

From Tea To Love:

An Analysis of Plato's Symposium

For a lot of people, to live is to aspire to beauty and good, and many equate this aspiration to love. But, is love itself beautiful and good. I plan to demonstrate that love is neither beautiful nor good, and I develop this conclusion informed by a reading of Plato's *Symposium*, with a focus on the analysis of Pausanias and Socrates.

Plato was a philosopher in Greece and is universally acknowledged to be the pivotal figure in the development of Western philosophy. One of his most notable works, the *Symposium*, is the foundation of this essay. The philosophical text depicts a friendly contest of improvised speeches given by a group of notable men attending a banquet. Some of them include Socrates, Phaedrus, Agathon, and Aristophanes. The speeches are to be given in praise of Eros, the god of love and desire, and the son of Aphrodite, or the companion of her, depending on the story. Pausanias stated that love is not in itself noble or worthy of praise but depends on the sentiments one produces in others that are noble.¹ Socrates, using reasoning and also from the experience of Diotima, argued that love is neither beautiful nor good because love wants and lacks both.²

So how is love neither beautiful nor good? Let us reason by analyzing Pausanias, Socrates, and Diotima.

Let us imagine there is an empty cup. The cup itself has a form, the form of a cup. Within it there is a void, which can be filled by pouring any kind of liquid in it. Thus, we may conclude that the cup has the potential to be a cup of something once there is a substance inside. It may be a cup of tea, a cup of water, or a cup of hot chocolate, or even a cup of mixture of them. But the cup itself is not a cup of tea, it is only when one pours tea in it that it changes and becomes a cup of tea. The cup can now be understood of not only having a form but it is the form itself. This means the form is instantiated in the liquids. Hence, the cup of tea is the physical image of the form, albeit an incomplete and insufficient representation.

The same analogy can be applied to love. Love is a form, but it is special in the sense that it does not contain the perfect beauty or goodness within it. In fact, love is inherently and initially a blank canvas; it is whether one chooses to beautify or taint it that shapes it. Just as there are many types of practices and there are different motives for the same action, the practices and their intentions are what crafts the image of love. Love is good when practices that aspire to love are good, and love is beautiful when practices that aspire to love are beautiful.

Pausanias also applied this reasoning here, “to every type of action: considered in itself, no action is either good or bad, honorable or shameful. Take, for example, our own case. We had a choice between drinking, singing, or having a conversation. Now, in itself none of these is better than any other: how it comes out depends entirely on how it is performed. If it is done

¹ Plato. *Symposium*. (360 B.C.E). 181a

² Plato. *Symposium*. (360 B.C.E). 201c

honorably and properly, it turns out to be honorable; if it is done improperly, it is disgraceful. And my point is that exactly this principle applies to being in love: Love is not in himself noble and worthy of praise; that depends on whether the sentiments he produces in us are themselves noble.”³

Pausanias furthered his claim by introducing the two types of Aphrodite and using those to exemplify his argument. The first one is an older deity, the motherless daughter of Uranus, the god of heaven: she is known as Urania, or Heavenly Aphrodite. The other goddess is younger, the daughter of Zeus and Dione: her name is Pandemos, or Common Aphrodite.

The type of love one pursues greatly influence whether love is good or not. Pausanias demonstrated that “This (the Common Aphrodite’s Love), of course, is the love felt by the vulgar, who are attached to women no less than to boys, to the body more than to the soul, and to the least intelligent partners, since all they care about is completing the sexual act. Whether they do it honorably or not is of no concern. That is why they do whatever comes their way, sometimes good, sometimes bad; and which one it is incidental to their purpose.”⁴

Additionally, the action, the intention, and the pursuit of higher good and meaning are equally important. Another major idea that Pausanias asserted is that not only do the practices have to be noble and beautiful, but when they must also aspire to a higher level of purity and nobility. Thus, one always has to strive to reach the intelligible realm for every action. Pausanias remarked, “In my opinion, however, the fact of the matter is this. As I said earlier, love is, like everything else, complex: considered simply in itself, it is neither honorable nor a disgrace—its character depends entirely on the behavior it gives rise to. To give oneself to a vile man in a vile way is truly disgraceful behavior; by contrast, it is perfectly honorable to give oneself honorably to the right man. Now you may want to know who he counts as vile in this context. I’ll tell you: it is the common, vulgar lover, who loves the body rather than the soul, the man whose love is bound to be inconstant, since what he loves is itself mutable and unstable.”⁵

Thus, from dissecting and understanding Pausanias’s ideas and reasoning, one concludes that love is neither beautiful nor good because love is void of beauty and goodness in the first place. It is with honorable, righteous, and noble behaviors, intentions, and the drive to achieve a higher level of meaning and form that makes love ideal. Thus, though love is neither beautiful nor good by nature, it is possible for it to become beautiful and good.”

Let us once again return to the cup analogy. Previously we assumed that the cup is the form and that it is inherently lack of materials that shape its characteristic of a cup of that material. But, can the cup be an empty cup on its own and not have any liquid in it? The answer is no. The purpose of the cup is to contain a fix amount of substance inside of its internally designed space. If one does not pour anything into the cup, the cup is now the cup of air. Now one tries to put it into space to get rid of air, the cup now contains a portion of the emptiness of

³ Plato. *Symposium*. (360 B.C.E). 181a

⁴ Plato. *Symposium*. (360 B.C.E). 181b

⁵ Plato. *Symposium*. (360 B.C.E). 183e

space that resides within the cup. The cup must contain something the moment it is crafted because of its intrinsic design, regardless of substance.

Similarly, Socrates stated that love is neither love (love for the sake of love) nor love of nothing but always love of something. He explained his reasoning with the analogies of families (the father has to be a father of a child or children) and concluded it with “Love desire that of which it is the love.”⁶ Then he reasoned that if one loves something, one desires and does not have it in “a thing that desires, desires something of which it is in need; otherwise, if it were not in need, it would not desire it.”⁷

One might object and questions what happen if one already possesses it but want to have it in the future, because wouldn't that contradict his statement? And for that, Socrates replied: “But when someone says “I am healthy, but that's just what I want to be,” or “I am rich, but that's just what I want to be,” or “I desire the very things that I have,” let us say to him: “You already have riches and health and strength in your possession, my man, what you want is to possess these things in time to come, since in the present, whether you want to or not, you have them. Whenever you say, I desire what I already have, ask yourself whether you don't mean this: I want the things I have now to be mine in the future as well.””⁸

Now, let us take this a step further. Assuming that a craftsman makes a teacup. Thus, one infers teacup must want the tea, yet at the same time it does not possess the tea. Thus, the teacup is not a cup of tea, but it can potentially be a cup of tea if there is tea in it. The same can be said for love. Love, although neither beautiful nor good, can be both if there is beauty and good that are carried in the actions in the name of love.

As for the Symposium, Socrates derived that love as neither beautiful nor good through the following bit of dialogue

“And we also agreed that he loves just what he needs and does not have.”

“Yes,” he said.

“So Love needs beauty, then, and does not have it.”

“Necessarily,” he said.

“So! If something needs beauty and has got no beauty at all, would you still say that it is beautiful?”

“Certainly not.”

“Then do you still agree that Love is beautiful, if those things are so?”

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⁶ Plato. *Symposium*. (360 B.C.E). 199d-200a

⁷ Plato. *Symposium*. (360 B.C.E). 200b

⁸ Plato. *Symposium*. (360 B.C.E). 200d

“Now take it a little further. Don’t you think that good things are always beautiful as well?”

“I do.”

“Then if Love needs beautiful things, and if all good things are beautiful, he will need good things too.”⁹

Thus, from understanding Socrates’s speech, one sees that love is neither beautiful nor good because it wants and lacks both.

One might ponder:” If the teacup is always full of tea, isn't love always good?” One has to understand to in order for the teacup to be always full of tea, either someone is constantly consuming and pouring the tea to fill the cup all the time, or the tea in the cup is never consumed and be left cold in the teacup.

If the tea is constantly supplied, this means that it requires effort for love to be good, therefore love is not intrinsically good, but it takes concentrated and intended effort to make it good. Also since someone has to consume the tea repeatedly in order to make space for new tea to be filled, this signifies that love can neither be good for the sake of love nor the sake of goodness, because the act of consuming tea is the same as being the beloved, that the actions to drink tea is to satisfy one’s need of consuming the liquid that one intends to consume, and that is equal of having actions done to someone to make them happy in the name of love. Lastly, as one consumes tea, there will be less tea in the teacup before it can be filled again. Thus, love can never be always good but rather be in a constant, harmonic, and oscillating flux of goodness. This logical, because everything in life is always in a state of change and love is no different.

If the tea is never consumed, then it is always full, but it is not be good anymore. The purpose of making the shape of the teacup is to contain tea, but the purpose of making a teacup is to use it to consume tea. If the tea is left unconsumed, then the cup serves its geometric purpose, the boundary purpose, but its real purpose is now rendered useless. Additionally, what is the point of having tea when there is no one to taste it, because to make tea is to have it enjoyed and cherished? The same can be said for love. There is no point in acting in the name of love, when there is no one is on the receiving end of it. As the tea gets colder, one equates this to the goodness in love is getting less and less. The tea is still there, but the taste is now bland, the temperature is now cold, and the desirability of drinking it is now miniscule. Goodness is a spectrum, and shouldn’t one strive to attain the highest of goodness?

One point worth mentioning is that if love is always love of something, yet love is neither beautiful nor good, then what is love for? Using the cup again, one does not drink a hot cup tea for the sake of drinking tea. One drinks tea to feel nice and calm and cozy, and ultimately to be happy. Diotima realized this by stating

“Tell me, Socrates, a lover of good things has a desire; what does he desire?”

⁹ Plato. *Symposium*. (360 B.C.E). 201b-201c

“That they become his own,” I said.

“And what will he have, when the good things he wants have become his own?”

“This time it’s easier to come up with the answer,” I said. “He’ll have happiness.”¹⁰

In a nutshell, the essay to prove that love is neither beautiful nor good. The reason is love wants is void of beauty and goodness in the first place and it takes great actions and intention to achieve a good love. This essay achieved this goal by providing arguments along with additional arguments to support the chosen perspective while providing counter arguments.

Finally, one questions the validity of the analogy of the teacup with "What are the similarities between love and a teacup that make this a good analogy?" And for that questions, one sees that both are created to categorize and characterize an aspect of life, they serve a purpose, they bring happiness to both the giving and receiving ends when the actions and intentions line up, and they are intrinsically empty, only to be filled with what is right for them to be filled so that they can do what they do best.

Bibliography

Plato, *Plato: Complete Works*, John Cooper ed., [Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997]

¹⁰ Plato. *Symposium*. (360 B.C.E). 205a