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LYSIS

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Lysis

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Содержание

INTRODUCTION	5
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	9

Plato

Lysis

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 middle-aged; 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 everywhere 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 returns, 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 misfortune, 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 commonly 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.

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