

Περὶ Φιλίας:  
The interpretation of Plato's *Lysis* 212a8-213d51<sup>1</sup>

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The *Lysis* is one of Plato's short 'Socratic' dialogues. Socrates converses with the teenage boys Lysis, Menexenus, Ctesippus and Hippothales in a wrestling school. Menexenus and Lysis are buddies, but Hippothales is infatuated with the younger boy Lysis and bores the other boys with endless praise of him. This friendship and love among the boys sets the topic of the dialogue: what is friendship, φιλία? The dialogue as a whole is a paradigmatic example of Socratic *paideia*. Socrates clearly understands more about friendship than he is letting on to the youths. Rather than telling them what he thinks he asks them tricky questions, the result of which is that they become confused. The confusion is painful for them and forces them to do the only thing that could relieve it: to think for themselves. Although my friend Øivind Andersen is no longer a teenager and has long ago entered the rank of the wise who have seen, and seen through, most human affairs, I thought he might be pleased by a little discourse on friendship. So in what follows I shall seek to elucidate aspects of this old dialogue.

Socrates makes some unexpected moves in the conversation, and there are places where one may suspect that he is less than completely honest. Not that he intentionally forces falsities upon the youths – they agree to them themselves – but the questions are sometimes very tricky and misleading. There is good reason to suppose, however, that all this is fully intentional on Plato's part; we see indications of this in the text itself. After the exchange between Socrates and Menexenos at 212b8 to 213d Socrates summarizes the conclusions they have reached: “Then what are we going to do”, I said, “if friends are neither those who hold dear (οἱ φιλοῦντες) nor those who are held dear (οἱ φιλούμενοι) nor those who both hold and are held dear? Are there any other besides these of whom we can say that they become each other's friends (φίλους ἀλλήλοις γιγνομένους)?”<sup>2</sup> Menexenus says he cannot think of other possibilities. Socrates then asks if they have perhaps been looking at the matter in the wrong way. At that point Lysis, who is said to have been paying close attention to what was being said all along, breaks into the conversation expressing strong agreement that they have been looking at this in the wrong

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2 All translations here are author's own.

way. Socrates says he thinks he is right, which strongly suggests that Plato himself saw something suspect in the procedure. I shall first consider aspects of the exchange between Socrates and Menexenus in some detail, and then I shall venture a hypothesis about what went wrong.

As we have already seen, in lines 212a8–13d5, Socrates and Menexenus explore various possibilities concerning the necessary features of A's being a friend of B: the given premise of the conversation is that A φιλεῖ B, i.e. holds B dear. The questions are all about what inferences we are entitled to make about the friendship relation from this fact. There will be four proposals in all.

- (1) If A φιλεῖ B, then A is a friend of B and B is also a friend of A (212b2–c8). How does Menexenus come to think that this is at all plausible? Nothing is said about this, but Menexenus may be thinking along the following lines when he agrees to this: I φιλεῖ you; by virtue of that you become for me φίλος, someone dear. But I too am φίλος for you, because since I hold you dear, I am well disposed to you. You will appreciate that and I become dear to you. So from your viewpoint too, I am φίλος. This proposal is refuted by the counterexample of unrequited love and even hatred from the loved one. So a new proposal suggesting mutual φιλεῖν is made:
- (2) If A φιλεῖ B, then A is not a friend of B and B is not a friend of A, unless B also φιλεῖ A (212c8–e6). That is to say, neither one is a friend of the other unless each φιλεῖ the other. Menexenus does not explain why he finds this option attractive, but we may speculate. In order for B to be A's φίλος, A's friend, A has indeed to hold B dear; but not only that, in order to count B as his friend, B has to be well disposed towards A; but if B is so disposed, that is most likely because B holds A dear. So, from A's point of view, his counting B as a friend presumes that he thinks he is dear to B. In the refutation of this, Socrates appeals to the many φιλο-words in the Greek language and to a poem by Solon: there are those who hold horses, dogs, wisdom, quails, wine, gymnastics, etc. dear. These are loved, φιλούμενα, and οἱ φιλοῦντες, those who love, hence have them as their friends, even if these do not return the attitude. There are some questionable aspects in this refutation that I shall let lie. But given this, it seems natural to propose that the friend is the φιλούμενος, which becomes the next hypothesis.
- (3) It is the loved one, the φιλούμενος, who is the friend of ὁ φιλῶν, whether ὁ φιλούμενος φιλεῖ back or not (212e6–13b5). Why would this look plausible at all? The support given for this proposal is that children whom the parents describe as their dearest, φίλτατα, may be unable to return the love of, or they may even hate, their parents when they are being disciplined. The implication is that their being held dearest qualifies them as friends of the parents. This looks like the passive aspect of the adjective φίλος, which just means 'dear', is being taken as grounds for saying that the φίλος in this sense is a friend. In other words, this is playing on a certain ambiguity of the word φίλος, which we shall consider more closely below. The refutation brings in hate and the ἐχθρός, the enemy, a word which is similar to φίλος in its grammatical behaviour in that it sometimes takes the guise of an adjective, sometimes of a substantive. The word ἐχθρός also has an active and a passive sense, can mean both 'hostile' and 'hated'. Socrates

stipulates here that the enemy is the object of hatred since the friend, on the present hypothesis, is the object of love. The conclusion of the refutation is the supposedly impossible claim that one can be an enemy to one's friend and a friend to one's enemy. I shall postpone the discussion of this refutation until later.

- (4) The one who φιλεῖ is a friend of the loved (213b5–c5). So if A φιλεῖ B, A is a friend of B. Analogously with hatred and the enemy: if B hates A, B is A's enemy. But if so, one is often a friend of non-friends and even of one's enemies, and an enemy of one's non-enemies and even of friends. The refutation of this is just a mirror image of the one in (2).

As previously mentioned, all these claims are refuted. So neither the one who φιλεῖ nor the loved one is a friend; nor are those who love and are loved in return (213c5–7). Socrates and Menexenus agree that this exhausts the possibilities. Moreover, Socrates agrees with Lysis that 'if we were looking at things in the right way, we would not be so far off the course' (213e2–3). The way this is phrased suggests their suspicion is not just about particular mistakes that may have been made but that there is something fundamentally wrong about the way they have proceeded.

As a first step, let me make some brief remarks about the words φίλος and φιλεῖν. First, let us note that the verb, φιλεῖν, just means 'to be well disposed to', 'to hold dear', 'to love'. Often, perhaps in the majority of cases, the word φίλος functions as an adjective meaning 'dear', 'beloved' and suchlike: if A loves, φιλεῖ, B, then B is a dear one, φίλος, to A. Secondly, and much less commonly, the adjective φίλος has an active use. According to this use, it describes someone or something as well disposed towards something, welcoming or inviting. There are several examples of this in *LSJ*, especially from the poets.<sup>3</sup> Thus, we find in Hom. *Iliad* 17.325, φίλα φρεσὶ μήδεα εἰδῶς, ('with a friendly mind'). Thirdly, φίλος, has a substantive meaning as 'friend' or something very close to that. Often it is not obvious whether the substantive or the adjective is intended. The issue between Socrates and Menexenus is the notion of a friend, the substantive. This is eminently clear from the start of their conversation and indeed from the *Lysis* as a whole, even if appeals are made to the adjective and the verb in the attempts to illuminate the friend.

The passive and active uses of φίλος that *LSJ* distinguishes are no doubt non-incidentally connected: we have a tendency to be fond of that which is well disposed towards us. And in the case of beings capable of intentional action, if they are well disposed towards me, that is at least to some extent an indication that they hold me dear; and, conversely, if a being capable of intentional action holds some other such being dear, the former will, if everything is normal, be

<sup>3</sup> *LSJ*<sup>9</sup> 1940, 1939 s.v. φίλος.

friendly towards the latter. This is, I suppose, generally true. But, sadly, there are exceptions, and most dramatically so in the case of unrequited love among human beings.

I take it that the English word ‘friend’ contains in its meaning both aspects of the Greek adjective φίλος. If A regards B as his friend, B must be dear to A but A must also see B as well disposed towards him. Suppose I am to consider whether a given person is my friend. I might then first of all see that this person is dear to me. But I may note in addition that this person was a great support to me during a difficult period. I may comment on this by saying that he or she showed himself to be a true or trustworthy friend. In this case, I am not expressing my kind feelings towards this person, I am noting something about him. And I am not simply implying that he is dear to me, and that I am evidently dear to him too – rather I am saying that this other person behaved towards me as only a friend would behave. I take it that the Greek substantive φίλος has the same shades of meaning: surely someone I call a φίλος is someone dear to me, but he is also someone of whom I expect only good things with regard to me. This shade of meaning is shown by the occurrences of phrases such as πιστὸς φίλος, a trustworthy friend, which make it clear that a φίλος is not merely someone who is held dear and who holds one dear in return but also someone from whom certain friendly behaviour is expected.<sup>4</sup>

So what is wrong about the procedure? It is noteworthy that all four propositions considered and refuted have the same antecedent: if A φιλεῖ B, which conclusions are we to draw about who is a friend or friends with whom? I suggest that what is wrong in the procedure is the assumption that it is possible to decide about friendship relations from this antecedent alone. Lysis presumably realized this. The fact that Plato suggests this indicates that he thought that we, the readers, could see this too. It is best, however, that we realize this the hard way by thinking for ourselves.

My suggestion is that even if B being A’s friend indeed involves φιλεῖν on the part of A, this is not enough: what Lysis realizes is *that no definite inferences about who is a friend of whom can be drawn from the mere fact that A φιλεῖ B*. One aspect that is crucially missing is reciprocity. Socrates and Menexenus admittedly try to take reciprocity into account in (2), where the proposal is: if A φιλεῖ B, then A is not a friend of B and B is not a friend of A, unless B also φιλεῖ A (212c8–e6). In other words, there is no friendship unless the φιλεῖν is mutual. This is dismissed on the grounds that there are people who love horses, wine, etc. and hold them dear, even if none of these loves

4 Eur. fr. 271b.1 (*Auge*) Kannicht: τίς δὲ νῶν πιστὸς φίλος; ‘But who is a trustworthy friend of us two?’ The expression is fairly common.

them back. Arguably, these things are friends only in an extended sense which does not apply to relationships between people. Leaving that aside, there is a notorious omission which concerns reciprocity in Socrates' proposals. He asks: is it the case that if there is not mutual φιλεῖν, then there is no friendship relation? What he does not ask, and never considers, is 'if A φιλεῖ B, are A and B friends if B φιλεῖ A in return?' In other words, nowhere is reciprocity shown not to be a sufficient condition of friendship.

Reciprocity is again indirectly at stake in the refutation of (3). The way the conclusion is harvested here again makes use of the fact that there are cases where the φιλοῦμενος hates the φιλῶν.<sup>5</sup> So if A φιλεῖ B, B is A's friend; but B hates A, which makes A B's enemy. So B is a friend to his enemy! One way of interpreting this is to suppose that Plato wants us to understand the phrase 'friend to his enemy' as meaning that one person regards another person both as a friend and as enemy. The premises of the exchange do, however, not warrant this understanding; if Plato wants to lure his readers to understand it in this way, then he is trying to cheat blatantly in the argument. This is a conclusion one seeks to avoid if there are good alternatives. I believe that indeed there are: I suggest that Socrates means what he says in the very sense that is actually warranted by the presuppositions of the conversation, and I also suggest that he and Menexenus find this absurd enough. Supposing that A φιλεῖ B and B hates A, from the premises of the refutation here Socrates does obtain that A is an enemy of his own friend and that B is a friend of his own enemy. There is nothing strictly contradictory about this, given merely what they have explicitly agreed on. The case may, however, strike Socrates and Menexenus as an impossibility *given what they – and we – understand by a friend*, which is, of course, what they wish to capture: How could someone who really is a friend of mine have me as his enemy? If he really is a friend of mine, I am entitled to expect good things from him – that is at least a part of what makes him a friend. But I cannot expect anything good from someone for whom I am an enemy. Surely I could not regard him as a trustworthy friend. So he cannot be my friend after all. In saying this I am assuming that Socrates is making appeals to some necessary mutuality in friendship, tacit appeals to the fact that a friend must be friendly, which is not what you can allow yourself to expect from your enemy.

<sup>5</sup> There is another possible grammatical construction of ... οἶμαι καὶ ἀδύνατον, τῷ τε φίλῳ ἐχθρὸν καὶ τῷ ἐχθρῷ φίλον εἶναι: In one case, the obvious one, followed in the main text here, we have an accusative with infinitive where the dative of τῷ φίλῳ is governed by ἐχθρὸν, 'enemy to a friend'. But we can also translate 'it is impossible for the friend to be an enemy', where the dative of τῷ φίλῳ is governed by ἀδύνατον. Also, in this construction the result is that the friend is an enemy and the enemy a friend, which superficially smacks of a contradiction, but no more than in the other construction does this constitute a real contradiction.

It may seem fair to ask if it is not a mere commonplace that friendship involves some mutual endearment. Not only is this something people readily come to think of – I have tried this out with some friends and acquaintances – it seems to have become a sort of commonplace as early as Aristotle’s time, half a century or so after the *Lysis* was written.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, given the strong association that lies in the language itself between the friend, ὁ φίλος, and the cognate verb, φιλεῖν, and especially given the equally strong semantic connection between the latter and φίλος, the adjective, according to which anyone who is loved, φιλούμενος, counts as a dear one, φίλος, the narrower notion of a *friend* can be said to be hidden in a semantic jungle. It is no wonder that the matter is not entirely clear to the adolescents.

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<sup>6</sup> See Arist. *Rh.* II 4, 1381a1–2.