PHILOSOPHY AND FRIENDSHIP

Mary P. Nichols: Socrates on Friendship and Community: Reflections on Plato's “Symposium,” “Phaedrus,” and “Lysis.” (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. Pp. viii, 229. $80.00.)

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With very few exceptions—Montaigne comes to mind—modern philosophers have little to say about friendship, and even less that is positive. If anything, they worship at the altar of heroic isolation: Descartes trusts only his own ideas, Nietzsche's Zarathustra is a loner who teaches that “our longing for our friend is our betrayer,” and Kierkegaard's pseudonymous identities include the “Hermit” Eremita, “John of Silence,” who is fascinated with the utterly incommunicable understanding of the “knight of faith,” and Johannes Climacus, who writes in *Philosophical Fragments* that his only “dancing partner” is “the thought of death.” While Nietzsche and Kierkegaard argue that Socratic philosophizing fails, and that it does so in such a way as to indicate the superiority of poetry (Nietzsche) or of faith (Kierkegaard), Mary Nichols connects these claims with these thinkers' inattention to the philosophical significance of friendship. Nichols's thoughtful and important book about the essential place of friendship and community in Socratic philosophizing is itself a friendly correction of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, one that develops their best insights in showing how poetry and piety come together in philosophy.

Nichols's story of “love transformed into friendship” (24) implicitly builds on Climacus's observation that, in erotic love, self-love paradoxically reveals itself to be love for another. Her seminal intuition is that friendship involves the experience of a distance as well as a connection between self and other—an experience that is analogous to philosophical wonder and that also furnishes a model for political community (5). In wonder, as in friendship, we experience the familiar as strange and the strange as familiar. The same combination of familiarity and strangeness characterizes the partial presence of the truth in recollection, the primary image of

learning in the Platonic dialogues, as well as the relationship of "participation" that links the Ideas to the particulars. Friendship and community (including the paradigmatic ontological community of the Ideas, which "neither do injustice to one another nor suffer it at one another's hands, but remain all in order according to reason" [*Republic* 500c]) would collapse if otherness gave way entirely to sameness, or sameness to otherness. So, too, philosophy is both necessary and possible only because the wisdom we seek is absent, yet somehow also available—capable of becoming our own, but never fully so.

Nichols presents comprehensive readings of three dialogues on love and friendship. She shows that the *Symposium*'s speeches on love lead naturally to the *Phaedrus*'s teaching that love finds fulfillment in friendship; the *Phaedrus*, in turn, prepares us for the *Lysis*'s clarification of the essential nature of friendship and its relationship to philosophy. In reading the *Symposium*, Nichols traces the way in which Socrates brings rival philosophical positions into friendly cooperation—presenting in Diotima's account of the daimonic nature of eros, for example, a middle ground between Aristophanes' assertion that we are entirely cut off from the gods (which anticipates Climacus's insistence on the absolute otherness of "the god") and Agathon's proto-Nietzschean account of the poet's godlike self-sufficiency. Diotima, Nichols observes, connects "being a lover with being a teacher": one who is pregnant in soul seeks to educate his beautiful beloved, and so to generate and nurture virtue in him (67). In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates makes it clear that the lover-qua-teacher is also a learner, who acquires self-knowledge as he attempts to make his beloved like the god they both follow (115–16). This "journeying together" of lover and beloved involves the reciprocity characteristic of friendship (cf. 256d). Finally, Nichols's reading of the *Lysis* leads her to the beautiful insight that one can never "possess" a friend, because a friend is something one is always in the process of acquiring. Put another way, acquiring and releasing (*ktēsis* and *lysis*) go together in friendship, a point signaled also by the name of Lysis's friend Menexenus ("Remains a Stranger"). And because philosophy and friendship exhibit an analogous combination of distance and connection, familiarity and strangeness, one's pursuit of wisdom is also forever unfinished (167–68; compare Diotima's assertion that we are always simultaneously forgetting and remembering what we once knew [*Symp.* 208a]).

It is in thinking through the *Lysis*'s account of the relationship between goodness and beauty in friendship that Nichols articulates her fullest understanding of friendship's philosophical and political significance. Friendship with the truth is an inadequate model for friendship as such, and not simply because the truth cannot reciprocate the philosopher's affection. A deeper reason is that "if one pursues the

truth because it is one's good," the philosopher "runs the risk of confounding the object of his search with what is good for him, or the true with the useful." The philosopher's understanding must therefore be "informed by an experience of another that resists being reduced to his own desires and needs." This is the experience of friendship, "an experience of one's own as another who cannot be assimilated or subordinated" (179–80). Rivalry thus has an essential place in friendship as well as philosophy—an insight that promises to illuminate, among other things, the internal dynamic of the *Laws*, in which the Athenian Stranger uses the contentiousness of his Spartan and Cretan interlocutors as an engine of philosophical discussion. Reading the Platonic dialogues, which Nichols aptly describes as the recantation of Socrates' criticisms of writing in the *Phaedrus* (144), is also an experience akin to friendship. Through interpretation, the dialogues become the reader's own, "yet they can never be simply his own inasmuch as they depend on the author's text for its 'meaning' or 'intent' (*Phaedrus* 228d)" (193). And because "the community formed by Plato and his readers through his writing … gives readers through their activity of interpreting the experience of another as their own and of their own as other that is essential to friendship," this community "serves not as an alternative or substitute for political communities but as their standard" (194).

Because Socratic philosophizing reflects the structure of friendship, it incorporates both piety and poetry. We trust that the knowledge we seek, like a friend, is somehow our own. This trust is reflected in Socrates' "prophetic" access to the truth (cf. *Phdr*. 242c and *Lys. 2*16d with *Rep.* 505d–506a), access that strikes him as a "godsend" (*hermaion*: *Rep.* 368d). Yet because we also always experience the truth as distant from us, it cannot be fully possessed; philosophical speech is never simply the means of acquiring a truth that exists independently of it, for it always involves a component of production or poetry (*poiēsis*). What is more, poetry and piety are perfected when they befriend each other in philosophy. Held together with piety, poetry is ennobled through its connection with the truth; held together with poetry, piety is moderated by the knowledge of ignorance.

In sum, Nichols's reading of Plato's central dialogues on love and friendship, and her critical yet constructive engagement with Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and the secondary literature (including Nussbaum and Vlastos on love and Bolotin on friendship), combines the resourcefulness and neediness of philosophical eros with the openness and self-awareness of friendship. Her writing thus exhibits the harmony of speech and deed that is the hallmark of genuine philosophers and true friends alike. Read in the spirit in which it is written, her fine book will yield abundant fruit for years to come.