

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