

The 'First Friend' in Plato's *Lysis*

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The 'first friend' argument introduces the most peculiar concept in the whole of Plato's *Lysis*. Ostensibly, with this argument Socrates establishes a certain hierarchy of friendships, where the highest is all that matters and everything below is simply in service towards it. This notion is just as disturbing to Socrates as it is to the contemporary reader. However, a closer look reveals that the idea of the 'first friend' is not just a clarification and deepening of the argument in the dialogue up to this point, but also that it presents a kind of friendship which appears to be entirely unconditional for the first time. The argument concerning the 'first friend' naturally emerges out of a latent problem in the preceding conception of friendship. Socrates had felt like a "successful hunter" with his previous definition: "that which is neither good nor bad is a friend to the good on account of the presence of the bad."¹ Yet he will go on to proclaim, "Our wealth has been a dream!" and says, "I'm afraid we've fallen into arguments about friendship that are no better than con artists."²

Socrates' definition of friendship appears to have overlooked a key aspect of 'the good' that, according to this definition, is a friend to us. In his definition, as in earlier parts of the argument, one finds a certain interchangeability between the friend and 'the good'. For example, Socrates says, "It turns out that only what is neither good nor bad is a friend to the good, and *only to the good*."³ The problem with this picture is that not everything is loved simply because it is good purely and simply. Goods often have an instrumental character; they are loved "for the sake of something" else.⁴

The argument begins with an exchange between Socrates and Lysis on this point:

Soc.: Whoever is a friend, is he a friend to someone or not?

Lys.: He has to be a friend to someone.

Soc.: For the sake of nothing and on account of nothing, or for the sake of something and on account of something?

Lys.: For the sake of something and on account of something.⁵

This notion of 'for the sake of' provides a certain ordering and succession to the various goods, insofar as goods which are for the sake of something else are subordinate to that other good. But, as the argument begins to make clear, Socrates does not take this 'for the sake of' to be an accidental property of the friend. It is rather the friend's defining

¹ 218c. All translations are from Plato, *Lysis*, trans. Stanley Lombardo, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper, (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997): 687-708. All Greek text is from *Platonis Opera*, vol. 4, ed. John Burnet, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946).

² 218c-d.

³ 217a.

⁴ (ἕνεκά του) 218d.

⁵ 218d.

character. In the example of the doctor, the patient is a friend to medicine not because medicine is good in its own right, but rather for the sake of becoming healthy. His dearness to the medicine rests solely upon it being useful to him as a means to become healthy. If the patient picked up the wrong prescription and the medicine was not effective towards the goal of becoming healthy, the patient would not find it dear. Likewise, Socrates earlier excluded the healthy body from being friends with a doctor because “it has no need of a doctor's help. It's fine (ικανῶς, literally 'sufficient') just as it is.”⁶ What is thus beginning to emerge is a concept of friendship and goodness as utility, the useful. Where there is no utility, or no 'for the sake of something', there is no friendship.

But the argument does not stop there. If we desire health and it is dear to us, then, according to the argument, it must be dear to us for the sake of something else; and that goal of health must be dear to us for the sake of another thing, and so on and so forth. Thus, the argument is threatened by an infinite regress, spurred on by the fact that every object of love is dear to us because it is useful for the sake of something else. Socrates finally puts a stop to this regression by saying, "Aren't we going to have to give up going on like this? Don't we have to arrive at some first principle (ἀρχήν) that goes back to the first friend (πρῶτον φίλον), something for the sake of which we say that all the rest are friends too?"⁷ The 'first friend' is thus the point at which all of our various relations and instrumental goods converge and reach their consummation. The first friend prevents the friendship from spinning off into infinity, in which case friendship would have no ultimate ground or justification. As one scholar put it, it is “the ultimate object of love which gives sense and coherence to each particular aspiration.”⁸

According to some scholars, in this passage Socrates is attempting to explain why we love good things.⁹ This thesis can be true in the sense described above, that each particular love or aspiration finds its goal in the first friend. Without the first friend, nothing else would be dear to us; nothing would present itself as a means to it, so that, in a sense, the end creates the means. However, the first friend cannot explain why it itself is loved.¹⁰ It is impossible to explain one's love for the first friend by referring to some other principle or reason, otherwise the first friend would not really be *first*, but this other thing would be. If one wishes to speak conservatively, all the first friend can do is show that all our loves and relations tend towards a single point, for whose sake they exist, but it cannot explain the origin or nature of our love for that very thing. At least in this part of the argument, our love for the first friend is simply a given.

⁶ 217a.

⁷ 219d.

⁸ Platon, *Charmide/Lysis*, traduction inédite, introduction et notes par Louis-André Dorion (Paris: Flammarion, 2004), 205.

⁹ Francisco Gonzalez, “Plato's *Lysis*: An Enactment of Philosophical Kinship”, *Ancient Philosophy* 15 (1995): 80; Terry Penner, and Christopher Rowe, *Plato's Lysis* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 108-109.

¹⁰ Gonzalez at least seems to acknowledge this at Gonzalez, 81.

In the first instance, Socrates' main concern is to figure out how this first friend differs from all those other friends. Indeed, he tells us that this is the concern which prompts the whole argument. He says, "This is what I am talking about, the possibility that all the other things that we have called friends for the sake of that thing may be deceiving us, like so many phantoms (εἶδωλα ἅττα) of it, and that it is that first thing which is truly (ἀληθῶς) a friend."¹¹ In the face of this first friend, all other friendships appear to be nullified; they simply bear the appearance or the name of friend. Later Socrates says that the first friend is the 'real' friend (τῷ ὄντι), whereas in the other cases "it is clear that we are merely using the word 'friend.'"¹² This was the cause of Socrates' initial outburst where he said, "Lysis and Menexenus, our wealth (πεπλουτηκέναι) has been a dream."¹³ Socrates is here referring back to his first interaction with the boys, where he decided not to ask which of them was richer (πλουσιωτέρον) at 207c, because, according to a proverb, friends have everything in common. By this reference, Socrates suggests that everything that the three had come to share as friends has turned out to be an illusion. Much to Socrates' dismay, this argument jeopardizes not only their account of friendship, but the very friendship that had been forming between Socrates and the boys.

The conclusion that Socrates seems to be leading towards is that these instrumental friends are worth nothing in themselves, and that someone who possessed this first friend would not really be a friend to anything else. In some ways, this is a reiteration of the relation between ends and means that Socrates discusses earlier: someone who is healthy is not a friend to medicine, since he has no need for it; and the wise ones, whether they are human or divine, do not philosophize.¹⁴ When it comes to the first friend, however, this notion takes on a much greater significance. For the implication seems to be that if one were to possess this first friend, nothing else would be at all good or dear to us. It is to this end that Socrates says, "The real friend is surely that in which all these so-called friendships terminate."¹⁵ The Greek word that is translated as 'terminate' is τελευτῶσιν; they literally reach their *telos*. This conveys the sense both of things simply ceasing to be or stopping, but it also conveys the sense of things reaching their perfection or completion. To state this relation positively, the other friends are not simply nullified in the face of the first friend, but actually bring it about and procure it, so that they could be said to reach their perfection in it - even if this perfection is to serve as a means. This is why, despite not being real friends, they can still bear the name and appearance of friendship.

Socrates gives a very provoking example to demonstrate the radical difference between the first friend and all the others: parental love. He describes a father who

¹¹ 219d.

¹² 220b.

¹³ 218c.

¹⁴ 218a.

¹⁵ 220b.

"values his son more highly than all his other possessions."¹⁶ If someone were expecting Socrates's first principle of friendship to be something like the Good of the *Republic*, this analogy might appear surprisingly mundane, if not deeply problematic. Yet, the image of the father and the son presents a vivid image of complete and unconditional devotion. The problem Socrates addresses with this image is whether the father, in light of his complete love for his son, would "also value anything else."¹⁷ In other words, the question is whether anyone who is in the immediate possession of a 'first friend' would love anything else, or whether this first friend makes all other loves irrelevant.

Socrates continues with his example by asking if the child had drunk hemlock and fallen deathly ill, would the father value wine if he thought it could save him, or the cup which bore the wine?¹⁸ The scenario that Socrates sets up is significant. In order to consider whether the father would love anything else, Socrates resorts to suggesting that the son is in danger. The implication seems to be that under ordinary circumstances, where the relation to the son is secure, the father would not love anything other than his son. On a superficial level, the example appears to be a reworking of the earlier example of the doctor; there are the same three basic elements: sickness, health, and medicine. But what is different here is that sickness is only responsible for the father's love of the means, the medicine. His love for the son has nothing to do with the sickness; he loves his son prior to and independently of any sort of reference to sickness that befalls him.

What does it mean to say that the father acts for the sake of the son? Aristotle came to distinguish two distinct senses of 'for the sake of': on the one hand, something can be for the sake of something as a means to a purpose or goal, on the other hand, something can also be 'for the sake of the something' in the sense of being in the interest or the benefit of something. In the example of the father and son, both of these types coalesce. The father acts for the sake of preserving his relation to his son, which requires that he act in the son's interest by saving his life. However, the good for the sake of which the father acts is not something that is necessarily good or beneficial for him. This is not such a great problem. As Gadamer points out, "what emerges when one ascends to higher and higher means is not greater and greater utility but another mode of being altogether: that which is 'good' *eo ipso*."¹⁹ What we see is in the case of the father is rather love in the sense of devotion. All of this might seem quite obvious, but it is important because it falls outside of the conception of friendship as loving something good on account of the bad, and it seems to anticipate, and be immune to, Socrates' later criticism that they had been talking about the good as if it were simply a remedy for the bad.²⁰

¹⁶ 219d.

¹⁷ 219d.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Logos and Ergon in Plato's *Lysis*", in *Dialogue and Dialectics*, trans. P. Christopher Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 17.

²⁰ 220e.

Unlike the sick man who takes medicine in order to become healthy, the father does not derive any benefit from attempting to save his son. The whole example of the father and son is meant to draw out this stark contrast between the first friend and the intermediary friends. Socrates concedes that the father would indeed value the wine and the cup if he thought it could save his son.²¹ But the example really serves to show that the value that the father places on the wine or the cup is incomparable to the value he places on his son, even if they could possibly save the son's life. Neither the cup nor the wine is valuable in itself but only as a means to save the son's life. Socrates says that "all such concern is expended not for those things that are provided for the sake of something else, but for that something for whose sake all the other things are provided."²² The language here is that of commerce, and Socrates even seems to imply that these instrumental friends serve a function similar to money, or silver and gold.²³ In contrast, of course money is utterly worthless apart from its usefulness in procuring other goods. Likewise, the argument goes, all our concern for these intermediate things redounds to the first friend.

As has already been noted, the logic of utility has a self-terminating effect, where whatever is useful and dear to us only on account of this utility becomes useless and not dear when we obtain our goal, just as medicine is useless to a healthy body. If the logic of utility is extended to all of our interpersonal relations it seems that no one is a friend to one another except to rid each other of their deficiencies.²⁴ Thus, as Gadamer asks,

Does the proper attraction which brings and holds friends together consist in a person being for another what the other lacks? And does it last only as long as he lacks this thing? Or is there a mode of attraction which is not governed by the law of self-termination but which of itself nourishes and augments itself, as it were, so that we can say of friends that they are always becoming more for each other?²⁵

In light of this, the first friend appears as the condition for having a friendship that is actually capable of developing and persisting beyond the satisfaction of mutual needs.

There are two main currents of thought when it comes to identifying who or what the first friend is: (1) something resembling the Good of the *Republic*,²⁶ and (2)

²¹ 219e.

²² 219e-220a.

²³ 220a.

²⁴ Paraphrasing Gadamer, 15.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁶ Many scholars seem to agree on such an interpretation: Charles Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 288; Dorion, 202; and Gadamer above are quite explicit about this. Others seem to suggest it such as Mary P. Nichols, *Socrates on Friendship and Community: Reflections on Plato's Symposium, Phaedrus, and, Lysis* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 180; Gonzalez, 80-81.

something resembling another human individual. Each of these positions has their strengths and weaknesses. The example of the father seems to be cause for some serious doubt about whether it is possible to identify the first friend with something similar to the Good, such as we find it, for example, in the *Republic*. Plato does use language that lends itself towards this interpretation, for instance, by calling the first friend an ἀρχή or 'first principle' (219d), and saying that other friends are εἰδωλα or 'little Forms' of it.²⁷ But what the example of the father seems to show is that when our relation to the good is purged of all instrumentality, we do not find ourselves not, so to speak, reposing in pure appreciation of it. Rather, we find the image of the total devotion of the parent. A parent would do anything for their child, and not with a view to any sort of self-serving end or purpose. Moreover, a parent would do anything for their child even if their child hates them.²⁸ The parents' love does not even require the child to reciprocate their love, or show any affection to the parents at all. In this sense, our relation to the first friend is that of benefactors not beneficiaries — this does not seem to agree with our conception of the Good at all.

On the other hand, there seems to be both a great benefit and a great danger to taking seriously Socrates' example of the father and son. On the one hand, taking this example seriously would provide a remedy to that supposedly Platonic view that, as Gregory Vlastos expresses it, “the individual, in the uniqueness and integrity of his or her individuality, will never be the object of our love,” to which he also adds, “[t]his seems to me the cardinal flaw in Plato's theory.”²⁹ The father's love for his son is not interchangeable with any other relation: no other person would love the son like the parent, and the parent would not love anyone else like their child. In this sense it is not completely unreasonable to say that the parent loves the child 'in the uniqueness and integrity of his or her individuality'. On the other hand, the danger with taking this example seriously is that the complete uniqueness and individuality that characterizes the relation between the father and son entails that there must be multiple first friends, or more precisely that each person has their own unique first friend.³⁰ For the son is the first friend only to his own parent, and another person's child is the first friend to them, and so on. If this view is taken to an extreme, it seems to reduce the highest good to what is uniquely one's own good, and therefore it seems to destroy any basis for a communal good.

Thus, the guiding question of the *Lysis* could be summarized as 'what makes two people friends?' The interlocutors' earlier formulations attempted to solve this with some characteristic or quality (such as likeness or unlikeness), in virtue of which people

²⁷ 219d.

²⁸ cf. 213a.

²⁹ Gregory Vlastos, “The Individual as Object of Love in Plato's Dialogues,” in *Platonic Studies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973): 31, quoted in Dorion, 207 n. 1. Nichols advances the thesis that the example of the father counters the Vlastonian view, at Nichols, 181-82.

³⁰ This problem is recognized by Dorion, 205.

become friends. The 'first friend' exposes these friendships as all too paltry. Real friendship must be grounded in something which is inherently endearing, the love of which is self-justifying. However, the question remains whether, after uncovering this first principle of all friendships, we can then establish real voluntary friendships, so that Socrates' and the boys' figurative wealth may be restored. Furthermore, is it still possible from this perspective to form social and political institutions which rely upon common and shared goods, such as the ones to which the interlocutors return at the end of the dialogue? Even at the end of the *Lysis* this problem remains unsolved, at least within the domain of the argument: Socrates and the boys concede that they have not been able to explain how people become friends.³¹ Yet, in Socrates' last words, where he tells Lysis that he considers them friends, we catch a glimpse of a friendship which neither vacillates through the various changes in one's character and the qualities that occur over time, nor a friendship that is swallowed up into its unconditional ground and thereafter revealed as illusory. This, if anything, reveals the possibility of a truly philosophical friendship.

³¹ 222e.