

# Interpretation

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# Interpretation

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## The Political Significance of Friendship in Plato's *Lysis*

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**Abstract:** In this paper I argue that Plato's dialogue on friendship, the *Lysis*, can help us to understand the political significance of friendship. First, I argue that the dialogue indicates through its structure, as well as through the responses of its interlocutors, a parallel between the psychology of the ruler and the psychology of the friend. Second, I argue that the dialogue implies that three conditions must be met for friendship to exist among human beings or citizens in a polity: similarity, utility, and nobility. More careful attention to the establishment and maintenance of these conditions, I suggest, and to the psychological parallel between rulers and friends, might help us to attend more effectively to the civic health of a liberal democracy whose bonds of affection have become strained.

The personal significance of friendship is obvious. Friendship is essential to human happiness, as becomes clear if one imagines the bleakness of a friendless existence. "Without friends," Aristotle writes in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, "no one would choose to live, even if he possessed all other goods" (1155a5–6). Less obvious, perhaps, is friendship's political significance. But in the same chapter of the *Ethics*, Aristotle goes on to say: "It seems too that friendship holds cities together and that lawgivers are more serious about it than justice.... When people are friends, they have no need of justice, but when they are just, they do need friendship in addition" (1155a26–27). If friendship has the power to hold a community together, we would expect political theorists to make friendship a central theme of their work. Yet modern and even contemporary political theorists have had a tendency to ignore friendship, or to characterize it as merely a matter of private concern.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This tendency, now well noted, has been somewhat counteracted by a recent surge of interest in the topic of civic friendship. See Danielle Allen, *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship Since Brown v. Board of Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 119–59; John von Heyking and Richard Avramenko, eds., *Friendship and Politics: Essays in Political Thought* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008); and the special issue on Friendship in Political Theory, ed.

Two political theorists who resist this tendency, however, are Carl Schmitt and Sybil Schwarzenbach. In *The Concept of the Political*, Schmitt suggests that true political science is impossible without an understanding of friendship and enmity. According to Schmitt, “the specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy.”<sup>2</sup> The enemy, as distinguished from the private adversary, exists “only when, at least potentially, one fighting collectivity of people confronts a similar collectivity.”<sup>3</sup> The most extreme consequence of enmity, and the most extreme political means, is war, which, while being an exceptional case, nevertheless “has an especially decisive meaning which exposes the core of the matter.”<sup>4</sup> For a world without the distinction between friend and enemy, and without at least the possibility of war, would be “a world without politics.”<sup>5</sup>

Schmitt helps us become more aware of something we may optimistically overlook: that political life as we know it is always life within a particular community, defined in contrast or opposition to another, against which it may fight. And in Schmitt’s view, the tight connection between politics, friendship, and enmity has implications for the way we talk and write about political life. Terms such as “the state” and “the people,” he suggests, become unintelligible without a tacit understanding of friendship and enmity.<sup>6</sup> In fact, nearly every term used in political science—for instance, “state, republic, society, class, as well as sovereignty, constitutional state, absolutism, dictatorship, economic planning, neutral or total state”—becomes “incomprehensible” if one does not pay attention to the “essentially polemical nature” of “politically charged terms” and politics, and thus to the concepts of friend and enemy.<sup>7</sup> We may, of course, resist much of Schmitt’s argument, but the core of his challenge

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Derek Edyvane and Kerri Woods, *Res Publica* 19, no. 1 (Feb. 2013). For discussions of the neglect of friendship as a political theme, see Paul Ludwig, “Without Foundations: Plato’s *Lysis* and Postmodern Friendship,” *American Political Science Review* 104, no. 1 (Feb. 2010): 134–35; Sybil Schwarzenbach, “On Civic Friendship,” *Ethics* 107, no. 1 (Oct. 1996): 97–98 and 108–17; Sybil Schwarzenbach, *On Civic Friendship: Including Women in the State* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 16–17; and Jason Scorza, “Liberal Citizenship and Civic Friendship,” *Political Theory* 32, no. 1 (2004): 85–86. According to Ludwig’s argument, “the privatization of friendship and a correspondingly cold or calculating view of the public sphere can be seen in classical liberal theory as well as contemporary mainstream liberal theory,” regardless of whether the theory in question is utilitarian or deontological in its foundations (“Without Foundations,” 135).

<sup>2</sup> Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 26.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 33, 35.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 19–20, 25–26.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 30–32, 31n12.

here seems worth taking seriously: that “the phenomenon of the political can be understood only in the context of the ever-present possibility of the friend-and-enemy grouping.”<sup>8</sup>

But is the question of friendship's role in political life of only theoretical significance, or is it also relevant to practical politics? A growing number of neo-Aristotelian theorists seek to rehabilitate the ideal of civic or political friendship; and among the most forceful and thoughtful of these is Sybil Schwarzenbach. Friendship among citizens, she writes, is “*the* forgotten problem of modern democratic theory.”<sup>9</sup> This forgetting is especially unfortunate now, when a return to the ideal of civic friendship could help to unify a community threatened with disintegration.<sup>10</sup> Friendship “must again be acknowledged as an essential factor unifying even the just modern state.”<sup>11</sup> Instead of writing more “tomes on the freedom and equality of citizens” while neglecting friendship, democratic theorists ought to “go beyond the simple debate between freedom and equality and include this third distinct value.”<sup>12</sup> In fact, among the three values, friendship may be paramount. For once it is accepted as “a third critical value of democracy,” friendship can “help determine the limits of legitimate freedom and equality”; “many (if not all) of the other criteria that are typically cited as distinctive of democracy may be understood to flow from this central value.”<sup>13</sup> Not only does civic friendship give content to the notion of civic virtue, but even more importantly, civic friendship alone prevents justice from being a chimera.<sup>14</sup> For it is not only actual injustice, but also perceived injustice, that causes civic breakdown, and only friendly feeling can prevent that perception:

a high degree of civic friendship *alone makes genuine justice possible*. That is, amidst a general background of distrust, ill will, or even simple indifference, many citizens will characteristically still

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 35; cf. 67. One might think that for Schmitt, enmity is fundamental, while friendship is merely an afterthought. But it seems to me that Schmitt has good reason for referring, in his statements about the essence of politics, to both enmity and friendship: each concept has its meaning for him in relation to the other. And for the public and thus common enemy to exist, the people must already be bound in some sort of friendship—a friendship that allows Schmitt to speak at times, somewhat surprisingly, of the *domestic* enemy, understood as an exceptional case (46–47; cf. 28).

<sup>9</sup> Sybil Schwarzenbach, “Democracy and Friendship,” *Journal of Social Philosophy* 36, no. 2 (2004): 239.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>11</sup> Schwarzenbach, “On Civic Friendship,” 98.

<sup>12</sup> Schwarzenbach, “Democracy and Friendship,” 239, 247.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 233; cf. 250.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 237, 250.

*perceive* themselves to be unjustly treated even if they in fact are not so, even if some narrower form of objective, distributive justice (such as proportionate equality) is being adhered to. Again, without the general goodwill and flexible “give and take” that a civic friendship entails, citizens will be unable to accept in practice the *burdens of justice* required in any particular case; they will be unwilling to yield regarding their own interests when necessary, or forego their special privileges when called upon.<sup>15</sup>

Like Aristotle, though in a somewhat different way, Schwarzenbach argues that justice, insufficient by itself, requires the supplement of friendship.<sup>16</sup> But Schwarzenbach’s most powerful argument is a simple one: because contemporary America is threatened by a number of “disintegrative tendencies,” “the problem of social unity—of what it is that generally binds persons together in a just society—is emerging as of critical importance once again.”<sup>17</sup> In such a situation, “all resources for a fair and undogmatic social unity must be mined.” And “some form of political friendship,” in Schwarzenbach’s view, “is central among such resources.”<sup>18</sup>

Each thinker, Schmitt and Schwarzenbach, while pointing us down promising paths, leaves us with a sense that more territory remains unexplored in the theorizing of friendship. In particular, we are left wondering about the psychology of friendship, and about its conditions. Precisely if we take seriously Schmitt’s challenge that we will never understand politics unless we understand friendship and enmity, we may be left dissatisfied with his brief account of their essences—“the distinction of friend and enemy denotes the utmost degree of intensity of a union or separation, of an association or dissociation”<sup>19</sup>—and we may be led to seek an account of the psychology of friendship that is more nuanced and exact. And precisely if we agree with Schwarzenbach that attending to civic friendship, or

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 236–37. Cf. Schwarzenbach, *On Civic Friendship*, 54–55.

<sup>16</sup> For indications of certain difficulties with Schwarzenbach’s application of Aristotle, consider *Nic. Eth.* 1132b31–1133a5, 1170b29–32, and *Politics* 1280b5–35.

<sup>17</sup> Schwarzenbach, “Democracy and Friendship,” 99.

<sup>18</sup> Jason Scorza, who also confronts the problem of social unity, argues that truth and tenderness, which are communicative norms of Emersonian friendship, can serve to constrain and guide disagreements between citizens of pluralist liberal democracies in order to create a social union that is neither too polite nor too antagonistic (Jason Scorza, “Liberal Citizenship,” 88, 92, 95–101, 103); “the same norms that work for friendship also will work to preserve and strengthen modern liberal societies, even in the face of inevitable disagreement between members with different values and interests” (103).

<sup>19</sup> Schmitt, *Concept of the Political*, 26.

to “a background general concern and goodwill between citizens,”<sup>20</sup> may help us to bind our community together, we may be left wishing we had a better grasp of friendship's conditions, so as to promote or maintain them more effectively. In this article, I suggest that Plato, in his dialogue *Lysis*, points the way toward a deeper understanding of both the psychology and the conditions of friendship. That understanding, valuable in its own right for political scientists, may also promise to be of some use in strengthening what Lincoln called our bonds of affection, bonds of affection that passion and principle have recently strained.

### THREE PUZZLES OF THE *LYSIS*

The *Lysis* is Plato's dialogue on friendship. Like the *Republic*, Plato's dialogue on justice, it is narrated by Socrates, who recounts in the first person a conversation he had with a pair of teenage boys who are friends: the shy and beautiful Lysis, and the bold and contentious Menexenus. This conversation takes a number of twists and turns, careful attention to which can shed light on Plato's teaching. For the purpose of a summary, we can divide the dialogue into eight sections.

As the dialogue opens, Socrates, walking from the Academy to the Lyceum, encounters and gives advice to his acquaintance Hippothales, who is in love with Lysis, as to how he might love more prudently; Hippothales welcomes this advice and persuades Socrates to enter a nearby palestra, or wrestling school, where he might display for Hippothales how a lover ought to speak to his beloved, in order to catch him (203a1–207b7). In conversation with the young Lysis, Socrates draws attention to the apparent tension between Lysis's parents' love for him and their willingness to limit his freedom; since it is not youth but rather ignorance that prevents Lysis from being free, sufficient prudence would allow him to rule over his father, his neighbor, the Athenians, the king of Persia, and the whole world (207b8–211a1). Upon the return of Lysis's friend Menexenus, who had been observing the sacred rites, Socrates questions him about how one becomes a friend; but none of the four positions they consider—that one becomes a friend by either loving or being loved, by both loving and being loved, by being loved, or by loving—seems correct (211a1–213d2). Turning to Lysis, and to the less difficult question of who are friends, Socrates suggests that it is similars, only to refute this suggestion on the grounds that similars as such would

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<sup>20</sup> Schwarzenbach, “On Civic Friendship,” 122.

not be useful to each other, while similars defined as good men would not need anything, would not treasure, and would not love (213d2–215c2). Perhaps, then, as Socrates once heard from a clever speaker, it is not similars but rather opposites who are friends, both among human beings and in the whole cosmos; but this suggestion, too, is refuted, on the grounds that certain opposites (friends and enemies, good men and bad men) would not be friends (215c3–216b9). Next, Socrates and the boys investigate the possibility that the friend is either the lover of the good because of the presence of an evil, or the good itself, loved because of the bad; but this is rejected on the grounds that the bad cannot be a cause of love and friendship (216c1–221d2). Finally, Socrates suggests that it is the kindred who are friends; but this suggestion proves vulnerable to the same type of refutation that was used in the section on similars (221d2–222d8). At a loss, Socrates can do no better than to tally up the various refuted accounts of friendship, just before the family attendants, drunk and presumably invulnerable to persuasion, whisk Lysis and Menexenus away: Socrates and the boys have been unable to discover what a friend is (222e1–223b8).

The first puzzle that emerges from this summary concerns the dialogue's structure. The topic under consideration in the *Lysis* is friendship. Yet the investigation of friendship does not begin until the third section. What gives the dialogue its unity? How do its sections cohere? Perhaps we could respond by saying that the first two sections, which present conversations about erotic love and parental love, still belong in a dialogue about friendship in the broadest sense. But the lengthy digression about global rule, in the second section, remains puzzling. Of course, this digression may be dramatically necessary, since Socrates hopes to whet Lysis's appetite for the prudence or wisdom that, as Socrates promises him, will be a necessary and sufficient condition for rule. But Plato's dialogues are guided not only by dramatic but also by philosophic necessities: why would Plato choose to include a speech about rule in his dialogue on friendship? And if Plato had good reason to structure the dialogue in this way, this interpretive puzzle may be linked to the more important theoretical question of the connection between politics and friendship themselves.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> In other dialogues as well, we find indications of a link between politics and friendship. One of the first definitions of justice offered in the *Republic* is that justice means helping friends and harming enemies (331e1–336a10). And Alcibiades, who is perhaps the most politically ambitious interlocutor in Plato's dialogues, suggests that fostering friendship among the citizens is *the* aim of the political art (*Alcibiades I* 125d7–127e8).

The second puzzle is that of whether the dialogue's investigation of friendship leads to any positive teaching. As is evident from the summary above, each suggestion that Socrates and the boys investigate about friendship is refuted in its turn, leaving us with the impression that the dialogue can teach us only what friendship is not. Can we find amid this rubble of refutations any positive teaching, or is the dialogue simply aporetic?<sup>22</sup>

The third puzzle is that of the role in the dialogue of the thesis that the kindred are friends. That thesis, discussed in the dialogue's seventh section, seems suspiciously similar to (and is refuted on the same grounds as) the thesis that similars are friends, which was already discussed in the fourth section. If the discussion of kinship is not a mere repetition, not superfluous, what is its role in the dialogue?

#### THE PSYCHOLOGY OF RULERS AND FRIENDS

To make headway on the first puzzle, and to understand something about the psychology of rulers in Plato's view, we need to look more closely at the dialogue's second section. When Socrates first enters the palestra and sits down, he begins a conversation with both Menexenus and Lysis, apparently aiming at an investigation of justice and wisdom. But when Menexenus leaves to take care of the sacred rites, Socrates begins to question Lysis alone: if Lysis's parents love him, and thus wish for him to be as happy as possible, why don't they allow him to do whatever he wishes? Lysis's first attempt to explain the compatibility of being loved with being constrained is to say that he is not yet of age (to be trusted with freedom or rule), but this attempt is countered by Socrates: youth cannot be the explanation, since Lysis is already free to read, write, or play the lyre however he wishes. Therefore it must be insufficient understanding alone that impedes the boy; if he became prudent, all would submit willingly to his rule: his father, his neighbor, the Athenians, the Great King of Persia, and (in what we can call the capstone to Socrates's argument) everyone in the world. But, in an addendum to this capstone, Socrates goes on to say that if Lysis wants to be loved, he will need to be useful to others,

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<sup>22</sup> As Versenyi notes, summarizing one of the dominant strains of interpretation of the *Lysis*, many readers "regard the dialogue as a purely negative semantic or logical exercise lacking in all substantial content and positive theory" (Laszlo Versenyi, "Plato's 'Lysis,'" *Phronesis* 20, no. 3 [1975]: 185). Annas writes, "It is hard to resist the opinion when reading the *Lysis* that in it Plato is more interested in discovering and setting out intellectually attractive paradoxes than in getting to the root of the problems offered by the concept of *philia*" (Julia Annas, "Plato and Aristotle on Friendship and Altruism," *Mind* 86, no. 344 [1977]: 551; cf. 539). For a helpful survey of claims made by less recent commentators who find in the *Lysis* only negative or at best minimal results, see Robert Hoerber, "Plato's 'Lysis,'" *Phronesis* 4, no. 1 (1959): 16–17.

since no one will become his friend or love him unless he is useful to them. Finally, after using a sophistic argument (equating “thoughtless” with “not thinking”) to absolve Lysis from any charge of “thinking big,” Socrates glances over at Hippothales (the lover of Lysis) and finds him in agony and disturbed at what has been said.

Does Socrates really believe his own argument—that if Lysis becomes prudent, everyone in the world will gladly invite him to become their ruler? Does he believe in a necessary alignment between practical wisdom and power? In the *Republic*, Socrates compares life in a political community to life aboard a ship, where the ignorant and quarreling sailors often seize the helm, while the true pilot, the knower of the art, is mocked as a stargazer (488a1–489c10). Socrates admits there that wisdom or prudence is neither a sufficient nor even a necessary condition of actually ruling.<sup>23</sup> But here, in the conversation with Lysis, Socrates blithely (or slyly) presupposes the interchangeability of public belief in Lysis’s prudence and the actual existence of that prudence, the interchangeability (in this case, at least) of seeming and being. The possibility is buried that even prudence, should Lysis acquire it, may not be recognized for what it is by those who would otherwise be willing to allow him to rule. But the argument about prudence and rule, whatever its dubiousness, does have the merit of confirming for Socrates, and teaching us, something important about Lysis’s psychology. Not only does Lysis have a strong desire to rule, which makes him receptive to a dubious argument promising the fulfillment or satisfaction of that desire, but he also has a strong faith in an alignment between wisdom and justice, or, more precisely, between becoming wise and becoming able to benefit others on a grand scale.<sup>24</sup>

But what precisely is the aim of Lysis’s rule? Upon becoming a ruler, whom does he aim to benefit? If we keep this question in mind, a tension comes to light between the capstone and its addendum:

“This, then,” I [Socrates] said, “is how it stands, my dear Lysis. With regard to the things in which we become prudent, everyone—Greeks as well as barbarians, and both men and women—will entrust them to us; we will do in regard to these matters whatever we wish, and no one will voluntarily obstruct us. Rather, we ourselves shall be free

<sup>23</sup> Cf. James Rhodes, “Platonic *Philia* and Political Order,” in Avramenko and von Heyking, eds., *Friendship and Politics*, 31 and 50n12. See also *Rep.* 519b7–520a9 and *Alc. I* 119b1–c1.

<sup>24</sup> Scholarship on the *Lysis* tends either to neglect the question of Lysis’s psychology entirely, or to present him as simply selfish or utilitarian (see, e.g., Rhodes, “Platonic *Philia*,” 23, 27, 42). I argue that Lysis is both complex and relatable, and that an understanding of his psychology can shed light on our own.

in regard to them and rulers over others, and these things will be ours, for we shall profit from them. But with regard to those things in which we don't acquire good sense, no one will entrust us with permission to do what is in our opinion best concerning them; but everyone will obstruct us as much as is in his power—not merely aliens, but even our father and mother and whatever may be more closely akin to us than they are. And we ourselves shall be subject to others in regard to those things, and they will be alien to us, for we shall derive no profit from them. Do you grant that this is how it is?"

"I do grant it."

"Then will we become friends to anyone and will anyone love us in regard to those matters in which we're of no benefit?"

"Surely not," he said.

"Now, therefore, not even your father loves you, nor does anyone else love anyone else insofar as he is useless."

"It doesn't seem so," he said.

"Then if you become wise, my boy, all will be your friends and all akin to you—for you will be useful and good. But if you don't, no one else will be your friend, and neither will your father, nor your mother, nor your own kinsmen."

In the capstone, the aim of Lysis's rule seems to be benefiting himself: the emphasis is on his power to do what he wishes, his freedom from obstruction or subjection, and his profit for himself. But in the addendum (starting at "Then will we become friends"), the emphasis is on Lysis's benefiting of the ruled, his usefulness to them. Which aim is primary? Presumably there would be a substantial alignment or harmony between the two aims. Even to cause his own good, Lysis would need to avoid selfishness or self-absorption and often focus on causing the good of others. But in the case of a real tension between the two goals, will Lysis's deeper priority, in Socrates's portrait of him as a future ruler, be the benefiting of himself or the benefiting of the ruled?

An attempt to resolve this question for Lysis, in either direction, will lead us into new difficulties. For if we hypothesize that Lysis will be fundamentally self-interested, and will benefit the ruled only as a means to, as a byproduct of, or in addition to his self-benefiting, we make the addendum seem consistent with the capstone, but at the expense of rendering less explicable the eagerness of others to be ruled by Lysis. Not only in the capstone and the addendum, but throughout the second section of the dialogue, others were glad to welcome Lysis's rule. There was no indication that the ruled would misunderstand his prudence or its goal. Rather, it seemed to be the same prudence, in Lysis, that justified his rule in their eyes and in his. But why would they be eager to be ruled by, why submit without reservation to the rule

of, someone who was fundamentally self-interested, and who would benefit himself rather than them in case of a conflict of interest? The eagerness of others to be ruled by Lysis, on the grounds of his being prudent, seems to imply that his prudence will be directed toward their good. Furthermore, the hypothesis that Lysis will rule in a fundamentally self-interested spirit is incompatible with the conclusion of the addendum, where Socrates guarantees that if Lysis becomes wise, all will be his friends, on account of his being useful and good. In the context, becoming wise seems to mean becoming prudent or acquiring good sense, and acquiring others as friends seems to mean being loved by them.<sup>25</sup> But why assume that being useful to and being loved by the ruled—indeed, being loved by “all” of the ruled, and apparently also being useful to all—would be a necessary consequence or entailment of Lysis’s pursuit of profit for himself? Acquiring friends or being lovable would in many cases be in his interest; but what guarantee of Lysis’s usefulness and universal lovability could exist, if he were fundamentally a seeker of his own profit? If, on the other hand, we hypothesize that Lysis’s more fundamental priority will be to benefit the ruled, we will make sense of their willingness to be ruled by him, and of Socrates’s guarantee that he will be useful in such a way as to be loved by all, but we will make it more difficult to understand Lysis’s own eagerness to rule. That eagerness seemed predicated on the promise of profit held out to him in the capstone; is that promise then qualified or overridden by the addendum’s emphasis on his usefulness to others? Do the burdens accepted by a ruler who aims to be useful to the ruled ever outweigh the benefits that he enjoys in and from ruling? There seem to be two possible goals of Lysis’s rule, and yet their relationship and relative priority are never clarified.

Apart from any resolution we might try to impose, there is the question of why Lysis fails to ask for any clarification with regard to his aims in ruling. He will prove bold enough, later in the dialogue, to object to arguments that seem wrong to him (213d2–3) and to remain silent when he has doubts (222a4 and perhaps also 216a2–4; compare 211a2–b5). Why is it that Lysis, when presented with this portrait of his future, fails to ask for clarification of the ambiguity with regard to his aims as a ruler, or even, as seems likely, fails to notice that ambiguity in the first place?

Perhaps the third section of the dialogue can shed light on this question. Socrates himself suggests a connection between the second section and the

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<sup>25</sup> Alternatively, if Socrates intends to imply a distinction between prudence and wisdom (cf. *Apology* 22a6 and context), the gap between the two possible goals of Lysis’s rule would seem to widen.

third, during the transition between them. For when Lysis, whispering to Socrates, commands him to speak to Menexenus about something else in order to refute and chasten him, Socrates—asked by Ctesippus to end this secrecy and report their whispered conversation to the group—covers for Lysis by reporting, “this one here [Lysis] doesn’t understand something about what I’ve been saying, but he says that he supposes Menexenus knows, and he bids me to ask him” (211d2–4). Socrates’s report, though not entirely true,<sup>26</sup> prompts us to reflect on the connection between the prior conversation and the upcoming one, and to wonder whether the latter might truly be, in some sense, a continuation of the former.

The question at issue in the dialogue’s third section is that of how one person becomes a friend of another. Although Socrates presents himself as baffled by this question, he had implicitly claimed, at the end of the second section, to know how Lysis could come to possess many friends (210d1–3). But perhaps there was more of a mystery in that process than Socrates there admitted. And isn’t it a mystery? Two people begin as strangers, then become acquaintances, their interaction becomes a relationship, they become friends, even good friends—what changes? How do two people become friends?

Four accounts are discussed by Socrates and Menexenus: that one becomes a friend by either loving or being loved, by both loving and being loved, by being loved, or by loving. Although the question, “What is a friend?” is not explicitly at issue in this section, each of the four accounts implies a different definition of the friend: a friend is either a lover or a loved one, a friend is a loved lover, a friend is a loved one, or a friend is a lover. But each of the four accounts, though briefly endorsed in its turn, is dismissed when Menexenus is brought to consider certain difficulties. By the end of the discussion he is left baffled, exclaiming: “By Zeus, I can’t find my way at all!” Why is Menexenus amenable to dismissing each of the four accounts? And how might his amenability, in each case, teach us something about the psychology of friendship?

We can start with the third account, which is immediately plausible: a person becomes a friend by being loved. Indeed, when asked to define a friend, we may well answer: “someone you care about.” The problem, however, as Socrates leads Menexenus to see, is that a loved one might not love in return, or might even hate those who love him. In that case, a friend (loved one) could be a friend of an enemy (hated one), and an enemy (hated one)

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. David Bolotin, *Plato's Dialogue on Friendship* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1979), 107.

could be an enemy of a friend (loved one). And it seems wrong to say that a person could be hated by his friends.

If a friend must love, perhaps the fourth account is correct: one becomes a friend by loving. This account, too, is immediately plausible. When asked to define a friend, we may well answer: “someone who cares about you.” The problem, though, as Socrates leads Menexenus to see, is that given the possibility of nonreciprocal loving, a friend (lover) could be a friend of an enemy (hater) and an enemy (hater) could be an enemy of a friend (lover). Since friendship ought to be reciprocal, it seems strange to say that a person could hate her friends; it seems more plausible to say, instead, that anyone who is a friend must also have a friend and be in a relation of friendship.

The second account, according to which one becomes a friend by both loving and being loved, seems to resolve all these difficulties. Reciprocity is assured, since only the combination of loving and being loved makes one a friend. And if a friend is a loved lover, it is likely that not only having but also being a friend will be good (cf. 207d5–e1). Why, then, is Menexenus amenable to dismissing even this account?

To cast doubt on the second account, Socrates relies on examples—six of his own, and either one or (stretching the Greek) four provided by the poet and lawgiver Solon—of objects of love that are dear or friends (*philoï*) without loving in return. Socrates’s examples (horses, quail, dogs, wine, gymnastics, and wisdom) could be rejected by Menexenus as irrelevant to the subject of friendship between human beings.<sup>27</sup> But according to Solon, “prosperous is he who has children as friends, together with single-hoofed horses, dogs for the hunt, and a guest-friend in a foreign land.” The example of children, if not also the example of guest-friends, seems to introduce the possibility of selfless or purely giving love. As Socrates will say in a moment, “newly born children—some of whom don’t yet love, while others even hate, whenever they’re chastised by their mother or by their father—despite even their hating, are nevertheless at that time, most of all, dearest to their parents” (212e7–213a3).<sup>28</sup> And the poet’s reminder seems to play some role in making Menexenus amenable to dismissing the second account. Perhaps, then, the second account’s assurance of reciprocity strikes Menexenus as an assurance of conditionality. For if one becomes a friend only by both being loved and

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Rhodes, “Platonic *Philia*,” 36.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Hoerber, “Plato’s ‘Lysis,’” 19: “Another area of *philia*, by way of extreme contrast [to *erōs*, as Hoerber understands it], is the affection of parents for children, which is the direct opposite of selfish, one-sided, passionate emotion and physical attraction.”

loving, one would presumably stop being a friend either by not being loved or by not loving. To put this another way, if a friend is by definition a loved lover, a lover would stop being a friend the moment she was no longer loved in return, and a loved one would stop being a friend the moment she no longer loved. But a true friend continues to love or be loved, to hold dear or be held dear, even in the absence of reciprocity; a true friend remains a friend no matter what.

To understand better Menexenus's dissatisfaction with the second account, we need to look more closely at the first account, according to which a person becomes a friend either by loving or by being loved. Menexenus seems to prefer this account to the others: it is his first choice, and his initial endorsement of it is somewhat more enthusiastic than are his initial endorsements of the other accounts (compare 212b2–5 with 212c8–d4, 213a5–6, and 213b6). Perhaps it would be better, however, to call it not an “account” but a “position.” For it includes an equivocal word, “friend,” which it applies either to lovers or to loved ones, without making clear what they have in common. This would be akin to using the same word for that which carries and that which is carried, for the one who teaches and the one who is taught, or for that which leads and that which is led (*Euthyphro* 10a5–12). Won't Menexenus, using the same word for lovers and for loved ones, be likely to blur the difference between the two?

Indications of such a blurring, apart from the equivocal usage itself, are evident in the context. Socrates asks Menexenus, “When someone loves someone, which one becomes a friend of the other, the one who loves of the loved, or the loved one of the lover? Or is there no difference?” And Menexenus responds, “There seems to be no difference, in my opinion.” After a moment's hesitation (“How do you mean?”), Socrates interprets Menexenus's response to mean that it makes no difference whether the word “friend” is applied to the lover or to the loved one. But Menexenus's words might also be interpreted, more literally and more strangely, to mean that there is no difference between the two people or the two processes at issue. Although the refutation of Menexenus's initial position might seem to be unfinished, if compared with the refutations of the three accounts that follow, all that is required to cast doubt on the initial position is to distinguish sharply between lover (as potentially unloved) and loved one (as potentially unloving). Yet it is necessary to remind Menexenus repeatedly, throughout this section, of the possibility of nonreciprocal love (212b5–6, 213a6–b5, 213b7–c5). That necessity is most explicable, it seems to me, if Menexenus is blurring the difference

between lover and loved one, and between loving and being loved, such that even nonreciprocal love seems somehow reciprocal. This blurring or pair of blurrings, then, is likely reflected in (and reinforced by) his initial position's equivocal usage of the word "friend."<sup>29</sup>

But perhaps the equivocal usage of "friend" is not a defect but rather a virtue of Menexenus's initial position; it may capture something true. In a friendship, each friend, loving the other, transcends the focus on self and self-interest. When someone is concerned for her friend rather than for herself, the petty calculation of costs and benefits, of deficits and surpluses on the balance sheet of favors done and received, is left behind. Since, as Aristotle puts it, "the friend is another self" (*Nic. Eth.* 1166a31–32), it makes "no difference," as Menexenus says, which friend loves more or benefits more in a given moment of the friendship. The two friends somehow merge or become one.<sup>30</sup> Perhaps, then, Menexenus is dissatisfied with the three accounts that follow his initial position because each distinguishes too sharply between lover and loved one, or, even in a reciprocal relationship, between one friend insofar as he loves and the other insofar as he is loved. Any account that fails to capture the blending of two friends' identities or selves will, according to this view, fail to do justice to friendship as we experience it. To use an equivocal word, then, or to blur the difference between lover and loved one, is simply to do justice to the blending of identities or selves that occurs in any true friendship.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> It might seem that although Menexenus is blurring the lover (understood as a person who happens to love) with the loved one (understood as a person who happens to be loved), he is not blurring loving with being loved. Yet his equivocal usage of "friend" seems to imply that lover as such is blurred with loved one as such.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Allen, *Talking to Strangers*, 133–34, and Bolotin, *Plato's Dialogue on Friendship*, 116–17, 134, 176, 183–84.

<sup>31</sup> The phenomenon of "self-other merging" has been studied extensively by contemporary psychologists, who have developed an Inclusion of the Other in the Self (IOS) scale, illustrated by a series of seven pairs of increasingly overlapping circles labeled "self" and "other" (A. Aron, E. N. Aron, and D. Smollan, "Inclusion of Other in the Self Scale and the Structure of Interpersonal Closeness," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 63 no. 4 [1992]: 597–98). In one experiment, Mashek, Aron, and Boncimino tested whether people have greater difficulty in distinguishing their own traits from those of close others than they do in distinguishing their own traits from those of non-close others. The results supported the hypothesis that "in a close relationship we 'include the other in the self' in the sense that, to some extent, we treat the other's resources, perspectives, and identities as our own" or were "consistent with the notion that, in a close relationship, other is 'included in the self' in the sense that cognitive representations of self and close others overlap" (Debra J. Mashek, Arthur Aron, and Maria Boncimino, "Confusions of Self with Close Others," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 29, no. 3 [March 2003]: 383, 386–87). See also Chu Zhou et al., "Direct Gaze Blurs Self-Other Boundaries," *Journal of General Psychology* 145, no. 3 (2018): 280–81, 291–92; Mashek, Aron, and Boncimino, "Confusions of Self," 484–92; Maria-Paola Paladino et al., "Synchronous Multisensory Stimulation Blurs Self-Other Boundaries," *Psychological Science* 21, no. 9 (Sept. 2010): 1202–3, 1205–6; and the manuscript readings at *Philebus* 47b3 and *Lysis* 220b1.

The blending of lover and loved one, of loving and being loved, is acknowledged not only by Menexenus's initial position but also by our ordinary speech about friendship and love. Being a friend (to or of someone) means loving or taking care of another. But being a friend (of someone) can also mean being loved or taken care of by another. And having a friend means having someone who loves or takes care of you, having someone in your corner. But it also means having someone whom you love or take care of, having someone for whom you are responsible. If loving and being loved are in some way interchangeable, perhaps genuine love is necessarily reciprocal. Is love (or loving, or being in love) necessarily reciprocal or not? Although we sometimes consider love to prove itself most thoroughly when it is *not* reciprocated, or at least when any reasonable hope for reciprocation ought to have died, it would be strange to hear someone claim that an instance of true love, at least, was not reciprocal.

Later in the dialogue, Socrates will get the boys to agree that genuine lovers are always loved in return (222a6–b1). Although Menexenus's agreement to this claim might at first glance seem strange (compare 212b6–c3), his receptivity to it was in a way foreshadowed by his initial position: if lover and loved one are in some way interchangeable, perhaps anyone who is a lover (friend) must be a loved one (friend), anyone who has a loved one (friend) must have a lover (friend), anyone who has a lover (friend) must have a loved one (friend), and anyone who is a loved one (friend) must be a lover (friend). Menexenus's receptivity to the later claim, then, seems most explicable if he is blending lover and loved one, loving and being loved.<sup>32</sup>

Now, with this view of Menexenus's understanding in mind, we can turn back to the second section, and to the mystery of Lysis's indifference to the ambiguity in Socrates's speech about his future. For it seems to me that Lysis's indifference is best understood in conjunction with a blending of selves that is closely akin to what we find implicit in Menexenus's initial position about how one becomes a friend. Upon hearing Socrates's speech about his future as a ruler, Lysis had seemed indifferent to the ambiguity about whether his more fundamental priority would be profiting himself or being useful to the ruled. But if we overlay this hypothesis about Menexenus's understanding onto Lysis, we begin to see how the mystery might be unraveled: as the friend, represented by Menexenus, blends the selves of friend and friend, attributing something of loving to the loved one and something of being-loved to the

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<sup>32</sup> Consider also 204b8–c2 with *Symposium* 204c1–6.

lover, so too the ruler, represented by Lysis, likely blends ruler and ruled, in which case it would make “no difference,” as Menexenus says, whether he was useful to them or profited himself. After all, the distinction that can be drawn between the capstone and the addendum could be only as sharp as the distinction between the identity of the ruler and that of the ruled; the two distinctions would soften and fade in tandem. The good ruler, in other words, like the good friend, comes to understand that the calculation of his own gains and losses in isolation from the gains and losses of others is something of a distortion, since his own good has come to be mixed or entwined with theirs; what he seeks is the common good. His own good having merged with that of others, he is no longer an atom but part of a larger whole, a community.<sup>33</sup>

In three ways, this type of reflection about the parallel between the understanding of Menexenus and that of Lysis is invited by Plato and his Socrates. First, as we have seen, in transitioning from the discussion with Lysis to the discussion with Menexenus, Socrates implies that the latter may be in some sense a continuation of the former (211d2–6). Second, in the addendum to his speech about rule, Socrates mentions friends, characterizing Lysis’s ascent to rule as a movement toward a condition of universal friendship (210d1–3). And third, in mentioning friends in the addendum, Socrates may model the very conflation that he will soon disallow in the discussion with Menexenus, first associating being a friend with being loved and then associating being a friend with loving (210c5–6 and 210c7–d4). In these ways, it seems to me, Plato and his Socrates indicate a connection between the second and third sections of the dialogue, and thereby a parallel between the psychology of the ruler and the psychology of the friend.

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<sup>33</sup> Of course, this blending of identities would likely be less complete in the case of the ruler with the ruled than in the case of the friend with the friend. And in either case, it would occur to different degrees at different times and would remain always partial; “complete” identification would undermine the possibility of benefiting the other. Cf. Bolotin, *Plato’s Dialogue on Friendship*, 183–84; James Haden, “Friendship in Plato’s ‘Lysis,’” 353; and Paul Tillich on the psychology of collectivism: “Participation [in the collective, by its members] is partial identity, partial nonidentity” (Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, 3rd ed. [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004], 92). R. K. Bentley (“Civic Friendship and Thin Citizenship,” *Res Publica* 19, no. 1 [2013]: 6–7, 13–14) argues that Aristotle’s conception of the friend as another self would be dangerous if applied to political friendship in a liberal democracy, since it would entail a refusal to tolerate vice in one’s fellow citizens: “That would be equivalent to tolerating it in oneself” (7). But if self-other merging can occur to different degrees (see above, note 31), the application of some version of this Aristotelian conception of friendship might in fact be compatible with liberalism.

### THREE CONDITIONS OF FRIENDSHIP

The remainder of the dialogue appears to consist in a series of provisional answers to the question of who are friends or what is the friend (similar, opposites, the lover of the good, the good, the kindred), each of which is refuted in its turn. Is the dialogue then simply negative, aporetic, able to teach us only what friendship is not? I will suggest that if we read carefully as these refutations rush past, we catch glimpses of something unrefuted and valid, glimpses of a positive teaching about the conditions of friendship.

Having led Menexenus to dismiss each of the three accounts of how one becomes a friend, Socrates turns to *Lysis*, and to the easier path of investigating who are friends. According to both the poets and the wisest ones, “similar” are friends, by divine will or necessity. An immediate objection—surely wicked similars, who do injustice, are not friends—leads to a modification or interpretation of the position: “similar are friends” turns out to mean “good people are friends,” since the wicked, being unsteady and at variance with themselves, are not even similar to each other. Socrates, however, returning to the unmodified or broader version of the position, refutes it: because similars, lacking as such the power to provide any benefit or harm for each other that they couldn't provide for themselves, would not be useful to each other, they would not be treasured or be friends. Next, the modified version of the position is refuted: if goodness means self-sufficiency, good people would not need, treasure, or love each other (or would not make much of each other), and therefore would not be friends. The discussion of similarity is thus dropped, Socrates having concluded (at 215a3–4; compare 219b6–8 and 222e3–7) that similars are not friends.

The refutations in this section of the dialogue are quite weak. First, why couldn't the wicked be friends? It seems possible that the wicked might direct their injustice toward outsiders while refraining from doing injustice to each other.<sup>34</sup> Second, why are the wicked not similar to each other, rather than being similar to each other precisely in their self-variance or lack of self-similarity? And third, why is goodness equated with self-sufficiency? Other understandings of goodness or virtue seem equally or more plausible—for instance, that virtue means not self-sufficiency but rather justice (*Rep.* 335c4–5; *Meno* 73d9–10).<sup>35</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Bolotin, *Plato's Dialogue on Friendship*, 128–29; *Rep.* 351c7–d1.

<sup>35</sup> By equating goodness with self-sufficiency, Socrates manages to raise in some form the question of whether it is always good for the good to be good to the good. Consider Annas on the “optimistic” view that “if I am drawn to X because of his virtue I will necessarily find him useful and pleasant”

Setting aside these weaknesses, there is the more general ambiguity as to what exactly is being argued and refuted in this section. The strongest argument presented here is that while similars could be useless to each other, those who are useless would not be treasured or friends. But the only conclusion to be drawn from this argument is that some similars might not be friends. Having established this, Socrates leaps wildly to the extreme claim that no similars are friends. The wildness of his leap ought to prompt us to wonder about the possibility of some middle ground. Even if not all similars are friends, it remains possible that some similars are friends, or even that all friends are similars.<sup>36</sup> The very weakness of the argument seems to imply, by omission, that similarity is a necessary though not sufficient condition of friendship.

The thesis that similarity is a necessary condition of friendship seems invited by the *Lysis* in several ways. First, there is the very inclusion of the discussion of similarity in the dialogue, which seems to imply some close or essential connection between similarity and friendship. Moreover, at the end of the dialogue, in the discussion of kinship, Socrates will return to the topic of similarity, as if some stone had been left unturned here.<sup>37</sup> After all, the question set forth at the outset of the discussion of similarity was not a question about “who necessarily become friends” but rather about “friends, who they happen to be” (214a2–3). As an answer to that question, “similars” remains plausible, even in the wake of Socrates’s refutations.

Common sense or ordinary experience, too, supports the thesis that similarity is a necessary condition for friendship. All around us, we see similars becoming friends: the lover of poetry becomes friends with the lover of poetry, the lover of soccer becomes friends with the lover of soccer, the lover of both becomes friends with the lover of either or (best of all) both. Even apart from the special utility made possible by similarity—each lover of poetry can teach the other what the other does not know—there is a certain delight in the presence of similars, perhaps in part because our self-love, “extending” itself, leads us to delight in what reminds us of ourselves, but also in part because we experience an intensification of our desires and their satisfactions

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(Annas, “Plato and Aristotle on Friendship,” 548); compare Xenophon, *Oeconomicus* 3.7 and *Memorabilia* 2.6.35–37.

<sup>36</sup> See Bolotin, *Plato’s Dialogue on Friendship*, 142.

<sup>37</sup> On the relation between the argument about the kindred and the arguments that precede it, consider also Bolotin, *Plato’s Dialogue on Friendship*, 188, and Lorraine Pangle, *Aristotle and the Philosophy of Friendship* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 31–36.

in the presence of those whose similar desires and satisfactions we perceive, especially when we engage in activities together with them. Moreover, in the presence of similars, we may feel less of a pressure or obligation to change ourselves, to assume a pose or fight our natural inclinations in order to please or put others at ease: in the presence of similars, who encourage us to do what we love, we feel most free to be ourselves.

There are problems, however, with friendship between similars. The pleasant affirmation that similars offer each other can encourage complacency. Similars may strengthen each other's bad habits, biases, and false opinions. Just as opposites may come to believe in an obligation to remain opposites, so as to maintain their complementarity, similars may come to believe in an obligation to remain similars, or even to become as similar as possible, so as to maintain or increase mutual affirmation and delight. Rivalry, too, is especially common among similars, who may strive and compete for the same type of virtue. But if the rivalry is arranged advantageously (Xenophon, *Mem.* 2.6.20–23), the similarity in desiring virtue, especially on the part of two who differ in their specific defects and capacities for improvement, can be a spur to greater nobility for both (cf. *Nic. Eth.* 1162b5–13).<sup>38</sup>

After the explicit conclusion that neither similars as such nor good people would be friends, Socrates turns to the opposite position. According to a clever speaker whom Socrates once heard, opposites are friends, not only among human beings but also among all things in the cosmos. But this position proves vulnerable to a dual refutation: although hatred and friendship are opposites, surely the enemy would not be a friend to the friend, nor the friend a friend to the enemy; nor would the just and the unjust, the moderate and the undisciplined, or the good and the bad be friends, despite being opposites. On these grounds, Socrates concludes that opposites are not friends (216b8–9, 218b3–6; compare 222e3–7).

The refutation of the position that opposites are friends relies on the reasonable assumptions of Menexenus that friendship must be reciprocal and that the selection of a friend must be limited if not guided by moral considerations. Yet here, again, there is an ambiguity as to what is being argued and refuted. Socrates begins from an extreme position (all opposites are friends), disproves it by means of counterexamples (some opposites are not friends), and leaps immediately to the other extreme (opposites are not friends). But

<sup>38</sup> See Versenyi, "Plato's 'Lysis,'" 191–92 on the copresence of common interests with different types of "knowledge, experience, and individual talents."

even if not all opposites are friends, it remains possible that some opposites are friends, or even that all friends are opposites.<sup>39</sup> Again, the very weakness of the argument seems to imply that opposition, while not being sufficient for friendship, may be compatible with or even necessary for it.

However, if we look more closely at the clever speaker's speech, we see that it may be not opposition as such but rather usefulness that is necessary for friendship. For the clever speaker never said that the strong person is a friend of the weak person, or that the sick person is a friend of the healthy person, but rather that the weak person is a friend of the strong person ("for the sake of help as an ally"), and that the sick person is a friend of the doctor; the opposition, then, is incidental.<sup>40</sup> Later in the dialogue, Socrates will confirm in passing that in his view being useful is a necessary condition of being a friend: as he says, "it is dissonant/faulty [or out of tune: *plēmmeles*] to agree that what is useless is a friend" (222b8–c1; compare 215a1–4).<sup>41</sup>

The thesis that being useful is a condition of being a friend is somehow both plausible and objectionable. It would be strange if a friend were merely delightful, fun to be around, without also being good for us in some deeper and more serious way, for instance by making us better. Friends are not only pleasant but also treasured, made much of, longed for when absent (215a3, 215b3–c2). Yet we expect that one who has a friend will be loyal: a true friend is irreplaceable, and friendship is something lasting and stable. Is it always the same people, whom we love the most and who are best for us? Is it always the same people, who are best for us and for whom we are best? Socrates's position would not require him to deny that a person could continue to love someone who was in no way useful to her. But presumably he would deny, in such cases, that the right term for such a loved one was "friend."

The dialogue's most complicated and difficult section, to which we now turn, can help us begin to recognize a third condition of friendship, but only if we proceed slowly. For here, the dialogue reveals—largely through its dramatic subtleties—that being noble is a condition of being a friend. First, dropping or modifying the thesis about opposition, Socrates suggests that

<sup>39</sup> See Bolotin, *Plato's Dialogue on Friendship*, 142.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 137–38.

<sup>41</sup> Here we see one way in which Socrates would disagree with Carl Schmitt. It seems that in Socrates's view, someone who seeks to understand what a friend is must consider relevant at least some of the distinctions ("moral, aesthetic, economic, or other distinctions") that Schmitt, who characterizes friendship and enmity as merely "the utmost degree of intensity of a union or separation," wants to bracket (*Concept of the Political*, 26–27).

whatever is neither good nor bad is a friend of the good because of the presence of an evil. But after the triumphant conclusion that he and the boys have finally discovered what is and what is not a friend, Socrates is overcome with the strange suspicion that their apparent discovery, their vision of wealth, has been merely a dream dependent on certain speeches whose falsity is akin to that of boastful human beings. For it remains unclear whether that for the sake of which a friend is a friend is itself a friend or not. The medical art, for example, is loved not only by a friend but also for the sake of a friend, namely, health; yet since this friend, too, would be loved (be a friend) for the sake of a further friend, we are threatened with an infinite regress of means, avoidable only if we posit the existence of a first friend or end beside which all the others are mere phantoms. After discussing a second example (that of a father who loves and hopes to save his poisoned son), Socrates turns to a discussion of the definition of the friend as the good, loved because of the bad. But Menexenus proves amenable to dismissing the entire view of friendship posited in this section, when presented with the following argument: since, as he agrees, some desires are useful or non-harmful rather than bad, desires could in fact endure in the absence of all bad things; therefore lovers in some form would endure, and therefore also loved ones or friends; and since a thing could not endure if its cause ceased to be, this endurance of friends in the absence of bad things means that the bad cannot be a cause of friendly love.

The mystery or puzzle of this section is that of the reason for Menexenus's willingness to dismiss the two definitions of the friend suggested by Socrates. Not long after Socrates turns from the explicit discussion of the first definition (the friend as the lover of the good) toward the discussion of the second (the friend as the good), both definitions are quickly dismissed on the grounds of a weak argument conflating "non-harmful" with "non-bad."<sup>42</sup> Why does

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<sup>42</sup> Even if some desires are not harmful (bad-causing), it remains possible that all desires are in some way bad (for example, painful) or are essentially connected with bads. Thus, even if we assume that any given desire would cause friendly love, the existence of non-harmful desires would not cast doubt on the view that the bad is a cause of friendship or love (cf. Versenyi, "Plato's 'Lysis,'" 196). Moreover, Socrates never proves that the desires that are characteristic of friendship or friendly love are among the non-bad desires (if they exist); consider the odd inclusion of erotic or passionate love at 221b7–8. If Socrates is not engaged in the same kind of eristic argumentation that he elsewhere rejects (*Euthydemus* 278b–d; *Rep.* 454a–b; *Gorgias* 515b), but is rather trying to learn from the conversation (consider *Lysis* 212a6–7 and 223b7–8), he may be using a sophistic argument to test the boys' responses and to usher out an account with which they are already dissatisfied (compare *Greater Hippias* 303b1–d1 as well as 303e11–304a3). In characterizing Socrates's argument as sophistic, I disagree with Annas, who takes the argument to be serious and in fact sufficient to establish the possibility of at least one "object of love which is loved for its own sake and not by reason of any deficiency in the agent" (Annas, "Plato and Aristotle on Friendship," 538). Consider also Pangle, *Aristotle and the Philosophy of Friendship*, 29, 34.

Menexenus, supposedly exceedingly contentious (211b8–9), acquiesce so readily to the dismissal of the two definitions of the friend, one of which he had enthusiastically endorsed only moments before? Has something shifted, in the argument or in its presentation, to dampen his enthusiasm?

A clue as to what may have shifted emerges if we compare the beginning of this section to its latter half. At the beginning of the section, Socrates mentions the noble several times. Having said that he suspects that what is beautiful/noble is a friend, he characterizes the good loved by the lover (friend) as noble, then as noble and good. And shortly thereafter, he asks, “Is what is now being said guiding us in a noble way?” But in the latter half of the section, the noble is never mentioned. Indeed, the bulk of this section of the dialogue might be divided simply into the more noble subsection (216c1–218c5) and the less noble subsection (218c5–220e6). If we look more closely at the difference between the two subsections, we may begin to understand a likely reason for (and begin to sympathize with) the waning of Menexenus’s enthusiasm.

In the more noble subsection, after prefacing the discussion with the agreement that the good is noble, Socrates provides the example of the sick body: while itself neither good nor bad, the sick body loves (is a friend of) the doctor or the medical art because of the presence of an evil, namely, disease. By analogy, the friend (lover) would love the good because of the presence of an evil, without being himself bad. Yet it seems strange to call a sick body “neither good nor bad,” or to say that it suffers merely from “the presence of an evil” without being itself to some extent bad.<sup>43</sup> To explain further what he means by “the presence of an evil,” Socrates provides another example: even if Lysis’s blond hair were coated with white lead, it would not be white, though whiteness would be present to it. Yet the example of color, too, is strange. For it is difficult to say what could be meant by color except for visible or apparent color. Isn’t hair coated with white lead (apparently, and thus in some sense truly) white? By analogy, wouldn’t the lover to whom badness is present be in some sense or to some extent truly bad?

To support his case further, Socrates provides the example of lovers of wisdom, who are not bad despite having an evil, namely, ignorance. “For we wouldn’t say that anyone bad and stupid loves wisdom” (218a5–6). But Socrates cheats in the argument. The inclusion of “and stupid” alerts us—if we ask ourselves why this inclusion is necessary—to the possibility that the

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<sup>43</sup> Cf. *Rep.* 341e2–9 as well as Rhodes, “Platonic *Philia*,” 39.

lovers of wisdom might be to a great extent truly bad, insofar as they are ignorant. We begin to realize that by using phrases such as “neither good nor bad” and “the presence of an evil,” Socrates is veiling or downplaying the badness of the lover. The phrase “neither good nor bad,” especially, tends to blur the difference between “neither wholly good nor wholly bad” and “neither at all good nor at all bad,” the former of which, as applied to the lover, is accurate and the latter inaccurate. By veiling or downplaying the badness of the lover, Socrates veils or downplays the extent to which the lover’s love might be motivated by badness, need, or self-interest, thus leaving room for a love motivated by goodness, excellence, or nobility.

At the beginning of the less noble subsection, however, Socrates is accosted by a “most strange suspicion” that the things he and the boys have agreed to are not true. To begin to explain the grounds for his strange suspicion, Socrates asks a series of three questions, the third of which is quite vague. First he asks, “Is he who would be a friend a friend to someone/something, or is he not?” Second, “Now is it for the sake of nothing/no one, and because of nothing, or else for the sake of something/someone, and because of something?” And third: “Now that thing [*pragma*], for the sake of which the one who is a friend is a friend to his friend, is it a friend, or is it neither a friend nor an enemy?” The vague question, that is, the third question, might be thought to rule out what the first two allowed for, namely, the love of other human beings for their own sake. To clarify the meaning of the vague question, Socrates revisits the example of the sick body’s love of the medical art. But this time, he mentions the lover’s “for-the-sake-of” (that for the sake of which the lover loves: in this case, health) and distinguishes it from what might be called the lover’s more proximal loves (the doctor and the medical art), a procedure that makes possible the conclusion that *only* the for-the-sake-of is truly a friend. A distinction thus comes to sight between the human being whom the lover loves (the doctor) and that for the sake of which the lover loves (health, or some further end).<sup>44</sup> In fact, the doctor, not being the lover’s for-the-sake-of, is by Socrates’s argument not even truly a friend.

To clarify the meaning of the vague question in a second way (see *houtōsi* at 219d5, with *hōde* at 218e2), Socrates describes a father who, for the sake of saving his poisoned son, makes much of wine, and therefore also the vessel in which the wine is contained. This example, which sends us along the chain of means but away from the end, appears superfluous, since it seems to

<sup>44</sup> Cf. 219c1–d5.

lead to the same conclusion made possible by the discussion of the medical art: the real friend is not a mere means but rather the end (220a6–b3; compare 219c5–d5). But the example has the advantage of raising the question of whether even close loved ones are loved as ends. Is the son loved by the father as an end? This question is difficult to answer, especially because of an ambiguity in the Greek: “Whenever someone makes much of something—as sometimes a father values his son more highly than all his other possessions—would such a one also make much of something else because of / for the sake of [*heneka*] considering his son worth everything?” If *heneka* means “because of,” the father might indeed love his son as an end. But if *heneka* means “for the sake of,” the father’s end would seem to be something other than the son’s good.<sup>45</sup> And as David Bolotin points out, “In this dialogue... Socrates has made a clear and explicit distinction between *tou heneka*—‘for the sake of something (good)’—and *dia ti*—‘because of something (bad).’”<sup>46</sup> Our suspicion that the less noble meaning is the one intended by Socrates grows as he leads Menexenus to deny again the plurality of ends: all loved things are loved for the sake of one thing, the true friend, which seems to be the good. The father, then, according to Socrates’s implicit characterization of him, does not have multiple ends, each the endpoint of a different branch or chain of apparent means, but rather, if he ever loves anything for the sake of his own good, loves everything only for its sake.<sup>47</sup>

Here, in the wake of the example of the father and the son, Socrates utters a vague denial—“what is really a friend is not a friend for the sake of some friend”—and turns to a discussion of the definition of the friend as the good. The vague denial seems like an answer to the vague question (asked at 218d9–10). But the vague question had concerned whether the *lover* (friend) is a friend (loves) for the sake of a friend, whereas the vague denial seems to be a denial that the truly *loved thing* (friend) is a friend (is loved) only for the sake of some (further) friend. In fact, the argument seems to have justified only an affirmative answer to the question of whether the friend (lover) is a friend (loves) for the sake of the true friend, namely, the good. Why, then, does Socrates phrase the vague denial as if it were an answer to the vague question?

Perhaps the vague denial is, after all, in some way an answer to the vague question, or to a certain interpretation of it. For the vague question,

<sup>45</sup> Consider Ludwig, “Without Foundations,” 148.

<sup>46</sup> Bolotin, *Plato’s Dialogue on Friendship*, 60n70.

<sup>47</sup> On the question of the “first friend” or ultimate object of love, consider Terence Irwin, *Plato’s Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 54–55, and Versenyi, “Plato’s ‘Lysis,’” 194–95.

understood in the context of the three-question series of which it was a part, prodded us to wonder about the identity or lack thereof between the lover's for-the-sake-of and the human being of whom he was a friend. And the vague denial, understood in the context of Socrates's examples of the sick body and the father, might serve as a subtle denial that the friend (lover) is a friend (loves) for the sake of his human friend. But if this is an implication of the argument, can Menexenus remain satisfied with this account of the friend? Or is the friend (lover), in Menexenus's view, essentially one who cares for another human being as an end, that is, for that human being's own sake?

After the vague denial, Socrates defines the friend as the good and presents the boys with an account of the good as "a drug for the bad." Socrates seems to be testing, here and in the less noble subsection as a whole, whether the boys can be led to accept an account according to which the friend is non-noble. For the good in this account is loved only "because of the bad" (rather than "because of the presence of a bad") and is understood to be merely the eliminating, or to be rather a means to the eliminating, of some bad in the lover. The love of other human beings is hardly mentioned, if at all (220d8–e5), and would seem here to be merely instrumental to the lover's own good. At this point in the argument, in other words, the lover would have only an incidental and conditional rather than any essential and unconditional love of particular human beings. But Menexenus, when presented with this account of the good and the friend, is hesitant to assent (compare 220d7–e6 with 218c2–3) and is willing to dismiss both definitions quickly, on the grounds of a weak argument—an argument whose weakness he himself may vaguely sense (at 221b6 and b8; compare his greater confidence at 221c1).<sup>48</sup> The most compelling explanation for this willingness, as it seems to me, is that Menexenus has become dissatisfied with the lack of nobility in this subsection's account of friendship and friendly love. The fleeting elimination of a bad is not what Menexenus means by the good,<sup>49</sup> nor is the lover of such a "good" for himself what Menexenus means by one who loves a friend or is a friend. Once all nobility, all devotion to something or someone apart from the self or the self's own good, has been stripped away from the lover, the remainder is not, in Menexenus's view, deserving of the label "friend." The investigation in this subsection of the dialogue, then, serves to confirm what we might have already suspected from the preface to the discussion

<sup>48</sup> Compare Howard Curzer, "Plato's Rejection of the Instrumental Account of Friendship in the *Lysis*," *Polis* 31 (2014): 363–67.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. *Philebus* 54d1–3 and 60b7–61a3, as well as Haden, "Friendship," 333.

(216c4–d4), that a simply non-noble “friend” is not truly a friend at all, or that nobility is a condition of friendship.<sup>50</sup>

The thesis that being noble is a condition of being a friend aligns not only with Menexenus’s position in the dialogue but also with common sense. When we think of friends, we think first and foremost of good people. Friends care about virtue and justice; they are concerned to encourage and reward virtue in each other and to avoid friendship or “friendship” with those who are unjust (cf. 214b7–e2, 216b4–6). Even the desire to benefit similars may often be, at its core, a desire to benefit or reward those who are virtuous (consider the substitution at 214c6–d7). Most importantly, a friend is one who cares for another person for that other person’s own sake (cf. 212d2–213a4). As we can see from the willingness of Lysis and Menexenus to dismiss Socrates’s non-noble accounts of the friend, a willingness Socrates surely anticipated but perhaps desired to confirm, a friend is not merely a person who uses another for the sake of some good, or a person who loves a good made possible for him by another, but rather a person who loves another as an end.<sup>51</sup>

#### FRIENDSHIP AND LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

I have argued that Plato’s *Lysis* can lead us toward a deeper understanding of both rule and friendship. For the dialogue indicates a parallel between the psychology of the ruler and the psychology of the friend, and points us toward an account of three conditions of friendship: similarity, utility, and nobility. Valuable in its own right for those who seek to understand political

<sup>50</sup> Here my argument aligns to some extent with the arguments of Rhodes (“Platonic *Philia*,” 42–43) and Curzer (“Plato’s Rejection,” 362, 363–66, 368), but with important differences. Like most scholars, Curzer underestimates the role played by the boys’ responses in guiding the trajectory of the conversation; and this underestimation, along with his overestimation of the strength of the argument about non-bad desires, leads him to regard Socrates’s own view regarding friendship as settled and commonsensical (354–55, 359, 362–64, 366–68). Rhodes, although generally more attentive than Curzer to the dramatic context of each stage of the conversation (24–25), blames the utilitarian trajectory of the argument on Lysis’s lust for power, which “introduced utility into the reasoning” (42); but it seems to me that it was Socrates, not Lysis, who advanced such considerations, and that there is not sufficient evidence in the dialogue for the claim that Lysis is a selfish utilitarian (cf. 23, 27). What Rhodes has highlighted seems to be merely one side of Lysis’s understanding of love and friendship (consider his responses at 207c12 and 207e1, as well as his hesitance at 210c8). In my discussion of friendship’s third condition, I have focused on what Socrates learns from Menexenus about the commonsense view of friendship; regarding the possibility of an alternative, Socratic view of friendship, consider 211d6–212a7 and 222e3–223b8.

<sup>51</sup> In the subsequent discussion of the kindred, where Socrates tests the boys’ receptivity to a teleological account of desire as a force uniting souls that are akin to each other by nature, we learn that Socrates’s more utilitarian arguments have not shaken either boy’s faith concerning the nobility of the friend or lover in any lasting way (221e7–222b1). The lover who is genuine (*gnēsios*), rather than pretended, will necessarily be loved in return.

psychology, this account also promises to be of some use to those who seek to choose leaders and craft policies in such a way as to encourage political friendship, both between rulers and the ruled, and between ordinary citizens and each other. To conclude, I will offer a few provisional suggestions about how the account might be applied to the question or problem of political friendship in a liberal democracy such as our own.

First, there is the question of friendship between the rulers and the ruled, or rather between leaders and ordinary citizens, representatives and the people. Our distaste for the phrase “the rulers and the ruled” indicates among other things the degree to which we cherish similarity in our leaders. Elitist leaders, leaders who think of themselves as “rulers,” have already lost touch with the people, have already lost sight of the people’s sense of their own dignity, as expressed and confirmed through representative self-governance. And the account of friendship’s conditions offered here confirms the legitimacy of the concern for similarity between leaders and citizens. A leader who is more similar to the citizens will more readily identify with them, even blending his identity with theirs, in such a way as to encourage empathy and benefiting. All else being equal, such a leader will have more knowledge of the citizens’ needs, and will be less likely to exploit and oppress them. Yet similarity is not the only condition of friendship. The leaders most similar to the people may not always be the most useful or the most noble leaders. By definition, in fact, they would not be exceptional. The question of whether or to what degree we want our leaders to be exceptional has been a more or less explicit source of controversy in American politics since the days of the Federalists and Anti-Federalists.<sup>52</sup> But contemporary political debates between those who fear most an elitist technocracy and those who fear most a vulgar demagoguery might, if seen through the lens of this account of the conditions of friendship, be somewhat clarified. For the account would chasten our hopes that either the most virtuous person, or the most generally likable person, will assuredly be the best leader. A delicate balancing act will be necessary, since neither similarity, on the one hand, nor exceptional utility and nobility, on the other, will be sufficient to establish friendship between leaders and ordinary citizens.

More importantly, there is the question of the friendship of ordinary citizens with each other. Sybil Schwarzenbach is right to suggest that, in contemporary America, political friendship might be a forgotten yet crucial

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<sup>52</sup> Compare *Federalist*, No. 10 (Hamilton, Madison, and Jay, *The Federalist, with Letters of “Brutus,”* ed. Terence Ball [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003], 44) with Brutus’s 3rd Letter (456).

resource for civic unity. Yet the effectiveness of liberal democracy in promoting and preserving political friendship among the citizens will depend upon its effectiveness in promoting and preserving friendship's conditions. How effective, then, is liberal democracy in promoting and preserving similarity, utility, and nobility? Quite effective, it seems to me, in the case of utility: liberalism ensures that a diversity of types of people can learn from each other, and capitalism ensures that a diversity of specialized workers may provide for each other's needs. Yet liberal democracy seems to be less effective in promoting and preserving nobility or, what matters more in this case, mutual perceptions of nobility: citizens under capitalism can come to see each other as self-interested creatures of the market, unconcerned with each other's well-being, and citizens under modern liberalism can come to see each other as egoistic hedonists, unconcerned with their duties.<sup>53</sup> With regard to the preservation and promotion of similarity, too, and especially a similarity in moral outlook, liberalism may struggle. Is liberalism able to prevent an increasing balkanization of moral outlooks, such that one group's virtue becomes another group's vice, and vice versa? And if we no longer see each other as noble, can we still be friends? This account of friendship's conditions would suggest, as would other dialogues by Plato (see *Laws* 659c9–e3, 739b8–e3), that diversity of thought is not an unqualified good but rather one good to be balanced among others. In the best case, the emphasis on diversity or difference would be paired with an emphasis on some more fundamental similarity in moral outlook or moral dignity.<sup>54</sup> For the sense of similarity, and the endurance of the community it makes possible, is not an inevitability but rather something to be actively maintained. Liberalism will be fragile if it depends on similarities and mutual perceptions of nobility that it takes for granted yet finds difficult to sustain.

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<sup>53</sup> Consider in this context the implicit disagreement between Allen (*Talking to Strangers*, 127) and Schwarzenbach (*On Civic Friendship*, 53), as well as Allen's discussion of self-sacrifice as a catalyst for trust, good will, and political friendship (*Talking to Strangers*, 154–59). The loss of faith in the nobility of one's fellow citizens might be especially likely in an era marked by popular scientific enlightenment, relativism, and reactions to relativism (consider Leo Strauss, "German Nihilism," *Interpretation* 26 no. 3 [Spring 1999]: 360, 370–71, and Strauss, *Natural Right and History* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965], 5–7). Regarding technology and civic friendship, consider Cass Sunstein, "The Law of Group Polarization" (John M. Olin Program in Law and Economics Working Paper no. 99, 1999), 26–30; W. J. Brady et al., "An Ideological Asymmetry in the Diffusion of Moralized Content on Social Media among Political Leaders," *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 148 no. 10 (2019): 1802–13; L. E. Anisette and K. D. Lafreniere, "Social Media, Texting, and Personality: A Test of the Shallowing Hypothesis," *Personality and Individual Differences* 115, no. 1 (2017): 154–58; and Christopher Bail et al., "Exposure to Opposing Views on Social Media Can Increase Political Polarization," *PNAS* 115 no. 37 (2018): 9216–21.

<sup>54</sup> Consider Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind* (New York: Vintage Books, 2012), 277.

Do we possess the resources, especially the inner resources, necessary for a recovery of political friendship? Or, if an exact recovery seems impossible or even undesirable, might political friendship in some new form be created among us? A first step toward an answer, and toward such a recovery or creation, might be to ask ourselves whether we are still innocent enough, open enough, to feel the weight of the words with which Lincoln concludes the First Inaugural:

I am loath to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.