PLATO'S PHILOSOPHY OF LOVE: THE SYMPOSIUM

Western Canon 1 | Brendan Shea, PhD (Brendan.Shea@rtc.edu)

In Plato's *Symposium,* a group of famous Athenians (including Socrates, the comic playwright Aristophanes, the tragic playwright Agathon, and the ne'er-do-well Aristophanes) attend a drinking party after the **Dionysian festival**, a five-day event in which the Athenians gathered to watch a large number of tragic and comic plays. Everyone had apparently drank a great deal the night before, and the group decides they should do something *besides* having another drinking contest. Eventually, they land on the idea of giving speeches on the nature of love.

THE SETTING AND CHARACTERS OF THE SYMPOSIUM

The *Symposium* is focused on the question "What is romantic/sexual love **(eros)**?" or, more broadly, "What is the nature of the things that make life worth living?" Some characters will interpret this strictly as romantic or sexual love, while others (such as Socrates) will broaden it to include familial love, friendship, and finally desires (such as the love of wisdom, or the love of art) that have little to do with other people. There are a few interesting aspects of the setting worth noting:

- The *Symposium* is set at the conclusion of the Dionysian festival. The characters would have seen two very different sorts of plays: **comedies** in which a more-or-less ordinary person manages to overcome some relatively mundane social problem (e.g., finding a spouse), and **tragedies** in which a flawed hero is destroyed as the result of his or her **tragic flaw** (Oedipus sleeps with his mother and kills his father)**.** At the end, Socrates is overheard suggesting that it is impossible to be skilled in writing one type of play without also being skilled in writing the other. Why? Given the nature of the dialogue, it seems likely that Plato's thinks that good art requires an understanding of human nature, and in particular an understanding of what it is that causes humans to flourish or fail.
- The main (though certainly not only) type of romantic love discussed is that between a man and a boy (**paiderastia**). In upper-class Greek society, it was common for older, successful men to have sexual relationships with adolescent boys. In return, they provided the boys with money and favors. Alcbiades (the last character to speak) is apparently a young man who had tried (when he was younger) to convince Socrates to enter into this sort of relationship with him.
- The Greeks were also (somewhat) tolerant of homosexual relationships between adult men and adult women, and of prostitution (the "flute girls" who are mentioned in the *Symposium* would also serve as prostitutes). All of these relationships are mentioned over the course of the dialogue.

THE FIRST THREE SPEECHES: PHAEDRUS, PAUSANIAS, AND ERYXIMACHUS

The *Symposium* begins with three short speeches. Here is a brief overview of the main themes of each:

- Phaedrus (somewhat naïvely) claims that "love is god" or, more specifically, that love should be thought of as the 'first" or "oldest" god that gives meaning to people's lives and which motivates them to become better people. His main example: he notes that husbands and wives are motivated to sacrifice one for one another. He argues that an army made of pairs of (male) lovers would be especially brave and strong, since each and every person would want to brave in front of his beloved. On Phraedus's view, romantic love is portrayed as the prime driver of life, and it is almost exclusively a good thing.
- Pausanias is something like an ancient Greek version of a lawyer, and he talks about two "varieties" of love. The first type is sexual desire, and Pausanias thinks this is (primarily) directed at women and young boys. The second type is a more intellectual type of love, and he argues that this (primarily) directed at other men (or at least toward older adolescent boys). He argues that the legal and social institutions of Athens need to take account of this fact, and should encourage young boys/men should only enter into relationships with older men who care about their intellectual development (and who don't simply want to have sex with them).
- Eryximachus is a physician who also distinguishes between "healthy" and "unhealthy" love. He claims that the entire cosmos (including heavenly bodies, plants, animals, and humans) are driven by these two sorts of love. Healthy love is (roughly) a desire for union with some other distinct entity, so that the two parts become part of one harmonious whole; unhealthy love is a desire for (unnatural) domination, and can easily lead to destruction. In humans, the former sort of love is something like an intellectual relationship of equals; the latter is a purely sexual relationship (especially where one partner dominates the other).

These three views are plausibly intended to represent something like the "common sense" views of love—among other things, they all affirm the central place of eros in human life.

COMEDY AND TRAGEDY: ARISTOPHANES AND AGATHON

The next two speeches are given by the comic playwright Aristophanes and the tragic playwright Agathon.

- Aristophanes gives a famous "creation story" explaining why lovers feel that they are parts of the same "whole." It turns out that, in the beginning of the universe, there were three types of beings: male-male, female-female, and male-female. These beings each had four arms, four legs, and four eyes. These beings were too awesome and poweful, though, and the gods decided to split them up, which led to everyone desperately "searching for their missing half." In fact, the split-up humans were so distraught, they forgot to do things like eat. So, the gods invented sex, and this allowed people to regain some measure of their lost unity. Pretty awesome story, right?
- Agathon returns to the theme of "love is god", but represents love as a young, beautiful person that provides people with a *goal* for their actions. He argues that love is, among other things, the "root cause" of virtues such as wisdom, courage, and moderation. Unlike Aristophanes' (comic) account, it doesn't look like anyone can actually "catch" love, though: love is (in some sense) an unattainable goal that is valuable mostly for what it drives humans to do.

SOCRATES AND DIOTIMA: WHAT IS SO GREAT ABOUT PLATONIC LOVE?

Socrates no recounts a speech by **Diotima,** who was apparently some sort of priestess. We don't know much about Diotima's life or views; however, given the way Plato generally operates (he almost always uses real people in his dialogues), it is at least somewhat plausible to think that she was both a real person and an intellectual, and that the views assigned to her by Socrates bear *some* relation to her actual views. This speech is famous for its defense of so-called **Platonic love:**

- Unlike the other characters, Diotima emphasizes that love requires *imperfection* or *need*—it must involve some sort of desire for something (sex, beauty, truth, art, union with another person) that we don't already have. This implies, among other things, that it is (conceptually) impossible for the gods to love anyone or anything. So, if "love is god" (as many of the other characters seem to think) it can't be anything like the super-powerful *personal* gods common to most mythologies. If anything, love is something like more like a relationship between the merely human and the divine (here, "divine" just means "better than human").
- Diotima describes a **Ladder of Love** that, like the Sun and Divided Line analogies in the *Republic,* shows how the *good life* requires that we move beyond considering *merely* physical things and must instead consider the forms of things. In a successful life, people learn to "ascend" the ladder—while we all start out at the lowest level, the "right" sorts of relationships help us move to the higher levels.
    - Level 1: Love of individual bodies—the sexual desire for a particular person's body.
    - Level 2: Love of bodies in general—the person realizes that sexual desire is not aimed at a specific body, but instead relates to various aspects of bodies in general.
    - Level 3: Love of minds in general—the person continues to focus solely on other people (he or she lives only for "romantic love"), but realizes that the really *important* parts of other people are their minds.
    - Level 4: Love of laws and institutions—the person sees the *inherent* value in social and legal institutions, and understands why a worthwhile life can be dedicated to improving these institutions.
    - Level 5: Love of knowledge—the person sees the value in knowledge, considered in and of itself. The person sees the value in a life dedicated to science or mathematics, even if the *application* of this science is unclear.
    - Level 6: Love of Beauty—the person perceives the Form of Beauty—i.e., the basic thing that "makes things worthwhile" or "the thing that we aim at when we do actions." Like the Form of the Good in the *Republic,* this serves a special purpose, in that the Form of Beauty is both a Form (just like the Form of Triangle or the Form of Justice) AND the thing that makes it possible for us to see the other Forms (since it is what we are always "aiming at" when we engage in any meaningful human activity.)

The dialogue ends with **Alcibiades** giving a (drunken) speech in which he describes the frustrations of being in love with Socrates (who liked philosophy more than sex). While this speech is somewhat humorous, there is a much darker undertone, as Plato's readers would surely have known. Alcibiades would go on to become one of the great villains of Greek history, who would betray his native Athens for both the Spartans and the Persians. It is likely that Socrates' association with Alcibiades contributed to his own trial and execution. Alcibiades' version of love—focused on the physical pleasures of the moment to the exclusion of anything "higher"—can certainly be the stuff of comedy, but it can also lead to much worse outcomes. (In this respect, its worth remembering that Plato elsewhere doesn't seem to have a terribly high opinion of comedy!). A modern equivalent of this might be a dialogue featuring speeches on love by Charlie Chaplin, Virginia Woolf, Sigmund Freud, and…Hitler. One of these things is not like the other!

Then, a bunch more drunk people show up, and everyone decides to start drinking. Eventually, nearly everyone passes out except Socrates, who talks to the playwrights Agathon and Aristophanes all night, and then leaves in the morning.

REVIEW QUESTIONS