

Plato's
Lysis
or Friendship

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LYSIS

by

PLATO

Translated by Benjamin Jowett

INTRODUCTION

NO ANSWER IS GIVEN IN THE LYSIS to the question, ‘What is Friendship?’ any more than in the Charmides to the question, ‘What is Temperance?’ There are several resemblances in the two Dialogues: the same youthfulness and sense of beauty pervades both of them; they are alike rich in the description of Greek life. The question is again raised of the relation of knowledge to virtue and good, which also recurs in the Laches; and Socrates appears again as the elder friend of the two boys, Lysis and

Menexenus. In the Charmides, as also in the Laches, he is described as middleaged; in the Lysis he is advanced in years.

The Dialogue consists of two scenes or conversations which seem to have no relation to each other. The first is a conversation between Socrates and Lysis, who, like Charmides, is an Athenian youth of noble descent and of great beauty, goodness, and intelligence: this is carried on in the absence of Menexenus, who is called away to take part in a sacrifice. Socrates asks Lysis whether his father and mother do not love him very much? ‘To be sure they do.’ ‘Then of course they allow him to do exactly as he likes.’ ‘Of course not: the very slaves have more liberty than he has.’ ‘But how is this?’ ‘The reason is that he is not old enough.’ ‘No; the real reason is that he is not wise enough: for are there not some things which he is allowed to do, although he is not allowed to do others?’ ‘Yes, because he knows them, and does not know the others.’ This leads to the conclusion that all men ev-

erywhere will trust him in what he knows, but not in what he does not know; for in such matters he will be unprofitable to them, and do them no good. And no one will love him, if he does them no good; and he can only do them good by knowledge; and as he is still without knowledge, he can have as yet no conceit of knowledge. In this manner Socrates reads a lesson to Hippothales, the foolish lover of Lysis, respecting the style of conversation which he should address to his beloved.

After the return of Menexenus, Socrates, at the request of Lysis, asks him a new question: ‘What is friendship? You, Menexenus, who have a friend already, can tell me, who am always longing to find one, what is the secret of this great blessing.’

When one man loves another, which is the friend—he who loves, or he who is loved? Or are both friends? From the first of these suppositions they are driven to the second; and from the second to the third; and neither the two boys nor Socrates are satisfied with any of the three or with all of

them. Socrates turns to the poets, who affirm that God brings like to like (Homer), and to philosophers (Empedocles), who also assert that like is the friend of like. But the bad are not friends, for they are not even like themselves, and still less are they like one another. And the good have no need of one another, and therefore do not care about one another. Moreover there are others who say that likeness is a cause of aversion, and unlikeness of love and friendship; and they too adduce the authority of poets and philosophers in support of their doctrines; for Hesiod says that ‘potter is jealous of potter, bard of bard;’ and subtle doctors tell us that ‘moist is the friend of dry, hot of cold,’ and the like. But neither can their doctrine be maintained; for then the just would be the friend of the unjust, good of evil.

Thus we arrive at the conclusion that like is not the friend of like, nor unlike of unlike; and therefore good is not the friend of good, nor evil of evil, nor good of evil, nor evil of good. What remains

but that the indifferent, which is neither good nor evil, should be the friend (not of the indifferent, for that would be ‘like the friend of like,’ but) of the good, or rather of the beautiful?

But why should the indifferent have this attachment to the beautiful or good? There are circumstances under which such an attachment would be natural. Suppose the indifferent, say the human body, to be desirous of getting rid of some evil, such as disease, which is not essential but only accidental to it (for if the evil were essential the body would cease to be indifferent, and would become evil)—in such a case the indifferent becomes a friend of the good for the sake of getting rid of the evil. In this intermediate ‘indifferent’ position the philosopher or lover of wisdom stands: he is not wise, and yet not unwise, but he has ignorance accidentally clinging to him, and he yearns for wisdom as the cure of the evil. (Symp.)

After this explanation has been received with triumphant accord, a fresh dissatisfaction begins to

steal over the mind of Socrates: Must not friendship be for the sake of some ulterior end? and what can that final cause or end of friendship be, other than the good? But the good is desired by us only as the cure of evil; and therefore if there were no evil there would be no friendship. Some other explanation then has to be devised. May not desire be the source of friendship? And desire is of what a man wants and of what is congenial to him. But then the congenial cannot be the same as the like; for like, as has been already shown, cannot be the friend of like. Nor can the congenial be the good; for good is not the friend of good, as has been also shown. The problem is unsolved, and the three friends, Socrates, Lysis, and Menexenus, are still unable to find out what a friend is.

Thus, as in the Charmides and Laches, and several of the other Dialogues of Plato (compare especially the Protagoras and Theaetetus), no conclusion is arrived at. Socrates maintains his character of a ‘know nothing;’ but the boys have already

learned the lesson which he is unable to teach them, and they are free from the conceit of knowledge. (Compare Chrm.) The dialogue is what would be called in the language of Thrasyllus tentative or inquisitive. The subject is continued in the Phaedrus and Symposium, and treated, with a manifest reference to the Lysis, in the eighth and ninth books of the Nicomachean Ethics of Aristotle. As in other writings of Plato (for example, the Republic), there is a progress from unconscious morality, illustrated by the friendship of the two youths, and also by the sayings of the poets (‘who are our fathers in wisdom,’ and yet only tell us half the truth, and in this particular instance are not much improved upon by the philosophers), to a more comprehensive notion of friendship. This, however, is far from being cleared of its perplexity. Two notions appear to be struggling or balancing in the mind of Socrates:— First, the sense that friendship arises out of human needs and wants; Secondly, that the higher form or ideal of friendship exists only for the sake of the

good. That friends are not necessarily either like or unlike, is also a truth confirmed by experience. But the use of the terms ‘like’ or ‘good’ is too strictly limited; Socrates has allowed himself to be carried away by a sort of eristic or illogical logic against which no definition of friendship would be able to stand. In the course of the argument he makes a distinction between property and accident which is a real contribution to the science of logic. Some higher truths appear through the mist. The manner in which the field of argument is widened, as in the Charmides and Laches by the introduction of the idea of knowledge, so here by the introduction of the good, is deserving of attention. The sense of the inter-dependence of good and evil, and the allusion to the possibility of the non-existence of evil, are also very remarkable.

The dialectical interest is fully sustained by the dramatic accompaniments. Observe, first, the scene, which is a Greek Palaestra, at a time when a sacrifice is going on, and the Hermaea are in course of

celebration; secondly, the ‘accustomed irony’ of Socrates, who declares, as in the Symposium, that he is ignorant of all other things, but claims to have a knowledge of the mysteries of love. There are likewise several contrasts of character; first of the dry, caustic Ctesippus, of whom Socrates professes a humorous sort of fear, and Hippothales the flighty lover, who murders sleep by bawling out the name of his beloved; there is also a contrast between the false, exaggerated, sentimental love of Hippothales towards Lysis, and the childlike and innocent friendship of the boys with one another. Some difference appears to be intended between the characters of the more talkative Menexenus and the reserved and simple Lysis. Socrates draws out the latter by a new sort of irony, which is sometimes adopted in talking to children, and consists in asking a leading question which can only be answered in a sense contrary to the intention of the question: ‘Your father and mother of course allow you to drive the chariot?’ ‘No they do not.’ When Menexenus re-

turns, the serious dialectic begins. He is described as ‘very pugnacious,’ and we are thus prepared for the part which a mere youth takes in a difficult argument. But Plato has not forgotten dramatic propriety, and Socrates proposes at last to refer the question to some older person.

SOME QUESTIONS RELATING TO FRIENDSHIP.

THE SUBJECT OF FRIENDSHIP has a lower place in the modern than in the ancient world, partly because a higher place is assigned by us to love and marriage. The very meaning of the word has become slighter and more superficial; it seems almost to be borrowed from the ancients, and has nearly disappeared in modern treatises on Moral Philosophy. The received examples of friendship are to be found chiefly among the Greeks and Romans. Hence the casuistical or other questions which arise out of the relations of friends have not often been considered seriously in modern times. Many of them will be found to be

the same which are discussed in the Lysis. We may ask with Socrates, 1) whether friendship is ‘of similars or dissimilars,’ or of both; 2) whether such a tie exists between the good only and for the sake of the good; or 3) whether there may not be some peculiar attraction, which draws together ‘the neither good nor evil’ for the sake of the good and because of the evil; 4) whether friendship is always mutual,—may there not be a one-sided and unrequited friendship? This question, which, like many others, is only one of a laxer or stricter use of words, seems to have greatly exercised the minds both of Aristotle and Plato. 5) Can we expect friendship to be permanent, or must we acknowledge with Cicero, ‘Nihil difficilius quam amicitiam usque ad extremum vitae permanere’? Is not friendship, even more than love, liable to be swayed by the caprices of fancy? The person who pleased us most at first sight or upon a slight acquaintance, when we have seen him again, and under different circumstances, may make a much less favourable impression on our

minds. Young people swear ‘eternal friendships,’ but at these innocent perjuries their elders laugh. No one forms a friendship with the intention of renouncing it; yet in the course of a varied life it is practically certain that many changes will occur of feeling, opinion, locality, occupation, fortune, which will divide us from some persons and unite us to others. 6) There is an ancient saying, *Qui amicos amicum non habet*. But is not some less exclusive form of friendship better suited to the condition and nature of man? And in those especially who have no family ties, may not the feeling pass beyond one or a few, and embrace all with whom we come into contact, and, perhaps in a few passionate and exalted natures, all men everywhere? 7) The ancients had their three kinds of friendship, ‘for the sake of the pleasant, the useful, and the good:’ is the last to be resolved into the two first; or are the two first to be included in the last? The subject was puzzling to them: they could not say that friendship was only a quality, or a relation, or a virtue, or

a kind of virtue; and they had not in the age of Plato reached the point of regarding it, like justice, as a form or attribute of virtue. They had another perplexity: 8) How could one of the noblest feelings of human nature be so near to one of the most detestable corruptions of it? (Compare Symposium; Laws).

Leaving the Greek or ancient point of view, we may regard the question in a more general way. Friendship is the union of two persons in mutual affection and remembrance of one another. The friend can do for his friend what he cannot do for himself. He can give him counsel in time of difficulty; he can teach him ‘to see himself as others see him’; he can stand by him, when all the world are against him; he can gladden and enlighten him by his presence; he ‘can divide his sorrows,’ he can ‘double his joys;’ he can anticipate his wants. He will discover ways of helping him without creating a sense of his own superiority; he will find out his mental trials, but only that he may minister to them.

Among true friends jealousy has no place: they do not complain of one another for making new friends, or for not revealing some secret of their lives; (in friendship too there must be reserves;) they do not intrude upon one another, and they mutually rejoice in any good which happens to either of them, though it may be to the loss of the other. They may live apart and have little intercourse, but when they meet, the old tie is as strong as ever—according to the common saying, they find one another always the same. The greatest good of friendship is not daily intercourse, for circumstances rarely admit of this; but on the great occasions of life, when the advice of a friend is needed, then the word spoken in season about conduct, about health, about marriage, about business,—the letter written from a distance by a disinterested person who sees with clearer eyes may be of inestimable value. When the heart is failing and despair is setting in, then to hear the voice or grasp the hand of a friend, in a shipwreck, in a defeat, in some other failure or mis-

fortune, may restore the necessary courage and composure to the paralysed and disordered mind, and convert the feeble person into a hero; (compare Symposium).

It is true that friendships are apt to be disappointing: either we expect too much from them; or we are indolent and do not ‘keep them in repair;’ or being admitted to intimacy with another, we see his faults too clearly and lose our respect for him; and he loses his affection for us. Friendships may be too violent; and they may be too sensitive. The egotism of one of the parties may be too much for the other. The word of counsel or sympathy has been uttered too obtrusively, at the wrong time, or in the wrong manner; or the need of it has not been perceived until too late. ‘Oh if he had only told me’ has been the silent thought of many a troubled soul. And some things have to be indicated rather than spoken, because the very mention of them tends to disturb the equability of friendship. The alienation of friends, like many other human evils, is com-

monly due to a want of tact and insight. There is not enough of the *Scimus et hanc veniam petimusque damusque vicissim*. The sweet draught of sympathy is not inexhaustible; and it tends to weaken the person who too freely partakes of it. Thus we see that there are many causes which impair the happiness of friends.

We may expect a friendship almost divine, such as philosophers have sometimes dreamed of: we find what is human. The good of it is necessarily limited; it does not take the place of marriage; it affords rather a solace than an arm of support. It had better not be based on pecuniary obligations; these more often mar than make a friendship. It is most likely to be permanent when the two friends are equal and independent, or when they are engaged together in some common work or have some public interest in common. It exists among the bad or inferior sort of men almost as much as among the good; the bad and good, and ‘the neither bad nor good,’ are drawn together in a strange manner by

personal attachment. The essence of it is loyalty, without which it would cease to be friendship.

Another question 9) may be raised, whether friendship can safely exist between young persons of different sexes, not connected by ties of relationship, and without the thought of love or marriage; whether, again, a wife or a husband should have any intimate friend, besides his or her partner in marriage. The answer to this latter question is rather perplexing, and would probably be different in different countries (compare *Sympos.*). While we do not deny that great good may result from such attachments, for the mind may be drawn out and the character enlarged by them; yet we feel also that they are attended with many dangers, and that this Romance of Heavenly Love requires a strength, a freedom from passion, a self-control, which, in youth especially, are rarely to be found. The propriety of such friendships must be estimated a good deal by the manner in which public opinion regards them; they must be reconciled with the ordinary duties of

life; and they must be justified by the result.

Yet another question, 10). Admitting that friendships cannot be always permanent, we may ask when and upon what conditions should they be dissolved. It would be futile to retain the name when the reality has ceased to be. That two friends should part company whenever the relation between them begins to drag may be better for both of them. But then arises the consideration, how should these friends in youth or friends of the past regard or be regarded by one another? They are parted, but there still remain duties mutually owing by them. They will not admit the world to share in their difference any more than in their friendship; the memory of an old attachment, like the memory of the dead, has a kind of sacredness for them on which they will not allow others to intrude. Neither, if they were ever worthy to bear the name of friends, will either of them entertain any enmity or dislike of the other who was once so much to him. Neither will he by ‘shadowed hint reveal’ the secrets great

or small which an unfortunate mistake has placed within his reach. He who is of a noble mind will dwell upon his own faults rather than those of another, and will be ready to take upon himself the blame of their separation. He will feel pain at the loss of a friend; and he will remember with gratitude his ancient kindness. But he will not lightly renew a tie which has not been lightly broken...These are a few of the Problems of Friendship, some of them suggested by the Lysis, others by modern life, which he who wishes to make or keep a friend may profitably study. (Compare Bacon, Essay on Friendship; Cic. de Amicitia.)

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PERSONS OF THE DIALOGUE: Socrates, who is the narrator, Menexenus, Hippothales, Lysis, Ctesippus.

SCENE: A newly-erected Palaestra outside the walls of Athens.

I WAS GOING FROM THE ACADEMY straight to the Lyceum, intending to take the outer road, which is close under the wall. When I came to the postern gate of the city, which is by the fountain of Panops, I fell in with Hippothales, the son of Hieronymus, and Ctesippus the Paeonian, and a company of young men who were standing with them. Hippothales, seeing me approach, asked whence I came and whither I was going.

I am going, I replied, from the Academy straight to the Lyceum.

Then come straight to us, he said, and put in here; you may as well.

Who are you, I said; and where am I to come?

He showed me an enclosed space and an open door over against the wall. And there, he said, is the building at which we all meet: and a goodly company we are.

And what is this building, I asked; and what sort of entertainment have you?

The building, he replied, is a newly erected

Palaestra; and the entertainment is generally conversation, to which you are welcome.

Thank you, I said; and is there any teacher there?

Yes, he said, your old friend and admirer, Miccus.

Indeed, I replied; he is a very eminent professor.

Are you disposed, he said, to go with me and see them?

Yes, I said; but I should like to know first, what is expected of me, and who is the favourite among you?

Some persons have one favourite, Socrates, and some another, he said.

And who is yours? I asked: tell me that, Hippothales.

At this he blushed; and I said to him, O Hippothales, thou son of Hieronymus! do not say that you are, or that you are not, in love; the confession is too late; for I see that you are not only in love, but are already far gone in your love. Simple and foolish as I am, the Gods have given me the power of understanding affections of this kind.

Whereupon he blushed more and more.

Ctesippus said: I like to see you blushing, Hippothales, and hesitating to tell Socrates the name; when, if he were with you but for a very short time, you would have plagues him to death by talking about nothing else. Indeed, Socrates, he has literally deafened us, and stopped our ears with the praises of Lysis; and if he is a little intoxicated, there is every likelihood that we may have our sleep murdered with a cry of Lysis. His performances in prose are bad enough, but nothing at all in comparison with his verse; and when he drenches us with his poems and other compositions, it is really too bad; and worse still is his manner of singing them to his love; he has a voice which is truly appalling, and we cannot help hearing him: and now having a question put to him by you, behold he is blushing.

Who is Lysis? I said: I suppose that he must be young; for the name does not recall any one to me.

Why, he said, his father being a very well-known man, he retains his patronymic, and is not as yet

commonly called by his own name; but, although you do not know his name, I am sure that you must know his face, for that is quite enough to distinguish him.

But tell me whose son he is, I said.

He is the eldest son of Democrates, of the deme of Aexone.

Ah, Hippothales, I said; what a noble and really perfect love you have found! I wish that you would favour me with the exhibition which you have been making to the rest of the company, and then I shall be able to judge whether you know what a lover ought to say about his love, either to the youth himself, or to others.

Nay, Socrates, he said; you surely do not attach any importance to what he is saying.

Do you mean, I said, that you disown the love of the person whom he says that you love?

No; but I deny that I make verses or address compositions to him.

He is not in his right mind, said Ctesippus; he is

talking nonsense, and is stark mad.

O Hippothales, I said, if you have ever made any verses or songs in honour of your favourite, I do not want to hear them; but I want to know the purport of them, that I may be able to judge of your mode of approaching your fair one.

Ctesippus will be able to tell you, he said; for if, as he avers, the sound of my words is always dinning in his ears, he must have a very accurate knowledge and recollection of them.

Yes, indeed, said Ctesippus; I know only too well; and very ridiculous the tale is: for although he is a lover, and very devotedly in love, he has nothing particular to talk about to his beloved which a child might not say. Now is not that ridiculous? He can only speak of the wealth of Democrates, which the whole city celebrates, and grandfather Lysis, and the other ancestors of the youth, and their stud of horses, and their victory at the Pythian games, and at the Isthmus, and at Nemea with four horses and single horses—these are the tales which he com-

poses and repeats. And there is greater twaddle still. Only the day before yesterday he made a poem in which he described the entertainment of Heracles, who was a connexion of the family, setting forth how in virtue of this relationship he was hospitably received by an ancestor of Lysis; this ancestor was himself begotten of Zeus by the daughter of the founder of the deme. And these are the sort of old wives' tales which he sings and recites to us, and we are obliged to listen to him.

When I heard this, I said: O ridiculous Hippothales! how can you be making and singing hymns in honour of yourself before you have won?

But my songs and verses, he said, are not in honour of myself, Socrates.

You think not? I said.

Nay, but what do you think? he replied.

Most assuredly, I said, those songs are all in your own honour; for if you win your beautiful love, your discourses and songs will be a glory to you, and may be truly regarded as hymns of praise composed

in honour of you who have conquered and won such a love; but if he slips away from you, the more you have praised him, the more ridiculous you will look at having lost this fairest and best of blessings; and therefore the wise lover does not praise his beloved until he has won him, because he is afraid of accidents. There is also another danger; the fair, when any one praises or magnifies them, are filled with the spirit of pride and vain-glory. Do you not agree with me?

Yes, he said.

And the more vain-glorious they are, the more difficult is the capture of them?

I believe you.

What should you say of a hunter who frightened away his prey, and made the capture of the animals which he is hunting more difficult?

He would be a bad hunter, undoubtedly.

Yes; and if, instead of soothing them, he were to infuriate them with words and songs, that would show a great want of wit: do you not agree.

Yes.

And now reflect, Hippothales, and see whether you are not guilty of all these errors in writing poetry. For I can hardly suppose that you will affirm a man to be a good poet who injures himself by his poetry.

Assuredly not, he said; such a poet would be a fool. And this is the reason why I take you into my counsels, Socrates, and I shall be glad of any further advice which you may have to offer. Will you tell me by what words or actions I may become endeared to my love?

That is not easy to determine, I said; but if you will bring your love to me, and will let me talk with him, I may perhaps be able to show you how to converse with him, instead of singing and reciting in the fashion of which you are accused.

There will be no difficulty in bringing him, he replied; if you will only go with Ctesippus into the Palaestra, and sit down and talk, I believe that he will come of his own accord; for he is fond of listen-

ing, Socrates. And as this is the festival of the Hermaea, the young men and boys are all together, and there is no separation between them. He will be sure to come: but if he does not, Ctesippus with whom he is familiar, and whose relation Menexenus is his great friend, shall call him.

That will be the way, I said. Thereupon I led Ctesippus into the Palaestra, and the rest followed.

Upon entering we found that the boys had just been sacrificing; and this part of the festival was nearly at an end. They were all in their white array, and games at dice were going on among them. Most of them were in the outer court amusing themselves; but some were in a corner of the Apodyterium playing at odd and even with a number of dice, which they took out of little wicker baskets. There was also a circle of lookers-on; among them was Lysis. He was standing with the other boys and youths, having a crown upon his head, like a fair vision, and not less worthy of praise for his goodness than for his beauty. We left them, and went over to the

opposite side of the room, where, finding a quiet place, we sat down; and then we began to talk. This attracted Lysis, who was constantly turning round to look at us—he was evidently wanting to come to us. For a time he hesitated and had not the courage to come alone; but first of all, his friend Menexenus, leaving his play, entered the Palaestra from the court, and when he saw Ctesippus and myself, was going to take a seat by us; and then Lysis, seeing him, followed, and sat down by his side; and the other boys joined. I should observe that Hippothales, when he saw the crowd, got behind them, where he thought that he would be out of sight of Lysis, lest he should anger him; and there he stood and listened.

I turned to Menexenus, and said: Son of Demophon, which of you two youths is the elder?

That is a matter of dispute between us, he said.

And which is the nobler? Is that also a matter of dispute?

Yes, certainly.

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