

## 15. PLATO'S *LYSIS*

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**ABSTRACT.** It is shown that Plato's *Lysis* is full of positive content between the lines. At the close of the dialogue Socrates says that he considers Lysis, Menexenus, and himself to be friends of one another. Following up on the questions which the dialogue leads us to ask yields an explanation of why each of these instances of friendship is, in fact, an instance of friendship. In addition, the dialogue shows that there are five types of motivation for desiring something.

Duke: I know thee well: how dost thou, my good fellow?  
Clown: Truly, sir, the better for my foes and the worse for my friends.  
Duke: Just the contrary; the better for thy friends.  
Clown: No, sir, the worse.  
Duke: How can that be?  
Clown: Marry, sir, they praise me and make an ass of me; now my foes tell me plainly that I am an ass: so that by my foes, sir, I profit in the knowledge of myself, and by my friends I am abused . . .

--Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night" v.i.

At the close of the *Lysis* Socrates says that he considers Lysis, Menexenus, and himself to be friends of one another. This amounts to six instances of friendship; each of the three is a friend of the other two. This paper demonstrates that a careful reading of the *Lysis* yields an explanation of why each of these instances of friendship is, in fact, an instance of friendship.

### I

If at one point Plato presents us with a proposition and at another point presents us with a counter-example to that proposition, even though he does not tell us that it is a counter-example, then it seems fair to say that he expects us to qualify the original proposition accordingly. If, in turn, the original proposition is a conclusion of an argument, then it seems fair to say that Plato expects us to try and find out what is wrong with the argument and to modify the argument's premises accordingly.

*Lysis* 213a provides a counter-example to the conclusion at 210d that unless *Lysis* becomes wise no one, not even his mother and father, will be his friend. The argument was that someone without knowledge is useless, therefore no one will entrust them with anything, and therefore no one will be fond of them. But at 213a it is agreed that when parents punish their baby, even at the moment of punishment, the baby is the most dear friend of the parents. The parents like the baby even though the baby does not know anything, even though the baby is therefore useless. Thus there must be something wrong with the original argument.

There are two possibilities: either the parents count the baby to be their most dear friend because of some future benefit which they hope to receive from it, or the parents have no ulterior motive—they just like the baby. One of the few sound arguments in the dialogue provides us with the answer. *Lysis* 219c-220b argues that not every friend can be a friend for the sake of some other friend; the chain of friends must come to a last link, which is not liked for the sake of some further friend. If it were not for the last friend, the other friends would not be friends. For example, we would not consider medicine to be a friend except for the health which it helps us to attain, etc. Thus the true friend, the friend we really care about, is liked for no ulterior motive.<sup>1</sup> The claim at *Lysis* 213a is that the baby is *most* dear (φιλιτατα) to its parents, therefore it must be the case that the parents like it for no ulterior motive. If they had an ulterior motive then that would be more dear.

Parents punishing their baby is an example of the more general phenomenon of parents hindering their children from doing what the children want to do. This hindering is the main subject of conversation in *Lysis* 207d-210d. We are told there that the reason *Lysis'* parents prevent him from doing various things is that he is ignorant; he does not understand those particular things. Surely that is why the baby was punished—to prevent it from dealing with things which it did not understand and consequently causing harm. At *Lysis* 210c Socrates claims that everyone would hinder someone from dealing with the things of which that other person is ignorant. The claim is obviously false: an enemy would encourage me to deal with things of which I am ignorant, and a neutral person would just not bother to prevent me from dealing with them. But if someone prevents me from dealing with them, then that person is my friend. Thus it can be seen that not only is the baby most dear to the parents, the parents are also the baby's friends, for they prevent it from dealing with things of which it is ignorant. Thus it seems that through the false claim at 210c Plato has provided us with the raw material for seeing how the parents are their baby's friends. Plato seems to be asking us to read between the lines.

The example of the parents with their baby is the last of a series of examples in which the thing that is liked is considered to be the friend of the person who is doing the liking. This series of examples is immediately followed by an invalid argument. Socrates first claims, "Thus it is not the liker that is the friend, but the liked" (213a). This conclusion is invalid, for the examples merely establish that the liked is sometimes the friend of the liker; they do not establish that the liker is not the friend of the liked. The mere fact that such things as babies, horses, or wine do not like in return does not mean that the person who likes them is not their friend. Indeed, we have seen that the parents

are their baby's friends. The argument then proceeds to see the relationship between being liked and being a friend as being strictly parallel with the relationship between being hated and being an enemy: if the liked is the friend, then the hated must be the enemy (213a). But we have just seen an example in which the hated is the friend. The baby hates its parents (213a), but the parents are still the baby's friends; surely no one could think of them as being their most dear baby's enemies. Clearly liking and hating are not parallel in the way that Socrates is claiming they are. The parallel to the example of the parents and child would be the case in which my enemy gets me to like him and then this allows him to do me harm (the baby hates its parents as they do it good). In such a case even if in my ignorance I liked him, he would still be my enemy. The answer to the question of who is the friend is not simply 'the liker' or 'the liked', and the answer to the question of who is the enemy is not simply 'the hater' or 'the hated'; it is more complex than that. Again, because Plato provides the counter-example for his own argument, it seems clear that he wanted us to see how his formulations are inadequate.

The only positive conclusion we can make at this point is that if A prevents B from dealing with something of which B is ignorant, then A is being a friend to B. This is not a trivial result, as can be seen from our opening quotation from Shakespeare. We shall see that this conclusion will help us understand other parts of the dialogue.

## II

In this section of the article we will be reading between the lines in a different way. The key here will be recognizing the relationships between various passages.

Is the baby its parents' friend? The answer seems to be supplied by the discussion of the real friend (*ὄντα φίλον*) (219c-220b) which we discussed above. The real friend is the friend which is not desired for the sake of some further friend. If I desire something as an end-in-itself, then it does not matter to me whether that thing likes me in return or not. If my friendship with that thing were conditional upon the thing liking me in return, then the friend would be a mere means for attaining the true friend, the desired response. We are told that the baby is the most dear friend of its parents (213a). Thus the baby is not liked for any ulterior motive, and thus it would be its parents' true friend.

In addition to the baby, the other examples of liked objects which are the liker's friend include horses, quail, dogs, wine, and sports (212d). These examples are either thought to fail to like (even to hate) when they are punished by the one who likes them, or thought to be incapable of liking the one who likes them. Menexenus and Socrates agree that even though these things do not like in return, they are still the liker's friend.<sup>2</sup> This would have to be qualified with the stipulation that they are not a true friend if they are liked for an ulterior motive (220b). If the wine lover merely loves to get drunk, then the wine would not be his real friend; if the sports lover merely loves the honors he receives from sports, then sport is not his real friend.

*Lysis* 211d shows us one way in which someone can love something as an end-in-itself. There Socrates tells us that everyone has something which s/he has desired to possess from childhood. Sometimes such a childhood desire might be merely for the property rights to something (two of Socrates' examples are wealth and distinctions). But in some cases a child will desire more than mere legal ownership; the child who desires dogs or horses (Socrates' other two examples) desires real interaction with them. As we shall shortly see, the dialogue considers such interaction to be a different, higher, type of possession. It seems clear that the child who desires to possess horses in this way would have no ulterior motive; it would just like the idea of interacting with horses.

This sort of possession is referred to at *Lysis* 210b: if someone with a property right to something gives that thing to someone else who really understands it, the person with understanding *owns* the thing. Why does he own it? Because he derives delight (*ὀνασθεαί*) from it. *ὀνασθεαί* is usually translated here as 'derives advantage', but that translation is incompatible with the text. *Lysis's* father gives control of his horses to a hired servant (208a), someone who knows about horses. Any advantage that the servant derives from the horses goes to *Lysis's* father; the reason that the servant must be given wages (208a) is that the advantage which he derives from the horses is not his own. How can the servant be said to own the horses because of the advantage he derives from them, when that advantage is not his own?

There can be no doubt that a new sense of 'owning' is being introduced. As the reader reads the argument which culminates in the assertion that things belong to the person who understands them, he ought to be quite aware of an obvious problem with the argument: even if I know about horses (or whatever) people will still not entrust me with their horses if they think that I might cheat them out of their property. Now, while the reader is carrying this fact in one hand and turning pages with the other, Plato has Socrates say that the property in question would not belong to its legal owner at all. Does this mean that the knowledgeable person steals the property? No, a new sense of 'owning' is being introduced, that of someone who really knows how to interact with something, someone who knows how to *derive delight* from doing so. For example the hired servant derives enjoyment from the horses in a way which goes far beyond the enjoyment that someone who is ignorant about horses can have; the horses belong to the servant in a way that they do not belong to their legal owner.

In addition to the child who desires to own something in this way, anyone who really understands something can desire that thing as an end-in-itself. When one has access to that which one understands one necessarily derives delight from interaction with it; one might at times desire the thing for some ulterior motive, but it is also possible to view the delightful thing as an end-in-itself.

The two themes of possession and liking are linked by the parallelism which we shall see between Socrates' description of that which he has desired since childhood and the examples of liked objects which are their liker's friends. The fact that the themes are linked in this way supports the claim that Plato really wanted us to make the connections that we have been making. Rather than being a formulator of invalid arguments, Plato can be seen to be making some very interesting observations.

The things which Socrates has wanted to possess from childhood are *friends* (211d-e). This corresponds to his claim at 204b-c that he knows lovers and loved ones; he has attained at least some knowledge of the genus 'friends'. Now, the first time one reads 211-212 it sounds as if Socrates wants to have a friend in the same way as Menexenus has *Lysis* for a friend, but, when one becomes aware of the parallel with the lovers of horses, quail, dogs, wine, and sports of 212d, Socrates' wording makes clear that he desires friends in the same way as a horse-lover desires horses:

One person wants to get possession of horses, another dogs, another money, and another honors. I have no violent passion for any of these things, but I have a great passion to acquire friends, and would rather obtain a good friend than the best quail or cock in the world; yes, and rather, I swear, than any horse or dog. (211d-e)

He accentuates the parallel with the lovers of horses, dogs, and quail, and then he accentuates it again. The parallel dictates that if a horse is a friend of the horse-lover then a friend is a friend of Socrates. Socrates wants someone who is a friend. This would seem to be the significance of the fact that he is not interested in Darius (211e). Darius, like any other human being, would be a potential friend and thus an object of interest if Socrates were merely interested in someone who might become his friend. The fact that the type of possession which children desire can be that of knowledgeable interaction rather than mere possession suggests that if Socrates has knowledge about friends, then, when someone provides him access to a friend, Socrates will know how to interact with the friend. We shall find these observations confirmed as we continue to consider the issues which emerge between the lines of the dialogue.

### III

In this section we shall consider *Lysis* 213d-217a paragraph by paragraph. Though these paragraphs seem to be dealing with disparate issues, we shall find that there is a dialectical development from one paragraph to another. The development is so clear once it is seen that there can be no doubt that Plato purposely put it there.

*Lysis* 214c tells us that when a bad person (*πονηρός*) deals with (*δμιλῆ*) a bad person he injures him. *Πονηρός* can be thought of as being the opposite of *ἀγαθός* (good); just as *ἀγαθός* implies being good at something, *πονηρός* can imply being useless. Those who are *ἀγαθός* are those who understand something, and thus it would seem that those who are *πονηρός* are those who are ignorant. (At *Laches* 194c Nicias says that he has often heard Socrates say that each person is good [*ἀγαθός*] in that in which he is wise and bad [*κακός*] in that in which he is unlearned.) When someone deals with something of which s/he is ignorant, s/he injures the thing; that is why *Lysis's* mother will not let him touch her loom (208d). Thus the bad, in addition to not being able to be a friend to other bad people, cannot be a friend to anything; in their ignorance they cannot deal with anything without hurting it. This would seem to be the real reason for the conclusion at 214d that the bad cannot be a friend to anything. The reason given there for that

conclusion is that the bad are not constant. While it is true that ignorant people would tend not to be constant, their real problem is indicated by the discussion at 214b-c of how they hurt each other. The issue of constancy seems to be a red herring; it does not fit in with the issues discussed elsewhere in the dialogue, except for the fact that it shows us something about the condition of the argument.

At *Lysis* 215a-c Socrates argues that the good cannot befriend the good because the good do not need anything. But the good, as those who understand things, do need things; they need access to those things which they understand. A person with knowledge about something cannot experience the delight of interacting with that thing unless he has access to it. Just as Socrates was mistaken when he claimed that everyone would prevent an ignorant person from dealing with things which the ignorant person does not understand (only friends prevent this), so too he was mistaken when he claimed that everyone would give someone with understanding the things which that person understands (210a-b). Only two types of people would help the person with understanding: those who feel that they will get some gain by doing so (as *Lysis'* father does when he gives his horses to the chariot driver), and those who want to do so as an end-in-itself. The knowledgeable person, as such, would not care about what his benefactor's motivation might be; as far as he is concerned anyone who gives him access to the things that he understands is his friend. Thus we have found a way in which someone can be a friend to the good. Plato shows us this way through the inconsistency between the argument here and what he discussed earlier in the dialogue. The crucial connection between the good and those who have knowledge comes to mind very easily if one has recognized that the reason why the bad harm each other must be that they are ignorant.

Socrates' next move is to point out that like can be considered hostile to like. He quotes Hesiod, "See potter wroth with potter, bard with bard, beggar with beggar" (215c). If two people have knowledge about the same things, then there would indeed be a tendency toward conflict over access to the things which they both understand. Thus the good would tend not to be a friend to the good insofar as they are good at the same things; neither would want to give the other that which they both love. The seemingly more general conclusion that like cannot be a friend to like would follow from the claim found at *Lysis* 214d that only the good can be considered really to be like; only those who are good at the same things would be alike, and these would tend not to befriend each other in the one way in which we have found that the good can be befriended. Thus arises the question of who can give the good the things that they are good with.

*Lysis* 216c-d links three claims: (1) the beautiful is a friend, (2) the good is beautiful, and (3) what is neither good nor bad is a friend to what is beautiful and good. Who are the neither good nor bad? If the good are those who have knowledge and the bad are those who do not, then there would seem to be no one else left. But *Lysis* 217c-218a shows that the way in which one has ignorance makes a difference. Something can have some property, X, present with it without actually being X; someone can have the essentially bad thing, ignorance, present with them, and yet not be an ignorant person. The person who has evil and yet is not evil is the person who is aware that he does not know what he does not know (218a). Thus the answer to the question of who would

give the good the things that they are good with is someone who is aware that he is ignorant about those things; it is the neither good nor bad who can be a friend to the good. If I believe that I understand something, then I would not give that thing to someone just because I thought that they understood it too; I would feel that I had just as much right to it as they. Only the person who is both ignorant and aware that he is ignorant will be willing to give the good what the good needs. We are told that this person gives to the good and beautiful, and that the beautiful is a friend. This would not apply to someone like Lysis' father who, aware of his own ignorance, gives his horses to the chariot driver for the sake of some further telos. But it does show us another possible motivation for giving the good that which they are good with; the ultimate goal of the person who gives can simply be the beautiful interaction of the knowledgeable person with that which he understands. That interaction can be viewed as a beautiful end-in-itself.

Thus far we have found three ways in which friendship can arise: (1) by preventing the ignorant from dealing with that of which they are ignorant, (2) by desiring knowledgeable interaction with something, and (3) by providing the knowledgeable with access to that of which they have knowledge.

#### IV

In this section we shall see that the characters in the dialogue exemplify the relations which we have been discussing. Again, this must be more than a mere coincidence; that Plato intended his reader to make the moves which we have been making is proved by the fact that our results are exemplified in this way.

After Socrates shows Lysis that Lysis is ignorant (210d), Lysis gives Socrates a thing that Socrates is desirous of: a friend. He asks Socrates to have a talk with his friend Menexenus (211b-c). The neither good nor bad (someone who knows of his ignorance) gives the good (someone with knowledge) that which he understands and has desired since childhood.

Menexenus is said to be an extreme eristic (211b). There is something about conducting a discussion which an eristic does not understand. Lysis wants Socrates to correct (*κολάζειν*) Menexenus (211c), just as the parents wanted to correct (*κολάζειν*) their baby (213a). Just as the baby was most dear to its parents, so too is Menexenus most dear to Lysis; that Lysis has no ulterior motive in wanting Menexenus to be corrected is indicated by the fact that his manner is most childlike and friendly (211a). Thus Menexenus is Lysis' friend. And Lysis is Menexenus' friend, for when we have the true perspective we can see that despite any ill will the person being corrected might feel, the person who would have them corrected is really their friend; we established this in Part I through the example of the parents with their baby.

Menexenus is Socrates' friend, just as a horse is a friend of a horse-lover. Socrates desires to interact with someone who is a friend as an end-in-itself. He has desired it since childhood.

But in what way is Socrates a friend to Lysis? Lysis gives Socrates access to his friend with a further goal in mind, just as his father

gives the chariot driver access to his horses with a further goal in mind--Lysis wants Menexenus to be corrected. Socrates seems to be no more than a means to an end for Lysis; he would be not Lysis' friend any more than the chariot driver, a hired servant (*μισθωτός*), is a true friend of Lysis' father. We cannot say that Socrates is a friend to Lysis because he wishes to benefit Lysis through benefiting Lysis' friend, for if Socrates were a friend to Menexenus on account of his friendship with Lysis then *Menexenus* would not be Socrates' true friend. It is not as if he is doing Lysis a favor. Or is it? At *Lysis* 211c Socrates hesitates before entering into discussion with Menexenus. His reason for doing so has to do with the fact that Menexenus is Ctesippus' pupil. If Socrates were a horse-lover, and Lysis had asked him to take care of Lysis' horse, which had been in the care of another horse-lover named Ctesippus, Socrates might well be reluctant to take something which Ctesippus loves away from him. If the horse were not under anyone's care, then Socrates would love to have it, but, as it is, he would not take the horse on his own initiative. The owner of the horse would have to specifically ask Socrates to take the horse. In such a case he would not be accepting the horse for the sake of having the horse, but rather for the sake of the one who made the request. Afterwards he would be doing many things for the horse's sake, but the initial acceptance would be for the sake of the one who made the request. Once Lysis makes clear that he understands that his request involves taking Menexenus out of the care of the person who had charge of him, Socrates feels *compelled* to talk (*διαλεκτέον*) to Menexenus. He is not doing so because of his own inclination; he feels compelled to do so because of Lysis' request. He takes Menexenus for Lysis' sake; he has no further motivation, no ulterior motive. Thus he is being a friend to Lysis.

Note the allegorical significance of the fact that Ctesippus specifically urges Socrates to talk with Menexenus (211d). Just as Socrates does not desire to take from Ctesippus a thing which they both love, so too Ctesippus does not wish to stand in Socrates' way once the legal owner has made his request. Thus we can see that it is not true that like must be enemy to like; even though they desire to interact with the same type of object, they can still respect each other's right to such objects.

## V

In this section we shall see how an invalid argument relates to some of the topics which we have previously considered.

*Lysis* 218d-221c distinguishes between two general types of objects of desire. Some objects of desire are just the negation of negative conditions; health for example, has no positive qualities which could be found to be desirable if there were no possibility of disease. Now, there is an implicit argument about objects which are desirable for their *positive* qualities at 221d-e: (1) if you desire something then you do not yet have it--you lack it; (2) if you lack something then it has been taken away from you; (3) thus the things you desire belong with you. Premise (2) is obviously incorrect; it is quite possible to lack something which one has never had. Nonetheless, the suggestion is interesting that the things we desire for positive reasons are the things that belong with us (*οἰκεῖον*). *Οἰκεῖον* itself does not imply that one once had possession of the object of desire; it can mean simply 'belong with' or 'akin'. That

is a fair description of the relationship between the person with understanding and the thing which he understands. We were told at *Lysis* 210b that the things which are understood belong to the one who understands them and interacts with them. They also belong together; there is something right about their being together.

The dialogue presents another possible explanation for desiring things for their positive qualities. The beautiful is not merely the negation of negative qualities, and yet there is no such necessary relationship between the beautiful and that which desires the beautiful. *Lysis* 216c-d claims that the beautiful slides and slips into us because of its qualities of being soft and smooth and sleek. What the nature of the person who desires the beautiful is like does not matter; the beautiful appeals to us irrespective of what we are like--it just slips right on in.

Thus there are three general reasons for actively being someone's friend: because one wants to prevent a negative state from occurring, because the desired thing belongs with one, or because one is attracted to the beautiful. When someone prevents an ignorant person from dealing with something, they are being a friend to that person in an effort to prevent a negative state from occurring. When someone with understanding desires that which they understand, they are desiring that which belongs with them. When someone gives a person with understanding that which that person understands, they can have one of two possible motivations: either they have some (positive or negative) ulterior motive, or they are motivated by the beauty of knowledgeable interaction with things.

There would also be cases in which someone desires to possess something without understanding it. This can happen in two ways. *Lysis* 211d-e claims that everyone desires to possess a particular type of thing from their childhood. Different children desire different types of objects; it depends upon their nature. Thus the object of such desire would not be the beautiful *per se*, for desire for the beautiful is not dependent upon the nature of the desirer. A child would desire things in this way because those particular things *go with* the child. Of course, they would not belong with the child in the same way as they belong with the person who understands them; rather they would belong with the child in a potential way. We have here something quite similar to the traditional Greek understanding of virtue (*ἀρετή*) as acting in accordance with one's inborn excellence. That excellence would be actualized with the acquisition of knowledge.

The other way in which one can desire something which one does not understand is illustrated by Hippothales. He desires to possess Lysis, but he clearly does not know how to interact with Lysis and he can tell nothing more about Lysis than could a child (205b). While Hippothales is no doubt attracted to Lysis because of Lysis' beauty, he desires something for himself. He does not want to just look at the beautiful object, he wants to attain the glory (*κόσμος*) of acquiring someone so fair and with such an illustrious ancestry (211e). The implication seems to be that anyone who is ignorant of something and yet desires to interact with that thing because of the thing's beauty does not desire mere interaction with the thing as an end-in-itself. Thus, in addition to not being able to be a friend because of the harm that ignorant people necessarily cause that which they deal with, an ignorant person

who does not know of his own ignorance would not be able to actively have a friend. It would be the people who have an affinity with something who could envision interaction with that thing as an end-in-itself.

## VI

There are four reasons for thinking that Plato really intended his readers to make the moves that we have been making in this paper: (1) the cogency of the reasoning in Parts I-IV; (2) the fact that the characters in the dialogue exemplify many of the possible types of friendship which we have developed; (3) the fact that our results really are interesting in their own right--one does not make a silk purse out of a mere series of invalid arguments; (4) the fact that all this exemplifies the playful use of the written word discussed at *Phaedrus* 275ff.

I believe that one of the few statements of Plato that can be taken at face value is the following: "He who thinks, then, that he has left behind him any art in writing, and he who receives it in the belief that anything in writing will be clear and certain, would be an utterly simple person" (*Phaedrus* 275d). Plato, not wishing to have his thoughts "tossed about alike among those who understand and those who have no interest" (*Phaedrus* 275e) has tied down his meaning to a series of riddles. Those who know can demonstrate the untruth of what is said by those who are not really interested by referring to the riddles which established Plato's meaning. Putting together the answers to the riddles found in different dialogues would hopefully give us a body of Platonic doctrines as a systematic whole.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> W.K.C. Guthrie claims that according to the *Lysis* "friendship is never to be valued for the relationship itself, but always for some ulterior end" (*A History of Greek Philosophy* IV Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975, 144). He claims that this is taken as a premise at *Lysis* 218 and never subsequently denied. *Lysis* 218d-220b merely results in the claim that a real friend is not a friend for the sake of another friend. It leaves the impression that a real friend must be a friend for the sake of a foe. But the sort of negative ulterior motive that Socrates is referring to does not count as really being ulterior; to use the example of *Lysis* 218e-219b, if someone desires health because they wish to escape disease, that does not constitute having an ulterior motive. Moreover, *Lysis* 220e-221c establishes the possibility that one can desire a friend for no negative ulterior motive. This, combined with the conclusion of 218d-220b implies that if this friend is a real friend, then one would have no ulterior motive at all.

Guthrie further supports his claim by saying, "The *πρωτον φίλον*, when it appears, is not a friend". He offers no support for this extraordinary claim, and I cannot imagine why he would make it unless he is simply misreading the text.

<sup>2</sup> Guthrie (147) agrees with R.G. Hoerber's claim that "the main argument against reciprocity is a linguistic difficulty in the Greek language, which calls a person who is fond of wine or fond of wisdom *φίλιονος* or *φιλόσοφος*" (in "Plato's *Lysis*", *Phronesis*, 1959, 21). But this ignores the

example of the baby being a friend to its parents, and this one example is enough to make the point.