Friendship and Community in Plato’s *Lysis*

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**Abstract:** Plato’s *Lysis* addresses the problem of Plato’s *Republic*—the tension between individual and communal good—by exploring the question of what or who is the friend. Friends, I argue, experience another as their own, and themselves as not wholly their own. Unlike the guardians of Plato’s *Republic*, friends say both mine and not mine of another. Grounded in both self-awareness and belonging, friendship serves as a model for philosophy, and demonstrates the possibility of associations that support our complex identity as human beings and citizens.

Plato’s *Republic* presents the tension between individual and communal good and the difficulty of reconciling the two. This problem, underlying the education of the guardians, becomes explicit when Socrates’ interlocutors object that his proposal for the community of property among the guardians will deprive them of happiness (*Rep. 416d ff*.). Making clear that he is concerned not with individual happiness but with that of the community as a whole, Socrates proceeds to introduce common wives and children, claiming to follow “the proverb that friends have all things in common” (*Rep. 419a–420b; 423e*). Aristotle, too, objects, criticizing the understanding of friendship on which Socrates’ proposals are based. Socrates assimilates friendship, Aristotle says, to the view of love (*eros*) that Aristophanes presents in Plato’s *Symposium*, where lovers desire to grow together. If this actually happened, however, either one or both of them would disappear (*Pol. 1262b10–14*). Friendship so understood results in either a self-aggrandizement at the expense of the other, or the loss of self in the community.

Plato’s *Lysis*, his only dialogue that explicitly discusses what a friend is, might be read as confirmation of the difficulty. David Bolotin, author of one of the most weighty commentaries on this dialogue, argues that Plato presents friendship, understood as a reciprocal relation of love between human beings, as problematic and illusory. Thus he points out that

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1David Bolotin, *Plato’s Dialogue on Friendship: An Interpretation of the Lysis, with a New Translation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977). The *Lysis* has received less attention than some Platonic dialogues in part because it is typically viewed as one of Plato’s early dialogues, whose themes receive more extensive development.

Bolotin, Plato’s Dialogue on Friendship, p. 61, n. 86.

Bolotin, Plato’s Dialogue on Friendship, p. 139. Bolotin does qualify his argument that friendship is a deceptive whole by claiming that it is true at least to the extent that it is love of opposites. But the one reciprocal friendship that Bolotin does not find deceptive between two more or less self-sufficient beings he argues is rare, if it exists at all, and is friendship only in a limited sense, pp. 194–95. In any case, it could not apply to needy human beings. I discuss Bolotin’s position on this “friendship” at the end of the first section of my essay.
preference over mutual friendship. In fact, according to Bolotin, “the love of the good is ultimately inconsistent with our deepest hopes for friendship,” and “the Lysis brings this truth to light.”

My own analysis of Plato’s Lysis concludes that Plato has something more positive to offer us concerning the foundations of human association. Far from replacing friendship with philosophy as the truly satisfying human activity, the dialogue shows that philosophy must be grounded in an experience such as friends share. Inasmuch as friendship is reciprocal, it requires that our friend love us in return, that he or she concur or be willing—something that our friend can give or withhold. Our friend belongs to us, but is not entirely our own. Friends do not become one in the manner desired by the lovers in Aristophanes’ speech in the Symposium (Sym. 192e), or as Aristotle claims the members of the Republic’s city are intended to do. So too the knowledge the philosopher seeks is both his own and elusive. The experience of ourselves as not wholly our own (for we belong to another), and of another as our own—an experience that friendship offers—is analogous to Theaetetus’s experience of wonder, which Socrates calls “the beginning of philosophy” (Th. 155d; see also Phd. 96a–e). Friends remain separate, while they belong together, just as the philosopher’s love of wisdom implies his distance from yet intimate connection to the object of his love. Unlike the guardians of Plato’s Republic, friends can say both “mine” and “not mine” of one another.

My essay on Plato’s Lysis is divided into three parts. The first examines the case for understanding philosophy as the true friendship that individuals seek. The second presents an alternative to this position by arguing that philosophy must take friendship as its model in order to preserve its pursuit of truth. Whereas the first position concludes that community has no essential relation to human fulfillment, the second grounds fulfillment in the experience of human association. In the third part of my essay, I show how the friendship between Lysis and Menexenus that we see in the dialogue supports the latter position rather than the former.

I conclude with reflections about how the dialogue’s understanding of friendship is related to both the dialogue’s inconclusiveness and its form as a Socratic narration. The narrative form of the Lysis, as well as Plato’s dialogue form more generally, I argue, offers a model for how Plato’s understanding of friendship can extend to a larger community.


5For a criticism of Aristotle’s understanding of the friendship in the Republic’s city, see Darrell Dobbs, “Communism,” The Journal of Politics 62 (2000): 499. If Dobbs is correct and a guardian in that city says mine and not mine not of distinct things, but of the very ones he loves, the discussion of friendship in the Lysis, as I interpret it, is not so much a correction of the Republic’s but a development of it.
Friendship as Philosophy

Socrates recounts to unnamed listener(s) how he meets a group of young men, among whom is the frustrated lover Hippothales. Perhaps because Hippothales has heard of Socrates’ claim to expertise in matters of love (see Sym. 177e; Phdr. 227c and 257b), he asks Socrates for advice about how to endear himself to his beloved Lysis (206c). We might wonder whether Socrates’ knowledge of erotic matters issues in the sort of advice the lover seeks, but Socrates does not object. In fact, he offers more than requested. He will demonstrate how a lover should speak to his beloved, he proposes, by talking to Lysis himself. Socrates thus offers to place his ability to refute others (Apol. 21b ff.) in the service of a lover’s capturing his young man, for a humbled Lysis will become more amenable to Hippothales’ advances than one puffed up by Hippothales’ exaggerated songs of praise (206a; 210e). Of course, we should be wary of what the wily Socrates intends. Socrates has a reputation for pursuing beautiful—and promising young men for his own purposes (see Prot. 309a; Alc. 1, 103a; Charm. 153d and 154d). It is therefore conceivable that Socrates is using Hippothales’ commission as a pretext for speaking with Lysis (see Charm. 155a–b). But whether it is Socrates or Hippothales who serves in effect as the go-between for the other, Socrates’ dialogue with Lysis appears to aim not simply (if at all) at the truth of the matter discussed but at an ulterior and self-serving purpose of which its young interlocutor remains unaware. Having as it were conspired, the group proceeds to a palaestra where they find the boy (205e–206c).

Asking Lysis about his parents’ love, Socrates leads the discussion to the conclusion that Lysis will be truly loved by others only if he is useful to them, and hence wise (207d–210d). The inference is obvious—befriend those who can help you to become wise—so that you will be loved. Moreover, in the course of this discussion, Socrates asks Lysis to imagine the two of them together achieving preeminence and power because of their wisdom (209d–210a). It is not surprising that Lysis’ lover finds the

6References in parentheses in this paper, unless otherwise noted, are to Plato’s Lysis. I have used the translation of Bolotin, Plato’s Dialogue on Friendship, although I have made changes from time to time.

7Socrates uses the verb philein to ask Lysis whether his parents love him. There are two Greek verbs which are translated as to love, philēin, which corresponds to friendship (philia), and eran, which corresponds to erotic love (eros). The latter, with its sexual connotations, would be inappropriate to use for the affection between parents and their children. Following Bolotin’s usage in his translation and commentary, I use the verb love to refer to phileo. See Bolotin, Plato’s Dialogue on Friendship, p. 53, n. 10, and p. 55. Once Socrates and his companions move inside the palaestra, the verb eran is used only at 221e–222a, where Socrates applies his definition of friends as kindred to the lover and his beloved, as I discuss later in this essay.
result disconcerting (210e). And however shy Lysis may be (207a–b), he now feels close enough to Socrates to approach him “in a playful and friendly way,” whispering a request that Socrates refute his friend Menexenus just as he refuted him (211a–c).

Accepting the charge of his newfound ally, Socrates continues to narrate, he begins to converse with Menexenus on the pretext that Lysis does not understand something he thinks Menexenus does. It happens to be about friends. Socrates explains that he has desired to acquire a good friend since he was a boy, but that he is so far from having done so that he does not even know how one becomes the friend of another (211d–212b). Finding a friend, Socrates now suggests, is his purpose in discussing with the boys. With this introduction, the question what (or who) is the friend soon becomes the primary one of the dialogue.

One after another, Socrates shows the difficulties with every conception of the friend that Menexenus and later Lysis bring forward. Inasmuch as friend is used in the active sense of one who loves and in the passive sense of one who is loved or dear, Socrates is able to show that neither loving nor being loved can alone define the friend. One who is loved, after all, might not love in return or might even hate the one who loves him, and thus a friend (in the passive sense) might be an enemy, who hates, and the friend (in the active sense) might be an enemy (in the passive sense), inasmuch as he is hated. If a friend is one who both loves and is loved, this dilemma would not arise. But if this is the case, Socrates continues, we could not explain parents who are friends of their children even when their children hate them, or those who are friends to what neither loves nor hates, as wine lovers are friends of wine, or philosophers are friends to wisdom (212b–213c). The argument thus founders on trying to define friendship to include such non-reciprocal relations together with reciprocal ones.8

Socrates and the boys next explore whether likes are friends. They find that likeness cannot define friends, who would not need each other with respect to those things in which they are alike. On the other hand, those who are unlike each other desire not each other but what the other can do for him. Neither can the bad be friends with anyone, because they will be hated rather than loved (214b–c). And the good fail as candidates for friendship, for they need nothing from another—they are self-sufficient (215a–b). Friendship may lie, then, only with someone who is neither good nor bad, who would be a friend to the good, for it is the good that supplies what

8David B. Robinson argues that Plato’s “difficulties” in the dialogue involve his “not realizing the dangers in ambiguity in his definiendum” inasmuch as philon refers to “two distinct topics”—friendship and what human beings pursue, “Plato’s Lysis: The Structural Problem,” Illinois Classical Studies 11 (1986): 73–74, 77, and 82. Of course, if friends are among those things that human beings pursue, as at least Socrates claims is true in his case, the ambiguity in the Greek word points to a deeper difficulty.
he lacks (216e). Inasmuch as ignorance is bad and wisdom good, Socrates can refer to the philosopher, or lover of wisdom, to illustrate his new conception of the friend: “no one bad or stupid loves wisdom,” Socrates points out, for he would not even know that he does not know. But the philosopher, inasmuch as he is seeking wisdom, is not yet wise. He is therefore someone neither good nor bad who is a friend to the good (218a–b).

With this new conception of friend, Socrates claims to “rejoice greatly,” “as if [he] were a hunter and had captured, in a way that [he] cherished, what [he] had been hunting for [him]self” (218c). While friends cherish each other (215a, b), Socrates cherishes his understanding of a friend. Although he is not loved in return by the one he loves, he cannot be hated. In speaking of this definition of friend Socrates claims that he has captured what he has been hunting for himself. He uses the Greek middle voice, which indicates that the speaker is both the actor and the beneficiary of his action. At this point in the discussion Socrates neglects to tell his anonymous listener with which of the two boys he is speaking. The particular friend whom Socrates claims he seeks is becoming as irrelevant to the search as Menexenus and Lysis have become to the discussion.

Socrates first suggests that the good that the one “neither good nor bad” loves is a human being by speaking of a sick person who befriends a doctor (217a). But then he refers to the medical art that the sick person loves (217b). Socrates finally describes the object of the sick person’s desire as health itself, just as the philosopher, who knows that he is not wise, desires wisdom (218b). The sick person loves the doctor who benefits him only because the doctor has the skill to do so, and he loves that skill only because of the good he receives from it. One loves one’s own good.

Socrates thus prepares the next move he makes, when he dramatically claims that it is only a dream that the inquiry has been successful (218c). A friend is friend to his friend because of some other good, just as the sick person seeks a doctor for the sake of health. Since health in this case is the good he seeks, and therefore his friend, Socrates says as he moves back to the passive sense of friend, a friend is a friend for the sake of another friend. If the friend is a friend for the sake of another friend, we have an infinite regress of friends unless we stop at a “first friend,” in relation to which all the instrumental friends are only phantom friends who deceive us (219c–d). Only the first friend is truly a friend, who is not a friend for the sake of another friend. And “all those we assert to be friends” are friends “in name only.” “What is really a friend is that into which all these things spoken about as friendships terminate” (220a–b). Menexenus is understandably “afraid” that Socrates’ argument is correct (220b), for those he considers his friends would be friends in name only. And whether or not they are necessary means to that further good that is the true friend, they deceive us into thinking that they are more than they are.

9Davis, “Philosophy and Friendship,” p. 72.
Moreover, Socrates goes on to argue that we love the good only because of the bad, and therefore if the bad were out of the way, we would not love the good at all. The good is loved only as a remedy for the bad, as the sick person seeks the doctor and the medical art only because he is sick. “If that which is an enemy would go away,” Socrates concludes, “[the good], as it seems, is no longer a friend to us” (220a). Even the good, in light of which all our friends are phantom friends, loses its status as anything more than a drug or remedy for our ills.\textsuperscript{10} Love of the good collapses into self-love.

Socrates’ next twist in the argument makes manifest this implication, even if it momentarily saves the day for friends, as well as for Hippothales, who is silently listening. Even in the absence of the bad, Socrates now maintains, there will still be hunger and thirst and other desires that are neither good nor bad. And since love or eros is such a desire, and the lover befriends the one he loves, friends will still exist in the absence of good and bad. What, then, is a friend? Socrates explains that without the bad, we simply desire what we are in want of, what we are deprived of. We are deprived of that to which we are akin. But if one is kin to another, that other is kin to him. Friendship is reciprocal. And Socrates now generalizes to all desire and love. The beloved, akin to the lover, with respect to his soul, or to some character or aspect of his soul (222a), will love his lover in return. Socrates captures friendship for the lover. As a result of this argument, Hippothales’ love appears as innocent as the friendship between the boys. And if he loves Lysis, the two are soulmates and Lysis will love him in return. The dialogue has circled back to Menexenus’ initial answer that when one loves both are friends (212b). Insofar as the friend is one to whom one is akin, that answer is not as mistaken as it first appears. One is reminded of Aristophanes’ speech in the Symposium, where understanding love as love of one’s own renders love reciprocal.\textsuperscript{11} The problems with Socrates’ argument do not prevent Hippothales from beaming with pleasure (222a–b). Good and bad may have dropped out of the argument, but the lover has not forgotten the good he is seeking in this conversation—capturing his beloved.

\textsuperscript{10}In the context of making this argument that we love our friends on account of the bad for the sake of the good, Socrates strangely slips in the phrase that we love our friends for the sake of an enemy (220e). No one present seems to notice this anomaly. For discussion, see Bolotin, Plato’s Dialogue on Friendship, pp. 175–76; Umphrey, “Eros and Thumos,” pp. 363–68; Bolotin, “Response to Umphrey,” pp. 424–28; and Pangle, Aristotle and the Philosophy of Friendship, pp. 26–28. That discussion turns on the way in which we ourselves for whose sake we love our friends might be an enemy to ourselves. Perhaps, however, the good for whose sake we love our friends, is an enemy, inasmuch as in its pursuit we understand our friends as means, thereby disposing of the very means to our own good that we have at our disposal.

\textsuperscript{11}Friedlander, Plato: The Dialogues, p. 103, and Bolotin, Plato’s Dialogue on Friendship, p. 183.
Hippothales’ obvious pleasure at the result of this argument should make us wary of an argument that carries us beyond good and bad and in effect throws Lysis in his lover’s arms. If deficiency is bad and its relief good, then desire, which is a sign of lack or deficiency, and which at the same time is what moves us toward relief, cannot be understood in the absence of good and bad, as Socrates’ argument now supposes. Good and bad are still present, but only as the satisfaction and frustration of desire rather than something that belongs to the objects of desire, as implied in Socrates’ suggestion that the neither good nor bad might be a friend to the good. In the current argument, in contrast, the good is good because it is one’s own, because it is what one desires (see *Euthphr. 10a*).

Socrates thus exposes Hippothales and the premise of his pursuit of his beloved—the good is what satisfies desire. So does Socrates expose Hippothales to his anonymous listener(s) when he relates that as a result of the argument Hippothales “radiated all sorts of colors” (222b). Hippothales’ triumph, as we might expect, is short-lived. Socrates admits that it is ridiculous to ask what would be the case if bad ceases to be (221a), and in short order demolishes the argument that the kindred are friends. Who are the kindred, he asks. If the kindred are friends they cannot be alike, for example, for a previous argument rejected this possibility, nor can they be good, nor bad, for the same reason (222b–d). Thus Socrates does not rest with the argument that friends are simply those who are our own, no more than he would stop with an argument that says the good is simply that which we desire (cf., 220b). Like the embracing half-beings of Aristophanes’ speech (*Sym. 191a–c*), the discussion must move on. And while Socrates says to the gathering that if the kin are not friends, he “no longer know[s] what to say,” he intends to question one of the others present, as he reveals in his narration of the event (222e). And he no longer tells his hearer(s) what effect the argument has on Hippothales. In fact, Socrates does not mention him again as he recounts the end of the dialogue. The argument leaves him as distant from his beloved as when Socrates first met him: although he spoke about Lysis incessantly to others (204d and 205b), there is no evidence that he has ever spoken with Lysis himself (205a, and 206c).

Although Socrates does not leave Lysis in Hippothales’ grasp, it is not clear that he leaves any room for Lysis’ and Menexenus’ friendship. Where does the *Lysis* leave us on the question of what the friend is? Bolotin attempts to reconcile two of the most appealing conceptions of the friend discussed, that the good are friends and that the kindred are friends. He argues that “beings who are sufficient or good for themselves might be considered akin to their own good—and this means primarily the virtue (*arete*) of their own souls.” While he admits that this “seems to

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leave no room for reciprocity,” he also suggests that the good is “in ‘need’ of a needy being in order for it to be useful or good.”15 There is thus a reciprocity of sorts between an individual who loves his own good, say his own virtue, and the good that he loves. So, even in Socrates’ move to reciprocity at the end of the dialogue, Bolotin finds confirmation that one is primarily a friend to oneself. The kindred are friends, for an individual and his own good are kindred.

Bolotin does acknowledge that those who have become good, “whose more or less lasting self-sufficiency includes the perfection of wisdom,” might “even without needing one another, and longing for one another in order to become whole,” still “being kindred, desire and enjoy one another’s company.” Theirs might be “among the purest, if not the deepest, of ‘friendships’.” Their friendship is pure because it is not selfish, for these friends do not need each other. And while each may delight in the company of the other, they can take it or leave it. Bolotin admits this is friendship “only in a limited sense.”14 The relation of these “friends” is less deep, presumably, than a human being’s love of the good for himself. In the end, self-love characterizes even the deepest recesses of the soul, including that of the philosopher, who is less deceived by “phantom” friends than others. The philosopher most of all, then, is a true friend to himself, as he more clear-mindedly than others seeks his good.15 This account of the dialogue’s teaching still presents friendship as love of one’s own, even if it is understood as the philosopher’s pursuit of his own good. If Socrates merely demonstrates the imperfection of human relationships in comparison to the philosopher’s pursuit of his own good, his statement at the end of the dialogue that he considers himself and Lysis and Menexenus to be friends would surely be ironic a polite and gratifying closing belied by the argument.16 But irony is never simply falsehood. In the remaining sections of this essay, I attempt to put forth an alternative view of friendship that takes seriously, as Socrates appears to do, the boys’ friendship, as well as Socrates’ own engagement with them. This alternative will have more promising implications for political communities.

15For another understanding of the relation between love of the good and love of one’s own in the Lysis, see Geier, Plato’s Erotic Thought, esp. pp. 115–35. In his analysis, however, as in Bolotin’s, friendship between a human being and his good which he lacks and pursues is prior to that between human beings and is essentially different from and superior to it (see, e.g., pp. 130–34 and 142).
16This seems to be Bolotin’s view of it—consistent with his interpretation of the dialogue’s position on friendship, Plato’s Dialogue on Friendship, p. 199.
Philosophy as Friendship

If philosophy replaces reciprocal friendship between human beings as the true human fulfillment, what would its character be? The issue of wisdom, that which the philosopher pursues and loves, first comes up for discussion in Socrates’ initial exchange with Lysis, when he questions him about whether his parents love him. If they do, as Lysis readily admits, why do they prevent him from doing what he likes? It is not simply his youth, Socrates points out, for his parents do entrust certain things to him in spite of his age, namely, those things he understands (209c). From this observation it is a short step away, at least under the guidance of Socrates’ questions, from the conclusion that as soon as Lysis becomes wise, his parents, his neighbors, his fellow Athenians, even the Great King of Asia himself will turn themselves and all that is theirs over to Lysis. He will then be free to do whatever he likes, and to rule everyone. Moreover, he will be loved by all if he is wise, because, Socrates explains, he will be useful to them (209c–210b). Wisdom offers freedom, power, and the love of others.

When Socrates turns from Lysis’ parents, whom Lysis admits will entrust themselves and all that is their own to him when he becomes wise, to his neighbor, Socrates asks Lysis whether his neighbor has the same standard as his parents (209c–d). Lysis supposes he does, but Socrates’ use of horos, the word translated as standard, calls attention to a problem with Lysis’ answer. Horos in Greek, means boundary, or definition, and specifically refers to the boundary stone separating one piece of property from another. Lysis’ father and his neighbor do have the same horos, but as a boundary it both connects their properties and also distinguishes them. Their common standard is a boundary that keeps them separate. Lysis ignores this aspect of horos in his answer, just as he accepts a vision of his dominating the world. When Socrates refuses to repeat with Menexenus this conversation about why we need wisdom, as Lysis asks him to do (211a), and asks instead how one becomes a friend of another, Socrates turns to a way of correcting Lysis’ understanding.

If one pursues the truth because it is one’s good, one’s good would become the measure of the truth rather than the truth the measure of one’s good. The philosopher would resemble the lover Hippothales, who wants to know how to capture his beloved, or even the individual who emerges in Socrates’ discussion with Lysis who pursues knowledge out of self-love, and consequently seeks the knowledge that will make him loved by others and hence able to rule them. This initial exchange between Socrates and Lysis that demonstrates that knowledge alone justifies his ruling his parents, his neighbors, fellow Athenians, and foreigners alike does not foreshadow the notion that the deepest friendship is between the philosopher and his own good. To the contrary, it suggests the dangers of that very conception. Insofar as one loves the truth because he loves his own good, he
runs the risk of confounding the object of his search with what is good for him, or the true with the good. He would be like Hippothales, who supposes that he praises his beloved when he praises only himself—the good that would be his if he captures his beloved (205d–e). Philosophy in such a case would not be a refuge from the illusion of phantom friends but would fall prey to a version of that same illusion. Philosophy cannot be a means of escaping illusion unless the philosopher’s understanding of the world is informed by an experience of another that resists being reduced to his own desires and needs, and therefore cannot be understood simply as a means to his own ends.

Love alone cannot serve as this experience. To be sure, a lover needs and loves someone other than himself. As Hippothales’ case illustrates, the lover can long for his beloved from a distance (see 207b), but he is also eager to capture him. His beloved either remains other or becomes his own. Unlike love, friendship is necessarily reciprocal. Of course a friend might not have loved in return, but if he did not do so, he would not become a friend, whereas a beloved who even hates could still be loved. One’s love does not secure another’s love in return (212b–c). One cannot become a friend unless another does so as well. One’s friend is therefore other, since one depends on his loving in return, and also one’s own, since he does love in return. Because friends do not merge into one, they can be considered a pair. This is how Menexenus understands his relationship with Lysis. When Socrates first asks Menexenus which one of them is the older, he does not use Lysis’ name (207b–c). Menexenus assumes that when Socrates refers to him and another, Lysis is the other. And Socrates knows, or at least suspects, that he can speak in that way to him and be understood. The boys do not hesitate to acknowledge they are friends when Socrates asks (207c). Yet Lysis finds his friend contentious, and Menexenus admits to Socrates that he and Lysis dispute (211a–b and 207c). The rivalry between friends, as Plato portrays existing between Lysis and Menexenus, at the same time results from and preserves this experience of their own as other, which is necessary for their being friends. Lysis is annoyed by Menexenus’ contentiousness, but he would not find it so disconcerting if Menexenus were not his friend (see also 213d–e).

It is not, then, that philosophy serves as the experience that friends ultimately seek, free of the illusions of friendship. Rather, philosophy must find its model in the experience of friends—an experience of one’s own as another who cannot be assimilated or subordinated. The whole by which we might be deceived is not an illusion that our friendships are wholes but that we ourselves are. The experience of friends offers us access to a world that must be known rather than mastered, and one that is not so radically different from ourselves that it must remain unknown. The friend who emerges here plays in part, but only in part, the role of the beautiful in the Symposium’s account of the philosopher’s ascent (Sym. 210a ff.). When in
the *Lysis* Socrates and the boys become perplexed in their efforts to define the friend, Socrates compares the friend to the beautiful—which is smooth and sleek and therefore can “slide past [them] and give [them] the slip” (216c–d). The beautiful moves us, but cannot be possessed. It cannot become our own, but remains elusive. But Socrates immediately couples the beautiful with the good (216d; see also 207a).17 We want to possess the good things so that we will be happy (see *Sym.* 204d–205a). Friends fall between the beautiful and the good, and give us access to both. Socrates calls a friend a “possession,” but claims to be “erotically disposed to acquiring [or possessing] friends” (211e–212a). “Possessing” a friend is an ongoing activity.18

The love of parents for their children has on several occasions, as we have seen, entered the discussion of friendship, whether Socrates points to the parent who loves his child or the child who is loved as the example of a friend. Socrates nevertheless dismisses the parent-child relationship as a model for friendship, for it lacks reciprocity. Parents love their children, Socrates points out, regardless of whether their children love them, and even if their children hate them, as sometimes happens when they are punished by their parents (212a–213e). Later Socrates uses a father’s love for his son to illustrate the person who loves his friend for the sake of some further friend, who is truly a friend: like that person, the loving father cares for other things only for the sake of his son whom he “values more highly than all of his other possessions” (219e). Whereas a beloved is not sufficiently his lover’s own for their relationship to serve as a model for philosophy, a child is not sufficiently other from his parents for their relationship to do so. After all, children belong to their parents in a way that their parents do not belong to them. Children are extensions of their parents, through whom they preserve themselves (*Sym.* 206c–207a; Aristotle, *NE* 1161b22–24). Even when parents educate their children, as *Lysis*’ parents do him (208c–d), their self-love may be primary. Parents’ memories are better served the better their children are. When Socrates refuses *Lysis*’ request to repeat their conversation with Menexenus, he drops a discussion about parents and their children. He asks instead how one becomes the friend of another (212a), a question that leads as we have seen to that of who or what is the friend. Socrates is interested in those who become friends, rather than in those who are born friends, as children are born dear to

17 Even in the *Symposium*, where the philosophic ascent seems rather selfless, the love of beauty always culminates in generation, which links the lover of beauty to the community (e.g., *Sym.*, 212a). See Mary P. Nichols, “Socrates’ Contest with the Poets in Plato’s *Symposium*,” *Political Theory* 32 (2004).

18 If possessing is an activity rather than a static condition, this may result from its combining capturing with releasing. The Greek meaning of *Lysis*’ name is not merely dissolution (see my discussion in the last section of this essay), but also release. This latter meaning may have influenced Plato’s choice of the title of the dialogue.
their parents. One’s own is more clearly other if it has not always been one’s own, and if it might not always be one’s own.

Socrates turns to Menexenus and Lysis for help in answering his question about the friend “inasmuch as [they] are experienced” (212a). The discussion of the friend will start with their experience. It is this experience that could help the lover Hippothales, for it is love itself that must be captured by and transformed into friendship. Hippothales’ own language at the outset foreshadows this, for the lover wants Socrates to advise him how to become dear (prophiles) to his beloved (206c). He would not really be satisfied by his capture, even though he does not understand this. Like Socrates, he too is seeking a friend. The dialogue’s move from his love to the friendship of the two boys reflects this possibility.

Lysis and Menexenus as Friends

When Menexenus and Lysis first join Socrates’ group, Socrates asks Menexenus to compare himself with Lysis in age, birth, beauty, and wealth.19 In response to Socrates’ questions, Menexenus admits that he and Lysis dispute as to which is the older, and which is more nobly born. As to whether they dispute about which of them is the more beautiful, the two boys merely laugh when Socrates asks (207c). Whatever difference in beauty separates them, their laughter is shared.20 With respect to their relative wealth, Socrates does not have to ask, he says, since friends hold possessions in common, and the boys admit they are friends (207c). Their sharing is consistent with the differences between them, which Socrates’ questions highlight. Socrates even has other comparisons in mind to ask the boys to make which of the two is wiser and more just when Menexenus is called away. Since they are only “in the middle” (207d), as Socrates points out in his narration of events, we must wonder where the discussion is going, and why Socrates asks these young friends to compare themselves with each other.

It is possible that Socrates’ questions, calling attention to the boys’ rivalry, might come between them. But reflecting on and speaking about their relationship does not necessarily have negative consequences. Indeed, the boys’ responses to Socrates’ questions point to the complex bonds that hold friends together, bonds that include agreement about some things as well as dispute about others. Friends are both like and unlike, and can

19 This brief exchange between Socrates and Menexenus is not often discussed in the literature on the Lysis. Paul Friedlander ignores its existence, for example, when he observes that “Socrates will talk first with Lysis and then with Menexenus,” Plato: The Dialogues, First Period, p. 93. Bolotin and Geier are exceptions, Plato’s Dialogue on Friendship, pp. 80–81, and Plato’s Erotic Thought, pp. 87–90.

20 This is true, whether they laugh at the question because the greater beauty of one of them is obvious (Bolotin, Plato’s Dialogue on Friendship, p. 81), or because each supposes his friend the more beautiful (Geier, Plato’s Erotic Thought, p. 88).
reflect on the ways in which they are so. And their reflection can take the form of disputing and even laughing. Not in spite of their differences but because of their reaction to their differences, especially their laughter, they are friends. In this brief exchange Socrates begins to imitate the matchmaking god whom he claims to find in Homer’s Odyssey, who makes friends acquainted with each other (214b). But Socrates finds more than is there in the poem, which simply reads that a god brings likes together (Od., 17. 218). It is Socrates who adds, “and makes them acquainted,” or “leads them to know each other.” And it is Socrates, not Homer, who calls them friends.

When we consider Menexenus and Lysis we find boys who are neither simply good nor simply bad. Rather they are mixed beings, who are more or less nobly born, and just, and wise, as assumed by Socrates’ questions.21 Their being friends, as these comparisons indicate, cannot be understood apart from their attributes, including their virtues. We cannot know them by some unchanging identity or form, underlying their changing attributes, something neither good nor bad, for it is their attributes that identify and form them. When at the beginning of the Lysis Socrates does not recognize Lysis’ name, one of those present claims that Socrates cannot be “ignorant of his form (eidos), for this alone is enough to know him by.” Form here means his appearance, what can be seen of him. Socrates wants to know other things about him as well, for he immediately asks, “whose son [is he]?” (204e). When eidos is used again in the Lysis, it is in connection with the soul rather than the body, and Socrates associates it with the soul’s character (ethos) and ways (tropoi) (222a). Similarly, after hearing from his companions of Lysis’ beauty, Socrates proclaims upon seeing him that he is both “beautiful and good” (204b and 207a; cf. Charm., 154b–e).

When Socrates speaks of the “neither bad nor good,” he speaks in the neuter. But when he speaks of “us,” who love the good, he says that we “are in the middle of the bad and the good” (220d). If we are in the middle of the bad and good, both are present to us, and we cannot be understood apart from them. Socrates says that the bad is present to the neither good nor bad in a way that does not make it bad, just as white dye rubbed onto his interlocutor’s blond hair would not make it white. His hair under such circumstances, Socrates observes, would be “neither white nor black” (217d). Blond hair, however, is “neither white nor black,” not because its white lead is only rubbed on, but because it is blond. Socrates’ example of blond hair thus qualifies his language of “neither/nor.” We are not as undefined as that language suggests, even if one day our blond hair will become white. It would be unfortunate if we were. If we are neither one thing or

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21 For a good analysis of the differences between Lysis and Menexenus as they are revealed in the action of the dialogue, see Tessitore, “Plato’s Lysis,” pp. 119–20. Geier argues that Lysis’ friendship with Menexenus stands in the way of his developing his excellent nature, Plato’s Erotic Thought, pp. 87–90, while Bolotin suggests a greater affinity between Socrates and Menexenus, Plato’s Dialogue on Friendship, p. 186.
another, with attributes that being merely rubbed on could also be rubbed off, we would not be distinct from any other human being. No one would have cause to single us out as a friend, nor would we have cause to single out another. Whatever relationships we formed would be no deeper or more enduring than our rubbed on attributes.

Nor is Socrates’ other model for how something can be present to something else, hair that has become white through aging, an adequate model for understanding ourselves. Human beings cannot be reduced to their attributes. We understand who Lysis and Menexenus are not simply from the attributes that they compare, but also from their activity of comparing. We see these friends not simply in their relative ages and noble birth, for example, but also in what they say about themselves, in their disputing, in their laughing together, and in their admission that they are friends. It is our self-awareness, according to Socrates, that makes us unlike one so “stupid and senseless” that he does not know his own ignorance and also one, perhaps a god, already wise (218a–b). We know that we can know more than we do, and that we can become more than we have yet become. And we are aware that our doing so is not as automatic as our hair’s becoming white through aging. It is our self-awareness that puts us in the middle. It is a sign of our freedom. And although self-awareness makes friendship contingent—for friends must admit that they are friends, they must be willing—it also makes it possible. If friends were present to each other as white is present to hair due to aging, there would be no space between them, no separation, and no freedom. Friends must be able to go away, as Lysis and Menexenus do at the end of the dialogue, while being able to come back, as Menexenus does earlier. The Lysis is the only Platonic dialogue in which one of the characters goes away and comes back to converse. And it is the only dialogue explicitly about friends.

It is appropriate that Socrates’ conversation with Menexenus about him and Lysis be left in the middle. Of course, this may seem accidental, as many things about friendships are, for Menexenus is called away. But Menexenus does return, and Socrates does not bring the conversation back to the point at which it left off. If Menexenus’s discussion about Lysis and himself is to continue, perhaps it will be with Lysis himself (see 211a–b). Socrates of course could push his questions further, but at some point reflecting on their friendship must become something they can do without Socrates. Only if friends can incorporate into their own friendship the matchmaking in which Socrates engages, only if their friendship can survive Socrates’ going away, can friendship endure. One must ultimately become one’s own matchmaker in order to be matched. To acquire a good friend requires becoming a good friend. Socrates thus asks not how one captures a beloved, as a lover might, but how one becomes the friend of another (212a).

—See also Davis, “Philosophy and Friendship,” pp. 75–76.
At the end of his discussion with the boys, Socrates admits that they have not determined "what [or whether] a friend is," and that he has in mind to question one of the older lads there (223a–b). He thus leaves the discussion with the boys about the friend, as he leaves his discussion with them about themselves, in the middle (207d). It is appropriate that he leave this discussion inconclusive as well. For whether or not anyone can say what a friend is, only friends can know whether a friend exists. That knowledge comes from the friends' experience of friendship, including their reflecting on that experience, from their sharing in some things and differing in others (see 222a–b), from their contending, and from their laughing together.

Lysis and Menexenus, it is believed, are the youngest interlocutors in the Platonic corpus.  

It would not be correct to assume that their youth casts doubt on their experience of friendship on the ground that being so young they could not have had extensive experience of anything. Rather, their youth shows that the experience of friendship even of boys so young manifests in a simple way what friends are and what Socrates himself seeks. Friends are not more or less self-sufficient beings who enjoy each other's company in a pure but not very deep relationship because free of self-interest. The satisfaction of such beings lies elsewhere than in each other, and they are similar in their self-sufficiency. Such "friends" are therefore neither sufficiently each other's own nor sufficiently other to give each other an experience of his own as other, or of another as his own. It is this experience that supports the pursuit of truth, suggesting both the necessity and possibility of that pursuit, necessary because one's own is experienced as other, possible because another is experienced as one's own. Friendship itself cultivates both self-awareness and belonging.

Friendship so conceived occupies a mean between the excesses of lovers that Aristotle indicates—the disappearance of one in the other or the disappearance of both in the whole they form, that is, the capture sought by Hippothales, or the "friendship" underlying the Republic's community of wives and children. It is friends, not lovers and beloveds, who resist such political possibilities (cf. Sym. 182b–c). Inasmuch as friendship cultivates both self-awareness and belonging, it offers support for our complex identity as human beings and citizens.


24It is also the case that being so young Lysis would be less likely to have had contact with his lover. Plato therefore can use Hippothales' love of him to indicate more clearly the alienating character of an erotic relationship, as opposed to friendship. At the same time, a young beloved seems more vulnerable, easier to capture. Plato thus can use Lysis' youth to suggest as well the potentially tyrannical character of love.
Friendly Communities

Even if the *Lysis*’ inconclusiveness is appropriate to its subject matter, the dialogue seems to end on an ominous note. Although Socrates has in mind to continue the discussion with one of the older boys, his plans are interrupted when *Lysis*’ and *Menexenus*’ pedagogues arrive to take them home. Pedagogues, literally those “who lead boys,” were typically slaves entrusted with bringing boys to and from school and watching over them. Socrates and the others, he recounts, try to drive the pedagogues away. He may intend to talk to someone else, but it appears important to him that the two boys remain to hear what is said. When their confrontation with the pedagogues is unsuccessful, Socrates reports, “we dissolved the gathering” (223b). Since dissolved is *dielusamen*, the *Lysis* ends as its name foreshadows, in *lusis*, a dissolution. The shuffle at the end might appear as a confrontation between Socrates and the city, at least as represented by the fathers or their representatives the pedagogues.25 That is, the fathers reassert their authority over their children, and Socrates’ pursuit of the question of the friend is at least for the moment thwarted.

The pedagogues, however, do not necessarily represent the political community, nor does the dissolution of the gathering necessarily suggest a threat to philosophy. The pedagogues do not intend to break up the meeting, or even to take the boys away from a conversation with Socrates; they intend only to take the boys home. They are merely doing their job—one that *Lysis* alluded to earlier (211b). The boys’ going away does not preclude their coming back for further discussion, as *Menexenus* did earlier. Going away and coming back is in fact characteristic of friends, for they are not as inseparable as Aristophanes’ lovers wish they could be. Socrates earlier imagined another conversation with Lysis at a future date (211b), and readers of the Platonic corpus know that *Menexenus* returns on at least two occasions—in the dialogue bearing his name and on the day of Socrates’ death (Phd. 59b).

Socrates says to the boys as they are going away that the three of them have become ridiculous, “I an old man and you,” for it will be said that “we believe ourselves to be friends—for I place myself among you—but have not been able to discover what a friend is” (223b). Just when the representatives of the boys’ fathers effect the end of the gathering, Socrates holds out the possibility of another larger community—those who have been listening to their conversation at the palaestra—who will speak about their comic state: the contradiction between their belief about themselves and their inability to articulate exactly what it means. Just as another might be helped to self-knowledge by a friend (see, e.g., *Alc. I.*, 132d–e), Socrates imagines that their companions might remind them of their ridiculous

25For a version of this interpretation, see Bolotin, *Plato’s Dialogue on Friendship*, p. 198.
pretensions (see *Apol.* 41e). Indeed, Aristophanes had some years earlier in his play the *Clouds* prompted Athens to laugh at Socrates for his pretensions to wisdom. If Aristophanes’ was a friendly criticism, however, his criticism found its way to the Athenian law court, where it was no longer a laughing matter (*Apol.* 19c; see *Euthphr.* 3c). That the relation between the philosopher and the political community remain a friendly one depends on the success of the very view of friendship that arises from the *Lysis*. Inasmuch as friendship does not disappear into philosophy, and philosophy maintains itself by taking friendship as its standard, philosophy defines itself in terms of ordinary human experience. There can be no radical separation between philosophy and non-philosophy. In contrast to *eros*, which can remain alienated from its object or seek its conquest, friendship is a model for a political community in which some things are held in common, while others remain private (*Arist. Pol.* 1260b36–61a9). If members of political communities in the manner of friends say not mine as well as mine of one another, and philosophers say mine as well as not mine of their fellow citizens, political communities would allow philosophers space to philosophize, and philosophers would understand what they have in common with non-philosophers. Such friendly relations might be fostered by publicization of such demonstrations as the *Lysis*, whether we understand that demonstration as Socrates’ rescue of a boy from the pursuit of a lover or as a showing that the fulfillment of *eros* lies not in capture but in friendship. Only then might laughter remain a friendly reminder of ignorance—for both Socrates and his interlocutors rather than a prelude to inevitable or tragic conflict.

The *Lysis* does not conclude simply with the dissolution of the gathering, moreover, for Socrates proceeds to tell the story after it happens. That is, Plato incorporates his drama Socrates’ publicizing the event. It is to his anonymous listener(s), as we have seen, that Socrates reveals what the audience at the palaestra would not know—what Lysis whispers to Socrates, for example, or that Socrates sees the effect of the discussion on Hippothales. Being there in this instance does not yield as full an understanding of events as hearing about them from Socrates (see *Euthyd.* 271a ff.). It is only in his narration, for example, that Socrates mentions his intention to question one of the older lads just before the discussion ends. Because the gathering breaks up before Socrates turns to another interlocutor, only the one(s) silently listening to Socrates’ story of his conversation—and of course the readers of Plato’s dialogues—learn that Socrates has further discussion in mind. We see a middle when those present see only an end.

On the other hand, as narrator Socrates does not tell his listener everything that those present would know. It is during the part of the discussion in which Socrates neglects to mention the identity of his interlocutor, for example, that Socrates refers to his blond hair. Had we been there, we could have seen which of the two has blond hair. Of course, had we been there, or even if the dialogue were in dramatic rather than narrated form, we would know which of the two boys answered Socrates’ questions
about the “neither good nor bad.” As narrator, Socrates makes the conversation accessible to us, but he also separates us from it. We know only what Socrates tells us. But even if a dialogue is dramatic rather than narrated, so that there is no middle man who reports it to us, the dialogue reveals only what Plato tells us. Narration thus makes clear the truth about all Platonic dialogues—that they reveal only in part. They could never become ours by a process as automatic as hair becomes white through aging.

Plato requires in his reader one who is, as Hippothales says of Lysis, “fond of listening” (206d). If someone merely listened, however, what he heard might go in one ear and out the other, or he might absorb it without understanding. Lysis, Socrates indicates, must be more than fond of listening, for he asks whether Lysis “can be made to converse with him” (206c). Inasmuch as Platonic dialogues require interpretation, they require a reader who is not merely fond of listening but who can be made to converse. Because Plato wrote dialogues, so that a reader to understand must interpret, Platonic writing is neither merely rubbed on nor perfectly rubbed in. Indeed, it can be present to him only in the manner of a friend, for it becomes his own while remaining other.

We wonder if Socrates draws his anonymous listener(s) into conversation. We have no way of knowing. But this is as it should be, just as it is fitting that Socrates leaves Menexenus’ exploration of his friendship with Lysis to the friends themselves. The understanding of friendship that emerges in the Lysis requires experience, whether it be of a friend or of a Platonic dialogue. Plato’s writing is thus modeled on the understanding of friendship that emerges from the Lysis. In his relation to his readers Plato demonstrates how friendship can be translated into a larger community, one that transcends any given pair of friends and that endures over time. Such a community does not serve as an alternative to political communities, but as their standard.

26Davis notes that when Socrates’ interlocutor does not understand, Socrates seems to rub him with an argument that he does not absorb, “Philosophy and Friendship,” p. 75.