Introduction

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. Only by experiencing our own as other do we become aware of our need or incompleteness that leads us to pursue wisdom; only by experiencing another as our own do we have any reason to suppose that learning is possible. This twofold character of friendship not only connects it to philosophy for Plato, but means that friendship can serve as a model for a political community where there is both a common bond among citizens and recognition of their separate identities. This view of Socrates and friends, with its implications for philosophy and political life, emerges from my analyses of Plato's *Symposium*, *Phaedrus*, and *Lysis*.

Since at least Hegel, however, Socrates has been presented less as a proponent of friendship than as an alienated and alienating figure, even when his freedom has been a source of admiration. This is true of the interpretations of both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments* contrasts the universality of the truth to which Socrates led his interlocutors with the Christian demand for faith in a God who enters time or history.[1] Whereas Socrates presents philosophy as drawing us away from temporal life, the god redeems human life by becoming man himself.[2] Even more forceful in his criticism of Socrates, Nietzsche identifies the problem of Western civilization and its enthronement of

[1] Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments* (*PF*), ed. and trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

[2] It is not until almost the end of the *Fragments* that it is stated that the "thought-project" is about Christianity, which "is the only historical phenomenon that . . . has wanted to base [the individual's] happiness on something historical," 109.

reason as "the problem of Socrates." In *Twilight of the Idols*, he claims that Socrates' "rationality at any price" means a denial of the instincts and ultimately a denial of life.[3] Just as Kierkegaard insists that the monastery is a medieval idea and that faith, in contrast, is "for this life,"[4] Nietzsche urges us "to remain faithful to the earth, and not [to] believe those who speak of other worldly hopes." The "way of the creator," in contrast to the otherworldly asceticism of Socrates, reveals "the meaning of the earth."[5]

In spite of Kierkegaard's and Nietzsche's attempts to present alternatives to the otherworldly alienation that they trace to Socrates, however, their influence on Western thought has not been in the direction of community. Because the highest appears in Kierkegaard's works as an incommunicable relation between the individual and the god, for example, it does not become manifest in communal life (see, e.g., *FT* 71 and 76–80). And Nietzsche's Zarathustra proclaims that "in the end one experiences only oneself" (*TSZ* 264). Under the influence of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, the twentieth century to a large extent reduced religion to a leap into the absurd, on the one hand, and philosophy to arbitrary or willful creativity, on the other. Such turns to subjectivity, whether they be to an individual's private relation to God or to his own self-creations, undermine communal and hence political life as it has long been understood in Western thought. When reason no longer serves as a bond among human beings or as a means of discovering and implementing common purposes, alienation is as likely the result as the life-affirming challenges that Kierkegaard and Nietzsche intended to offer humankind.

My purpose in this book is to revisit their view of an "alienated" Socrates and to recover the place of friendship and community in Socratic philosophizing as an antidote to the alienating aspects of modern thought. We must look beyond the visions bequeathed to us by Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, I argue, to Plato's understanding of community as essential to human fulfillment.

[3] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols* (*TI*) in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking Penguin, 1954), 473–79.

[4] This is the way in which Kierkegaard's pseudonym Johannes de Silentio (John the Silent) describes Abraham's faith in *Fear and Trembling*(*FT*), ed. and trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 20. According to Johannes, entering the monastery belongs to the Middle Ages rather than to faith, 98. While he expresses admiration for the "deep and earnest souls who found rest in the monastery," he claims that "to enter a monastery is not the highest," 100.

[5] This is the advice of Nietzsche's character Zarathustra in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (*TSZ*), in *The Portable Nietzsche*, 125 and 176–77.

At the same time, my study of friendship in the philosophic life of Plato's Socrates contributes to the contemporary scholarship on Plato. In *Love and Friendship*, for example, Allan Bloom argues that love and friendship "are distinctively human and inseparable from man's spirituality."[6] But while he gives the two equal place in his title, his work gives short shrift to friendship. Friendship differs from love in being necessarily reciprocal: one can love without being loved in return, whereas one can be a friend with another only if that other is one's friend. But according to Bloom, reciprocity is "missing from the Platonic understanding of love and friendship."[7] More generally in the scholarly literature on Plato, there is relatively little discussion of friendship as compared with love. Those interested in classical friendship are more likely to turn to Aristotle. My focus on friendship in my study of Plato's Socrates fills this lacuna. It is in part because of the place of friendship in his philosophic life, I argue, that Plato's Socrates offers an alternative to both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche.

As a point of departure for my study of Socrates and friends in Plato's dialogues, Chapter 1 begins with a brief examination of Kierkegaard's and Nietzsche's portrayals of Socrates. In the course of Kierkegaard's *Fragments*, Socrates becomes an example of someone whose understanding collides with the unknown, and in doing so encounters a gap between the temporal and the eternal that only the god – and faith – can bridge (*PF* 37–48). Socrates thus comes closer to Kierkegaard than it appears at the outset. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche, although seeking an artistic rather than a moral justification of the world, calls not for a rebirth of tragedy but for a new "artistic Socrates."[8] He hopes that the discipline required by Socratic rationalism will lead to the emergence of a new art or poetry whose need, he thinks, even the dying Socrates came to recognize (*BT* 93). Kierkegaard and Nietzsche thus find more in Socrates, their paradigmatic representative of Western rationalism, than the self-denying universalism or otherworldly asceticism than appears at first sight. Taking them as guides in Chapter 1, I examine Socrates' understanding of knowledge in Plato's *Meno*, to which Kierkegaard points us in *Philosophical Fragments*, and Socrates'

[6] Allan Bloom, *Love and Friendship* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), 548.
[7] Bloom, *Love and Friendship*, 34.
[8] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* (*BT*), in *The Birth of Tragedy* and *The Case of Wagner*, trans. and commentary by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1976), 92.

recourse to art or poetry in Plato's *Phaedo*, to which Nietzsche points us in *Twilight of the Idols*.[9] Kierkegaard and Nietzsche are correct to connect Socratic philosophizing with piety and poetry, even though their interpretations do leave Socrates alienated from friendship and political community.[10]

In Chapter 2, I turn to Plato's *Symposium*, where Socrates encounters the leading poets of Athens at the time, as well as its great political figure, Alcibiades, a man whom Socrates claims to have loved and whom he was accused of corrupting. Scholarly discussion of that dialogue emphasizes either Socrates' philosophic ascent along a "ladder of love" away from ordinary human life to beauty itself, or the tension between Socratic philosophy and political life, as Plato captures it in Socrates' relationship with Alcibiades. While not ignoring the difficulties in Socrates' relationship with Alcibiades and ultimately with the city of Athens, my reading of the *Symposium* focuses on Socrates' understanding of the human condition as both needy and resourceful. It is this position between lack and possession that is the basis of generation at all levels of human life. Love connects human beings to others through their desire to generate and nurture their offspring in political communities (*Symposium* 209a). As for Nietzsche, philosophic pursuit culminates in generation, but for Plato it is born from and strengthens our connections to others and to our political communities. The *Symposium* thus prepares for Socrates' connecting love to friendship and both to an art of rhetoric in the *Phaedrus*, which is the subject of Chapter 3.

Plato's *Phaedrus* examines love in the context of self-knowledge, including the extent to which self-knowledge is possible through our relations to others, and the role of "a true art of speaking" in generation and immortality (*Phaedrus* 260e and 276e–277a). Whereas for Kierkegaard the divine itself must descend to human beings if they are to learn the truth, Love serves to connect human and divine in the *Symposium*, and in the *Phaedrus* not only love but the individual beloved

[9] For a fuller examination of Kierkegaard's relation to Socrates, see Jacob Howland, *Kierkegaard and Socrates: A Study in Faith and Philosophy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006). For a fuller examination of Nietzsche's relation to Socrates (and to Plato), see Catherine H. Zuckert, *Postmodern Platos* (University of Chicago Press, 1996), 10–32.

[10] See Howland's telling observation: "Both Kierkegaard and Climacus [Kierkegaard's pseudonym in *Philosophical Fragments*] tend to represent Socratic philosophizing as the heroically independent endeavor of a solitary individual," *Kierkegaard and Socrates*, 216.

plays this role.[11] If the beloved were reduced or subordinated either to the lover or to divinity, he could no longer do so. So too do our political communities, where we encounter a heterogeneity of human types, both like and unlike ourselves, reflect and thereby make accessible the truth about the whole.

Our relation to the truth, for Socrates, is a mediated one, whether he describes it in terms of loving another, as in his speech about love in the *Phaedrus*, or in terms of his conversing with different human beings and discovering the speeches appropriate to them, as he describes later in that dialogue. From Plato's *Lysis*, which is the subject of Chapter 4, we learn that love must be transformed into friendship to fulfill this promise. This dialogue begins with Socrates' encounter with the lover Hippothales, who asks for the philosopher's help in winning his beloved Lysis. Socrates offers to give him a demonstration of how to do so, while turning his discussion with Lysis to the question of what or who is the friend. Instead of demonstrating how to woo a beloved for Hippothales, Socrates demonstrates for a larger group listening in the palaestra how one becomes the friend of another. The *Lysis* shows that philosophy must be grounded in an experience analogous to friendship. In experiencing our own as other, as we do in friendship, we experience the strange in the familiar; in experiencing the other as our own, we experience the familiar in the strange. As Socrates says, philosophy begins in wonder (*Theaetetus* 155d): we have reason to think that we do not know; and we also have reason to trust that we might do so. Whereas the experience of alienation is only that of a distance between self and other, friendship offers an experience of a connection as well. That is why it can serve as the standard for a political life that does justice to both freedom and community.

Finally, in Chapter 5, I return to the *Phaedo*, where Socrates before his death gives an account of his philosophic development – his famous "second sailing," his own way of pursuing the truth when natural science fails to understand the place of human life within the whole, including the pursuit of the good. Socrates' new approach, he explains, involves "taking refuge in speeches," a way of inquiry that distinguishes him from pre-Socratic philosophy, and that entails his examination of opinions about what is good that underlie and are articulated in political life. In this context, Socrates gives an account of the ideas as causes that raises the question of how something that is separate can also be related

[11] I have capitalized Love whenever he is personified.

to something else (*Phaedo* 78b ff.). The problem of the ideas is the problem that comes to light in friendship itself, and underlies both the conflict and community found in political life. Socrates' search for a friend, which he announces in the *Lysis*, and his questioning how one becomes the friend of another, are expressions of his new approach to philosophy, which we understand as political philosophy. Because that approach understands difference or diversity as a condition for community rather than simply as a threat to it, Socrates can offer a remedy for modern alienation while preserving a fundamental place for the individualism central to modern thought and politics. It is for this reason that we can find a friend in Socrates.

1

The Problem of Socrates

Kierkegaard and Nietzsche

Kierkegaard gave his dissertation, *The Concept of Irony*, the subtitle, *With Continual Reference to Socrates*. In a way, this subtitle might characterize Kierkegaard's thought as a whole. *Stages on Life's Way*, for example, includes an imitation of Plato's *Symposium*, in which Socrates encounters representatives of Athens' intellectual and political life, and presents what he has learned about love.[1] *Fear and Trembling* presents Socrates as an intellectual tragic hero, in contrast to a knight of faith, while *Philosophical Fragments* explores faith as an alternative to the Socratic understanding of knowledge and truth. Kierkegaard's journals and papers have numerous and profound references to Socrates.[2] Nietzsche as well used Socrates as a point of departure for his own work. His first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, presents Socrates as the turning point of world history.[3] And *Twilight of the Idols*, one of the last works that Nietzsche wrote, takes Socrates as an idol requiring a tuning fork to reveal his hollowness. He explains how Socrates "fascinated" the youth of Athens, but Nietzsche would be the first to admit that Socrates fascinated him as well, even if he regarded his own work "as a great declaration of war" against idols.[4]

One does not take as one's primary interlocutor someone for whom one has no affinity.[5] In this chapter, we shall explore the ways in which

[1] Søren Kierkegaard, "In Vino Veritas," in *Stages on Life's Way*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 7–86.
[2] Howland, *Kierkegaard and Socrates*, 209.
[3] Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, 96.
[4] Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 465–66 and 478.
[5] According to Howland, Kierkegaard "felt himself to be the soulmate of [this] pagan Athenian who lived and died for philosophy," *Kierkegaard and Socrates*, 2. There is a substantial literature on Nietzsche's admiration for Socrates. See, for example, Walter Kaufmann's classic work on Nietzsche, in *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychiatrist, Antichrist*, 3d. ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), esp. ch. 13. As Nietzsche wrote,

Kierkegaard and Nietzsche point to a much more complex Socrates than their more obvious criticisms of his self-denying universalism and otherworldly asceticism suggest. Following Kierkegaard's lead in *Philosophical Fragments*, I discuss Socrates' understanding of knowledge in Plato's *Meno*. Then following Nietzsche's lead in *Twilight of the Idols*, I discuss Socrates' turn to art or poetry in Plato's *Phaedo*. Finally, I suggest that a more complete examination of Plato's Socrates, as I undertake through my analyses of the *Symposium*, the *Phaedrus*, and the *Lysis*, will reveal an understanding of the relation between philosophy and community that takes us beyond even Kierkegaard and Nietzsche.

KIERKEGAARD: SOCRATES VS. THE GOD

Kierkegaard is famous for criticizing the Hegelians of his day for their presumption of final and absolute knowledge made possible by the progressive development of mind or spirit in history. In *Fear and Trembling*, for example, Kierkegaard's pseudonym John the Silent attempts to cast doubt on the modern wisdom of those "unwilling to stop with faith," who presume that they have gone further. In "ancient days" it was different, for "faith was then a task for a whole lifetime." Ancient wisdom also understood doubting to be such a task, and "after all [the ancient Greeks] did know a little about philosophy." *Fear and Trembling* thus begins by pointing out that there are two alternatives to Hegelianism – faith and philosophical doubt. The work, however, turns its attention away from that "veteran disputant" of antiquity who "maintained the equilibrium of doubt," to Abraham, the Biblical father of faith (*FT* 6–7).[6]

Socrates, however, comes into his own in another of Kierkegaard's works, *Philosophical Fragments*, in which Kierkegaard adopts the pseudonym Johannes Climacus to explore a "Socratic question": "Can the truth be learned?" (*PF* 9). Socrates appears in that work not as the consummate doubter but as the advocate of the doctrine of recollection, the teaching that every human being has the truth within himself, but has forgotten what he once knew. Only if the truth is within each of us,

"Socrates, simply to confess it, stands so near to me, that I almost always fight a battle with him," quoted in Werner Dannhauser, *Nietzsche's View of Socrates* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974), 15.

[6] Socrates returns briefly toward the end of *Fear and Trembling*, when its author presents him as an ironic figure whose elasticity toward his own life allows him to banter with his jury when he hears his death sentence (*FT* 117).

Socrates argues, could we come to know anything, for if we did not in some way already possess it, we would not even know what to seek, or whether we had found it (*PF* 9). The "teacher" in this view gives the learner nothing and his questions provide a mere occasion for the learner's recollection. Socrates therefore presents himself merely as a midwife, who draws out by his questioning what the learner has within himself, rather than as a teacher. To defend the possibility of philosophic inquiry, Socrates thus describes learning as recollection, and teaching as reminding. The latter is "the highest relation a human being can have to another" (*PF* 10). Plato's "enthusiasm" for Socrates, from which his dialogues were born, is from this perspective only an illusion, for the truth was in Plato and emerged from Plato: "The person who understands Socrates best understands specifically that he owes Socrates nothing" (*PF* 61). That Socrates or anyone else prompted his recollection of the truth is a historical accident, and can be of no concern with regard to eternal happiness (*PF* 12). The moment of recollection has no decisive significance, and should disappear in light of the eternal truth.

Consequently, Climacus concludes that for Socrates "every human is himself the midpoint" (that is, no intermediary is strictly speaking necessary between the learner and the truth) and "self-knowledge is God-knowledge" (for to know oneself is to know the truth, which every human soul possesses) (*PF* 11). From this Socratic perspective, as Climacus presents it, we all live with a view to eternity; our temporal lives are but the outer casings of our eternal selves, which it is our task to recover. Socrates is thus the advocate of reason, which grasps the truth latent in the human soul.

After presenting this Socratic understanding, Climacus turns to the alternative possibility that teaching rather than reminding occurs. In such a case, the truth is not previously possessed by the learner, but he acquires it from another. The teacher does not simply serve as an occasion for learning, as does the midwife Socrates, but gives to the learner what no human being possesses or can possess on his own. Someone who does this cannot be a human being. The teacher must be the god. That human beings lack the condition for understanding the truth, which they receive from the god in the moment of teaching, cannot be an accident, for the condition for the truth is an essential condition, nor could our lack be due to the god, for this would be a contradiction in the god. Human beings must be deprived of the condition for understanding the truth because of themselves. This state of untruth Climacus calls sin (*PF* 15).

"Consciousness of sin," which is a condition for understanding the truth, "only the god can teach," otherwise we would ourselves possess the condition or be able to obtain it from another (*PF* 47).

In the act of teaching, the eternal, the truth, comes to the learner at a moment in time, a moment that is of decisive significance for his eternal happiness, and in which he undergoes a radical change, a second birth. In this moment, there occurs "the eternalization of the historical and the historicizing of the eternal" (*PF* 61). This does not mean that in this moment the learner grasps an eternal truth. Doing so would be nothing more than the Socratic position, which holds that the truth is always accessible if the occasion is right. An eternal truth, by virtue of its being eternal, is *always* accessible to human understanding, at least in principle, even if it is forgotten and must be discovered. For the understanding to grasp an eternal truth, there can be no teacher, only a midwife. What is taught, in contrast, is not the eternal, but the paradox that the eternal becomes historical. Truth undergoes as radical a change as the learner. The god becomes man. The object of teaching and the act of teaching are therefore identical. The medium is the message, but only in this paradoxical case. This paradox must come from the god inasmuch as the understanding on its own could have never originated such a thought. We cannot be led to it by being questioned, for example, or understand it by reason. In fact, the paradox seems to be the downfall of the understanding, which will therefore have objections to it (*PF* 47). If the understanding takes offense at the paradox, the encounter between the paradox and the understanding will become an unhappy one (*PF* 48). Only when the paradox is accepted by the learner in faith is the encounter happy (*PF* 59). Nor is there any way for a believer to give or teach the truth he has received from the god to another, for the truth is that the god has become the teacher (*PF* 99–101). Only when the god teaches the learner does he encounter the paradox, and is faith possible.

Socrates' position thus serves as the foil in the *Fragments* for the position that the truth is paradoxical, or beyond reason. A radical dichotomy between understanding and faith emerges from these alternative answers to the question of whether the truth can be learned (*PF* 9–22). This dichotomy between Socrates and the god, with which *Philosophical Fragments* begins, however, is qualified as the work proceeds.[7] In the third of the book's five chapters Climacus tells us that

[7] See Howland's *Kierkegaard and Socrates* for an excellent discussion of this aspect of *Philosophical Fragments*.