

**Mary P. Nichols, *Socrates on Friendship and Community: Reflections on Plato's Symposium, Phaedrus, and Lysis*.** Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. ISBN 978-0-521-89973-4 Hardback \$80.00.

I doubt that I can give the reader an adequate sense of Mary P. Nichols' ability to bring together detailed observation of Platonic texts and arresting generalization. This ambitious book ably defends a general thesis while providing excellent examples of how to read Platonic dialogues.

The first chapter of Nichols' *Socrates on Friendship and Community* deals with the problem of Socrates as seen by Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Socratic rationalism as they see it forces Socrates to become the master of irony and masks and for this very reason a solitary individual, lonely and alienated. Nichols' perspicacious readings of *Symposium*, *Phaedrus*, and *Lysis* discover not only an alternative Socrates but also "a remedy for alienation" (24). To borrow a phrase from Karl Löwith, Nichols finds a cure for the ills of modernity through "repeating antiquity at the peak of modernity."

An early statement of her general thesis occurs in the first sentence of Chapter Two on Plato's *Symposium*. "Any argument that the philosophic pursuits of Plato's Socrates exemplify an understanding of love and friendship supportive of political life, as I make in this book, must confront the charges against Socrates made by his own political community, the city of Athens" (25). In confronting these charges, Nichols turns not to the *Apology of Socrates* but to the encounter with the poets in the *Symposium*. She summarizes her own results in the following paragraph.

I shall argue ... that whereas Plato uses the *Symposium* as an occasion to revisit the issues surrounding Socrates' indictment, trial, and execution, he shows not the corrupting influence of Socrates on Athens but rather the mutual dependence of Socratic philosophizing and political life. It is Socrates' understanding of love, as we shall see, rooted both in human need and resourcefulness, that explains Socrates' piety, his philosophic life, and his connection to and even his love for other human beings. That same understanding limits imperialism while encouraging noble political action. (30)

Under Nichols' scrutiny, the long speeches made by Agathon's guests are turned into a virtual dialogue in which Socrates responds to Aristophanes and the other speakers (144n67). The dialogue she generates among Plato's characters gives birth to her defense of Socrates.

It is Nichols' ability to make audible the silent dialogue among Platonic characters and among different speeches by the same character that makes her both a practitioner and a teacher of the art of reading Plato. In addition to the dialogue she creates among the speeches of the *Symposium*, let me give two further, somewhat different, examples of this art. As Nichols points out, Kierkegaard's view of Socrates in his *Philosophical Fragments* undergoes a certain development as he moves from the Socrates who simply

contains the truth within himself (in Nichols' formula, "self-knowledge is God-Knowledge" [9]) to the Socrates of Plato's *Phaedrus*, who does not know "whether he is a wild beast more complex and furious than Typhon, or a gentler and simpler animal sharing by nature in a divine and un-Typhonic lot" (96). Nichols makes the observation—an act as simple as turning on a light—that what Socrates does here does not fit neatly under either of the categories, complex and furious or simple and gentle, that he creates. The alternatives he presents

... leave no place for the one like Socrates who is perplexed about himself. Such wonder on the part of Typhon would mean that he is gentler than he appears, and on the part of a gentler, simpler animal that he is less simple than he would otherwise be. Socrates' question does not exhaust or close his inquiry, but rather keeps it alive. (97)

In this passage, Nichols is able to read the speech in light of the action only because she recognizes that the speech itself is a kind of action.

In interpreting the *Lysis*, Nichols makes note of the fact that the argument that opposites are friends is itself introduced as being the "very opposite" of the argument that "likes are friends." She makes the simple but elegant observation that this way of introducing the second argument invites us to think of the two arguments as themselves being friends. "The argument for unlikes in that case would not stand alone, but find a place in company with the argument for likes" (177). This little gem is representative of this fine book. Though she never mentions Derrida, Nichols reads with the subtlety of Derrida and with the added awareness that Plato knows what he is doing; he intends it.

Nichols' main thesis is one of the overcoming of alienation and the reconciliation of opposites. The conflict between Socrates and Athens is at some level a misunderstanding. Philosophy and the city need each other and benefit each other. In a companion piece to the current book, Nichols writes that "Politics is not necessarily tragic" ("Philosophy and Empire," *Polity* 39/4: 521). But there is something about her style in the volume under review that gives me pause. Her gifted readings often lead her into paradox. In his speech in the *Symposium*, she writes, "Aristophanes restores the divine ... in a way that makes it inaccessible to human beings" (52). Such an outcome would be worthy of a comic poet, though it might be tragic for mankind. In Diotima's account the daemonic is a link between the human and the divine. But Nichols goes on to add that "Middles are double-edged, as illustrated by the midpoint of a line, which both joins two line segments and separates them. As intermediary between mortal and immortal, the daemonic links what Aristophanes left asunder, at the same time that it separates what Agathon collapsed" (60). Finally, Socrates "questions the intelligibility of an intermediate, which could exist as a link between human and divine only if it were not needed as a link, only if human and divine could mix" (62). Are these insights more consistent with a world of incommensurables (I do not recall that Nichols ever uses the word) or with the reconciliation her thesis seems to assume? Is the reconciliation of politics and philosophy possible only if it is not needed? I do not mean that Nichols'

thesis is in any way ironic but only that the simple thesis has a complex development, and she seems willing to follow the argument wherever it might lead. Her thesis changes much as she claims that Kierkegaard's thesis is revised by Climacus himself (Climacus being the pseudonymous author of Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments*).

Nichols makes it clear from the beginning that her thesis will undergo some development. The interpretations of the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus* explore the possibility that love is not enough. Love does not hold the key to the overcoming of alienation because love is not necessarily reciprocal. The account of reciprocal friendship in the *Lysis* will hold the key to the overcoming of alienation. For those who have read the *Lysis* prior to reading Nichols book, the latter becomes a kind of a mystery in which one keeps trying to figure out the end. The *Lysis* does not offer a clear solution to the problem of reciprocal friendship. At least on the surface, it leaves the problem unresolved. The good cannot be friends because each is self-sufficient. Self-sufficiency is the meaning of the good, but the self-sufficient have no need of friends. One is reminded of the paradox of the magnanimous man in Aristotle.

Of course, Nichols is well aware of those interpretations of the *Lysis* that retreat into the view that a philosopher can only be a friend to himself or herself (186). She pushes for a more complex interpretation, one that not only makes room for friendship but makes friendship a model for philosophic activity.

It is not, then, that philosophy serves as the true experience that friends seek, free of the illusions 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. The experience of friends offers us access to a world that must be known rather than mastered, one that is not so radically different from ourselves that it must remain unknown .... The argument that Socrates gives at this point in the *Lysis* – that our friends are phantom friends in light of the first friend in which all our friendships terminate – is therefore not the dialogue's deepest teaching about friendship. (180)

The possibility of reciprocal friendship as described here is the remedy for alienation. The experience of friendship is the model for a philosophy that does not itself end in alienation.

Does the experience of friendship that provides a model for philosophy also provide a model for politics? Nichols argues that it does.

The community formed by Plato and his readers through his writing, mediated by Socrates, gives readers through their activity of interpreting the experience of another as their own and of their own as other that is essential to friendship. Such a community therefore serves not as an alternative or substitute for political communities but as their standard. (194)

Does friendship as a model for both philosophy and politics suggest a remedy for the conflict between philosophy and politics? Or does not the standard of politics here proposed—a community of readers of Plato—clearly transcend any possible politics? If the latter is the case, does that not confirm the clash of politics and philosophy, even as we acknowledge their mutual dependence?

I believe it is fair to say that Nichols seeks in Plato and his Socrates an ancient remedy for a distinctively modern problem—a remedy for alienation. In so doing, she makes it very clear that there is abundant material in Plato for addressing just such a problem, particularly in the dialogues that explore love and friendship. The discovery that Plato’s universe of discourse encompasses the modern problem leads naturally or inevitably to Nichols’ arresting claim that “Plato was not a Platonist” (188).

What Nichols means by Platonism can be seen in Climacus’ initial thesis, according to which self-knowledge is God-knowledge. Our individuality vanishes in our identity with the divine. The truth in this case is what Leo Strauss (“Farabi’s *Plato*” 1945, 377) once called “the necessarily anonymous truth.” What is important about us as human beings are the attributes of beauty and goodness which we share with others. We love the attributes, not the person. Charles Griswold interprets the *Phaedrus* in such a way that self-knowledge is God-knowledge (117), and David Bolotin and Gregory Vlastos do the same for the *Lysis* (179). Vlastos identifies Plato and Platonism with love of the good qualities a person might have but not with love of “the whole person” (166). Martha Nussbaum, in contrast, recognizes the “irreducible individuality” that follows from the self-motion Socrates ascribes to soul in the *Phaedrus* (116). For Vlastos and for many of the scholars Nichols engages, the individuality Nussbaum invokes lies beyond the Platonic horizon; for Nichols it lies within that horizon. Without an awareness of individuality, Plato could not address friendship in a way that speaks to the problem of the alienated individual, as Nichols successfully shows he does. At the same time, Nichols is more careful than Nussbaum to avoid turning Plato into a modern individualist. The tension Nichols discovers is captured in a quote she takes from Seth Benardete. “The universality of knowledge and the individuality of self-knowledge seem not to consist with one another” (113, n.31). We are tempted to add that while they do not consist with one another they cannot exist apart. Reciprocity is the condition for both conflict and friendship. This is the spirit in which I understand Nichols statement, near the end of her book, that “The tension between human being and citizen holds the threat of fatal conflict, as between Socrates and Athens, even if it also means that political communities can approach friendship as their standard” (207).

I hope I have said enough to tempt the reader into a friendship with this thoughtful and instructive book. It is a friendship that will be amply rewarded.

CHRIS COLMO  
DEPT. OF POLITICAL SCIENCE  
DOMINICAN UNIVERSITY