

## **Platonic Friendship\***

I

Scholars have long appreciated the central and pivotal role played by *eros* (and to a lesser extent *philia*) in the Platonic corpus. And yet the myriad of interpretative essays on this topic seem to agree solely on the importance of Platonic *eros*; as far as the substance of the Platonic theory is concerned, there is almost as much divergence as there are "interpretations". At the heart of these interpretative difficulties one may point to the dialogue form employed by Plato. And yet I find something bewildering in this, for those of us who have been gripped by the passion which accompanies the activity of thinking philosophically would I suspect concede that our own philosophical development is carried on not *in vacuo*, but rather, *hic et nunc*, over countless cups of coffee in university common rooms, at dinner with our friends, and over drinks in the pub. We ask questions, expound theories, take up and drop avenues of inquiry, pursue (too often) dead ends, but usually in the presence and with the interaction of others.

Philosophy plays itself out in the interminable exchange of dialogue through a dialectic of speaking and listening. Naturally, the dialogue form carries with it 'difficulties', but these 'difficulties' do no more than reflect the actualities of our lives. Understanding and being understood is no easy matter; little it would seem is more obvious and yet little is less grasped. However, dialogue with others opens us up to a further dialogue, and one which is the central concern of Socrates: that is, the internal dimension of dialogue, the intimate dialogue with ourselves. I do not say 'monologue' here, because the interaction between our intuitions, our ideas, our conceptualizations and our consciousness does not assume the form of dogma, but requires revision, reappraisal, evaluation, both in terms of our basic beliefs and motivations and also our persistent leanings towards 'truth' and hence the nature of things. It is this latter insight which pervades the spirit of Platonic

philosophy - it is the basis of his identification of virtue and knowledge - for it is one thing to let an idea or intuition remain one of a multitude of mere facts or objects of consciousness, it is wholly another to allow an idea or intuition to permeate our entire being and hence to be instituted in a *bios* or way of life.

Dialogue, when it is dialogue and not mere chit-chat requires living and interested beings (it never strays far from passion), and so as the scholar approaches the Platonic dialogues, he/she must learn to become as sensitive to the dialogue form as we all know we ought to be in our dialogue with others and ourselves in our own lives. For it is only by doing so that we can come to understand the strategies and sensitivities the Platonic Socrates adopts with his interlocutors, particularly Lysis.<sup>1</sup> Despite this sympathy or empathy which I advocate, we may still not achieve a 'correct' interpretation, but I am convinced that it is a most fruitful and worthwhile path. People are complex beings whose actions and words are pregnant with meaning; however, meaning often transcends both actions and words.

## II

The discussion in this article will focus upon a widely prevalent view in Platonic scholarship, which claims that Plato's theory of *eros/philia* in the realm of interpersonal relations is radically mistaken. When Plato emphasizes, it is claimed, that love aims at the Good, the Beautiful and the True, he misses out on the fragile elements of a concrete individual's relations with another concrete individual. To be specific, proponents of this critique argue that Plato's theory of love does not account for love of persons *qua* persons, or in the language of Kant, of persons as ends-in-themselves, and that instead Plato views persons only insofar as they are embodiments of metaphysical realities, viz.,

Goodness, Beauty and Truth. This view has been espoused most forcefully by Gregory Vlastos in his article, 'The Individual as Object of Love in Plato' (1969),<sup>1</sup> and more recently has with some minor reservations been expounded by Martha Nussbaum.<sup>2</sup> This article is mainly concerned with responding to the views put forward by Vlastos, but by extension hopes to cover all the objections based on this general critique. Vlastos's article derives much of its force from conclusions drawn with regard to the hermeneutic study of Plato's *Lysis*, but it moves beyond the *Lysis* to argue that the conclusions drawn about the theory of *eros/philia* in the *Lysis*, are also applicable to Plato's theories in later dialogues such as the *Republic*, *Symposium*, and *Phaedrus*. This article will centre mostly on the *Lysis*.<sup>3</sup>

The *Lysis* is admittedly a perplexing dialogue and one which has generated quite a bit of controversy. Some scholars such as Ast and Sacher have even claimed that it is not a Platonic work at all, because they consider it to contain too much sophistry and eristic.<sup>4</sup> And while it is now generally accepted as a genuine Platonic work, most scholars have been less than satisfied with it, some going so far as to claim that it is worthless. Guthrie, for example, declares that philosophically it is not a success.<sup>5</sup> Crombie dwelling on the complexities of the dialogue seems to echo Guthrie, noting that Socrates's arguments create a 'conundrum which he could solve had he a mind to, but which he feels the reader may prefer to solve for himself'.<sup>6</sup> Grote had also, much earlier, made a negative appraisal, concentrating on what he deems to be the series of defective arguments in the *Lysis* and concluding that the work ends 'not only without any positive result, but with speakers and hearers more puzzled than they were at the beginning'.<sup>7</sup>

The consensus among more recent commentators, however, has once again reinstated the *Lysis* as an important Platonic work. Perhaps one of the most important aspects of recent Platonic studies has emerged out of the attempt to study Plato not only as a philosopher but as a literary artist. Foremost among the writers viewing Plato in this manner was the late Hans-Georg Gadamer, who demands that the Platonic scholar take into full account what he terms (following a remark in the *Laches* 193d-e) the Doric harmony of *logos* and *ergon*.<sup>8</sup> Gadamer's subtle claim, suggests (among other things) Plato's notion of the intimate connection between doctrine and method, and echoes what other writers have referred to as the unity of form and content in Plato's writings, and indeed these are the terms I will use.<sup>9</sup> Martha Nussbaum has carefully and persuasively articulated this method in her magnificent work, *The Fragility of Goodness*<sup>10</sup> and in a series of articles over the past two decades, as has Paul Friedlander in his volumes on Plato.<sup>11</sup> More recently, Kim Lycos has consolidated brilliantly this approach.<sup>12</sup> The views expressed by these writers may be summarized as requiring that the philosophical significance of the dialogues be intimately linked with the dramatic presentation. Form and content are mutually enlightening, and to separate the two, in any but the most rudimentary way, is to violate not only art but also philosophy. (It is interesting to note that until the time of Aristotle philosophy was almost invariably presented in a literary form.<sup>13</sup>)

In the Platonic dialogues, the setting and the action, the motives of Socrates, the atmosphere, the personalities of the individuals with whom Socrates is discussing, indeed the whole overall dramatic design, all contribute to the meaning and philosophical clarity of the works. As I noted implicitly in my introduction, philosophy has the character of a dialogue, and in this respect may be thought of as being less about arguments and syllogisms than about persuasion, a turning of the soul; it is an exercise designed to meet

particular people, needs and situations and in the expectation of a genuine *metanoia*. Greek philosophy is not primarily concerned, despite appearances at times, with the esoteric or metaphysical; it is concretely situated and practical, it seeks to elucidate not just a doctrine but a method. Plato's whole concern is to provide both a doctrine and a method – one that exemplifies the idea of philosophy as a way of life.

The subject matter of the *Lysis* is a discussion of *philia*. *Philia* is the general term in Greek for friendship, but it is quite clear that in the *Lysis* and generally within the Greek philosophical tradition its meaning is not exhausted by the modern English word 'friendship'. It is often used interchangeably with *eros* (normally translated as 'love'), but it also comprises the feeling of affection one has with regard to things, as well as to familial love (*storge*) and even desire (*epithumia*) and benevolence; in my own interpretation of Plato, it even goes a long way to including what Christians have considered to be distinctive in Christian love and termed *agape*. In the *Lysis*, Plato employs the terms, *eran*, *philein*, *agapan*, *epithumein* and *peri pollou poieisthai*, sometimes interchangeably, but certainly as loosely demarcated but closely related subsets of *philia*. At 215a-d the terms *agapan*, *philein* and *peri pollou poieisthai* are quite clearly used interchangeably.<sup>14</sup> And importantly, even before the *philia* group of terms are introduced in the text, and the attraction of friends is settled as the initial topic of conversation, the discussion employs for the most part the *eros* group of words (204-206A). The background to the discussion of *philia* is markedly erotic, and the subsequent discussion is stamped throughout by the sexual orientation of the opening. In fact, the *philia* group is used exclusively only in the discussion of familial love between 207-210 and in the attempt to spell out a meaning for what is 'dear' (*philos*) (211e-213d).<sup>15</sup> In the remaining sections, from 214 through to the close, there is a mixture of all the terms mentioned above, sometimes used interchangeably, at other times with only

subtle changes of meaning. The point to be taken from this is in substantial agreement with Kenneth Dover's claim that *philia* and *eros* do not designate separate realms of meaning, but that there is a degree of overlapping between the two terms.<sup>16</sup> This also is not so surprising given that many modern languages conflate the two, most notably French which groups together love and friendship under the single verb *aimer* and even in English the distinction between love and friendship appears to break down when we try to express particularly close friendships. With these preliminary reflections in mind, let us now proceed to give an account of Vlastos's critique of Plato's theory of *philia* in the *Lysis*.

### III

Vlastos's critique arises out of a point of scholarship and has three major thrusts:

- a) he attempts to show that the *Lysis* does not contain a theory of Ideas, thus aligning himself with a genetic theory of the Platonic corpus;
- b) he attempts to show that Plato's theory of *philia* is based on a narrowly egoistic perspective; and
- c) as a result of b) Plato misses out on the **irreplaceable** aspects of relational love.

In defending Plato, I will have to answer all three of Vlastos's positions.

Vlastos's argument over whether or not the *Lysis* contains a theory of Ideas rejoins a long-standing debate, of which the two chief protagonists are Pohlenz and von Arnim.<sup>17</sup> Much of this debate is concerned with the understanding of *philia* in the *Lysis* and its relation to *eros* in the middle and later Platonic works, but it grew out of a more general concern to elucidate whether the Platonic dialogues exhibit a development or whether Plato had from the beginning a systematic philosophy which he depicts in different ways

in different dialogues. Pohlenz advocated the developmental or genetic theory, von Arnim the other view.

Scholars are still divided on this issue, though on the whole most favour the developmental thesis. For my own part, I suspect that there are good reasons to think that there are marked divergences between the early aporetic dialogues, which are primarily concerned with the virtues, and the middle and late works, which while retaining a strong element of ethical thinking are also concerned with cosmology and metaphysics. Scholars refer to this as the difference between Socrates and Plato; however, the fairest way to go, I believe, is to suggest that Plato follows Socratic thought in the direction in which it was always straining.

Whatever the answer is on this broad issue, it is not at all clear that the genetic or developmental thesis is applicable to the *Lysis*. To some extent this is due to the positioning of the *Lysis* within the chronology of the Platonic corpus. Raeder and Ritter, for example, claim that the *Lysis* must be situated **immediately** before the *Symposium*, *Phaedo*, *Republic* and *Phaedrus*,<sup>18</sup> and Grube remarks that 'The *Lysis* is probably later than most of the early dialogues.'<sup>19</sup> Friedlander gives substance to the chronological debate by noting that the discussion of *philia* in the *Lysis* is substantially in accord with the middle period dialogues' emphasis on *eros* and the Ideas: '... nobody can fail to recognize that Plato, when he wrote this, knew the way and the goal'.<sup>20</sup> Gadamer appears to agree on this chronological point.<sup>21</sup> However, Shorey's judicious comment on *Lysis* 217c-d notes that 'a subtle digression on the meaning of "presence" either illustrates the unity of Plato's thought or indicates that the *Lysis* is "late".'.<sup>22</sup>

Vlastos also bases part of his argument against there being a theory of Ideas in the *Lysis* precisely on this point. In Appendix I to his paper he claims that there is no way the terms 'presence' and 'to be present' (*pareimi*) can be taken to involve the theory of Ideas.

He notes:

But there is not one word or phrase in the *Lysis* to name a transcendent Form.... At no point does the discussion shift from particular, empirical, goods ordered in the means-end nexus to an overarching, eternal, absolute Beauty-in-itself. (pp. 36-37)

Vlastos, thus, is quite clearly aligning himself with the developmental thesis; a point which is somewhat surprising given that he claims (paradoxically) that the philosophical content of *philia* as presented in the *Lysis* coheres essentially with the theories presented in later dialogues. I will return to this point later.

Vlastos's critique of the theory of *philia* in the *Lysis* focuses on the meaning of the term 'usefulness'. What does Plato mean, he asks, when using the word *chrestos*, which may be translated as 'useful' or 'profitable'? Vlastos's long and distinguished career as both philosopher and classicist allows him to distinguish correctly between the modern meanings of these words in English and what these words signified not only for Plato but for the Greek tradition in general. Thus, he observes that for the Greeks they had a much wider field of application, 'physical, economic, aesthetic, intellectual (and) moral' (p. 7). He is also correct in understanding that the term *chrestos* for Plato has also the meaning of 'good producing' (p. 7).

Where I believe Vlastos goes wrong is when he attempts to flesh out the answer to the question: 'useful' or 'good for whom'? (p. 7) He argues that *Lysis*'s parents, for



example, will not love him if he becomes wise because it will be **good for Lysis**; rather his suggestion, borne out by later examples, is that it will be **good for the parents**. He applies this same question - 'good for whom?' - to Plato's health analogies later in the dialogue and argues that the poor man loves the rich man not for the good of the rich man but out of self-interest, and similarly for the sick man's love for the doctor. He claims that:

This is straightforward utility-love: the doctor, the rich, the wise are loved by one who needs them for what **he** can get out of them and no reason is offered why we should love anyone except for what we can get out of them. The egoistic perspective of "love" so conceived becomes unmistakable when Socrates, generalizing, argues that 'if one were in want of nothing, one would feel no affection... and he who felt no affection would not love'. The lover Socrates has in view seems positively incapable of loving others for their own sake, else why must he feel no affection for anyone whose good-producing qualities he did not happen to need? (pp. 8-9)

Extrapolating from this argument, he claims that this is the basis of the theory of *eros* in the *Symposium* (note 20, pp. 8-9). In both cases I hope to show that this is a mistaken interpretation. I believe that part, if not the whole difficulty in Vlastos's reading of the *Lysis* is involved in the attempt to separate philosophical 'points' from their dramatic context, in other words of failing to accommodate the unity of form and content, or the inability to express the Doric harmony of *logos* and *ergon*. So, as I turn to provide a reading of the *Lysis* which relates form to content, I will be concerned to show that Vlastos is mistaken on three fundamental levels:

- (1) that Plato does, in fact, have a theory of love which is not narrowly egoistic;
- (2) that he does provide us with an account of love of people as ends-in-themselves; and that such love is not defective; and
- (3) that the *Lysis* implicitly contains a theory of Ideas, which as mentioned earlier is intimately connected to the former point.<sup>23</sup>

#### IV

One of the keys to understanding the *Lysis* and one which announces the intimate relation of form and content is to be found in the very title of the dialogue.<sup>24</sup> For while *Lysis* refers to the name of one of the principal characters in the dialogue, it is also importantly the Greek word for a 'releasing', in the sense of a setting free from bondage. When the dialogue is viewed from this perspective, the boy *Lysis* is successively released from a series of chains: parental rule, unquestioned piety, group friendship, allegiance to the statesmen, poets and sages of the past, even from the *polis* considered in terms of the opinions of fellow citizens, but most importantly he is released from certain barriers within his own self. And what is true for *Lysis*, it may be added, is true for the other participants in the dialogue, perhaps even for the readers.

Dramatically, the dialogue begins with the contrasting of two different forms of homoerotic love personified by Hippothales's erotic passion towards *Lysis*, and by Ctesippus's attraction to Menexenus. Hippothales attempts to entice his favourite through the rhapsodic passion of poetry which Plato depicts as accompanied by a sense of shame (204b7)<sup>25</sup>, artificiality, and even secretiveness in the direct presence

of the beloved. Thus, we note that Hippothales hides himself away from the direct view of Lysis during the discussion (207b). Ctesippus, in contrast, is presented as engrossed in the debate and openly participating in it (it is through the enticement to debate with beautiful young men that he entices Socrates into their circle). 'Show yourself' or 'give me a performance', Socrates demands of Hippothales, thus drawing attention to the difference between Hippothales and Ctesippus.<sup>26</sup>

The various forms of love and friendship and their bases in attraction to be discussed philosophically in the dialogue are already dramatically prefigured in the relations among the characters of the dialogue: group friendship, the varying degrees of erotic drive between Hippothales and Lysis, Ctesippus and Menexenus, familial love, and behind these the personality of Socrates, who incarnates the apex of the love/friendship relation and is presented as the more perfected friend/lover, displaying his love in the form of *paideia*.

Related to the themes of 'releasing' and 'opening up' ('show yourself') are the further themes of 'undressing' and 'wrestling'.<sup>27</sup> The dialogue is situated at the Palaestra under the guardianship of Hermes, an area used for sport and recreation, specifically here wrestling, an activity which was normally carried on naked. So, accompanying the physical bodies' wrestling we have the dialectical wrestling of minds. Similarly, we have a shedding of clothes on the physical level, and on the mental level we are presented with the shedding of *doxa* and thus a rendering of minds naked and open for truth. The fact, too, that Plato mentions that on this day it is a festival to Hermes (206c-e, 207d) is important and may suggest a link between the discussion of *philia* in the *Lysis* and the role of *eros* in the *Symposium*. Hermes is a multifaceted God; Aristophanes in *Peace* has the chorus refer to him as 'friendliest of spirits to man, and

greatest giver of gifts',<sup>28</sup> a role which is also ascribed to *eros* in the *Symposium*. Furthermore, J. Haden remarks that Hermes usurps the function of Iris as messenger and herald of the gods, which is closely related to Socrates's claim in the *Symposium* that *eros* is neither fully human nor fully divine, but something occupying *to metaxu*, the intermediate, and hence mediating between the divine and the human. The playfulness and humour attributed to Hermes is reflected in the gentle fun and friendly mocking that occurs in the early part of the *Lysis*.<sup>29</sup> And when viewed in this way the whole dialogue is permeated by a certain whimsical tongue-in-cheek. But Hermes is also equated by Plato in the *Cratylus* to the *logos* (408a-d); and so we may be sure that while the playful element is obviously present in the festivities and boisterous atmosphere of young men at play, there is also a serious side to the drama. Nothing less is at stake than young men's souls, so the interplay of humour is underscored by the possibility of the tragic or at least the serious. This is attested by the ominous and dangerous element in the rivalry between Menexenus and Lysis (211c-d), and by the purely lustful *eros* of Hippothales, an *eros* transfixed by the physical and not aimed at aiding the self-transcendence of the beloved.

The dialogue immediately announces a network of relationships: thus, Lysis and Menexenus are 'best friends' (206d) among a larger group of 'friends'; these friendships are characterized as youthful. Varying degrees of erotic fixation are represented through the characters of Ctesippus and Hippothales who are older than their two beloveds in the tradition of *paidikos eros*,<sup>30</sup> and furthermore, the emphasis accorded to lineage in the early sections of the dialogue points to the elements of love that obtain among familial relations. We are also presented with the figure of Socrates as lover and friend. The presentation of the Socratic personality by itself amounts to an argument against Vlastos's interpretation of Plato's theory of love as

being egoistic. One would have to ask what Socrates is getting or 'profiting' from the extension of his friendship to the young men? The answer would appear to be 'nothing'. Socrates seems to be presented as loving in an unqualified, generous and certainly non-egoistical way.<sup>31</sup>

V

Writers who have failed to note or take seriously the relation of form and content have often tended to neglect the early part of the dialogue in which, as I have pointed out, many important themes are introduced.<sup>32</sup> Dialogue adapts itself to the persons we talk to and this is also true of the *Lysis*; Socrates speaks to Lysis in a different manner than he does to a Gorgias or a Protagoras. Lysis is a young man and thus Socrates' approach is coloured by this fact. As Haden points out, 'Plato's skill is such that he paints for us, especially in the earlier dialogues, recognizable rounded people, not mere two dimensional silhouettes'.<sup>33</sup> Recognizing this, we can readily interpret the *Lysis* in a manner very different from Vlastos as I shall show.

Lysis's parents love him but they do not permit him "to do what he likes or wills" (208-211), because in certain fields he lacks knowledge. It would be wrong to surmise, as Vlastos does, that Lysis's parents only want him to gain knowledge so that he can be of benefit to them, by, for example, being capable of running the family estate (cf. Vlastos, pp. 7-8). In fact, they wish Lysis to fulfil his potential as a person, and thus require him to be educated, and this is generally in accord with the Socratic position that only the wise man is truly loveable (210d).

Parental love employs privations for the sake of Lysis. Parental love projects itself into the possibilities of what Lysis might become. To suggest, with Vlastos, that Lysis must become useful (*chrestos* or *vopheleis*) in order that he will benefit Lysis's parents is to stretch the text beyond what it can bear. Lysis must become useful primarily to and for himself, in keeping with the fulfillment of his possibilities. The Socratic dialectic appeals to Lysis on his own level; Lysis is not allowed to do certain things because he would be useless at them (chariot-driving, cooking, etc.). But Socrates points out that it is knowledge which enables one to do things well; thus, to have knowledge is to be useful. It may be pointed out that so far the argument is dealing primarily with knowing how (*phronesis*), and it is only at a later point that knowing that (*sophia*) comes to the fore, particularly when philosophy is put forward as a cure for the ills of the soul. Nevertheless, it is clear in this context that the emphasis of Socrates's words must be placed more on the element knowledge than on the element useful. And while it is true that Socrates wants to claim that to be useful is a good thing, the primary object of this usefulness is the self, i.e. useful to Lysis. It may be pointed out further that Socrates is appealing to Lysis's sense of ambition, to his idea of what he is now and what he wants to become; it is not superfluous that Socrates, just when Lysis has made the connection between intelligence and usefulness, refers to him as *ho aristos* - excellent or noble. Moreover, this statement, like my reading, coheres more readily with the Greek ideal of man; man is, in the Greek tradition, only noble when he transcends his particularity by aiming at the ideal. To be useful is to be wise; it is the outward manifestation of an inner quality. Moreover, it is only in this sense that we can construe Plato's theory of love as having an egoistic element.

The first philosophical question in regard to friendship follows on from the discussion of usefulness and knowing how. Socrates says, 'I do passionately love acquiring friends' (211e2-3), and yet he goes on to say that 'I'm so far from acquiring one that I don't even know how one man becomes a friend to another'. This is a typical Socratic ploy used in many dialogues, the raising of a theoretical issue disguised in an ironic self-deprecation. The interpretation of this section is however extremely difficult. There is not only the obvious range of meanings attached to the word *philos*, (dear, friendly, friend), but Socrates constantly shifts between *philos* as masculine and the neuter *philon*. Moreover, there is a continual play between passive and active senses, i.e.: 'the one who is loved' and 'the one who loves'. And this is no mere linguistic game - it has important consequences on the existential level.

Socrates's first question is something like 'is *befriending* a *techne*, or what exactly is involved in the activity of *befriending*?' Now the formal characterization of *befriending* is the making of a thing/person dear. There appears to be a strong resistance on Plato's part to thinking of friendship in terms of passivity. *Befriending* is a conscious activity which does not just happen 'out of the blue' but rather is actively engaged in rendering something dear. And this is an important insight, for there may be all sorts of things in the world which are valuable and hence dear in themselves, but I may not necessarily love them or *befriend* them. I may hold a person in very high esteem, respect, etc., but I may not even desire to *befriend* that person.

So we may distinguish further a subject or *befriender*, an object or the *befriended*, and the activity which makes something dear, the *befriending*. These distinctions are necessary in order that Socrates can reject Menexenus's intuition that all friendship

must be reciprocal. As he points out, people do indeed love quail, wine, and other objects. And indeed one would be indulging in some very strange metaphysics if one were to think that one was loved in return. Befriending of itself invests value, makes dear a certain thing, but there is no *logical* necessity that one will be befriended in return. Moreover, Socrates is highlighting that there are a myriad of forms of love, and as the dialogue continues, also a hierarchy: i.e., certain things and people will be, and ought to be, held more dear than others. However, as a corollary of making something dear or befriending it, there is not just the activity of investing value, but also a causal ground in the object which is attractive. Unless there is something in the object or the befriended which attracts the befriender in the first place there would be no motivational or causal element which would lead to befriending. So Socrates is implicitly pointing out that there may be a basis upon which all love is constructed. This is, it must be pointed out, not to deny that love may be reciprocal, but only to deny that all love is reciprocal, in other words, the basis of love or befriending is not reciprocity.

From here the discussion moves to a consideration of the poets who it is claimed 'are our fathers and guides in wisdom' (214a). Following Homer and Empedocles, it is suggested that friendship/love is a gift from the gods drawing like to like. At this point, we have moved away from the theoretical or logical grammar involved with *befriending* to the bases of attraction of the *befriender* and the *befriended*.

The question that Socrates poses is, if two people are alike, are they friends in respect of their likeness, and are they useful to one another? (214e) It is in the second part of this question that Vlastos once again takes up his argument. In regard to the first part of the question it is readily agreed that only good men can be alike, not bad ones. The reason proffered for this is that evil people are too unstable, constantly changing



and therefore always "unlike" even to themselves, and hence incapable of befriending. Now this appears to be quite unconvincing, until we take cognizance of the notion of befriending as an activity of investing value; the activity itself is a process which requires a degree of stability. From the perspective of the bad *befriender*, such stability, Socrates believes, will be psychologically too difficult to maintain.

Yet Socrates goes on to claim that the good man will not be a friend to another good man in respect of their likeness, because the good man is self-sufficient. Neither likeness nor goodness is, it would seem, sufficient ground for befriending, though they may very well be grounds of attraction. Perhaps Socrates wishes to draw attention to the idea that there may not be such a thing as the *perfectly* good man, and thus that there is an aspect of *endeia* or lack within every human being. In this way it can be understood how friends may come together in respect of their similarity in goodness, but also in the knowledge that they are not perfect. And related to this, one may want to point out that while goodness in itself is certainly a cause of attraction, it may require something else in order for there to be befriending. Perhaps this something is to be found in the *befriender*. Now it is clear from what has already been said that I must invest value in the other to make it dear, and that there will be something in the befriended which attracts my befriending. However, one might well ask what must I do or be, or what is the motivational structure which prompts me to make something dear? In other words, the goodness, beauty or whatever in the befriended is not sufficient in itself to entice me to befriend it, there must be a need or lack on my part which initiates, in combination with the befriended my *befriending*.

This motivation, Socrates suggests, is rooted in lack and desire. However, Vlastos's interpretation once again conceives this in terms of usefulness and egoism. At this point, however, Vlastos appears to be heading in the right direction, for there does seem to be a utility base in Plato's theory. We most certainly desire what we lack, at least in regard to positive and beneficial things; however, this in no way requires egoism. There is a vast difference between, for instance, befriending someone and receiving the benefits that accrue from this befriending in the realization that what one needs is not only a friend but also the befriending, and embarking into Vlastos's interpretation of Platonic friendship which takes the egoistic perspective of 'what I can get out of' such a friend. Thus, we must conclude that while there are benefits to *philia* it is neither narrow nor purely egoistic. There is a further reason for this and it has both ontological/metaphysical aspects and existential ones.

The *endeia* which is revealed by desire ontologically or metaphysically, is conceived of as lack of unity, the separation of subject and object, the fact that we do not find our own cause within ourselves, and is also revealed by our capacity to apprehend the Absolute/Infinite without being it. This ontological/metaphysical 'lack' Plato claims is remedied only in the erotic ascent to contemplation of the Ideas 'in so far as this is possible for man'. Erotic contemplation perceives Beauty, Truth, and Goodness in particulars, but traces these qualities back up to their transcendent cause, hence a form of unity pervades the contemplative process. This is the vertical dimension of *eros* described in the *Symposium*. On the existential level, this 'lack' or 'need' is experienced in the desire for a plurality of things, a person or persons. The experience of love points to a breaking down of particularity or individuality as such, for to some extent the subject/object dichotomy is transcended. However, while this may appear to have moved far beyond the words of the *Lysis*, it nevertheless is the

doctrine of *Symposium* (200 B ff), which repeats almost verbatim the reflections up to this point in the *Lysis* and I suggest that this provides further evidence against both of Vlastos's positions.

One further point can be made against Vlastos's reading at this stage. Even if we suppose that there is such a thing as the perfectly good man (which is the way Vlastos takes it), we may say that while he may not need a friend, and indeed that a friend may not be useful to him, there is no reason to suppose that he might not still have friends and be a friend. Many genuinely noble aspects of moral living are not circumscribed by duty, rights or needs, but are somehow superfluous, and what has its roots in lack may not end up being lacking. Love in this sense may be seen as a form of generosity or gift. And indeed, as we shall see presently, at a certain level of Plato's hierarchy of love, it does have these characteristics.

Having rejected the notion that all love is based on the attraction of like to like, Socrates now examines the Heraclitean notion that unlike is drawn to unlike, or in modern parlance that opposites attract (215c-216b). Once again, Socrates rejects this as a dogmatic foundation of all attraction in *philia*, but leaves it open as to whether some friendships may be attracted on this principle. Vlastos picks up on Socrates' analogies at this stage, tenaciously holding to what he sees as the egoistic, acquisitive nature of the theory. Thus, when Socrates claims that the poor man is *philia* to the rich man and similarly the sick man to the doctor, Vlastos wants to see in this the essence of the Platonic theory. Vlastos fails to see that in highlighting a further ground of attraction Socrates is, in fact, pointing to the existence of egoistic grounds of attraction, but ones which do not circumscribe *philia* and which are even further removed from what Socrates presently will call 'what is especially a friend'.

Having rejected the basis of attraction in like to like conceived in terms of goodness, and having also rejected attraction grounded in unlike to unlike couched in terms of the bad and because the good cannot love the bad, Socrates now suggests that it is that which is neither good nor bad, the intermediate, which is attracted to the intermediate (216c-217). However, this too is rejected on the basis of the earlier arguments on the attraction of like to like. The attraction of what is neither wholly good nor wholly bad to that which is neither wholly good nor wholly bad provides neither a motivational structure on the part of the befriender nor a worthy object of befriending in the befriended; in other words, there is no reason for attraction.

However, perhaps it is because there is an element of bad in the befriender that he is attracted to the good. This bad or evil is *endeia*. But *endeia* itself, both metaphysical and existential, although an evil in the sense that it entails imperfection, nevertheless may, depending on its object, be the springboard of a good. In other words, it may cause desire for the good or its opposite. It is at this point that we must reject Vlastos's argument that there is no theory of Ideas involved in the *Lysis*. Firstly, it must be noted that *endeia* causes desire, and desire seeks satiation. The very notion of lack requires its opposite - plenitude - and this for Plato is to be found in the Ideas: to have a desire is to expect its fulfilment, at least in principle.

Having noted this we must now deal with Vlastos's interpretation of the term 'presence' as it arises in the text (217c-218c). Plato uses the analogy of the 'presence' of whiteness in the hair of someone whose hair is normally a different colour and relates this to the presence of evil in the soul. Plato's point is to contrast the 'presence' of whiteness in the hair with the hair's true colour prior to the 'rubbing on' of

whiteness. When applied to the soul it is obvious that Plato wants to say that evil is something like the rubbed-on whiteness in the hair, it is to some extent un-natural. As whiteness is not the true colour of the hair, neither is evil true or natural in the soul. Vlastos goes along with this reading; but he claims that this has no relation to the theory of Ideas. However, it seems to me that we must contrast the 'presence' of an 'appearance' with the 'presence' of what is 'real', and this leads us directly into Platonic metaphysics and the theory of Ideas. So, if the existence of evil is not what is real or natural in the soul, there must be something which is real and natural, and this I suggest is the element 'love', which is the positive force springing from both lack and desire; and when, in the final sections of the *Lysis*, 'the first object of love' is pointed to as the goal of love, there can be little doubt that the theory of Ideas is at least implicit in the *Lysis*. So, in reply to Vlastos, while there is no explicit formulation of the theory of Ideas in the *Lysis*, the doctrine seems to be there, if the text is to make sense.

## VI

Up to this point the dialogue has more or less followed the following philosophical structure. Firstly, the theoretical or logical grammar of befriending is spelt out. Secondly, a substantive element is brought in with the discussion of the grounds of attraction. Thirdly, the motivational structure of the *befriender* is taken up in both existential and metaphysical ways. The final sections of the *Lysis* attempt to spell out the *telos* of the *befriending* of the *befriender* (218cff).

At 218b-c the protagonists have agreed on a formal definition of *philia*: 'We say that in the soul, in the body and anywhere else, it is what is neither bad nor good that is the befriender of the good because of the presence of bad' (my translation).

However, no sooner does this positive description of *philia* arise than it too is subjected to a further negative critique. Once again, however, the position is not rejected as such; what it requires is a further dialectical elucidation, for the weight of this 'definition' lies one-sidedly with the befriender and the activity of befriending. It is clear that the befriender is motivated by *endeia* and befriending is the activity of rendering valuable, but more needs to be said about the befriended. And it is for this reason that Socrates asks: 'Is the man who's to be a befriender (*philos*) a befriender to someone or not?' (218d).

*Philia*, it would seem, is not just relational but also intentional. It is consciously directed toward something, and it is for the sake of (*hou heneka*) this something that the befriender befriends. Socrates, drawing all the various linguistic difficulties together, asks, 'Is that thing for the sake of which the befriender [active sense] is befriending [active sense] the befriended [passive sense] a befriended [passive sense] or is it neither a befriended [passive sense] nor an enemied [passive sense]' (218d).

It is clear that Socrates wants now to illuminate the object/goal of *philia*. So, what are the features of the befriended which attract or elicit the befriending of the befriender? By using the health analogies Socrates suggests that each active befriending is for the sake of something. Thus, the doctor is befriended or held dear by the sick man for the sake of health. But is there something by virtue of which all befriending, all holding dear is explicable? Is there something in each particular befriending which transcends so to speak the particularity of the relation? Socrates

wants to highlight something of the hierarchical nature of rendering valuable, and at the same time to suggest that there is something in each particular relation by virtue of which it is a befriending (219c-220e).

And yet, Socrates only teases the reader here. All we get are a few hints about this 'first principle of love' (*proton philon*). Socrates tells us that 'what is truly a befriended, then, is not the object of befriending for the sake of some other befriended' (220b).<sup>34</sup> This *proton philon* then is beyond the distinctions of for the sake of or because of; it is not loved out of any narrowly construed egoistic motives, but is in itself just simply lovable. The *proton philon* is, naturally enough, the Good. Again, this is the language of the theory of Ideas; the Good transcends all particular goods and yet participates in each good.

But one further step is required. It has been established that from the perspective of the befriender, and according to the hierarchical movement *per ascensum* towards the befriended - the *proton philon* - it is the elements 'lack' (*endeia*) and desire which are the motivational forces that initiate the befriending of the befriended. Furthermore, depending on the object of befriending, befriending may be either good or bad. What happens, it may be asked, when the movement towards the *proton philon* and the participation in it is sufficient to render the bad negligible or non-existent? Socrates appears to want to say that desire can be purged of its possibility of intending or even perhaps mistaking its object. Such is the force of the *proton philon* that somewhere along the scale of *philia*, the *proton philon* is naturally attractive, to such an extent that the bad is annihilated (221a-d). Desire still exists, but it is desire only for the Good. Now to draw out some of the implications of this we might say that human befriending, when it recognizes its ultimate object as the Good, and by virtue of

participation in the Good, acquires the character of the good, and may become lovable in itself. It may at some point even lose most of its egoistic character. However, this latter point is by no means assured, as the befriender and befriending have their roots still in desire, and one desires what one doesn't possess. And yet, it does not stretch the text too far to suggest that just as the Good appears in Plato to radiate or overflow, so we might expect *philia* to have similar characteristics as it is hierarchically more attuned to the Good.

If the *Lysis* ends aporetically we may point out that it does so only provisionally. The content of the *proton philon* has not been fully spelt out, nor has exactly what constitutes the *oikeion* between *befriender* and *befriended* (222a). The conclusion then must be sought in the *Symposium*, *Phaedo*, and *Phaedrus*. However, in attempting to answer Vlastos's final point on whether Plato provides a theory of loving persons as ends in themselves, we can venture some tentative remarks.

## VII

Having applied the critique of the *Lysis* to the *Republic* and the *Symposium*, Vlastos proclaims his findings with a degree of emotional force. In no uncertain terms, he claims that 'Plato is scarcely aware of kindness, tenderness, compassion, concern for the freedom, respect for the integrity of the beloved, as essential ingredients of the highest type of interpersonal love' (Vlastos, p. 30). Furthermore, he attacks Plato for having 'missed the dimensions of love in which tolerance, trust, forgiveness, tenderness, respect have validity' (p. 32). Vlastos sees the crux of these 'omissions' as being rooted in Plato's failure to take the individual, or the person *qua* person, seriously. He claims that:



... the individual, in the uniqueness and integrity of his or her individuality, will never be (for Plato) the object of our love. This seems to me the cardinal flaw in Plato's theory. It does not provide for love of whole persons but only for love of that abstract version of persons which consists of the complex of their best qualities. (Vlastos, p. 31)

To this he adds:

Since persons in their concreteness are thinking, feeling, wishing, hoping, fearing beings, to think of love for them as love of objectifications of excellence is to fail to make the thought of them as **subjects** central to what is felt for them in love. (p. 32)

And yet my reply to Vlastos here is already implicit in my reading of the *Lysis*. Plato's concern in the *Lysis* is to highlight the structure of *philia*. *Endeia* provides the basis of the instability or fragility that characterizes the contingent being. Indeed, we are thinking beings but what and why do we think? We feel, wish, hope and fear, but what and why do we do so? It is the lack of plenitude, or the fact that we do not find our own cause and *raison-d'etre* within ourselves, as revealed by *endeia* and *epithumia*, that opens us up to the possibilities of acting in the world in such ways. The act of befriending, of rendering something or someone valuable, is to embark upon a method which tends toward overcoming our ontological and metaphysical need, of making ourselves whole, and this requires taking our contingent nature seriously and hence making room for such things as trust, tolerance, forgiveness, compassion, respect. If it is objected that this is egoistic, one would reply, then it is egoistic to eat, sleep and drink, even to breathe. It is not the taking to oneself of what legitimately belongs to another, but is rather in the nature of things, a need, or in the language of the existentialists, a given or ontological fact about our facticity. It may

be pointed out that making oneself whole in no way logically requires that we do this at the expense of others. In fact, as the *Lysis* shows, *philia* at its best requires that an individual *befriender* and an individual *befriended* hold all things in common (207c). In the hierarchy of *befriending*, it is the *proton philon* which is most truly dear, that transcendent object which renders all particular things dear. To conceive of the *philia* relation as terminating in a person as he or she is at present, as Vlastos does, is to fail to appreciate the dynamic involved in the love relation of befriending. It is precisely because in human friendship the relationship is not static, and because we hope for the good of the other, think about his/her good, feel elated in their goodness, or feel hurt at their shortcomings, wish for their happiness, and fear that contingency will defeat them, that the dynamic of the relationship requires the orientation toward the Good.

The relationship of human *befriender* and human *befriended* in its dynamism is mutual overcoming of *endeia*, and thus the friendship is a unit in the transcending of the subject/object dichotomy.

And even if it is true that to some extent in befriending we love objectifications of the Good, Beautiful and True in the other, this does not logically require that we do not love the other in his/her individuality as irreplaceable and hence *qua* person. One might want to say that although I love, for example, the good in such and such a person, I might also add that I love that person and not some other because he or she acts, wills, feels, thinks and exhibits the good in such and such particular ways, which are *oikeion* or akin to my own ways of acting, willing, feeling, thinking and exhibiting the good. The advantage of viewing Plato's theory in this way is to see how a theory of disinterested love, in the sense of loving one's neighbour or humanity, is wholly in keeping with having certain special relationships with

particular individuals. Just as there is something 'akin' (*oikeion*) between me and any member of the human species due to the fact that we are human, so too there may be something more akin between me and that special person whom I actively befriend. A hierarchical structure is in evidence here, as in valuing in general. The *aporia* of the closing of the *Lysis* has a further instructive lesson, for while Plato no doubt has been successful in outlining the structure of *philia*, it remains undefined. *Philia* is bound to some extent and in certain relations to particularity, it grows in an interior way through the experience of befriending, of having a friend and being a friend. Socrates may well illuminate its theoretical or formal structure and some of its substantive aspects, but befriending in its individual and particular context no doubt cannot be fully circumscribed and hence defined, so Plato leaves it open as to what modality it will take for each individual.

## Notes

\* I would like to acknowledge the excellent and detailed comments of two anonymous referees for *Ethics Education* who have helped me refine this paper in important ways.

1. Gregory Vlastos, "The Individual as Object of Love in Plato", in *Platonic Studies*, Princeton, 1973, pp. 3-42.
2. Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, 1986. Other proponents of this position include A. Nygren, *Eros and Agape*, Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1953; I. Singer, *The Nature of Love*, 3 vols., Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1984; R.C. Solomon, *Love: Emotion, Myth and Metaphor*, New York, Doubleday, 1981

3. Much of what follows will be constrained by the limitations of the *Lysis* itself. For fuller accounts of the metaphysical doctrines implicit in Plato's theory of love and friendship, the reader is referred to my doctoral thesis: 'Perspectives on the Philosophy of Love and Friendship: Homer to Plato'.
4. Ast, *Platons Leben und Schriften* (429-34) and Sacher, *Ueber Platons Schriften*, cited in G. Grote, *Plato and the Other Companions of Sokrates*, London, 1875, Vol. I, p. 515.
5. W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, vol. 4, Cambridge University Press, 1962, p. 143.
6. Crombie, *An Examination of Plato's Doctrines*, vol. I, London, 1962, p. 20.
7. Grote, op. cit., p. 515.
8. Hans Georg Gadamer, *Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato*, translated by P. Christopher Smith, New Haven : Yale University Press, 1980, p. 1.
9. Cf. for example, R.G. Hoerber, 'Plato's Lysis', *Phronesis*, 4, (1959), pp. 15-28, and P. Friedlander, *Plato, Vols. I-III The Dialogues* , Bollingen Series LIX, New York, Pantheon Books, 1958.
10. Martha C. Nussbaum, op. cit.
11. P. Friedlander, op. cit.
12. Kimon Lycos, *Plato on Justice and Power: Reading Book I of Plato's Republic*, Macmillan ., London, 1987. It is important to point out that Leo Strauss and his followers such as Stanley Rosen and Allan Bloom have also been very sensitive to the unity of form and content in Plato.
13. Cf. M.C. Nussbaum, op. cit., p. 123ff.

14. Cf. L. Versenyi, *Phronesis*. 20 (1975), p. 187.
15. Ibid., p. 187.
16. Kenneth Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*, Duckworth, London, 1978, p. 50. For the most comprehensive and important contribution to the usage and meanings of *philia* related terms see, D. Konstan, *Friendship In The Classical World*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997.
17. Max Pohlenz, *Aus Platos Werdezeit*, Berlin, 1913. Hans von Arnim, *Platos Jugenddialogue und die Entstehungszeit des "Phaidros"*, Leipzig, 1914. For a full discussion of this debate see D. Bolotin, *Plato's Dialogue on Friendship. An Interpretation of the Lysis with a New Translation*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca : London, 1979.
18. Cited by Hoerber, op. cit., p. 15.
19. G.M.A. Grube, *Plato's Thought*, London, 1935, p. 216, n.2.
20. Friedlander, op. cit., Vol. II.
21. Gadamer, op. cit., p. 1.
21. Paul Shorey, *What Plato Said*, Chicago, 1934, p. 117.
23. My argument against Vlastos here will rely heavily on the implicit aspect of the theory of Ideas in the *Lysis*, for Vlastos is quite correct in pointing out that the doctrine is not made explicit in the *Lysis*.
24. Cf. D. Bolotin, op. cit., p. 66. The etymological point which I venture rather tentatively is derived from the Greek *lyo*. Moreover, Plato is fond of drawing out philosophical points from

names. One may refer to the *Symposium's* play on the name Diotima (honour the god, or honoured by the god) and the tacit references to Alcibiades's lover Androtima (honour the man, or honoured by the man). Again, there is the play on the gods' name for *eros* in the *Phaedrus* (252c). Analogous remarks may be made about the names Thrasymachus in *Republic I* and possibly Protarchus in the *Philebus*.

25. Cf. *Phaedrus* 237a.
26. This is the way Friedlander op. cit. takes up the Greek *ithi epeidexai*.
27. D. Bolotin, op. cit., pp. 79-80; and Friedlander, op. cit.
28. Aristophanes, *Peace*, lines 393ff.
29. Ctesippus and Socrates both indulge in some gentle banter with Hippothales, particularly when Socrates sophistically tells Hippothales how one should behave to win a lover.
30. Cf. K. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*, op. cit.
31. I do not wish to suggest that there is either in Plato's theory or in the depiction of Socrates an *absolutely* non-egoistic aspect to love. Love, of itself, will necessarily convey benefits, however, the point I wish to stress is that at a certain level of the hierarchy of love in Plato, the *motivation* for loving is not clearly egoistic. I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for *Ethics Education* in helping to clarify this point. The same reviewer also has suggested that each time I have used "egoistic" in the context of this debate it would be better to say "beneficial to the befriender" or "beneficial to others but not the befriended." This is a subtle and attractive point however Vlastos and those who have followed his line (see footnote 3) have all used the term "egoistic" and so for the purposes of engaging in this specific debate I retain that locution.
32. Writers such as Vlastos, Pohlenz, von Arnim, Grube and others.

33. J. Haden, 'Friendship in Plato's Lysis', *Review of Metaphysics*, 37, December 1983, p. 339.

35. This is a rhetorical question which I have rendered as a statement.

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