

interpretation

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Response

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For several reasons, I am grateful to Stewart Umphrey for his thoughtful review of my interpretation of the *Lysis*.¹ In particular, he has called attention to some possible obscurities, and to some genuine mistakes in my commentary. Moreover, his essay gives me an opportunity, as I answer it, to correct still other mistakes in what I wrote. I am happy to acknowledge these mistakes. But as for the claim that I regard as my most important one—concerning the relation between self-love and the (highest) good—I still think it was fundamentally sound. My response to Umphrey's argument will address at greatest length his objections to this claim, but I will also discuss some of his other criticisms.

Umphrey and I agree that the most surprising feature of the *Lysis*, understood as a dialogue about friendship, is its "pervasive emphasis on self-interestedness." And we further agree that the main difficulty for an understanding of friendship, if not also for friendship itself, concerns its relation to self-interest. This difficulty is a serious one, especially because our attachment to virtue, which accompanies and supports the willingness to make sacrifices for our friends, is more an attachment to our own (highest) good than to theirs (cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1168^a28–1169^b2). How can we reconcile the evident unselfishness in friendship at its highest with the self-interest that Socrates uncovers as an ingredient in all, or at least the deepest, friendly loves?

Umphrey's answer to this question is apparently that we cannot reconcile the two. He argues that clarity about our own self-interest destroys the "sacred bond," or the "illusion" (of community), upon which the truest friendship must depend. And he sees the *Lysis* primarily as a critique of friendship, for creating illusions that strengthen our natural complacency and hinder us, as individuals, from pursuing the high goods we need. Umphrey attributes to me, by contrast, the opinion that friendship "in the fullest sense" is possible without illusions, namely when the friends' natural desire simply to be together is combined with an acknowledged need for some further advantage from one another. Against this view, he contends that our attempt to use friends for our own advantage, far from contributing to the "fullest" friendship, undermines friendship by leading us to take advantage of, or to abandon, one another as we each "look after Number One."

There is great strength to Umphrey's argument on this point. But he has

1. This review is included in Part One of Umphrey's essay entitled "*erōs* and *thumos*." All quotations, unless otherwise noted, will be from this essay. Page references, except for those to the *Lysis*, will be to my book, *Plato's Dialogue on Friendship*.

misunderstood the purpose of my suggestion about the hybrid friendship caused by affectionate desire together with a need for one's own good. For I didn't present that suggestion as my own opinion, or as Socrates', about a possible "friendship in the fullest sense." I did intend to say that a friend in the fullest sense would have to be, among other things, someone we could rely on when in need. But Umphrey disregards several qualifications that I added to my suggestion, and in particular the warning that it ignores "the question of self-love, as well as the deceptiveness of what were called 'phantoms' of the good" (181; cf. 174–175 and 169–170). But these are, of course, decisive considerations. Earlier, I had stated clearly that love of the good (and even of the highest good) is at bottom a selfish desire, and that it ultimately weakens the friendly love of one human being for another. I chose not to repeat these claims in connection with my "hybrid" account of friendship, not because I had forgotten them, but because I was willing to allow some readers to do so. In truth, however, my claim that love of the good is an ingredient of "friendship in the fullest sense" was intended primarily to indicate that such friendship is at odds with itself, and thus impossible (cf. especially 169–170).

Perhaps I was too timid in my reluctance to further expose the illusions of many of our friendships. Still, it might not even have been wholly truthful to be more blunt. For I don't think that the friendship based on natural affection together with utility has to be so hollow or false, even among the clear-headed, as Umphrey's main argument portrays it. Socrates and some of his friends, for example, were quite useful to one another for a long time, and their affection was rather strong. And Umphrey himself, in fact, concludes his discussion of the *Lysis* with an admiring look at Socrates' pleasant and useful companionship with his friends.

Umphrey and I agree that love of the good is ultimately inconsistent with our deepest hopes from friendship, and that the *Lysis* brings this truth to light. And we further agree, I believe, that the dialogue's purpose in so doing is not to find fault with our love of the good—on the grounds, perhaps, of its being too selfish—but rather to expose the limits of friendship, whose charms tend to dull our awareness, as individuals, that our greatest need is for the good. Umphrey and I differ, however, about the character of our love for the good, and about the status of the good itself. Umphrey questions two key assertions that I made about the good. First, he objects to my claim that the good, whatever else it is, is essentially also a drug against evils, and that as such it would cease to be if evils were removed. Secondly, he disputes my interpretation of Socrates' suggestion that the good is not loved for its own sake, but for the sake of something else. I shall discuss separately Umphrey's arguments about these two claims.

According to Umphrey, Socrates' suggestion that the good depends for its

existence on the presence of evils is meant to apply only to instrumental goods, such as medicine or wealth. It does not apply to our ultimate good, which might be virtue or happiness, let alone to the absolute, unconditioned good itself. Umphrey's argument is apparently based on the fact that Socrates here speaks of the good as a drug against evils, that is, an instrumental good. But that very fact suggests a quite different interpretation, namely that all goods, insofar as they are goods, are like instrumental goods in being useful to us against evils or the threat of evils. Socrates has gone to great lengths, in this part of the dialogue (219b5–220e6), to distinguish the ultimate good, as the one thing that is truly dear to us (220b7–8), from all those instrumental “phantoms” that are “dear” in name only. By raising the question of ultimate purpose in our lives, he has directed our thoughts toward an ultimate good that we can love for its own sake, and not merely for ourselves. He has even suggested, as Umphrey himself notes elsewhere, that the good we love is a “*per se*, independent being” (cf. 220c1–5). Far from disregarding our ultimate good and the absolute good, Socrates' argument encourages us in the strongest way to think of them, and of them alone. His suggestion, therefore, that the good depends on the presence of evils applies especially to them. And it is because of his reference to our ultimate good, and to the good we regard as absolute, that Socrates' suggestion is so striking, and so important.

Umphrey further claims that Socrates' argument for the dependence of the good upon evils, if it did refer to our ultimate good or to the absolute good, would be inadequate. He offers several reasons for this claim, but I shall comment only on the two that seem to me the strongest. In the first place, Umphrey says that happiness, if we were ever to attain it, would no longer be useful or necessary as a remedy against evils, although it would still be good for us. It seems to me, however, that any attainable happiness would not be the whole of our ultimate good, since it would not yet have lasted into the future. And at all events, such happiness would be useful indeed as a remedy against evils, if only against those evils we are free from while it lasts. And as for a complete abolition of evils (once and for all), this condition would indeed no longer be useful for anything, but why would we even call it good? Without the ever-present possibility—however dimly perceived—of further evils, it wouldn't make sense to care about our condition or to speak of it as good. Umphrey contends, second, that the *Republic* outlines an alternative approach to knowledge of the Good, or of the Unconditioned, and that Socrates' argument in the *Lysis* is of no weight against the account suggested there. But the *Lysis* does indeed bear upon that suggestion, since it compels us to ask why we speak of anything, even the Unconditioned or the One, as being good. This question is also addressed, if less forcefully, in the *Republic* itself, where Socrates indicates that the initial vision of the Good is not yet adequate for knowledge of it. The vision must be supplemented, he says, by a reasoned account of the Good as a cause of other things, and the last step

of this account is to show that the Good must be seen by anyone who intends to act sensibly in private or in public (*Republic* 517b8–c5; cf. 505d11–e1; 534b8–d1). Socrates is implying, I believe, that we cannot meaningfully speak of anything as good without some reference to the lives of beings, like ourselves, who suffer from evils. And this is the fact that his argument in the *Lysis* is intended to bring to light.

Socrates' second major assertion about the good is that it is not loved for its own sake, but for the sake of something (or someone) else. In my book, I argued that the being for whose sake each of us loves the good is "himself," or rather—"since we cannot, and should not, love even ourselves unreservedly so long as our life is obstructed by the presence of evils"—it is "himself as he would be if he were free of evils" (176). I still think I was correct that each "loves" the good, and especially the highest good, for his own sake. But I should have left it at that, without suggesting that suffering beings cannot truly love themselves and without claiming that what each of us really loves is "himself as he would be if he were free of evils." Our self-love isn't necessarily diminished by the presence of (remediable or bearable) evils; in fact, it may even be deepened, just as our love for others may be deepened by the presence of evils to them. Moreover, it is not likely that what we most want for ourselves is complete freedom from evils, especially since such freedom appears to be impossible for us, and incompatible with life. And even if this were the condition we most wanted, we would still want it for the sake of ourselves. Our desire to attain it would still be rooted in the natural love that each of us, necessarily, has for himself. Our well-being is what we most want, but it is ourselves that we most love.

So far, however, my summary of this last argument has given a watered-down version of Socrates' claim. For what he says is not merely that we love the good for the sake of some other being, but that we love it "for the sake of an enemy" (220e3–4). In my book, I tried to explain this remarkable claim by proposing that we ourselves, for whose sake we desire the good, are not only friends, but also (loosely speaking) "enemies" to ourselves, since hatred of our present bad condition helps prompt us to seek the good. Against this interpretation Umphrey rightly objects that to hate one's bad condition, as long as one isn't thoroughly bad, is not at all to hate oneself or to regard oneself as an enemy. Accordingly, I failed to show that we ourselves are the "enemies" for whose sake we love the good. And so I haven't explained what Socrates could mean by saying that we love the good for the sake of an enemy.

Umphrey offers a tentative explanation of his own as to what Socrates' suggestion about love for the sake of an enemy might mean. Now in Umphrey's view, this whole argument about our love of the good still applies only to instrumental goods, as distinct from the highest ones. But apart from this qualification, he agrees with me that we love the good for the sake of ourselves, and he accepts the further suggestion in my book that we love it for

the sake of ourselves “as we would be if we were free of evils.” Umphrey sees such freedom from evils as something other than our ultimate or highest good. It is, instead, a freedom from good as well as from evil, a condition of unrestraint in which we are contented with ourselves as independent, intermediate beings. In Umphrey’s view, this state of comfortable self-satisfaction is the original one that we enjoyed before we first began to suffer from evils. All our pursuit of instrumental goods, he argues, aims at the recovery of this original state. And even though this state may no longer be attainable, Umphrey still regards it as our natural one, the one in which we are most simply ourselves.

Umphrey uses the above interpretation of what it means to love, and to be, oneself as the basis for his tentative suggestion about how we ourselves, for whose sake we love the (instrumental) good, might also be our own enemies. The natural state of being ourselves is hateful to us, according to this tentative proposal, not because it is intrinsically bad, but because our fondness for it hinders our pursuit of the highest good. Our satisfaction in simply being (or hoping to be) ourselves tempts us to dismiss the ultimate good as something too high for our concern. This satisfaction with ourselves is therefore a most insidious threat to our true welfare. And in the light of these facts, we ourselves may be said to be our own enemies.

According to this suggestion of Umphrey’s, one of Socrates’ purposes in the *Lysis* is to show that self-love, like the love for our friends, hinders us in our pursuit of the ultimate good. This assertion obviously depends on Umphrey’s claim that only the instrumental goods, but not the highest ones, are “loved” as a remedy against evils and for the sake of ourselves. It depends, in other words, on the assumption that Socrates’ discussion of why we love the good has ignored our selfless love of the highest good. But as I argued earlier, Socrates’ argument about love of the good applies above all to love of that good which seems the highest, and to that love of the good which we tend to regard as selfless. Far from ignoring that love, Socrates is concerned above all to show that such selflessness, in love for the good, is impossible. In Umphrey’s view, the *Lysis* is characterized by a deliberate disregard of our “natural [that is, unconditioned by the presence of evils] orientation to . . . the good” [that is, the highest good] or of “the intrinsic transcendence we show toward the intrinsically good or divine.” But this is a false premise, and it has allowed Umphrey to ignore the dialogue’s main concern, which is to examine that transcendence and to expose some of its hidden roots.

If love of ourselves is at the root of, and not incompatible with, our pursuit of even the highest good, then we cannot be enemies to ourselves in the sense that Umphrey proposes. And so the question remains as to what Socrates could mean that we love the good for the sake of an enemy. I still hold my earlier opinion that we pursue the good for our own sake, and that we ourselves are the “enemy” Socrates has in mind. But I now think differently about the

question of why he would speak of us as our own enemies. The answer I now suggest presupposes the distinction I have been drawing between our self-interested pursuit of the truly highest good, which serves us as a drug against evils, and our supposedly selfless love for a spurious good that we imagine as existing (and as being good) independently of any evils. We are enemies to ourselves, I think, to the extent that we surrender to the latter of these two loves. Our love for such a spurious good is rooted, though only in part, in an attempt to escape from ourselves, and from the evils that are bound up with our nature. In this sense we may be called our own enemies. Yet despite the hatred of being merely ourselves, our self-deluded love for a spurious good is no less for the sake of ourselves than is the clear-headed pursuit of our true good. Our ineradicable self-concern is revealed even in the comfort we tend to feel at the thought of having overcome it. And apart from that, the experience of this delusive love, together with reflection on that experience, appears to be a necessary precondition for our truest well-being. Accordingly, it is for the sake of ourselves, that is, of an “enemy,” that we believe that we love, and for its own sake, a self-subsistent good.

To conclude, let me indicate how the differences between Umphrey and me regarding the good are reflected in the attitudes we take toward the presence of evils. Umphrey’s position, to repeat, is that self-love does not direct us toward our ultimate good, but rather toward the mere abolition of evils and to a state of foolish self-satisfaction in the absence of the good. This view implies that freedom from evils, if it were possible for us, would remove us still further than we are now from our highest end. The world’s evils, by their very inescapability, help raise our sights from the futile attempt to avoid them all; they provoke us to try instead to transcend them through attainment of our ultimate good. Umphrey directs us, then, to a posture of gratitude for the evils that afflict us, at least so long as they are not unbearable. And he is consistent in saying that “We may thank God that we live in the so-called Age of Zeus, when natural scarcity, political society, and becoming towards death supply a rich diet of troubles.” For Umphrey, evils seem to be lightened, and even their indefinite continuance justified, by the contribution they make toward our ultimate good, toward our participation in what is good in itself. But the status of this higher good remains unexamined in Umphrey’s account. My own argument, by contrast, is that the very goodness of the highest good cannot be fully understood apart from its usefulness for us who suffer from evils. Just as nothing, not even to die, could be meaningfully called bad if there were no good, so nothing, not even virtue or happiness, could be truly good if it weren’t needed by those who are vulnerable to evils. The deepest necessity for evils (cf. *Theaetetus* 176a5–b1) does not lie in the contribution that some of them may make toward our highest good, but rather in their being, as evils, inseparable from those natures for which goods as such exist. To be sure, there are many evils, such as taxes, that could not possibly be eliminated

without the introduction of still greater evils, including that of being deprived of goods we need. But to prefer a lesser evil to a greater one is not to be grateful for evils as such. Admittedly, again, there are high goods—courage, for example—that we could never attain if we were, *per impossibile*, free of evils. But in that case, these “goods” would no longer be good for us, and we would have no reason to regret their absence. It is ultimately misguided, therefore, to try to be grateful for evils as such, just as it is to try to live in complete freedom from them. Instead, we would do better to acquire, if we can, enough true goods to balance or outweigh them.

Let me again thank Mr. Umphrey for his review of my book. I hope that these remarks will be as helpful to him as his have been to me.