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Mary P. Nichols, *Socrates on Friendship and Community: Reflections on Plato's Symposium, Phaedrus, and Lysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. Pp. viii + 229. ISBN 978-0-521-89973-4.

Laurence D. Cooper, *Eros in Plato, Rousseau, and Nietzsche: The Politics of Infinity*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008. Pp. xii + 357. ISBN 978-0-271-03330-3.

The titles of these two books in part conceal what they have in common, for although Nichols speaks of friendship, and Cooper of *erôs*, Nichols understands friendship in a latitudinous sense that includes passionate love or *erôs*, which is the principal theme of Plato's *Symposium*, a dialogue that both authors discuss in some detail. Collapsing friendship or *philia* and *erôs* this way is problematic, in my view, for reasons I indicate below. A second point of contact is that both scholars are indebted to the work of Leo Strauss. In the study of classical philosophy these days, that is telling. For Strauss developed a particular approach to interpretation, in which he took it for granted that ancient thinkers concealed their deepest doctrines in such a way that they were fully accessible only to an elite group of readers, who could divine, from often very subtle cues, the true meaning of the text. Decoding such texts requires special skills, which are transmitted from teacher to pupil: this accounts in part for the sometimes worshipful respect for the founder on the part of his disciples. The two books under consideration do apply fairly sophisticated hermeneutical methods, and of course this in itself is a good thing, if properly controlled against the texts themselves. They also see philosophy as having an urgent message for today, and in this sense as political, although the political as opposed to the metaphysical aspect of love is more evident in Nichols's book than in Cooper's. Nevertheless, the two studies are very different in approach and only partly overlap in the texts they address, and so I discuss them separately in what follows.

Nichols begins by explaining (p. 1): "This book is about Socrates and the place that friends play in his life of philosophy. Through friendship we experience both our own as not wholly our own and another as not wholly other. It is such an experience, I argue, that characterizes philosophy" (as we shall see, Cooper believes that the philosopher is characterized rather by the experience of

*erôs*). The connection between friendship and philosophy is that both involve an awareness of “our need or incompleteness,” which is why we seek friends and pursue wisdom. What is more, friendship, so conceived, “can serve as a model for a political community where there is both a common bond among citizens and a recognition of their separate identities.” In this way, Nichols exonerates Plato from the charge of philosophical egotism or the pursuit of wisdom for the sake of one’s own virtue and fulfillment, in which the love of other individuals is, at best, simply a stimulus to this higher aim. Socrates has indeed been accused, most notably by Gregory Vlastos, of having a purely instrumental view of love or friendship: we do not love others for themselves, or as an end in themselves (in the Kantian expression), but for the sake of something deeper, of which the love of others is an imitation and an invitation. Many have found this an unattractive view. But did Plato intend something different?

Nichols argues that there is a progression in Plato’s representation of love and friendship, from the relatively more self-centered conception in the *Symposium* to the more dialogic character of the *Phaedrus* and culminating in the *Lysis*, which Nichols takes to be the final or most developed form of Plato’s thinking on the subject. This is certainly to give a novel importance to the *Lysis*, which is more often taken to be one of Plato’s early dialogues. However, my objection to Nichols’s arrangement is rather that with the *Lysis*, Plato has changed topics: whereas in the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus* the focus is on *erôs*, which is here rendered, not wholly adequately, as “love,” in the *Lysis* Plato proposes to discuss *philia*, or more precisely what it is to be *philos* or “dear.” To treat the two ideas as equivalent masks a deep difference between them – and this, despite the fact that Plato himself, at one or two places in the *Lysis*, assimilates the two (and along with them, *epithumia* as well). But this is a sign, as I suggest below, not that love and friendship are closely related in Greek thought, but that Plato means something special by these terms.

After an introductory discussion of Kierkegaard’s and Nietzsche’s view of Socrates, Nichols turns to the *Symposium*. Socrates, having been invited to the celebration, brings along Aristodemus, encouraging him with the words: “when two go together.” Nichols notes that these are the words of Diomedes when he selects Odysseus as his companion for the night raid on the Trojan camp (*Iliad* 10.224), and suggests that “Plato is reenacting the *Iliad*’s night foray into enemy

territory” (p. 34); still, as she observes, “if, like Diomedes, [Socrates] chooses not to go alone, his entrance is anything but covert.” Are we then really to see a parallel here with the scene in the *Iliad*, and take the assembly of characters inside Agathon’s house as potentially hostile?

Nichols proceeds to discuss each speech in turn in the *Symposium*, providing close readings with special attention to dramatic details and other subtle cues. Here are some samples, I hope not unfairly selected. Of Phaedrus’ speech, Nichols observes: “Like love itself, in Phaedrus’ analysis, Admetus in effect had no parents” (p. 38), though Plato himself simply observes that Alcestis loved Admetus so much that his parents seemed so in name only (179B). Of the next speech she writes: “By duplicating gods of traditional Greek theology, Pausanias creates purified versions of gods, standards by which human beings and even Olympian gods – since Zeus fathers the pandemic Aphrodite – can be judged (p. 41); the point about the Olympian gods seems to me farfetched. In any case, Nichols regards both Pausanias’ speech, and that of Eryximachus which follows, as seedy (pp. 46-47), since they are really ad hominem attempts at seduction by showing that they can benefit their beloveds, though she acknowledges that “Only with the dramatic details that Plato supplies us – Eryximachus’ relationship with Phaedrus – do we hear in his speech a lover’s plea” (p. 46). The two poets, comic and tragic, follow, each betraying a deficient sense of the connection between love and philosophy: “For Aristophanes, philosophy is not possible, whereas for Agathon it is not necessary, since Love is the sufficient condition for wisdom” (p. 56). Their weaknesses are those of their arts: “Just as comedy might bind us to necessity more than is necessary by letting us see ourselves in our inferiors, tragedy might lead us to suppose that we can be free from suffering” (ibid.). Once again, dramatic characterization matters, and in the case of Agathon, who is described as “both lover and beloved” (p. 55), Nichols refers in a note to works by Harold Bloom, Stanley Rosen, and Seth Benardete – all admirers of Leo Strauss; this kind of closed or in-group conversation is characteristic of the book as a whole, though Nichols is by no means always in agreement with these scholars.

When it comes to Socrates’ speech, Nichols duly notes that he presents himself as a mouthpiece of Diotima, but she has a novel explanation for this: “Agathon’s presumption of self-sufficiency is related to his homosexuality, as is

love of one's like to love of oneself. Socrates therefore invents someone other to address these men – a prophetess, whose inspiration distinguishes her from other human beings; a foreigner, who is a stranger in Athens; and, most important in this setting of male homosexuals, a woman who points dramatically to what is missing from the previous speeches by presenting all human beings, men as well as women, as pregnant” (p. 66). Well, yes – but men do not give birth to children, but to something much finer (209C). Thus, I do not see that the human desire for immortality by way of generation “places human beings in political communities” (p. 68); Plato looks beyond human succession to something more abstract, as is his way (incidentally, there is no reference here to David Halperin’s “Why is Diotima a Woman?”). I skip over Nichols’s discussion of Alcibiades, save to note her claim that when he leaves the party, along with Phaedrus and Eryximachus, “we suspect that the three of them are off to mutilate the Hermae” (p. 83), something I for one hadn’t suspected, I confess. But where is friendship in all this? Nichols finds it in the relationship between lover and beloved after the beloved has given birth, which will be, Diotima affirms, both a greater *koinônia* and a firmer *philia* than that which is consequent upon producing children. From this, Nichols concludes that “Love’s fulfillment requires friendship” (p. 87). I fail to see how this conclusion follows.

In the chapter on the *Phaedrus*, Nichols again proceeds by “Allowing the events ... to unfold” (p. 93). I will not follow her analysis of this dialogue in detail, save to indicate that when Phaedrus imagines Lysias’ shame at being called a logographer (257C), which is not a reproach for writing speeches but for writing other people’s speeches, I hardly think this “shame before his city” constitutes a “movement toward community” (p. 123). I rather think that Charles Griswold is closer to the truth when he writes: “The message of the *Phaedrus* is clear: philosophy is a form of private eros, and it is essentially nobler and higher than the political concerns and the public rhetoric of the polis” (*Self-Knowledge in Plato’s Phaedrus*, 1996, p. 133, quoted on p. 141). As for Socrates’ concluding prayer to Pan and other deities, that he be beautiful (or noble: *kalos*) within and that his external possessions be in conformity (*philia*: neuter plural adjective) with his inner qualities, I scarcely see an allusion to friendship here (“he prays for friendship between the possibly disparate things that constitute him,” p. 150). Thus, when Socrates asks whether his prayer requires anything else, I am not

inclined to say, with Nichols, that “Socrates’ prayer, as is the *Phaedrus*, is in need of the *Lysis*” (ibid.). I fear that I find this argument fanciful and rather forced.

As I indicated above, Nichols sees the *Lysis* as the culmination of Plato’s thinking about friendship. This dialogue is narrated by Socrates without mention of a particular addressee, and Nichols suggests that nothing prevents us “from supposing that Socrates is speaking directly to us” (p. 156), giving it, in her view, a special claim to representing Plato’s own views. That the conversation takes place just outside the city walls, moreover, suggests to Nichols that the dialogue situates itself halfway between the urban house of Agathon, the site of the *Symposium*, and the rural location of the *Phaedrus* (p. 157). However this may be, in this dialogue Socrates does indeed discuss relations among friends, that is, *philoí* – among other things. For the abstract noun *philia* means affection or love in general, including, for example, the love of parents for children, and Socrates at some points extends the range of the idea to include neighboring but quite distinct notions such as erotic attraction (*erós*) and appetite generally (*epithumia*). As David Sedley has cogently argued, in a paper not cited by Nichols, the *Lysis* is not a dialogue of definition, like the *Euthyphro*, for instance; it is more a free-flowing conversation about various uses of *philia* and related words. Thus, when Nichols writes that “Socrates turns to another manifestation of friendship, the love (*philia*) of parents for children” (p. 163), I would reverse the proposition: friendship is rather a species of love, that is, *philia* in the broad sense. If it is true that “The discussion of love in the *Lysis* focuses on *philia*” (p. 164), rather than on *erós*, this is a sign that Plato understands there to be a deep difference between the two terms, and may suggest too that taking the three dialogues under discussion as a kind of trilogy has no more justification than placing *philia* alongside, say, holiness (which is what the gods love, on one definition in the *Euthyphro*) or the beautiful (the subject of the *Hippias Major*).

Before proceeding further with Nichols’s account of the *Lysis*, I had best make my own position clear. Socrates takes up a series of possible candidates for what it is for someone – or something – to be “dear,” that is, *philos* (or, in the neuter, *philon*), and he successively demolishes each of them. The arguments he uses vary, and serve to dismiss the particular definition at hand, whatever it may be: they do not amount to a systematic investigation of friendship or love. Nichols herself acknowledges some such strategy when she responds to Vlastos’s

charge that Plato fails to understand that one may love a whole person by observing that his case “requires abstracting from any defects Plato suggests in the argument” (p. 166). Whether or not Plato means to call our attention to such defects (a question I leave moot), it is clear enough that several of the arguments he employs are designed simply to confound his interlocutors, and when they have done their job, Plato moves on to the next point.

Let me illustrate by taking a closer look at one passage that is not analyzed in detail by Nichols. “Tell me this,” Socrates says: “when someone loves [*philein*] someone, which is the friend [*philos*] of the other, the one who loves of the one who is loved or the one who is loved of the one who loves? Or does it make no difference?” (212A8-B2). To Menexenus it seems that it makes no difference, but Socrates insists: “What then? Is it not possible for someone who loves not to be loved in return by the one he loves?” “It is,” Menexenus replies. “And possible even that he be hated, although he loves? This is the kind of thing, I think, that lovers [*erastai*] seem sometimes to experience in regard to their beloveds [*paidika*]” (212B5-8). Menexenus agrees with this too (he presumably knows that Hippothales' passion for Lysis seems not to be reciprocated). Socrates observes that in such a case, one would call neither the one who loves nor the one who is loved a friend of the other: “unless they both love,” he concludes, “neither is a friend.” This is straightforward enough, since mutual affection was understood to be the condition for *philia* in the sense of friendship (cf. p. 180: “Unlike love, friendship is reciprocal” – but why, then, say that “the truest exemplar of friendship is the philosopher’s love of wisdom,” p. 179). But Socrates then draws the general conclusion: “Nothing, consequently, is “dear” [*philon*] to one who loves unless it loves in return?” (212D4-5). This switch to the neuter -- “nothing” instead of “no one” – is an odd move, since one does not normally speak of things as friends. The form obliges us to translate *philos* in this context as “dear” rather than friend. The Greek word *philos* can of course bear both senses, and it is not always absolutely clear which use is in play, although the presence of the definite article unambiguously signals the noun: *ho philos* in Greek = “the dear one,” i.e., “friend.” The distinction may also be indicated by the case of the word associated with *philos*: if it is the genitive, “of so-and-so,” then *philos* will usually mean “friend”; if it is the dative, “to so-and-so,” then *philos* is likely to mean “dear,” though “friend to” does occur alongside the more regular “friend of” the person in question. In the present case, Socrates has combined the neuter

form of *philos* with the dative, which makes it entirely clear that "dear" is the correct interpretation. This move is sheer sophistry on his part, but it has, I think, a purpose. I have suggested, in a paper published in a Brazilian journal that Nichols can be entirely excused for having overlooked ("Plato between Love and Friendship," *Hypnos* 6 (2000) 154-69), that Plato means to clear the ground of the most likely contenders for a satisfactory definition of what is loved in order to predispose the reader to search for a deeper sense of the true or ultimate object of desire (*to prôton philon*); and it is desire, not friendship or even love, that Plato means to analyze, I suggest, a point made clear by his casual equation of *erôs*, *philia* and *epithumia* (e.g. at 221E3-4). Far from providing the solution to the puzzles raised in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, on my reading the *Lysis* is precisely a propaedeutic to the *Symposium*'s demonstration that the object of desire is ultimately transcendent.

Socrates says he has always inclined to the possession (*ktêsis*) of friends, and Nichols finds a rich meaning in this verbal noun: "When Socrates speaks of acquisition (*ktêsis*) rather than the possession (*ktêma*) as the object of his desire, he suggests that in the case of friends the verb [*ктаομαι*] cannot have its perfect sense of possessing, that the act of acquiring a friend cannot be completed... Friends are always becoming friends. Of them we should use the imperfect tense" (pp. 167-68). No evidence, however, is adduced to show that this is the necessary or even usual sense of *ktêsis*, and in fact the Liddell and Scott lexicon gives several examples in Plato himself of the perfect sense of the noun.

Where Nichols is heading with all this is toward a sense of philosophy that is intimately related to friendship – even if wisdom cannot reciprocate our love: "It is not, then, that philosophy serves as the true experience that friends seek, free of the illusion of friendship. Rather, philosophy must turn to the experience of friends – an experience of one's own as another who cannot be assimilated or subordinated" (p. 180). I agree that a friend is, in a mysterious sense, both our own and not our own, and that real friendship rests on both unity and independence. In Nichols' view, "The *Lysis* fails to produce an acceptable definition of the friend time after time ... because Socrates refuses to abandon friendship as a reciprocal human relationship" (p. 187). With friendship, we experience an "awareness of lack and belonging" and hence "it offers support for our complex identities as human beings and citizens" (p. 190). Here then, near

the end of the book, is the transition to community, and the crucial role that friendship plays in it, on Nichols' reading of Plato (a final brief chapter looks at the *Phaedo* and returns to the views of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche).

It should be clear that I regard Nichols' interpretation of Plato as tendentious, which is to say that it is out of line with my own reading of his dialogues on *erôs* and *philia*. But a certain *tendance* can be a good thing, since it alerts one to aspects of a text that might otherwise escape notice. As I noted above, the Straussian approach encourages such hermeneutic subtlety, or oversubtlety, and though the methods it exploits are not always consistent with my own sense of proper philological practice, it may lead to significant insights – and there are many of these in Nichols's book. I was not, however, brought to the point of accepting her basic argument.

Although Cooper too is beholden to Leo Strauss, as I mentioned, his interpretation of *erôs* in Plato is quite different from that of Nichols. Cooper finds a common element in Plato's passionate desire, Rousseau's "desire to extend our being," and Nietzsche's will to power, as the drive behind human ambition, longing for something higher, and "the spirited willingness to risk life," a discontent not just with any particular limit but also "with finitude itself" (p. 2). What is more, the heights to which we aspire, according to all three thinkers, are "essentially transpolitical" (p. 4), even if one is summoned back, like the philosopher kings in Plato's *Republic*, to perform a political task. Given such a drive, "Liberalism, to survive, depends on the successful management, the taming, of existential longing and discontent" (p. 5). In what follows, I shall deal exclusively with the chapters on Plato, and leave Rousseau and Nietzsche aside.

Cooper allows for the possibility that what Socrates says may not necessarily correspond to Plato's own views, a point that one may readily concede, at least as a heuristic counsel. "More important," Cooper adds, "it may not be the teaching that Plato wishes to impart to all of his readers. Indeed, I argue that it *is not*, though I do think that what Socrates teaches his interlocutors is what Plato wishes to teach at least some, in fact most, of his readers" (p. 9). The idea that classic texts are addressed to multiple readerships is characteristic of Strauss's method, an approach that he derived from his early interest in Moses Maimonides and mediaeval Islamic philosophy, where such a practice was

explicitly endorsed (only the initiated were privileged to discover the deepest spiritual meaning of the sacred texts); its applicability to Plato's dialogues, however, is more questionable.

Cooper begins with a discussion of the *Republic*, which he regards as a prologue to the *Symposium's* treatment of *erôs*. He maintains that the *Republic* "speaks not only through Socrates' explicit remarks but also through the context of what he says," which leads Cooper to conclude that "the underestimation of the body in this dialogue is a deliberate pedagogical tactic," and that Plato "means to instruct as much by the inadequacy of Socrates' explicit arguments as by the arguments themselves" (p. 17). Now, the *Republic* is exceptional for the way it ascribes *erôs* to all three parts of the soul, the rational, the spirited, and the appetitive, and it is remarkable that "the philosopher emerges as essentially erotic," the more so in that "the same erotic words are used to describe the tyrant" (p. 23). Cooper describes *erôs* as a striving for "a kind of wholeness or unity" (p. 26), though he cites in this connection not any passage from Plato himself but rather modern writers on Plato. Cooper affirms that *erôs* in the *Republic* "has a single aim but many objects"; in the case of the philosopher, desire is sublimated and its objects take the form of ideal *eidê* (p. 30). Beyond the forms, in turn, is the Good, and to participate in the Good is to participate in Being; hence, "what human beings seek simply, since they are always seeking the Good, is more being, or maximum being" (p. 31). But in seeking such an exalted object, is the desire for sex left entirely behind, that is, "does the philosopher have, and if so does he fulfill, sexual eros, or is his eroticism exclusively philosophic?" (p. 34). Since Socrates states that the philosopher's soul "would forsake those pleasures that come through the body" (p. 35, citing *Republic* 485D-E), one would think the answer to this question is settled. But Cooper remains skeptical, "given the fact that both the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus* offer very different views" – if indeed they do; at all events, these other dialogues hardly seem to me sufficient motive for doubting the plain sense of Socrates' words.

Cooper goes on to consider the relation between *erôs* and *thumos*, and argues that "*thymos* is itself a part or variant of *eros*" while acknowledging that "This conclusion is not decisively stated or implied at any one place" (p. 39); "spiritedness is a desire for victory," Cooper affirms, quoting Strauss (p. 41), although Strauss sees it as a negative passion to destroy rather than to generate,

whereas Cooper sees it rather as an aid that enables *erôs* to carry out its ascent. Building on Harold Bloom's view that the philosophic life contains all others, Cooper states that it is "also the most thymotically accomplished life" (pp. 42-43), since it achieves the greatest victory and honor. Cooper concludes his chapter on the *Republic* by observing: "With the discovery that thymos belongs to eros, the *Republic's* apparent psychic dualism resolves into a monism, albeit a tiered and variegated monism" (p. 47).

Turning to the *Symposium*, Cooper affirms that "The tragic error of humanity is to translate a love for *eternity* into the desperate and unsure longing for *immortality*" (p. 53; cf. pp. 93-95), a view with which I am in sympathy: that we mistake timelessness for infinite duration is at least implied in this dialogue, and made clearer in the *Timaeus*. Philosophy is thus in part a kind of "resignation to mortality," but unless this resignation "is accompanied by experience of the eternal," it is tragic, or rather, carries "tragic *political* possibilities." Since this political dimension is not self-evidently indicated in the speeches, Cooper proposes to show it by concentrating on those figures who do not just speak about but also act upon *erôs* in the dialogue, namely Apollodorus, Aristodemus, Alcibiades, and Socrates, including what the characters say or do offstage, as it were, "remembering that these were real people – Plato teaches the truth of human experience" (p. 54). Huge questions of method are raised here, needless to say: the tragic *interpretive* possibilities are legion. Not that Cooper regards the speeches as entirely irrelevant: speech, as he says, is a kind of action. But the speeches also indicate that "the primary effectual truth about eros ... is that people talk about it" (p. 56), and do so in a way that is fundamentally self-interested. I would note that the premise of the dialogue is that no one has ever before praised *erôs*, in contrast with the other gods, which perhaps suggests that people do not talk about it so much in daily life.

Cooper wonders whether a single sense of *erôs* can be extracted from the *Symposium*, especially since, even in Socrates' final speech, there is a "tension between love of the beautiful and love of the good" (for this view, Cooper cites Strauss and Bloom). But Socrates' speech is the culmination of the dialogue, since it responds to each of the preceding speeches and presents a view consistent with that of the *Republic* (p. 62), points that a good many critics of the dialogue have noted, and not just those in the Strauss camp. But Cooper wants to show

that Socrates' speech – if read correctly – also squares with the activities of his chosen figures, and this counts as an “empirical argument” (p. 63). Cooper first offers a reading of the overt sense of Socrates' account, which would lead a reader to suppose, for example, that the beautiful and the good are identical. But this is one of the misrepresentations which a closer reading (available to Plato's “better or more persistent readers,” p. 76) will expose. Cooper maintains that “The nonidentity of the beautiful and the good is not all that difficult to see, and even a moderately careful reading of Diotima's account will serve to highlight this fact of life” (p. 79). I suppose that I am willing to concede that the two do not seem identical to me, though whether my intuitions count as facts of life is open to argument. But, if this is so, then, as Cooper properly asks, “Why, then, submerge it?” His answer is that “Plato is here illustrating the erotic perspective, or the way that the erotic person sees things,” which a “sensitive reading” will reveal to be limited. It does so by pointing to Diotima's further observation that what we really want is to engender in the beautiful, and that this reflects a desire for immortality, which is itself a misrepresentation of the true object of *erôs*, namely eternity. And so the argument proceeds, in a rather leisurely way, examining what Cooper takes to be the logical problems and consequences of Diotima's exposition with occasional reference to the text itself, but more often taking the form of a meditation on the questions as such. As Cooper writes, “Argument alone cannot definitively settle a question concerning the interpretation and naming of experience” (p. 87), though he allows that argument may help.

There is another reason why “Socrates (or Plato) effectively eulogizes what he knows to be delusional eros” (p. 88): he does so for the benefit of ordinary souls, since it encourages citizens to aspire to great things, and this is useful. As Cooper puts it, “There is no necessary correlation between truth and social utility” (p. 89). But certain social activities and true *erôs* do share, according to Cooper, the element of self-forgetting (pp. 98-103), which characterizes Socrates himself, who “seems uniquely free from life's usual anxieties” (p. 102), even as he is highly self-aware. Socrates says at one point to Alcibiades, as a way of diminishing his own importance, “I may be nothing [*ouden ôn*]” (219A, quoted on p. 103). Cooper sees a deeper meaning behind this evident irony, asking “What does it mean to be nothing?” (p. 104), and takes us on a brief detour through neo-Platonism, then cites Aristodemus' surprise when, as he is on the point of entering Agathon's house with Socrates, he discovers

suddenly that Socrates is nowhere to be seen (174E). For Cooper, this suggests that “Socrates has disappeared, he *is not*, precisely on account of his turn inward” (p. 105). What is more, the *eidé* themselves are not exactly things, and so “a form or *eidos* is no-thing” (p. 106; Cooper knows that the *eidé* are not mentioned in the *Symposium*, but he believes that they are alluded to). The erotic experience thus moves by way of self-forgetting or non-being to a fuller realization of true being, as Cooper sees it: it is also a kind of dying and rebirth, each time the philosopher “transcends egoic consciousness, each time he ascends to nothingness” (p 108; cf. p. 114). Unfortunately, Aristodemus, Apollodorus, and Alcibiades do not understand this, despite their passion for Socrates, and so are trapped in their own egos or *amour propre*. That kind of *erôs* is dangerous, and must be corrected by a true and selfless desire for the eternal.

Cooper writes in a genial and often elegant way, and is evidently thoughtful about love and its objects. My objection to his approach, however, is twofold. First, the whole business of self-forgetting and dissolving into nothingness, only to achieve a higher state of being, is largely read into the Platonic text; it is elicited on the basis of slight hints, and treated as the inner meaning of the dialogues, which is illustrated in action (Socrates “disappearing”) but cannot be fully expressed in discursive form. My second objection is that the wisdom that emerges from this interpretation is banal, for all its air of mystery. If all that Plato has to communicate is a kind of popular spirituality, with a letting go of self as the route to self-realization in pure being, we can indeed make light work of the speeches. The rewards of philosophy are different from this, in my view, and consist just in the hard work of discursive analysis. There is a kind of love that motivates this pursuit too – *philosophia* is desire for understanding, after all. For Plato, this desire surely had elements of what we would identify as a mystical impulse, an urge to transcendence. But this is not secret or beneath the surface, and we do not require a Straussian interpretation to discover it.

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