

Love and Friendship in Plato's *Lysis*: A Socratic Account

JUSTIN CLARK

The *Lysis* is often considered barren—empty of any positive Socratic answers concerning friendship.¹ Moreover, following Charles Kahn, many commentators treat the *Lysis* as a mere prolegomenon to later dialogues like *Symposium*. I believe these interpretive trends are misguided.² I seek to provide a new interpretation. On my interpretation, the *Lysis* contains a positive Socratic answer about friendship. In order to uncover the positive answer, however, we must read *Lysis* alongside other early dialogues of definition. By reading *Lysis* alongside *Charmides*, I manage to solve two interpretive problems—the problem of the first friend and the problem of egoism. First, concerning the problem of the first friend, after concluding that intermediates are friendly to the good because of (διὰ) the presence of badness and for the sake of (ἔνεκα τοῦ) goodness, Socrates acknowledges that the conclusion was only a dream (218c10). He then proceeds to suggest that the body (an intermediate) is friendly to medicine because of the presence of disease and for the sake of health. But if health is pursued for the sake of some further end, this end becomes a friend, as well. In order to stop the regress, we must posit a first friend (πρῶτον φίλον)—some final end for the sake of which all other friends are friends (219d5). But commentators disagree about what the first friend refers to, thus generating an interpretive debate. Second, concerning the problem of egoism, Socrates's account of love and friendship has been denounced by Gregory Vlastos (1981) for being purely egoistic. On a straightforward reading of the prologue, for instance, Socrates holds that we befriend others only insofar as they contribute to our own good. Drawing primarily from *Charmides*, I offer a new interpretation. Friendship (φιλία), for Socrates, amounts to a relation between intermediates (second friends) who recognize their own ignorance

1. Grote (1988) 516.

All translations are taken from Cooper, *Plato Complete Works* (1997), with minimal adaptations of my own using original Greek from Burnet (1922), *Platonis Opera, Vol. 3: Tetralogiam V–VII Continens*.

2. Kahn (1996) 266.

and band together in pursuit of wisdom by means of conversation (καλοὶ λόγοι) with the aim of helping one another achieve *eudaimonia* (the first friend). On this interpretation, friendship requires that we love others *for their own sake*, not merely for their contribution to our own good.

Introduction

Does the *Lysis* contain a positive answer concerning friendship? Perhaps not. It has been suggested that the *Lysis* “is not positively constructive or helpful”;³ that it helps merely to prepare the way for later (more important) works such as the *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*; that “the whole business of the dialogue [is] to multiply defective explanations and say why they are defective”;⁴ and that “the *aporia* is complete,” so that the negative ending of the dialogue “represent[s] a complex structure of thesis and counter-thesis, which end without resolution and with no hint of a saving clause.”⁵ In this way, commentators often conclude that Plato did not ultimately intend for any positive upshot to emerge.

But a purely negative interpretation is not implied by the text. Socrates leaves positive hints in the *Lysis*, just as he does in other early dialogues. In this essay, I argue that a positive Socratic answer concerning friendship can be lifted from the text. Some of my conclusions align with those of Laszlo Versenyi. To my mind, Versenyi adopts a sensible approach: “To clarify what [. . .] the positive material contribution of the *Lysis* to the discussion of love, is, I would like to begin at the end, with the passage immediately preceding the aporetic conclusion, and then proceed backwards to consider supporting arguments.”⁶ Versenyi chooses to work backward, starting with the dialogue’s conclusion. On my interpretation, this is a move in the right direction. For the dialogue itself moves in reverse. Commentators typically assume that the *Lysis* pivots on the “What is F?” question. For example, Robinson writes: “Plato’s main philosophical question in the *Lysis* is τί ἔστιν τὸ φίλον (What is friendship?); He is trying to define the concept of τὸ φίλον. But which is the sense of τὸ φίλον (friendship) in which he is trying to define it? Probably at least two concepts could be suggested to a Greek by the expression.”⁷ Robinson makes the mistake of assuming that the dialogue pivots on the “What is F?” question, as other dialogues of definition do. He also makes the mistake of assuming the dialogue exhibits conceptual analysis. The *Lysis*

3. Lamb (1925) 4.

4. Grote (1888) 516.

5. Mackenzie (1988) 31.

6. Versenyi (1975) 188.

7. Robinson (1986) 69.

begins, however, with the *acquisition question*—the question of *how* friendship can be acquired (223b). It does not pivot on the question “What is friendship?” What Robinson refers to here as the “main philosophical question” never occurs in the text. And there is overwhelming evidence that Socrates is seeking a causal answer concerning friendship—he is not “trying to define the *concept*” (emphasis added). Of course, the investigation would have *profited* from the starting point Robinson assumes. Had Socrates addressed the conceptual question first, the investigation might have proven significantly more productive. I believe we are meant to observe that a philosophical inquiry that moves in the wrong direction (as this one does)—engaging the acquisition question prior to conceptual analysis—stands to become a conceptual disaster.⁸

Scholars have observed that the *Lysis* is a conceptual disaster. For although “friend” and “friendship” are the standard translations for φίλος and φιλία, respectively, the cognate verb φιλεῖν can be translated “to feel affection toward” or “to love” or even “to value.” Thus, Robinson correctly observes that there are two key senses of the term φίλος. One sense applies to *reciprocal relationships* between people; a second sense applies to that which *makes something valuable* as an object of pursuit. At one point, Socrates even appears to analyze human relationships in terms of the second sense of φίλος, rather than the first. It is due to conceptual-linguistic errors of this kind that the dialogue ends without positive discovery.

Like Versenyi, then, I will start with the dialogue’s conclusion. Versenyi “takes exception” to two poles of interpretation that I, too, will resist. First, he takes exception to the notion that the *Lysis* is “so defective, confused, Sophistic and eristic that [. . . the dialogue is] a purely negative semantic or logical exercise.” He also takes exception to the notion that the dialogue is merely “a kind of prolegomenon for the *Symposium*, *Republic*, and the *Phaedrus*” and that our only hope, therefore, “is to find positive content in the *Lysis* by interpreting it not on its own or in the context of the early Socratic dialogues but on the basis of Plato’s later epistemological and metaphysical theories.”⁹

Versenyi resists these two lines of interpretation by attempting to examine the *Lysis* on its own terms.¹⁰ Rarely does he draw support from other dialogues. When he does, however, he draws support from the *Symposium*, as so many

8. It is not my present purpose to argue this point here, but an argument can be found in Clark (2022).

9. Versenyi (1975) 188.

10. Mackenzie (1988) can be credited with resisting the “Platonizing interpretation,” while adding that “it is a commonplace for the interpretation of the *Lysis* that such separate entities [Forms] do indeed appear here, in the final argument about the [first friend].”

commentators do. This is where I part ways. I draw support from the family of early dialogues to which the *Lysis* belongs, the dialogues of definition. It is surprising to me, in fact, that this approach is so rare among scholars.¹¹ Kahn is partially responsible. He first formulated a list of “seven points” on which the *Lysis* hints at or prefigures important elements in the *Symposium*.¹² Kahn’s impressive list inspired several scholars to draw from the *Symposium* to explain the *Lysis*. In this paper, however, I draw primarily from the *Charmides*. Below, I have assembled nine points at which the *Lysis* hints at or makes contact with important elements in the *Charmides*. I take this list to be no less remarkable.

1. A *dialogue of definition* set within a *palaestra* (gymnasium) (204a; cf. *Charmides* 153a)
2. Prologue featuring the strong affection of a young lover, along with a careful strategy to lure him into discussion (206d; cf. *Charmides* 154b–155c)
3. Instances of blushing (204b–c; 213d; cf. *Charmides* 158c5) along with the corresponding theme of modesty (205e–206a; cf. *Charmides* 160e)
4. Self-knowledge, knowing what one knows, or an awareness of one’s own deficiencies (218a–b *Charmides* 167a–b; 172b)
5. Connection between *οικείωσις* (one’s own) and the good (221e–22b; cf. *Charmides* 163d)
6. A fundamental analogy of health and the science of medicine with wisdom and the good.
7. The first friend, and corresponding first science (219d; cf. *Charmides* 173b–74d)
8. A remedy (*φάρμακα*) for an ailment in relation to health and the good (220d; cf. *Charmides* 155c–e)
9. A “dream” that provides a hint at a crucial moment in the investigation (218c10; cf. *Charmides* 173a–b)

In what follows, therefore, I offer a positive interpretation of the *Lysis*, drawing primarily from the *Charmides* for support.

11. Roth (1995) is an exception.

12. Kahn (1996) 266 offers the following seven points of contact between *Lysis* and *Symposium*:

1. The lover-of-wisdom (*philos-sophos*) as neither wise nor ignorant (218a–b; cf. *Symp.* 204a)
2. Love as desire (*ἐπιθυμία*) for the good (217c1, e7; cf. *Symp.* 204e–205a)
3. The good interchangeable with the beautiful (*καλόν*) as object of love (216d2; cf. *Symp.* 204e)
4. Desire as lack or deficiency (221d7–e3; cf. *Symp.* 200a–e)
5. The good understood as what is akin (*οικείον*) (221e–222d; cf. *Symp.* 205e)
6. The primary dear object (*πρῶτον φίλον*) for the sake of which everything else is dear (219d, 220b, d8; cf. *Symp.* 210e6, 211c2)
7. What is truly dear, in contrast to mere images (*εἶδωλα*) (219d3–4; cf. *Symp.* 212a4–6)

Part 1: The First Friend

Prior to the dialogue's negative ending, Socrates recounts several answers that have failed throughout the discussion. But one important proposal is missing from the list of failed answers—namely, the thesis that *intermediate is friend to the good*.¹³ Socrates introduces this thesis (at 216c) as something he believes. Thus, the fact that he does *not* include it among the several discarded answers should be enough to raise our eyebrows. Even if it is not a genuine Socratic thesis, it is Socrates's favored proposal in the dialogue, and we should follow any hint Plato appears to leave behind.¹⁴

Upon discovering that intermediates are friend to the good *because of* (διὰ) the presence of badness, and *for the sake of* (ἔνεκα τοῦ) goodness, Socrates acknowledges that their discovery was only a dream (218c10). According to Socrates, the body (an intermediate) is friendly to medicine because of the presence of disease and for the sake of health. But if health is pursued for the sake of some further end, this end becomes friend as well. To stop the impending regress, therefore, we must posit some first friend (πρῶτον φίλον)—a final *end* for the sake of which all other friends are friends (219d5).

While much has been made of the connection between this passage and various movements in the *Symposium*, a similar movement occurs in the *Charmides*. In the *Charmides* (173a–e), Socrates tells of a dream he once had, depicting a situation in which *all* things are done with expertise, always in accordance with knowledge. In the dream, mankind falls short of faring well, even despite the expertise of doctors and others. There is but one science that can produce benefit by making people live well and be happy. This is the knowledge of good and bad (174b12). It happens to be the only science that produces εὐδαιμονία. No real benefit will come to mankind from all the other sciences combined, so long as this knowledge is absent. Medicine and health (and everything else), in other words, are pursued for the sake of εὐδαιμονία.

This idea occurs throughout the early dialogues. In the *Protagoras*, the knowledge of good and bad is equated with wisdom (φρόνησις) and described as the “science of measurement.”

P1 While the power of appearance often makes us wander all over the place in confusion, often changing our minds about the same things and regretting our actions and choices with respect to things large and small, the science of measurement by contrast, would make the appearances lose their power

13. Tessitore (1990) 128.

14. Several scholars agree that it is Socrates's favored proposal. See, for instance, Santas (1988); Penner and Rowe (2005); Tessitore (1990); Kahn (1996); Versenyi (1975), among others.

by showing us the truth, would give us peace of mind firmly rooted in the truth and would save our life. (Pl. *Prt.* 356d–e)

Notice that the knowledge of good and bad *saves* (σώζειν) our lives. It saves us by making us live well and be happy (εὐδαιμονία). For this reason, I contend that εὐδαιμονία serves as the “first friend” in Socratic philosophy. All other friendships are somehow in the service of εὐδαιμονία.¹⁵

The knowledge of good and bad plays an important role in the medical analogy featured in both *Charmides* and *Lysis*. In the *Charmides* Socrates enters into conversation with Charmides by claiming to have a remedy (φάρμακον) for his headache. At 155e Socrates describes a rare treatment he learned from a Thracian doctor working under the patronage of Zalmoxis. The remedy (φάρμακον) requires that Socrates attend to Charmides’s soul, as directed by the god (156e–157a). The remedy must be applied directly to Charmides’s soul by means of certain charms, which are described as “beautiful words” or “noble arguments” (καλοὶ λόγοι).

C1 And the soul, he said, my dear friend, is cured by means of certain charms, and these consist of beautiful words (τὰς δ’ ἐπὶ τὰς ταύτας τοὺς λόγους εἶναι τοὺς καλοὺς). It is a result of such words that temperance arises in the soul, and when the soul acquires and possesses temperance, it is easy to provide health both for the head and for the rest of the body. (Pl. *Chrm.* 156e–57a)

The charm in C1 refers to Socrates’s method of philosophical investigation (ἔλεγχος). With this introduction, therefore, Socrates begins the treatment of Charmides’s soul with an investigation into the nature of temperance.¹⁶ The investigation concludes (as we have seen) with an acknowledgment of the knowledge of good and bad as the true science of benefit.

An important parallel can be found in the *Lysis*, where the same medical analogy is presented in a different way. Since intermediates are neither (completely) good nor (completely) bad, they require a remedy (φάρμακον) for whatever badness is present. In the case of the body, medicine provides a remedy for disease, which helps restore the body to health. In the case of the soul, wisdom provides the remedy for ignorance, which helps secure the first friend, εὐδαιμονία—a good and happy life. At 220d Socrates asserts that it is the nature (πέφυκε) of

15. A host of commentators have drawn this conclusion, though typically without referencing the *Charmides* and *Protagoras*. See Annas (1977); Irwin (1977) 52; Vlastos (1981) 10–11; Wolfsdorf (2007) 253–56; Versenyi (1975) 195.

16. Tuckey (1951) 18–19 writes: “The *kaloi logoi* which constitute the charm . . . clearly refer to the Socratic method of *elenchus* whereby he convinced men of their own ignorance and of the necessity of *psuchēs epimeleia*, the essential prerequisite of virtue.”

the good to be loved by an intermediate. Intermediates require a remedy. Prior to this (219c), Socrates had illustrated the situation as follows:

L1 Suppose a man places great value on something, as in the common case of a father who values his son more highly than all his other possessions. Would such a man, for the sake of his supreme regard for his son, value something else at the same time? If, for example, he learned that his son had drunk hemlock, would he value wine if he thought it could *save* (σώζειν) his son's life? (Pl. *Lysis* 219e; emphasis added)

The father who loves his son will want to save (σώζειν) his son's life. Consequently, he will value (instrumentally) anything that might help save it. Socrates considers this common among fathers—parents typically want what's best for their children. Let us take this fundamental principle in conjunction with our previous discovery (P1). The knowledge of good and bad (wisdom) is the only thing, according to Socrates, that *saves* a person's life. As a result, the father who “prizes his son above all possessions” must value the knowledge of good and bad as highly as anything. He must value wisdom as a remedy (φάρμακον) for his son's ignorance, for the sake of his son's happiness. This principle happens to inform the prologue of the *Lysis*, where Socrates asks the following:

L2 Am I right in assuming, Lysis, that your father and mother love (φιλεῖ) you very much?—Oh yes, he said—Then they would like you to be as happy as possible (εὐδαιμονέστατον), right?—Naturally. (Pl. *Lysis* 207d)

In L2, Socrates uses parental love (once again) as an example of someone wanting another person's happiness for that person's sake. And yet, Socrates proceeds (207–10) to present Lysis with the following puzzle concerning parental love. He suggests that Lysis's parents do not really love him (207–10). After all, Lysis lacks knowledge. Because he lacks knowledge, he is somewhat *useless* to his parents. If, as Socrates temporarily suggests, a person is loveable only insofar as he is useful, it would follow that Lysis's parents do not love him.

On the basis of this puzzle, Vlastos concludes that Socrates endorses a purely egoistic, utility-based view of love. But we have encountered ample evidence to the contrary. Socrates uses the “common” case of parental love as an obvious example of noninstrumental, nonegoistic love. I want to suggest, therefore, that we take Socrates at his word in both L1 and L2, thus resisting the unattractive conclusion that Socrates endorses a purely egoistic view.¹⁷ As we have seen in L2, love

17. See Vlastos (1981). On this score, I am in agreement with Roth (1995) 5–8:

What Socrates proposes to Lysis in this passage is a plan whereby other people will come to have φιλία for Lysis. Lysis will become the object of their φιλία and his newly acquired φίλοι the subjects. But, if friendship is nothing other than straightforward

involves wanting another person to be as happy as possible (εὐδαιμονέστατον), which adds something to the Socratic position. On my interpretation, εὐδαιμονία serves as the first friend in Socratic philosophy. But we now learn that the *scope* of the “first friend” extends well beyond the agent’s own happiness. Love (φιλία) involves doing things for the sake of another person’s happiness. It involves aiming at the good of *another person*, for their sake.¹⁸ On Socrates’s view, this requires that the other person (the beloved) become wise—wisdom is required for happiness here, just as it was required as a remedy (φάρμακον) to *save* the son’s life (L1).

Part 2: The Οικεῖον

Immediately following the first-friend passage, in an abrupt transition, Socrates backpedals. He argues that badness cannot be the cause (αἰτία) of friendship after all, since friendship would occur even in the absence of badness. To revive the argument (221a–b), therefore, Socrates suggests that desire (ἐπιθυμία) is the cause of friendship. We desire what we lack (ἔνδεια) or what we are somehow deprived of or what is our own (οἰκείωσις) by nature. On this view, the key to friendship is the οἰκεῖον.

L3 And if one person desires (ἐπιθυμεῖ) another, or loves (ἐρᾷ) another passionately, he would not desire him or love him passionately or as a friend unless he somehow *belonged* (οἰκεῖος) to his beloved either in his soul, or in some characteristic, habit, or aspect of the soul. (Pl. *Lysis* 222a; emphasis added)

Socrates is now examining the nature of friendship (or love) between people. Of course, an explanation of interpersonal love requires a different structure than the means-end structure of the “first friend.” (I suspect Socrates is shifting here from the second sense of φίλος to the first sense of φίλος without warning.) Friendship between people is caused by desire (ἐπιθυμία), love (ἔρωσις), or a feeling of affection. But, according to L3, the desire that causes friendship must be directed toward something οἰκεῖον. The term “οἰκεῖον” presents another conceptual-linguistic barrier. Like “φίλος,” the term “οἰκεῖον” has several

utility-love, then Lysis’ newfound friends will be interested in him only insofar as he is useful to them and will not value him at all for his own sake. Thus, on Vlastos’s account, Socrates is advising Lysis to acquire certain characteristics for the sole purpose of being selfishly exploited by others . . . but such a portrayal of Socrates falls far enough beyond the parameters of any reasonable interpretation of what we know about Socrates’ character to be unacceptable on its face.

18. See Roth (1995). It is worth pointing out that Roth identifies *virtue* as the first friend, rather than *eudaimonia*.

senses. The term usually refers to those who are within “one’s own household” or those who “belong” to one’s family or *polis*. But οἰκεῖον also connotes something “appropriate” or “fitting,” something that is “one’s own proper concern” or “conformable to one’s nature.” In the *Lysis* there is no clear indication how οἰκεῖον is being used. And yet, the success of the entire investigation appears to hinge on a technical distinction concerning οἰκεῖον. At 222b Socrates suggests that they are on the brink of discovering *what friendship is*. There is one hurdle remaining in their path. They must mark a *distinction* between that which is “one’s own” (οἰκεῖον) and that which is merely alike (ὄμοιον). In the *Lysis*, this crucial distinction is never made.

In the *Charmides*, however, the topic of οἰκεῖον makes an appearance precisely where Critias engages the task of making technical distinctions and where Socrates mentions his own acquaintance with Prodicus—a renowned sophist notorious for making fine distinctions and offering precise definitions of terms. When Critias proposes that temperance is “doing one’s own things,” Socrates responds:

C2 Critias, I said, I understood the beginning of your speech pretty well, when you said that you called “one’s proper things” (τὰ οἰκεῖα) and “one’s own things” (τὰ αὐτοῦ) good, and called the making (ποίησις) of good things doings (πράξεις), because I have heard Prodicus discourse upon the distinction in words a hundred times. Well, I give you permission to define each word the way you like just so long as you make clear the application of whatever word you use. (Pl. *Chrm.* 163d–e)¹⁹

After this exchange, Critias manages to associate τὰ οἰκεῖα (one’s own proper things) with good things—or more specifically, good things that are made. Needless to say, this is precisely what is missing from the *Lysis*, a precise definition of the concept τὰ οἰκεῖα. According to Critias, temperance involves (roughly) concerning oneself with *beneficial results* and making these results “one’s own concern” (οἰκεῖα). As an account of temperance, of course, the answer is rejected. But its rejection is instructive for our purposes.

C3 Tell me whether you think a doctor, in making someone healthy, makes a useful result both for himself and for the person he cures.—Yes, I agree. And the man who does these things does his duty?—Yes[. . .] And does a

19. Prodicus is one of the sophists most often discussed in the early dialogues and perhaps the one Socrates is most sympathetic to, due to the former’s notorious preoccupation with accuracy in words and rigorous definitions. References to Prodicus abound in the early dialogues (see, for instance, *Charmides* 163d; *Laches* 197d; *Protagoras* 314c; 315c–316a; 317c–e; 336d–337c; 339e–342a; 347a; 357e–359a; *Meno* 75e; 96d; *Apology* 19e; *Euthydemus* 277e).

doctor have to know when he cures in a useful way and when he does not?
(Pl. *Chrm.* 164a–b)

The medical doctor is “doing good things.” She produces beneficial results both for herself and for the person whom she cures. In the process, she makes *someone else* her own concern. By practicing medicine, she accepts a *duty* to produce good results for other people. By analogy, then, the knowledge of good and bad (wisdom) will produce beneficial results for other people as well (εὐδαιμονία). The practitioner of wisdom, in other words, assumes a similar responsibility. The philosopher also accepts a *duty* to produce beneficial results (εὐδαιμονία) for other people, thus making other people her own concern.

It may seem like a stretch to import this passage into our understanding of the *Lysis*. However, once we observe how C3 connects with the prologue of the *Lysis*, it seems entirely fitting. At 210b–c, Socrates suggests that wisdom will make Lysis “useful and good,” thus rendering him friendly with everyone. More specifically, wisdom will make other people his own concern (οἰκεῖον), thus producing friendship.

L4 In those areas where we become wise (φρόνιμος), everyone will hand them over to us [. . .] and no one will care to obstruct us [. . .] and these will be *our things* (ἡμέτερά τε ταῦτα ἔστα), because we will derive some benefit from them [. . .] But if you become wise, my boy, then everybody will be your *friend* (φίλοι), everybody will *be your own concern* (οἰκεῖοι), because you will be useful and good. (Pl. *Lysis* 210b–d; emphasis added)

Wisdom, in other words, makes the happiness of other people our own concern.²⁰ The practice of wisdom, much like medicine, is a mutually beneficial practice. Nor is it entirely egoistic. In fact, the practice of wisdom is partially *altruistic*. This is how Socrates describes his philosophical activity in the *Charmides*:

C4 Oh come, I said, how could you possibly think that even if I were to refute everything you say, I would be doing it for any other reason than the one I would give for a thorough investigation of my own statements—the

20. I am in agreement with Penner and Rowe (2005). They also notice the connection between wisdom and οἰκεῖον, at least in the *Lysis*. Against Penner and Rowe (2005), Obdrzalek (2010) argues that Socrates seems to imply that the friend (φίλος) is actually identified with the οἰκεῖον, rather than *that which makes things οἰκεῖον*. None of these commentators appear aware of the *Charmides* passage above C3, which lends additional support to the conclusion of Penner and Rowe (2005). That being said, in contrast to Penner and Rowe (2005), I identify the first friend as εὐδαιμονία itself (and not just for the agent). Meanwhile, they identify the first friend primarily as wisdom while equating the first friend also with the agent’s own εὐδαιμονία. On my view, this is a mistake, since wisdom cannot serve as the life-saving, φάρμακον-producing εὐδαιμονία as long as wisdom serves as the first friend.

fear of unconsciously thinking I know something when I do not. And this is what I claim to be doing now, examining the argument *for my own sake* primarily, but also *for the sake of my friends*. Or don't you believe it to be for the common good, or for that of most men, that the truth about how things are should become clear. (Pl. *Chrm.* 166c–d; emphasis added)

Socrates confirms that his philosophical activity provides a mutual benefit. It is for the *common good* that he pursues wisdom. Of course, he engages in the *καλοὶ λόγοι* for himself. But he also practices his craft *for the sake of his friends*. For Socrates, the pursuit of wisdom involves both egoistic and altruistic motives.²¹

In emphasizing the importance of self-knowledge—or an awareness of one's own ignorance—passage C4 also highlights another meaningful connection between the *Lysis* and *Charmides*. The theme of self-knowledge emerges at a crucial stage in the *Lysis*, as well.

L5 Those who are already wise no longer love wisdom, whether they are gods or men. Nor do those love wisdom who are so ignorant that they are bad, for no bad and stupid man loves wisdom. There remain only those who possess this bad thing, ignorance, but are not yet made ignorant or stupid, since they are *conscious of not knowing what they don't know*. (Pl. *Lysis* 218b; emphasis added)

Socrates describes “intermediates” as those who are neither (completely) good nor (completely) bad. Intermediates happen to recognize the badness that is present and desire to be *rid* of it. For this reason, intermediates love (φιλεῖν) the good they pursue. In recognizing their own ignorance, in other words, intermediates seek a remedy (φάρμακον), as they pursue the very thing (knowledge) they are deficient in. Those who are terminally “bad,” meanwhile, are ignorant in a different way. For they remain entirely “unaware of not knowing the things they do not know.” Their lack of self-knowledge prevents them from loving the good and seeking a remedy.

As we unpack the core thesis that *intermediate is friend to good*, therefore, we should acknowledge that *self-knowledge* is a prerequisite.²² For Socrates, in

21. For more on this, see Annas (1977) 535.

22. This connection enhances our understanding of yet another dramatic scene. The opening scene of the *Lysis* shows Socrates questioning Hippothales, who blushes upon discussing his affection for Lysis, even though he typically goes around broadcasting poems and songs in praise of Lysis. Socrates explains that the poems and songs are really about Hippothales (and not so much about Lysis); such compositions reveal a certain preoccupation Hippothales has with himself. At this, Hippothales is somewhat incredulous, which reveals a lack of self-awareness on his part. At 206a, Socrates proceeds to correct Hippothales's strategy for capturing his beloved as well. Rather than puffing his beloved

fact, self-knowledge is a prerequisite for *any* type of friendship. The pursuit of wisdom is predicated on an awareness of one's own ignorance.²³

At this point, we can recognize two distinct types of friendship. Friendship (φιλία) will necessarily involve intermediates. On my interpretation of the *Lysis*, friendship will turn out to be a relationship between intermediates (*second friends*) who recognize their own ignorance, and therefore band together in pursuit of wisdom by means of conversation (καλοὶ λόγοι), in order to help one another secure happiness (*first friend*). Notice that this interpretation combines our two senses of φίλος, making room both for *reciprocal relationships* (between intermediates) and for *that which makes something valuable* (the first friend). This account also retains the core positive thesis that *intermediate is friend to the good*. The good is represented here by the first friend, εὐδαιμονία. Of course, in keeping with this core thesis, we should also acknowledge that it would be ideal for an intermediate to befriend someone who is already wise. Unfortunately, as we learn from the *Apology*, Socrates has spent the better part of his life searching for someone wise. The search has come up empty (22a–e). Thus, it is fitting that Socrates announces his inability to acquire a “good friendship” at the beginning of the dialogue.

L6 When I see you and Lysis together, I'm really amazed; I think it's wonderful that you two have been able to acquire this possession [friendship] so quickly and easily while you're still young. Because you have in fact, each of you, gotten the other as a true friend—and quickly too. And here I am, so far from having this *possession* that I don't even know how *one person becomes the friend* of another, which is exactly what I want to question you about, since you have experience of it. (Pl. *Lysis* 212a)

And yet, Socrates concludes the dialogue by placing himself among Lysis and Menexenus *as friends*. He does this, even despite the failed investigation.

L7 But just as they were leaving I said, “now we've done it, Lysis and Menexenus—made fools of ourselves, I, an old man, as well as you. These people here will go away saying that we are friends of one another—for I count myself in with you—but what a friend is, we have not yet been able to find out. (Pl. *Lysis* 223b)

up with songs of praise, which can only serve to make him harder to catch, Hippothales should converse with his beloved instead. This method of conversation might serve to make Lysis aware of his own ignorance. He might therefore begin to register a need for wisdom and perhaps a need for Hippothales. Once again, self-knowledge turns out to be a prerequisite for φιλία, or friendship.

23. The necessity of self-knowledge is also stressed by Versenyi (1975) 197.

To accommodate Socrates's closing remarks, therefore, it is necessary to allow for a *secondary* friendship between intermediates.

The Final Question

One might object that the text provides no clear indication that friendship (φιλία) can occur between intermediates. Toward the end of the dialogue, Lysis and Menexenus get tripped up on the following question:

L8 And shall we suppose that the good is οἰκεῖον to everyone, while the bad is alien? Or is the bad οἰκεῖον to the bad, the good to the good, and the intermediate to the intermediate? They agreed that the last three pairs belong together. (Pl. *Lysis* 222c)

As readers, we should wonder why the dialogue concludes with this question. Lysis and Menexenus are presented with two options:

- (i) the good is οἰκεῖον to everyone²⁴
- (ii) like is οἰκεῖον to like

Upon choosing the second option, (ii), it is said that Lysis and Menexenus are confronted with the same difficulties they encountered before (214e–215c; 216e), difficulties concerning the thesis that *like is friend to like*. As readers, it would be prudent to go back and reexamine those prior difficulties. Upon reexamination, we find that they were difficulties for two separate possibilities—namely, the possibility of friendship between two bad people, and the possibility of friendship between two good people. Intermediates were left out of the equation. According to Socrates, a bad person cannot be φίλος to another bad person, since two bad people will necessarily treat each other unjustly. And a good person cannot be φίλος to another good person, since two good people share the same qualities and so cannot be benefitted by each other's presence; two good people are also self-sufficient and therefore without any need of each other's company. In this manner, two separate possibilities are rejected. But there are *three* possibilities to consider under the second option (ii).

[possibility 1] Bad is οἰκεῖον (friend) to bad.

[possibility 2] Good is οἰκεῖον (friend) to good.

[possibility 3] Intermediate is οἰκεῖον (friend) to intermediate.

24. As we have seen, Socrates already suggested (210b–c) that Lysis will effectively make everyone “his own concern” (οἰκεῖον) simply by becoming wise and good. Thus, if we understand “the good” in the first option (i) as referring to the wise, then this option would appear to get things the wrong way around. Everyone is οἰκεῖον to the good.

The third possibility [possibility 3], which is perhaps the most likely candidate for mutual friendship, was never given independent consideration. In fact, it is cast aside for no apparent reason. The only mention of [possibility 3] occurs in the following exchange at (216e):

L9 For I don't suppose anything could be friend to the bad.—True. But we just said that like is not friend to like.—Yes. So what is neither good nor bad [intermediate] cannot be friend to something like itself [intermediate].—Apparently not. So it turns out that what is neither good nor bad is friend to the good, and only to the good. (Pl. *Lysis* 216e–217a)

Prior to introducing a category of “intermediates,” it was already established that “like cannot be friend to like.” This was established on the basis of the aforementioned problems for the other two possibilities, [possibility 1] and [possibility 2]. As a distinct possibility, [possibility 3] cannot be rejected *merely* because the other two possibilities, [possibility 1] and [possibility 2], were found problematic, especially if they were found problematic for reasons that do not apply to intermediates [possibility 3].

This introduces a question. Are the other two possibilities problematic for reasons that apply to intermediates [possibility 3]? As it turns out, they are not. On the one hand, it is suggested that *like* is incapable of friendship with *like* because they share the same characteristics (214e6–9). We might wonder whether this objection applies to intermediates [possibility 3]. But a close inspection of the text will reveal that it does not. The objection was initially presented (to *Lysis*) as a question:

L10 When something, anything at all, is like something else, how can it benefit or harm its like in a way that it could not benefit or harm itself? Or what could be done to it by its like that could not be done to it by itself? [. . .] Isn't a good person, in so far as he is good, sufficient to himself? . . . And the person who needs nothing wouldn't cherish anything? . . . And the person who does not cherish does not love. (Pl. *Lysis* 214e–215b)

The impossibility of a friendship between two good people was established moments later (215b) on the premise that “if a person needs nothing he will not love anything.” Thus, the impossibility of friendship between two good people [possibility 2] is ultimately established on the basis of self-sufficiency. Being self-sufficient, the good are no longer open to receiving benefit.²⁵ Needless to

25. There is room at the close of the dialogue to doubt that [possibility 2] has been ruled out. If good and wise people are οἰκεῖον to everyone, that would include being οἰκεῖον to other good and wise people. For a detailed analysis of this line of interpretation, an attempt to rescue [possibility 2], see Hoerber (1959), who argues that the highest form of friendship in the *Lysis* is between those who are good.

say, this is *not* a characteristic of intermediates. Intermediates remain needy, insufficient unto themselves.

The thesis that *intermediate is friend to intermediate* remains unrefuted in the dialogue. Plato brings it *back* to the reader's attention at the end of the dialogue, by introducing the final question in L8 (thereby inviting the reader to go back and reexamine the hollow reasons for its rejection). The thesis that *intermediate is friend to intermediate* is also implied by Socrates's own declaration of friendship with Lysis and Menexenus in L7. If this constitutes another positive hint (as I think it does), we have arrived at the dialogue's positive upshot. By pursuing wisdom with them, Socrates has made Lysis and Menexenus his own concern. Friendship (φιλία), for Socrates, amounts to a relation between intermediates (second friends) who recognize their own ignorance and therefore band together in pursuit of wisdom by means of conversation (καλοὶ λόγοι), in order to help one another secure a good and happy life (first friend).

This account of friendship coheres with Socratic philosophy, more generally. In order to discover this answer, however, we must read the *Lysis* alongside other dialogues of definition. As intermediates—and as friends—we must help one another pursue the wisdom necessary for a good and happy life. The first friend (εὐδαιμονία) can be attained only through mutually beneficial examinations into the nature of virtue. These are the καλοὶ λόγοι. They are our only expression of true friendship, our only remedy for ignorance, and our only means to εὐδαιμονία.

Hamilton College

jcclark@hamilton.edu

Works Cited

- Annas, J. 1977. "Plato and Aristotle on Friendship and Altruism." *Mind* 86: 532–54.
- Burnet, J., ed. 1922. *Platonis Opera, Vol. 3: Tetralogiam V–VII Continens*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Clark, J. C. 2022. *Plato's Dialogues of Definition: Causal and Conceptual Investigations*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Cooper, J. M., ed. 1997. *Plato: Complete Works*. Indianapolis: Hackett.
- Grote, G. 1888. *Plato and Other Companions of Sokrates*. 1865. 3rd ed. London: Murray.
- Hoerber, R. G. 1959. "Plato's 'Lysis.'" *Phronesis* 4: 15–28.
- Irwin, T. H. 1977. *Plato's Moral Theory: The Early and Middle Dialogues*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Kahn, C. 1996. *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue: The Philosophical Use of Literary Form*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lamb, W. R. M. 1925. *Plato. Lysis. Symposium. Gorgias*. Translated by Lamb. Loeb Classical Library 166. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1925.
- Mackenzie, M. M. 1988. "Impasse and Explanation: From the *Lysis* to the *Phaedo*." *AGPh* 70: 15–45.

- Obdrzalek, S. 2010. "Socrates on Love." In J. Bussanich and N. D. Smith, eds., *Bloomsbury Companion to Socrates*, 210–32 London: Bloomsbury.
- Penner, T., and Rowe, C. 2005. *Plato's Lysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Robinson, D. B. 1986. "Plato's *Lysis*: The Structural Problem." *ICS* 11: 63–83.
- Roth, M. D. 1995. "Did Plato Nod? Some Conjectures on Egoism and Friendship in the *Lysis*." *AGPh* 77: 1–20.
- Santas, G. 1988. *Plato and Freud*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Tessitore, A. 1990. "Plato's *Lysis*: An Introduction to Philosophic Friendship." *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 28: 115–32.
- Tuckey, T. G. 1951. *Plato's Charmides*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Versenyi, L. 1975. "Plato's *Lysis*." *Phronesis* 20: 185–98.
- Vlastos, G. 1981. "What Did Socrates Understand by His 'What Is F?' Question." In G. Vlastos, ed., *Platonic Studies*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 410–27.
- Wolfsdorf, D. 2007. "Philia in Plato's *Lysis*." *HSPH* 103: 235–59.