Friends and Friendship in Plato
Some Remarks on the *Lysis*

Samuel Scolnicov

For Ra'anana,

ὁ γενναῖος περὶ σοφίαν καὶ φιλίαν μάλιστα γίγνεται·
ὦν τὸ μέν ἐστι θνητὸν ἀγαθόν, τὸ δὲ ἀθάνατον.
Epicurus, *Sententiae Vaticanae* 78

Let me start with some well-known facts: The Greeks had three main words to describe feelings and relations of love and friendship, and the boundaries between them were not always sharply demarcated. *Philia* was the broadest, covering a variety of feelings and relations, such as those between host and guest, friend and friend, parent and child, husband and wife, lover and beloved, gods to men (but apparently not men to gods), and even such feelings of fondness and attachment as some may have towards money, victory, honour, one's own life, women, learning — anything, in fact. *Eros* was mostly, but not always, the more specifically sexual passion; at any rate it was more intense than *philia*, so that one could describe one's feeling toward one's fatherland as *philia*, but also, figuratively or not, as *eros* (as in *Agamemnon* 540). *Agape* seems initially to have been the weakest of the three terms. When at all distinguishable from *philia*, *agape* denoted sometimes no more than affection or preference, and sometimes even mere contentment. But it was also often used of the love between husband and wife, and it was usually said of the physical or social expressions of such love: Penelope, in recognizing Odysseus, embraces him and asks him not to take it amiss that "I did not embrace (or something similar: ἀγάπησα) you thus at first as soon as I saw you" (*Od.* 23.214). The Septuagint uses the word to translate, e.g., אהבת כלולותיך in *Jeremiah* 2.2 (see also *Jesaiah* 63 *passim*). In the Apocrypha it is the standard word for the love of God for man and man for God, and it is of course St. Paul's regular word for God's unmotivated and undiscrim-

inating love for man and its derivative, the love of man for God.[1] *Agape* receives little if any attention in classical philosophy. Plato and Aristotle deal at length with *eros* and *philia* (and Aristotle fills in the details with *eunoia*, good will, and *homonoia*, concord).

The question of the relation between *eros* and *philia* in Plato is not only of philological interest. For it is tied up not only with the question of the relation between the *Lysis* and the *Symposium*, but also with the more important question of Plato's views on *philia* as a political force and on *eros* as a drive both cosmic and psychological. Are they essentially different as Wilamowitz thought, or are they intimately related, as Grube maintained,[2] or perhaps even to some extent identical? For this seems to be the import of the question: If social and political *philia* is to be understood in the light of the psychological manifestations of the cosmic *eros*, then the interpretation of interpersonal relations cannot ultimately be divested of its metaphysical basis. And, on this view, the Lysis would be an incomplete study of a social and inter-personal phenomenon which cannot be adequately analysed on its own terms. Its completion would then be in the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*, not in the eighth and ninth books of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

It is perhaps a sign of our times that friendship has received less than its fair share of philosophical attention since the Renaissance, although we do seem to witness some resurgent interest in love (*eros*, I should say, not *philia*). Here is no doubt one reason why the *Lysis* has not been a very popular dialogue with commentators.[3]

Moreover, the task confronting the commentator of the *Lysis* is not an easy one. The Greek terms involved are recalcitrant to translation, and the questions arising fom the interpretation of the text range far beyond the ambit of the dialogue itself. On the other hand, the very evaluation of the relevance to the *Lysis* of problems arising from Plato's theory of ideas or his theory of the soul is in itself a main point in the interpretation of the dialogue.

The first point to be noted is the subject of the dialogue. The precise wording of its central question is somewhat peculiar. In other "small" Platonic dialogues, the question is usually phrased in terms of the abstract noun (or the substantivized adjective) corresponding to the virtue (ἀρετή) inquired into: What is courage? (τί ἐστιν ἀνδρεία; *Laches* 190e3), What do you say is temperance?

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1   Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, tr. P.S. Watson (London 1953), is indeed one-sided but still indispensable for an understanding of the concept of *agape*.

2   Cf. U. v. Wilamowitz-Möllendorf, *Platon* II (Berlin 1919), 68; G.M.A. Grube, *Plato's Thought* (London 1935), ch. 3.

3   Some time ago, David Bolotin did something to revive interest in this dialogue in the English-speaking world; cf. his *Plato's Dialogue on Fiendship* (Ithaca 1979). But apparently in the last five years there has not been one single article or monograph on the *Lysis*.

(τί φὴς εἶναι σωφροσύνην; *Charmides* 159a10), What do you say is the pious and what the impious? (τί φὴς εἶναι τὸ ὅσιον καὶ τί τὸ ἀνόσιον; *Euthyphro* 5d7). This time, however, Socrates does not use the abstract noun and ask, What is friendship? (τί ἐστιν φιλία;), but rather Who is the friend of whom? (πότερος ποτέρου φίλος γίγνεται; *Lysis* 212a8), But by putting the question in this form, Plato purposefully shifts attention from the broader implications of *philia* in the context of the philosophy of nature and the metaphysics of the fifth century, and confines the inquiry, at least initially, to the purely inter-personal plane. When philosophy of nature is brought in by the end of the dialogue it is only as an example and there is no serious consideration of it.

Moreover, the stress on *philos* rather than on *philia* glosses over the fact that *philia* is a relation between *philoi* (although not necessarily a symmetrical one). For *philia* is not like courage or piety: in this respect it is closer to justice, insofar as justice too is essentially a relation. And, indeed, in the *Republic*, *philia* is the bond that holds together the political community, and is almost interchangeable with justice.[4]

But asking who is a *philos* instead of what is *philia* forces the dialogue to take a wrong turn.[5] Relations are almost inevitably treated as qualities. It becomes then impossible to deal with the question of the reciprocity of friendship. *Philia* can be located neither in the lover nor in the beloved, nor in both at once.[6] As in other aporetic dialogues, Plato's own solution is presented here, too, but because the problem is badly posed, this solution is rejected almost offhand. Initially phrasing the question in terms of *philoi* instead of *philia* obscures the difference between qualities and relations, a distinction which will have to wait until later. But the cornerstone of the positive doctrine of the *Symposium*, where *eros* is explicitly described as a relation, is almost the same view that was found wanting in the *Lysis*: that love is neither of the good for the good, nor of the good for the bad, nor of the bad for the the good, nor of the bad for the bad, but of that which is neither good nor bad for that which he lacks and which is congenial (οἰκεῖον) to him.[7]

There are, however, some important differences between the *Lysis* and the *Symposium*. Firstly, the *Symposium* deals with *eros*, not with *philia*. How heavily one is prepared to lean on this difference depends of course on the view one takes of the relation between *philia* and *eros* in Platonic thought. This matter

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4   Cf. Gregory Vlastos, "The individual as object of love in Plato", *Platonic Studies* (Princeton 1973), 11ff. See also Aristotle on friendship and justice, *Nicomachean Ethics* 9.9-11.

5   Not an uncommon procedure with Plato. Cf., e.g., *Meno* 83de, 89de.

6   Bolotin, *op. cit.* (above, n. 3), 112-120 does not give enough attention to this aspect of the problem in his discussion of *Lysis* 212a8-213c9.

7   Cf. *Lysis* 210d, 221e-222c with *Symposium* 202-5.

was extensively dealt with in the controversy between Pohlenz and von Arnim.[8] On the whole, von Arnim seems to me to be right in maintaining, against Pohlenz, that the desire for completion (*Ergänzung*) is not necessarily the same as, and sometimes even incompatible with, the desire for perfection (*Vervollkommnung*). The Delphi Charioteer is incomplete: the arm it lacks is just another piece of bronze, of the same order as what is now extant; a second-rate Roman copy of it is imperfect not because it lacks any part but because it is not up to the original. However, the discrepancy between the two dialogues is no doubt due to the distortion forced on the *Lysis* by the terms of reference implied in the questions initially set by Socrates, commensurate with the philosophical capabilities of his interlocutors. It will take nothing less than the metaphysical impulse of the *Symposium* to draw the distinction: Aristophanes' ἀνθρώπων σύμβολα long for their other half, which is just like themselves; Diotima's *Eros* is drawn towards something which is always above itself.

The conceptual world of the *Lysis*, as of many "early" dialogues, is thoroughly utilitarian. In this the *Lysis* is truly dialectic: it starts from premises accepted by Socrates' interlocutor and develops them to their eventual contradiction. As more elaborately done in the *Protagoras* and later in the first book of the *Republic*, the utilitarian standpoint is shown to be insufficient to account for social phenomena. But as this is the only angle from which Socrates' interlocutors can view the problem, the dialogue ends in failure, without an inkling of alternative solutions based on a radically different understanding of the key terms. Only in the *Republic* does the consideration of such an alternative become possible.

Bolotin's interpretation of *Lysis* 220b6-e6 is typical of a trend of Anglo-Saxon interpretation which seems close to such a utilitarian view: "If the good is of such a nature as to be loved by us — who are in the middle of the bad and the good — because of what is bad, ... it is of no use itself for its own sake. ... What Socrates means here is that the very nature of the good, insofar as it is good (as distinct from the beautiful), is good for someone". His conclusion from this is "that each of us, to the extent that his love is love for the good, is his own true or primary friend (cf. 219c2-4). ... The real friend, for each of us, is 'himself', or himself as he would be if he were free of evils. ... Each of us would love himself then as he loves himself now, not because he was good, but simply because it is his nature to do so — his nature at least, once he becomes aware of himself in his distinctness from all others".[9]

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8   Cf. Hans von Arnim, *Platons Jugenddialoge* (Leipzig 1914); Max Pohlenz, *Aus Platons Werdezeit* (Berlin 1913). For a summary of the discussion, see Bolotin, *op. cit.* (above, n. 3), 201ff.

9   Bolotin, *op. cit.* (above, n. 3), 174-6. For other views on this question, see, e.g., besides the works quoted here, L. Robin, *La théorie platonicienne de l'amour* (Paris 1908, 1933²); T. Becker, "Zur Erklärung von Platons Lysis", *Philologus* 41 (1882),

But I cannot read such a Protagorean (or Romantic) conclusion in Plato's text, and I cannot reconcile it fully with Socrates' conception of the self. Whatever else Socrates may have thought, it seems fairly agreed that he maintained that the man is the soul and that the good of the soul is univocally the same for all. To that extent, at least, Plato appears to have remained fairly faithful to his friend. Moreover, the fundamental distinction between "good for someone or for something" and "good" *simpliciter*, which is elaborated at length in both the *Protagoras* and the *Theaetetus*, may confidently, I think, be taken as part of Socrates' bedrock convictions. Thus, although Socrates' language in the *Lysis* may be read in a Protagorean vein, it should perhaps better be taken as purposefully ambiguous, not to say deceitful.

Much more slippery is the question of the possible allusions to the theory of ideas. That Plato came to conceive of it as the true metaphysical basis for Socrates' ethical (and epistemological) convictions is almost commonplace; whether Plato advisedly hints at it in such early dialogues as the *Euthyphro* or the *Lysis* has been a hotly disputed matter. Precisely because philosophical terminology is yet fluid in these dialogues — and Plato keeps it thus if only for the sake of the conversational style — the mere appearance of words like εἶδος need not mean much in itself. There is, however, in the dialogue sufficient elaboration on the concept of presence (παρουσία) for commentators to have given it much attention (cf. 217-8). The elaboration on παρουσία in our text as a possible solution to the problems raised in it can hardly be accidental. It is true, however, that the use of παρουσία in the *Lysis* is sufficiently different from its use in the *Phaedo*, where it is (with other terms, such as μέθεξις, μίμησις, κοινωνία) the lynchpin of the theory of ideas. Note, for example, that the analysis of παρουσία at *Lysis* 217 is conducted solely in terms of the physical presence of white lead in the hair. It is the same inability to grasp the essential difference between a relation between an abstract idea and a concrete particular on the one hand and a relation between two concrete particulars on the other that brings this dialogue to a halt and is ultimately the cause of the quandaries in the first part of the *Parmenides*. Whether in the *Lysis* Plato had already clarified to himself that difference and chose to lead us astray for didactic purposes, or whether he was himself lost and did not find his way until after the *Parmenides* — this biographical question is, I think, immaterial to our present concern. But the requirement to distinguish between two sorts of presence, the one causing the thing to look so-and-so and the other causing it to be so-and-so, remains unanswered, just as

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284-308; P. Friedländer, *Plato* II (New York,1964); R.G. Hoerber, "Plato's *Lysis*", *Phronesis* 4 (1959), 15-28; K. Gläser, "Gang und Ergebnis des platonischen *Lysis*", *WS* 53 (1953), 47 ff.; W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy* IV (Cambridge 1975).

the related requirement to distinguish between the similar (ὅμοιον) and the congenial (οἰκεῖον).

But even if the theory of ideas is not present in the *Lysis*, the transcendence of the object of desire beyond the individual himself is clearly indicated, but not pursued for the reasons indicated above. In Konrad Gläser's terse formulation: "Primar ist das φίλον, secundär der φίλος".[10] The progress of the *Lysis* leads from the question, Which one is the φίλος? to the question, What is φίλον? and from this to the further question, What is the πρῶτον φίλον, the primary object of desire? As in so many dialogues, here, too, Plato starts from the consideration of the human and interpersonal situation, and eventually shows that an analysis of it in purely psychological, social or political terms is bound to be unsatisfactory.

For the transcendent basis of social and psychological attachments, Plato turns in the *Gorgias* to cosmic harmony, and later, in the *Republic* and the *Timaeus*, to the world of ideas. But here is what Vlastos considers the flaw of Plato's conception of *philia*.[11] It is not the case, for Plato, that to love a person one must wish for that person's good for that person's sake, although it would not be accurate to say that, for Plato, one loves a person for one's own sake. Rather, one loves a person for the common good of both, objectively conceived, i.e., for the sake of τὸ πρῶτον φίλον. Considering Plato's views on the individual and the particular, he could not have put much value on the love of the individual for the individual's sake. Plato looked for an alternative to basing friendship on utility and he finds it not in the love of another person as such — this is a road he cannot take — but in the transcendent objectivity which receives its full expression in the *Symposium* and the *Republic*.

A comparison with Aristotle is instructive. Aristotle, in trying to keep his discussion of friendship free from Plato's metaphysical presuppositions, could not avoid setting friendship squarely within a framework of social agreement, i.e., of mutual utility:

> But neither is there friendship towards a horse or an ox, nor to slave *qua* slave. For there is nothing common to the two parties; the slave is a living tool and the tool a lifeless slave. *Qua* slave, then, one cannot be friends with him. But *qua* man one can, for there seems to be some justice between any man and any other who can share in a system of law or be a party to an agreement; therefore there can also be friendship with him insofar as he is a man.[12]

One could, then, be friends with a slave insofar as the slave is a man, i.e., insofar as he, too, is a political being, and social arrangements are such that some kind of reciprocity may exist between any two men. The foundation of Aris-

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10   K. Gläser, *op. cit.* (previous note), 63.
11   G. Vlastos, *op. cit.* (above, n. 4).
12   *Nicomachean Ethics* 8.11, 1161b2ff.

totelian friendship is the ability immanent in men of participating in social ar-
rangements and the aim of all social arrangements is mutual utility.

The other, non-Greek, horizon of friendship is Kant's conception of it. For
Kant, friendship is not based on social arrangements but on the moral good will.
As such it is a "duty of honour" (*ehrenvolle Pflicht*), albeit one which cannot be
fully achieved in practice:

> *Friendship* (considered in its perfection) is the union of two persons through equal
> and mutual love and respect. — It is easy to see that [perfect friendship] is an ideal of
> the emotional and practical concern which each of the friends united through a
> morally good will takes in the other's welfare; and even if friendship does not pro-
> duce the complete happiness of life, the adoption of this ideal in men's attitude to one
> another contains their worthiness to be happy. Hence men have a duty of friendship.
> — The striving for the perfect friendship (as the maximum good in the attitude of
> friends to each other) is a duty imposed by reason — not, indeed, an ordinary duty but
> a duty of honour.[13]

Such a view obviously depends on a radical reinterpretation of the concept of
a person, indeed on the very development of such a concept, present only in
rudimentary form in Greek classical thought, and eventually on Kant's own
characterization of persons as ends-in-themselves.

In claiming that "there is no evidence in the *Lysis* for a kind of possible
friendship which is wholly independent of human wants and needs",[14] Bolotin,
like others, reads the dialogue from the point of view of the boys conversing
with Socrates. Clearly, there is little room in it for Aristotelian *philia* and none
for Kantian *Freundschaft* or Pauline *agape*. But the final *aporia* of this dialogue
shows rather that for Plato human deficiencies are never adequately analysable
in purely human terms. Man seeks his perfection not in what is like (ὅμοιον)
him, for what is like him, as such, is deficient too. Man's perfection lies in what
is congenial (οἰκεῖον) to but different from him. At this stage there is yet no talk
of an ontological difference. In any case, the utilitarian framework of the dia-
logue will not support such a distinction. Here there can be only talk of comple-
tion; the craving for perfection cannot be expressed in this dialogue. The ques-
tion about the πρῶτον φίλον remains unanswered because it cannot be an-
swered in terms of a purely human deficiency. As in the *Protagoras* and the
Gorgias, the basic positions of Socrates' interlocutors prevents a non-utilitarian
argument. Whether Plato already had his own solution ready at the time belongs

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13   *The Doctrine of Virtue* (Part II of *The Metaphysics of Morals*), Book I, Part 1, §46,
      tr. Mary J. Gregor (New York 1964), 140.

14   Bolotin, *op. cit.* (above, n. 3), 255. True, the Platonic Socrates often admits that he
      has to adapt himself to his interlocutor's level. Cf., e.g., *Euthyphro* 14b8-c5, *Meno*
      86d3-8. But this should only alert the reader against uncritically adopting the dia-
      logue's point of view.

to the realm of speculation, of which I would like to steer clear. But we do have here a sign of things to come.

The Hebrew University of Jerusalem