymus, you don’t have to tell me any more whether you are in love [*eran*] with someone or not; for I know that you are not only in love, but in fact that you are already far gone in your passion [*erôs*]” (204B5-8). Socrates continues to explain: “In other matters I am coarse and useless, but this I have as a gift from some god, I imagine, that I can quickly identify one who loves and one who is loved” (*erônta te kai erômenon*, 204B8-10). Ctesippus reveals that the object of Hippothales’ love is the boy called Lysis, for whom the dialogue is named, and he offers an amusing account of how Hippothales woos the lad with extravagant odes of praise about his ancestry and wealth and his family’s athletic victories, the sorts of things that any child could recite, Ctesippus remarks (205c1). This strategy of courtship, Socrates responds, is really Hippothales’s way of eulogizing himself for having won over a youth of such distinction even before he has succeeded in capturing him; if he fails to do so, Hippothales will appear all the more ridiculous. Besides this, praise for the beloved will swell his head and make him more difficult to catch; Hippothales, says Socrates, is behaving like a poor hunter who by startling his prey renders it harder to apprehend (206A9-10). Hippothales begs Socrates for help on how he may become dear (*prospilês*) to his beloved (*paidika*, 206C2), and Socrates, alleging that the right technique is difficult to explain, offers to demonstrate the art on Lysis himself (206C4-7).

The opening scene, then, prompts expectations of a discourse concerning erotic love. Yet by common consent this is Plato’s dialogue about friendship. Now, the difference between love and friendship may not seem to be inordinate, since it is perfectly natural to say that friends love one another. Nevertheless, the love that Hippothales bears for Lysis is plainly not just the kind that we would call friendly. What is more, the distinction between Hippothales’ feelings for Lysis and ordinary friendship is, if anything, even clearer in Greek.

The Greek word for erotic love is *erôs*, from which the word “erotic” derives, of course. This is the name that Socrates immediately gives to Hippothales’ passion, when he sees him blushing. The syndrome is easily recognized even by us, who do not necessarily possess Socrates’ divine gift in these matters: Hippothales’ shyness, combined with his extreme over-valuation of the object of his affection, plainly indicate a severe case of infatuation. But Socrates’ next remark points to a quality that is specific to the character of Greek *erôs* in this period: “I can quickly identify,” he says, “one who loves and one who is loved.” For Socrates, we must

understand, these are two distinct roles. Hippothales is the lover, Lysis the beloved, and not the other way around. The lover pursues, the beloved flees and will indeed escape unless the lover is clever enough to catch him. The imagery of hunting makes the asymmetrical nature of the relationship evident.

Nor is this state of affairs simply an accident, in the sense that Hippothales just happens to be in love with a youth who fails to reciprocate his feelings. Even if Hippothales succeeds in capturing Lysis, this does not mean that Lysis will feel the same passion or *erôs* for Hippothales that Hippothales entertains for him, any more than an animal who is chased by a hunter comes to share the hunter's desire once it is caught. The difference in the roles of lover and beloved abides, for it is inscribed, among other ways, in the difference between their respective ages. Hippothales and Ctesippus (who in the dialogue *Euthydemus* is represented as the lover of Clinias) are young men, *neaniskoi* in Greek (203A5). Lysis, however, is just a boy (*pais*), whom Socrates does not recognize by name because, as Ctesippus explains, people still call him by the name of his father (i.e., "son of Democrates," 204E3-8; cf. 205B8). One of the words typically employed for "beloved" in Greek is *paidika* (204D6, 205A5), related to the word *pais* as well as to modern derivatives such as pediatrics and, more relevantly, pederasty, that is, *erôs* directed toward a *pais* or boy. The difference in age between the lover and the beloved need not be very large, and at one point Socrates casually refers to Lysis himself as a *neaniskos* (205B1); but the distinction in the parts they play is fundamental.

Let me offer an example drawn from a work published in Socrates' lifetime. Toward the beginning of Aristophanes' comedy *The Frogs*, the god Dionysus explains to Heracles the reason why he plans to descend to Hades. "I was doing sevice with Cleisthenes," he begins; "and then, on the ship, while I was reading [Euripides'] *Andromeda* to myself, suddenly a longing stirred my heart – you can imagine how powerful it was." "A longing...? For a woman?" asks Heracles. "No indeed." "For a boy, then?" "Not at all." "A man, then?" "Aiaiai!," exclaims Dionysus. "But you were with Cleisthenes." "Don't make fun of me, Brother," says Dionysus, and he goes on to indicate that his passion is for a playwright like Euripides (48, 52-58).

Heracles' questions reflect the three – not two – categories of partner for a male that occurred naturally to an Athenian when he thought of sexual desire: a woman, a boy, and a man. The first two guesses are inoffensive, and Dionysus rejects them with a simple negative. Heracles mentions "woman" before "boy," but as Kenneth Dover notes in his commentary on

this passage, “the reverse order would have occasioned no surprise” (Dover 1993: 197). The suggestion that Dionysus might feel passion for an adult male, however, evokes a cry of dismay. For, as Dover explains, “the Greeks did not classify individuals as ‘heterosexual’ or ‘homosexual’, but treated females and immature males together as sex-objects, the adult male being the sexual subject.” Thus, an adult male was not supposed to feel sexually attracted to another adult male. It was particularly opprobrious for a man to play the passive role, because in this case he resigned the role of sexual subject and assumed that of sexual object. This cast him as effeminate and unworthy of citizenship, which was reserved for adult males. This is the point of Heracles’ joke about “doing service with Cleisthenes,” since Cleisthenes was lampooned for effeminacy by the comic poets. But Dionysus is shocked at the suggestion that he might have had any desire – active or passive – for such a person. Cleisthenes is outside the range of approved sexual objects. While passion for a woman or a boy was unremarkable, erotic relations between free adult males were perceived as degrading.

This difference between active and passive erotic roles was deeply grounded in the wider social patterns of the classical city-state. David Halperin (1993: 418) briskly summarizes the situation as follows:

In classical Athens a relatively small group made up of the adult male citizens held a virtual monopoly of social power and constituted a clearly defined élite within the political and social life of the city-state. The predominant feature of the social landscape of classical Athens was the great divide in status between this superordinate group, composed of citizens, and a subordinate group, composed of women, children, foreigners, and slaves... Sexual relations not only respected that divide but were strictly polarized in conformity with it.

Halperin adds: “sexual penetration was thematized as domination: the relation between the insertive and the receptive sexual partner was taken to be the same kind of relation as that obtaining between social superior and social inferior.” Adult citizen males were the bearers of erotic passion, while women, boys, and others of inferior status were its objects. Free men might assume the role of *erastês*, never of *erômenos*, for it would be demeaning for them to be perceived as an object of another’s sexual desire.

The desire characteristic of women and boys was correspondingly imagined to be different in kind from that of adult males. Women were typically represented as yielding to sex rather than commanding it, and

feminine desire, like that of boys, was expressed as consent to be penetrated rather than as an urge to penetrate (cf. Edwards 1993: 68-75). Whereas the lover, says Plato (*Phaedrus* 255d), experiences passionate desire or *erôs*, the beloved is expected to feel affection or *philia*; or, as Aristotle puts it, friends “must not be like the erotic lover and the boy he loves. For these do not take pleasure in the same things; the lover takes pleasure in seeing his beloved, while the beloved takes pleasure in being courted by his lover” (*EN* 8.4.1157a6-9, transl. Irwin 1985; cf. *EE* 7.3.1238b36-9; Alexis fr. 70 K-A; Theocritus 29. 22-34). The beloved was thought to respond to the care and attention of the older man, rather than to feel an active desire of the sort inspired by physical beauty. Friendship, as we shall see, depended rather on mutuality and equality, as reflected in the jingle “amity is parity” (*philotês isotês*, Aristotle *EN* 8.5.1157b36; *EE* 7.8.1241b13).

To return to the *Lysis*, we may recall that while Hippothales feels *erôs* for his beloved, he does not beg Socrates to teach him how to make the boy reciprocate this passion; what he wishes rather, as he says, is to be endeared (*prosphilês*) to him, that is, inspire in the boy that sense of affection or *philia* that Plato in the *Phaedrus* had discriminated from *erôs* as the sentiment proper to the beloved or *paidika*. Some large implications about Athenian erotic psychology lurk in the details of Plato’s vocabulary.

Once inside the gymnasium, Socrates begins the demonstration of his technique of seduction by inquiring of Lysis whether his father and mother love him very much (207D5-6); the word Socrates employs is *philein*, the most general term for love of any kind in Greek. It would be out of the question for him to have used *eran*, the verb corresponding to *erôs*, in the context of familial affection. If his parents love him, Socrates continues, they wish him to be as happy as possible, and happiness resides, Socrates further suggests, in the power to do whatever one wants (*epithumein*, 207D7-E2). When Lysis agrees to this sequence of propositions, Socrates concludes with a flourish: “So then, they let you do what you wish (*boulesthai*), and never punish you or prevent you from doing whatever you want?” (207E6-7). We recall here that Lysis is just a child, and there are many things his parents prohibit him from doing, such as driving his father’s horses or working his mother’s loom. Indeed, in accord with the custom of the upper classes in Athens, they assign a household slave to serve as his tutor or pedagogue (*paidagôgos*, 208C3-4); thus, Lysis is not even allowed to govern or rule over himself (*arkhein seautou*, 208C1-2), but is obliged to submit to the authority of a slave. Having proved that the

boy's freedom to do as he pleases is hemmed in on all sides, Socrates then observes that he is at liberty to perform those chores in which he is competent, such as reading aloud to the family. "Hence", Socrates concludes, "everyone entrusts us with those things in which we are knowledgeable..., and in those things we shall do whatever we wish" (210A9-B3). It follows, then, that only by being competent can we be happy, since happiness had been defined as the capacity to do what one wants. Neither our parents nor anyone else will grant us this liberty if we are useless (*anôphelês*, *akbrêstos*, 210C6-8) – here Socrates inserts an implicit step in the argument, but it is not a particularly controversial move – and so, Socrates winds up the demonstration, "If you become wise [or skilled: the Greek word *sophos* has both senses], everyone will be friendly to you [or be your friend: *philos*] and all will be your relatives [or your own: *oikeios*], but if not, neither anyone else nor your father nor your mother nor your relatives will be *philos* to you" – that is, "friendly" or a "friend" – since they will not let you do what you wish and thus be happy, which is what those who love you naturally desire in your behalf.

Socrates' cross-examination of the young Lysis has served several purposes simultaneously. For one thing, he has shown Hippothales the proper way to converse with a beloved, which is to say, by rendering him more humble rather than more arrogant (210E2-5). For another, he has demonstrated to a young man, and to the surrounding company, the importance of seeking wisdom or *sophia* (the state of being *sophos*), for it is only by loving wisdom – the literal meaning of the word *philosophia* or "philosophy" – that one can become loved oneself. The task of inculcating a desire for wisdom is, in Socrates' view, the essence of education; in the *Euthydemus*, for example, Socrates puts the two sophists, Euthydemus and his brother Dionysodorus, to the test by asking them to demonstrate their skill in respect to just one point: "Persuade this young man" – the reference is to Clinias, the beloved of Ctesippus – "that it is necessary to philosophize [*philosophhein*] and to be concerned for virtue" (275A5-6). These two purposes – rendering a boy one loves more modest and inspiring him to the pursuit of knowledge – are closely related, since a proper understanding of one's own ignorance is the greatest stimulus to philosophy.

A third function of this exchange is to introduce a new dimension of love into the dialogue, namely, the love that parents bear for their children, as opposed to the erotic passion that a young man may feel for a boy. Plato has thus implicitly widened the scope of his inquiry from *erôs*, which he intimated as a theme in the frame story concerning Hippothales

and Lysis, to include *philia*, that is, the kind of love that obtains among relatives or friends. Indeed, Socrates has also intimated yet a third kind of attraction in his description of happiness as the condition in which you can do anything you want, since wanting too is a kind of loving. Socrates did not pause here to specify what kinds of things it is good to want, or why we might want them, but this will become relevant in the subsequent inquiry. Finally, in this opening bit of dialectic Socrates has broached the question of why we find anyone or anything dear (*philos*) or lovable, and offers as a preliminary gambit the the motive of utility. For if parents do not indulge a young child's impulse to handle things of which he has no knowledge or experience, it is because his doing so will be of no use to them.

With this, Plato veers the conversation rather abruptly to an entirely new topic, which Socrates, at the prodding of Lysis, proposes to Lysis' young friend Menexenus (on their friendship, cf. 297C8). Socrates claims that while others may like hunting dogs or gold or political office, he himself has always been indifferent to these things; "but I am very passionately [*erôtikôs*] disposed", he says, "concerning the possession of friends, and I would wish to have a good friend" more than any other thing, including all the wealth of Persia. Socrates goes on to express his amazement that Lysis and Menexenus, although so young, have already achieved this: "you have so quickly and easily acquired him as a friend, and he you, in turn" (213A3-4), says Socrates. With this commences the inquiry into friend-ship proper – nearly halfway through the course of the entire dialogue.

The brief setting of the scene for the next cross-examination or *elenkhos*, to use Plato's own term for the dialogic procedure, points up one of the crucial differences between the friendship and erotic relations, as the Greeks typically conceived of them. The relationship between Lysis and Menexenus is mutual, as Socrates emphasizes: each has the other as a friend. In friendship, roles are symmetrical: all parties are designated by the single term *philos* (cf. Leach 1968: 57; Paine 1969: 507). As Horst Hutter (1978: 6) puts it: "friendship is a relationship between persons paired in the same role (e.g., friend-friend rather than parent and child, husband and wife, buyer and seller, etc.)...; friendship, unlike, for example, the relationship between a husband and a wife, does not involve a complementary role-pair." *Erôs*, on the contrary, involves inverse roles: the lover or *erastês* is, as we have seen, the active or dominant partner, while the beloved occupies the passive or subordinate position (cf. Halperin 1990: 30; Skinner 1979: 142; Richlin 1991: 173; Richlin 1992: 140, 212). In

the classical Greek world, friendship as an affective relation differs both from erotic passion and parental love by virtue of its reciprocal character.

Socrates, indeed, homes in immediately on just this aspect of friendship in his interrogation of Menexenus: “Tell me this,” he begins: “when someone loves [*philein*] someone, which is the friend [*philos*] of the other, the one who loves of the one who is loved or the one who is loved of the one who loves? Or does it make no difference?” (212A8-B2). To Menexenus it seems that it makes no difference, but Socrates pursues the point: “What then? Is it not possible for some one who loves not to be loved in return by the one he loves?” “It is,” Menexenus replies. “And possible even that he be hated, although he loves? This is the kind of thing, I think, that lovers [*erastês*, pl.] seem sometimes to experience in regard to their beloveds [*paidika*]” (212B5-8). Menexenus agrees with this description, naturally enough – we have already seen that Hippothales’ passion for Lysis seems not to be reciprocated. Socrates observes that in such a case, one would call neither the one who loves nor the one who is loved a friend of the other: “unless they both love”, he concludes, “neither is a friend.”

Socrates’ allusion to the case of lovers points up what we have seen to be an essential difference between *erôs* and friendship: reciprocity is constitutive of the latter but not of the former. Thus, when Aristotle comes to discuss friendship in the eighth book of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, the definition he offers runs as follows:

They say that one must wish good things for a friend for his sake, and they call those who wish good things in this way well-disposed [*eunous*], even if the same does not arise on the part of the other; for good will in those who feel it mutually is *philia*. We must add that it must not escape notice, for many are well-disposed toward people they have not seen, but believe that they are decent and worthy, and one of them might feel the same thing toward him. These then would seem to be well-disposed toward each other, but how might one call them friends if they escaped [the other’s] notice of how they were disposed toward one another? It is necessary, then, that they be well-disposed toward one another and wish good things, not escaping [the other’s] notice, in regard to some one of the abovementioned kinds [i.e., usefulness, pleasure, or goodness] (EN 8.2.1155b31-56a5).

Friendship was assumed to be a self-consciously reciprocal relationship.

Socrates then draws the general conclusion: “Nothing, consequently, is “dear” [*philon*] to one who loves unless it loves in return?” (212D4-5). This switch to the neuter – “nothing” instead of “no one” – is a curious move, since one does not normally speak of things as friends. The form



obliges us in turn to translated *philos* in this context as “dear” rather than friend; the Greek word *philos* can indeed bear both senses. More specifically, when *philos* is used as an adjective, it means “dear” or, on occasion, has the active sense of “loving”; when it is used as a substantive or noun, however, it normally signifies “friend.” It is not always absolutely clear which use is in play, although the presence of the definite article unambiguously signals the noun: *ho philos* in Greek = “the dear one,” i.e., “friend”. The distinction may also be indicated by the case of the word associated with *philos*: if it is the genitive, “of so-and-so”, then *philos* will usually mean “friend”; if it is the dative, “to so-and-so”, then *philos* is likely to mean “dear”, though “friend to” does occur alongside the more regular “friend of” the person in question. In the present case, Socrates has combined the neuter form of *philos* with the dative, which makes it entirely clear that “dear” is the correct interpretation.

Having switched meanings on Menexenus, Socrates then presses him: “Are people not horse-lovers [*philippos*, pl.], then, if their horses don’t love them in return?” (212D5-6). Of course they are, and so Socrates deduces that “what is loved is dear to the one who loves, whether it loves him or even hates him” (212E6-7). Sure it is, we are inclined to intervene here; but it is not his friend. The entire argument hinges on an equivocation. Socrates adds that small children are extremely dear to their parents, though they are not yet able (or willing) to return this love. Again, Menexenus agrees, and so do we; but parental love is not friendship, as we have already noted. Among the specific characteristics of friendship as opposed to just loving, for the Greeks as for us, is that it is symmetrical. Parental love, or indeed love in general, involves no such requirement (see Konstan 1997: 68-69). Of course one may love without being loved in return.

Socrates adds that a person may be loved (*philein*, passive) by an enemy (*ekthros*) – evidently, an ostensible enemy – and hated by a friend (*philos*); hence he is dear (or a friend: *philos*) to his enemy (dative, of course) and inimical (the adjectival sense of *ekthros*) to his friend (213A6-B2), which is palpably illogical, insofar as “friend” and “enemy” constitute a disjunctive pair. Hence, Socrates infers, the one who loves must be the friend of the one (genitive) who is loved (213B5-6). But this argument is subject to the same objection, that someone might chance to love one who does not love him or even hates him. Thus, it turns out that friends are neither those who love, nor those who are loved, nor those who mutually love one another (this last option, which on the face of it is the most promising, having been excluded by the example of the horselovers).

By now, Socrates' subtleties may have begun to appear mere sophistries, as he dismisses in turn each of a series of apparently exhaustive alternatives by means of the shallow debaters' trick of shifting the sense of the terms that are under investigation. Such conundrums may puzzle and amaze a pre-adolescent child such as Lysis, but why should they be of interest to a mature audience like ourselves? However, the drift of the entire discussion should perhaps have alerted us to the possibility that what Plato has in view here is not friendship as such but something else (for the view that the *Lysis* is not dialogue of definition, see Sedley 1989). After all, the dialogue began with the problem of what kindles affection in a beloved boy; it then moved to an analysis of why parents love their children; it has now come to focus on what makes people friends – whether it is loving, being loved, or both loving and being loved. The issue does not seem to be that of finding a definition of friendship, but rather of understanding how it happens that we love anyone – or, recalling the horse-lovers, anything – and this irrespective of whether the love in question is erotic, as in the case of Hippothales' feelings for Lysis, or parental, or comradely, as in the bond between Lysis and Menexenus. Whether it is *erôs*, or *philia* in the sense of love in general, or the special, reciprocal bond between *philoî* or friends, or even the bare wanting (*epithumein*) of a thing we enjoy, the question is the same: why do we love?

That this question is uppermost in Socrates' mind is suggested by his next line of attack, in which he draws inspiration from the poets for the proposition that "it is necessary that the like [*homoion*] forever be dear [*philon*] to the like" (214B3-4). Socrates objects that this truism pertains only to good people, since two equally evil men are unlikely to be friends, though he suggests that the poets may have been hinting that because evil people are unstable and inconsistent, they are never like themselves and hence cannot be similar or dear to anyone else (214C7-D3). But Socrates then perceives a further difficulty: people who are wholly similar to one another cannot offer each other help or assistance, and hence are not useful (*khrêsimos*, 214E4) to one another. If good people love each other, then, it is insofar as they are good, not insofar as they are alike (215A4-5). But a good person, insofar as he is good, is sufficient (*hikanos*) unto himself, and so is in need of nothing; needing nothing, there is nothing he warmly welcomes (*agapan*), and hence nothing that he loves (215A6-B2). Good men, accordingly, cannot be friends. Q.E.D.

This rather alarming conclusion depends on the assumption that surfaced earlier in the discussion concerning parental love, namely that

we love or want what is useful or necessary to ourselves. Someone who is similar to us has nothing with which to supply a lack that we may have; someone who is good, insofar as he is good, has no lack that needs providing for. Love or friendship is predicated on deficiency – a view that Cicero found deeply repugnant; in his treatise *De amicitia* or *On Friendship*, for example, Cicero remarks (9.31) that we are not beneficent and generous in order to demand recompense [*gratia*], for we do not make a loan of our benefits, but are disposed by nature to generosity; so too in the case of friendship we are not drawn by the hope of profit but believe that it is to be sought because its entire reward resides in the love itself.

Plato, however, would respond to these fine phrases by asking what it is that stirs this love in the first place? Whence the longing (cf. *potheinoi*, 215V4), the passion, the yearning? In a word, what is the source of our desire? It cannot be for what we already have and in respect to which we are complete and fulfilled, for that would not excite the sense of want and craving. We say we love another person, but what is it in that person that we ourselves are missing?

Taking his cue from a verse in Hesiod, Socrates suddenly reverses himself as he recalls that those who most resemble each other are commonly given to competitive strife, while it is opposites that attract (215C4-D4), for they give nourishment (*trophê*, 215E8) to one another. Now, this solution too is not without difficulties, since it is awkward to say that the just is friendly (*philon*) to the unjust or the good to the evil (216B4-5). While Socrates does not elaborate the point, we may observe that, apart from the evident paradox of making moral extremes compatible, the thesis concerning contraries runs into the same obstacle here as the argument from similarity: what is perfectly depraved is unlikely to be dear to anyone, even to another evil person, while the perfectly good is self-sufficient so that nothing is dear or desirable to such a one. This is why Socrates reaches, at this moment in the investigation, for a third possibility, namely that love involves that which is neither good nor bad but somewhere in between. Such a middling entity is not so corrupt as to be beyond the wish for improvement, nor so fine as not to require it. The neutral will not want what is bad, of course, because that is essentially unlovable (216E1-4). Nor will it find another neutral item dear, since Socrates has already excluded the attraction of like to like on the grounds that two similar things cannot be of any benefit to one another (216E5-7). All that remains, Socrates infers, is that the middle state is dear to the good (216E7-217A2).

Here we may find ourselves objecting that Socrates has it backwards: the good may be dear to the middle condition, but not the reverse, since

the good by definition (Socrates' definition, that is) is not in need, and least of all of what is neutral. Socrates seems to be using the word *philon* here in the active sense of "friendly" – the neutral is friendly to the good, not vice versa. That the issue of reciprocity has slipped from attention is not surprising when we recall that nowhere in this dialogue has Plato been seriously interested in the problem of friendship as a relationship and the mutuality that it presupposes. His eye is fastened rather on the issue of why we desire, and that is in principle a one-way emotion; if it happens to be reciprocated, it will be due to the mere accident that both parties suffer a lack. If they happen to be deficient in the same way, and thus are similar in this respect, they will not want or love one another on that basis, at all events, since neither will be able to supplement the inadequacy of the other.

Socrates' focus on lack and desire is manifest from the illustration he offers to clarify his point. A body, he says, is neither good nor bad. If it suffers an illness, or, as Socrates puts it, if illness is present – Socrates acknowledges that sickness is bad – then, on account of (*dia*) the illness, it will welcome (*aspazesthai*) and love (*philein*) medicine, which is both useful and good (217B1-4). Socrates is careful to stipulate that the body cannot have become wholly corrupted or tainted by the disease, or else, having become bad itself, it is no longer able to want the good or be its friend (217B7-C1). The use of the verb *epithumein*, "want" or "desire", is telltale. When Socrates wraps up the argument shortly afterwards, he affirms: "When something is not yet evil but evil is present, its presence makes it desire good; but if the [presence of evil] makes it evil, then it is stripped of its desire [*epithumia*] and love [*philia*] for the good" (217E6-9). So too with philosophy or the love of wisdom: neither the wholly ignorant will pursue it, since they do not know even that they are ignorant, nor the perfectly wise, since they have no need of it. Philosophy is for us middling sorts.

Having come this far, it is maddening to find that Socrates is again assailed by doubts about whether he has sussed out the truth of the matter (218C5-7), but even before we follow him further – and we are now mercifully near the end of the dialogue – we may pause to note that a new element has slipped into the equation, to which we ought be alert: it is the phrase, "on account of," which in Greek is rendered by the tiny preposition *dia*. From the examples Socrates offers – illness and ignorance – we infer that *dia* points to the cause of a defect in us – the fact that we are sick or foolish – and our desire is simply the drive we experience to correct or compensate for this negative presence. People are imagined

here as neutral vessels, which are liable to damage by proximity to something bad. In accord with this rather crude image, it follows that our condition is improved by the arrival of what is good. Corresponding to the lack which produces our desire is the sufficiency that fulfills it. And so Socrates reasons: a body, he says, is friendly to medicine or to a doctor on account of sickness and for the sake of (*beneka*) health, which is conceived of as sickness' opposite (218E4-5). Health, accordingly, is the good corresponding to the evil represented by disease (219A3-4). But a problem lies in wait: for if health is the good we love and desire (insofar as we are ill), and we love the good on account of the presence of something bad and for the sake of something good or dear, then we must want or love health, which is good, for the sake of some other good or dear thing (219C2-5). We are clearly on the way to an infinite regress here, since that other good thing will be dear in turn for the sake of some further good, unless we can discover some ultimate thing that is dear not for the sake of something else but will contain in itself what Socrates calls the "first" or "primary" dear thing (*prôton philon*, 219D1), for the sake of which all other things are dear.

The ingenuity of this argument may conceal the fundamental issue at stake. If, as Socrates claims, the dear cannot be dear for the sake of the dear (220B6-7), then neither is it dear on account of the presence of what is inimical (*ekbthron*, 219A6). Our bodies desire health on account of the presence of sickness; physical well-being, we may say, is the positive counterpart of the negative element represented by disease. If health is not dear in and of itself (since it is only dear for the sake of something else), then neither is illness inimical in and of itself. As the good becomes more remote, evil is in danger of vanishing altogether.

Socrates reasons that if what is good or dear is not loved for the sake of something dear, all that is left is that it is loved on account of what is bad. In the absence of evil, accordingly, the good would no longer be useful to us since nothing could do us any harm (220C1-D1). Socrates proceeds to conjure up the extraordinary notion of a world without evil, in which appetites like hunger and thirst, should they continue to exist, would no longer be harmful (220E6-221A4). Socrates dismisses this vision as ridiculous, since no one knows what would be the case in such a universe (221A4-5), but maintains the point that we could still have appetites or desires (*epithumia*) in absence of evil, and that, consequently, evil cannot be the reason (*aitia*) why something is dear (221B8-C5).

There must, accordingly, be some other cause of loving and being loved (221D1-2), and Socrates ventures the suggestion that it is just desire (*epithumia*, 221D3). Now, a desiring subject desires what it lacks or has been deprived of, and what a thing has been deprived of is something that belongs to it or is its own (*oikeion*); thus, Socrates pronounces, “*erôs* and *philia* and *epithumia*” – erotic passion and love and appetite – “are for what is their own” (221E3-4; on the conflation of different terms for affection cf. Cummins 1981; Robinson 1986: 74-75). There is no evil here, only deprivation; what we seek in all the variegated forms of desire is just that which already belongs to us by nature; we would not desire or be enamored of or love another unless he were already in some sense ours (222A1-2). Hence, a true and honest lover ought to be loved by his beloved.

While Lysis and Menexenus consent grudgingly to this final proposition, Hippothales turns all colors with joy. But Socrates is not done, since he is uncertain whether what is one’s own is the same as what is similar; if so, the arguments about the uselessness of latter will disqualify the former as a thing that is dear (222B3-C1). If not, there still remains the difficulty that if those who are bad have as their own what is bad, then one’s own will be a poor candidate for what is dear; but if what is one’s own is identified with the good, we shall have reverted once more to the problem of how the good can be dear to the good. At this point, the tutors of the two boys arrive to summon the lads home; just in time, we may be thinking.

The *Lysis* thus ends, like many of the Socratic dialogues, in an *aporia* or puzzlement, but this ought not to blind us to the progress that Plato has made in the course of the inquiry. We have discovered, to begin with, that the theme of the dialogue is not erotic passion or parental affection or friendship, but rather desire as such, which subtends all forms of love, whether for people or things or states of being such as health. Indeed, the most salient contribution of the *Lysis*, like its more famous companion piece, the *Symposium*, may be just the isolation of desire as a single concept, embracing everything from physical appetites to the purest esteem and devotion (on the relationship between the *Lysis* and the *Symposium*, see Levi 1950: 295; Price 1989: 12-14). We have also seen that desire is necessarily predicated on lack or deficiency. This is why we do not want what is like us, for that cannot make up for what we are missing. Nor will we desire a thing if we are perfect or complete in respect to it: a healthy person does not want health. Desire is the sign of our imperfection.

What is it, however, that we fundamentally lack, that renders us all, and inevitably, creatures of desire? It is not just the elimination of some

evil, since we can imagine desire in the absence of evil. Hence too, those goods that are just the flip side of evils – health as opposed to illness, for example – cannot be the ultimate ground of desire. Things such as health are only contingently dear: they have their basis in something else that is entirely different in nature. That thing that is dear in itself does not compensate for some supervenient evil; rather, it is dear to us in the way that something that is part of us is dear, a thing that belongs to us by nature but which we have somehow lost or been deprived of. What we desire is different from ourselves and is supremely good, and yet it is ultimately our own. It would not be going very far astray, I think, to infer from all this that what we find ultimately and primarily dear is grounded, for Plato, in our native connection to the divine.

What is dear in itself is also the reason for which any other thing we desire is dear to us. For Plato, it is the ground of every kind of love for others, whether it be erotic love, familial sentiment, or the love that unites friends in reciprocal affection. This is a steely doctrine. We do not love others for their own sakes, according to Plato, but for something else that motivates our love of them. Our response to beauty and virtue and other lovable qualities is in the final analysis a symptom or expression of a more metaphysical desire that is rooted in our very natures as mortal beings (on the metaphysical incompleteness of human beings, cf. Gómez Muntán 1966; Lualdi 1974: 140; Haden 1983: 351; Glidden 1981: 57; Halperin 1985: 189). And yet, is this not obviously true? What is Lysis that Hippothales should adore him so? He is a sweet but ignorant child, well-behaved but scarcely formed in character. Surely he is not the primary object of love; his comeliness simply serves to remind us of some truer kind of grace which, though we lack it, is ours by birthright. But if this is so, what becomes, on Plato's theory, of the unique individuality of the beloved, that special combination of qualities that only he or she possesses, which we customarily posit as the source of amatory attraction? Isn't what we love in someone else just their irreducible particularity? Frankly, I doubt it. The role of the personal is vastly overstated in modern conceptions of love. To this extent, at least, I am inclined to agree with Plato that the ground of our desire lies somewhere else, and that the investigation Plato conducts in the *Lysis* has much to teach us, still.

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