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How Virgil’s *Aeneid* Supports Socrates’ Definition of Love

Plato’s *Symposium* depicts Socrates describing love as a mean between that which is good and that which is evil, which allows Socrates to justify his claim that love acts as a means to the attainment of the unchanging or immortal good. Socrates specifies that this immortal good is “birth in beauty, whether of body or soul” (Plato 857). Socrates proceeds to describe how this birth in beauty is related to some element of immortality by addressing procreation. Socrates explains that mortals are desirous of procreation in beauty, which is harmonious with the immortal, as opposed to the deformed, which is inharmonious with the immortal. Thus, because mortals desire some sort of harmony with the immortal, Socrates describes love as the desire for the immortal. Virgil’s *Aeneid* portrays love as a powerful and potentially destructive force that, when not controlled, can lead to those afflicted with love to abandon important obligations, thereby leading to disastrous consequences. Despite Virgil’s alternate portrayal of love, Socrates’ definition of love can be seen throughout the epic. As a result, Socrates’ definition of love proves to be useful in determining whether characters in Virgil’s *Aeneid* actually love. For example, one can see Socrates’ definition of love in its absence, where Dido, forgetful of her own kingdom of Carthage, intensely craves for Aeneas. Dido’s ill-fated craving for Aeneas indicates that she does not love Aeneas according to Socrates. Additionally, Socrates’ definition of love sheds a similar light on Aeneas, who neglects his duties to his family and to his people in order to pursue a relationship with Dido. Aeneas’ pursuit for an inevitably ephemeral relationship with Dido demonstrates that Aeneas does not love Dido. Finally, one can see Socrates’ definition of love in Aeneas’ dutiful desire to found a homeland for the sake of his people and his family. Aeneas’ dutiful desire to find and found a homeland for the preservation of his people indicates that Aeneas loves his people and family according to Socrates. Therefore, using Socrates’ definition of love, Virgil’s *Aeneid* demonstrates that both Dido and Aeneas fail to love each other, but that Aeneas does love his people and family.

First, Dido does not love Aeneas because Aeneas is never meant to remain with Dido in Carthage, thereby rendering the object of Dido’s desires unable to resemble immortality. In other words, the relationship between Dido and Aeneas is never meant to last, which means that Dido’s pursuit for Aeneas is not a pursuit for that which resembles immortality. Numerous signs indicate that Aeneas is destined for something other than a relationship with Dido. Aeneas himself understands his fate to go to Italy before encountering Dido. When speaking to his crew after landing on Carthage, he says, “Through so many hard straits, so many twists and turns our course holds firm for Latium. There Fate holds out a homeland, calm, at peace. There the gods decree the kingdom of Troy will rise again” (Virgil932:240-243). Because Aeneas is destined not to remain in Carthage, Dido cannot hope to develop a lasting relationship with him, preventing an aspect of immortality from existing. Worse, Dido would be abandoning her duties to her kingdom in pursuing this relationship, thereby failing to seek immortality in the preservation of Carthage. Dido herself acknowledges the consequences of the affair, saying that “Numidian warlords hate me, even my own Tyrians rise against me” (Virgil 978:398-399). One could argue that Dido does attempt to seek immortality in the preservation of Carthage due to her being convinced by what Anna tells her. Anna says, “I think, in fact, the favor of all the gods and Juno’s backing drove these Trojan ships on the winds that sailed them here. Think what a city you will see, my sister, what a kingdom rising high if you marry such a man!” (Virgil 971:57-61). The problem with what Anna advises Dido is that Anna is wrong to say that the gods drove Aeneas and the Trojans to Carthage in order to build up Carthage as a great kingdom. As previously stated, Aeneas is fated to found a new kingdom for his people in Italy, not unite his people with the Carthaginians. Therefore, Anna’s words serve to give Dido justification for actions she herself knows are wrong, similar to how Dido uses the word marriage “to cloak her sense of guilt” (Virgil 974:218). Therefore, because of the lack of an immortal aspect in Dido’s relationship with Aeneas, Dido does not love Aeneas.

Just as Dido does not love Aeneas, so too does Aeneas fail to love Dido because the relationship between the two is fated not to last, thereby preventing Aeneas’ pursuit of Dido from being one which pursues immortality. Like Dido, Aeneas neglects his obligation to his fate and to his people in pursuing Dido. Jove, upon hearing of Aeneas’ affair with Dido, provides further insight into what Aeneas is fated to do. Jove angrily says, “[Aeneas] would be the one to master an Italy rife with leaders, shrill with the cries of war, to sire a people sprung from Teucer’s noble blood and bring the entire world beneath the rule of law” (Virgil 976:286-289). Jove describes the lasting empire that Aeneas would bring about if Aeneas were to pursue the course that his fate dictates. This lasting empire, which would resemble immortality due to its lasting nature, is the very thing Aeneas ought to be pursuing instead of a kingdom and woman that he is not fated to preserve. One can see that Aeneas is not meant to preserve Carthage based on Mercury’s reaction to witnessing Aeneas’ assistance in Carthage’s construction efforts. As Aeneas works on Carthage’s fortifications, Mercury scolds him: “You, so now you lay foundation stones for the soaring walls of Carthage! Building her gorgeous city, doting on your wife. Blind to your own realm, oblivious to your own fate!” (Virgil 977:330-333). The passage is a reminder not only that Aeneas fails to pursue immortality in choosing to be oblivious to his people and his fate, but also that Aeneas fails to pursue immortality in pursuing a relationship that can neither have a future nor produce anything that lasts. The only hope that some immortality could be attained in pursuing Dido is Anna’s fantasy that Carthage could become a great kingdom with Aeneas as Dido’s husband. However, as previously stated, this notion is just a fantasy since Aeneas is bound by fate not to remain in Carthage. Therefore, because Aeneas lacks a means of attaining that which resembles immortality in pursuing Dido, Aeneas does not love Dido.

However, despite Aeneas’ faltering with respect to his obligations to his people and his family, Aeneas ultimately proves to love his people and his family because of their resemblance to immortality. One can see that Aeneas’ people and family resemble immortality because of the fate that his people and family are to prosper in a new kingdom, as discussed previously. This fate essentially acts as an assurance that Aeneas’ family and people receive preservation from complete annihilation after the Trojan War. The notion of preservation inherently resembles the immortal due to the immortal’s nature of continuation or duration. Thus, one sees that the preservation of Aeneas’ people and family resembles immortality. Aeneas demonstrates the desire to preserve his people and family in numerous ways. For example, during the sack of Troy, after Aeneas valiantly attempts to defend Troy from the Greeks as the city burns, Aeneas demonstrates his desire for preserving his people and family as he attempts to lead his family safely out of Troy, carrying his father on his shoulders and holding his son’s hand (Virgil 967). Additionally, Aeneas demonstrates his desire for preserving kith and kin in expressing his difficult decision to leave Dido for Italy. He says, “Grynean Apollo’s oracle says that I must seize on Italy’s noble land, his Lycian lots say ‘Italy!’ There lies my love, there lies my homeland now” (Virgil 979:431-433). Aeneas says this after expressing his deep desire to establish a homeland now in Carthage for his war-weary Trojans. The fact that Aeneas gives up the vain hope of establishing a homeland for his people in Carthage demonstrates Aeneas’ ability to face the need of sailing to Italy if he truly desires to preserve his people. Therefore, because Aeneas decides to make the difficult decision to leave for Italy in order to preserve his people and family, Aeneas demonstrates love for his people and family.

In conclusion, Socrates’ notion that love is the desire for immortality demonstrates that, while Dido and Aeneas fail to love each other, Aeneas succeeds in loving his people and family. Dido fails to love Aeneas since fate prevents that which resembles immortality from resulting in such a pursuit, whether that resemblance be a lasting relationship with Aeneas or in the preservation of Carthage. Additionally, Aeneas fails to love Dido because both fate and the gods prevent Aeneas from being able to find some resemblance to immortality through Dido, whether that resemblance again be a lasting relationship with Dido or in the preservation of Carthage. Because Aeneas’ fate dictates that he will find the preservation, which resembles immortality, of his people and his family through the path that leads to Italy, Aeneas truly loves his people and his family.