

# Derivative and Novel Speeches in Plato's *Symposium*

Jonathan Sterling

April 2013

The six speeches of the *Symposium* may be divided into two sets: on the one hand, there is Phaedrus's speech and those which are derivative of his, and on the other hand, there are the novel speeches; and these are the ones which reject the previous approaches and propose unique theories of Eros.

## 1 Phaedrus and his derivatives

Phaedrus's speech may be understood as the basis for a theory of Eros which is developed and augmented all the way through the speeches of Pausanias and Eryximachus.

If we put aside for the moment Phaedrus's initial mythological appeals—which I consider to be a side effect of the kind of speech he is giving, and much less a core part of his argument—the main focus of Phaedrus's speech, then, would seem to be the power of Eros to engender in humans a kind of virtue or fury which they might not have had without the god's inspiration.

When Pausanias begins, he criticizes Phaedrus for failing to include in his account the fact that Eros is double in nature:

εἰπεῖν δ' αὐτὸν ὅτι Οὐ καλῶς μοι δοκεῖ, ὦ Φαῖδρε, προβεβλησθαι ἡμῖν ὁ λόγος, τὸ ἀπλῶς οὕτως παρηγγέλθαι ἐγκωμιάζειν Ἑρώτα. εἰ μὲν γὰρ εἷς ἦν ὁ Ἑρως, καλῶς ἂν εἶχε, νῦν δὲ οὐ γάρ ἐστὶν εἷς· μὴ ὄντος δὲ ενός ὀρθότερόν ἐστι πρότερον προρηθῆναι ὅποῖον δεῖ ἐπαινεῖν. (180c3–180d1)

But Pausanias's analysis is necessarily a refinement of Phaedrus's, and not a refutation. In fact, Pausanias only adds and does not subtract from Phaedrus's point; for he simply specifies further both the nature and the origin of the inspiration that Phaedrus discussed, integrating it into his bipartite understanding of Eros. In Pausanias's framework, this inspiration is nothing other than the engenderment of concern for virtue in the hearts of lovers and their beloveds; and this is, to be sure, the inspiration which is derived from the Heavenly Eros, as opposed to the other:

οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ τῆς οὐρανίας θεοῦ Ἑρως καὶ οὐράνιος καὶ πολλοῦ ἄξιος καὶ πόλει καὶ ἰδιώταις, πολλὴν ἐπιμέλειαν ἀναγκάζων ποιῆσθαι πρὸς ἀρετὴν τὸν τε ἐρῶντα αὐτὸν αὐτοῦ καὶ τὸν ἐρώμενον· οἱ δ' ἑτέροι πάντες τῆς ἐτέρας, τῆς πανδήμου. (185b5–185c2)

In this way, Pausanias is one of the refiners of previous ideas. Likewise, Eryximachus fails to present an entirely new approach, but rather starts where he considers Pausanias to have left off on the way to the correct theory:

Εἰπεῖν δὴ τὸν Ἐρυξίμαχον, Δοκεῖ τοίνυν μοι ἀναγκαῖον εἶναι, ἐπειδὴ Πausανίας ὁρμήσας ἐπὶ τὸν λόγον καλῶς οὐχ ἱκανῶς ἀπετέλεσε, δεῖν ἐμὲ πειρᾶσθαι τέλος ἐπιθεῖναι τῷ λόγῳ. (185e6–196a2)

In the course of his analysis, Eryximachus proceeds to generalize the existing discourse to encompass wide enough a breadth so as to admit a discussion of Medicine, Music, Athletics, Agriculture, and, in fact, every other affair.

To Eryximachus, then, the two kinds of love that humans may experience in their relationships are only special cases of something much more abstract; that is, Eros is simply the thing which drives opposites to combine. And so when things at variance combine by means of the Heavenly Eros (whether they be extremes of humor, flavor, pitch or temperature, or some other continuum), the result is harmonious and orderly; whereas, when the differing things combine by means of the Common Eros, the result is of disorderliness, harm, and pestilence.

By this means, Eryximachus continues with Pausanias's program of analyzing which kinds of inspiration are engendered by which kind of Eros, generalizing them to the point where we must understand the Inspiration introduced by Phaedrus as a special case itself of what results from, more abstractly, the joining of things together—in this case, namely, the joining of humans together.

## 2 The Novel Speeches

Aristophanes begins by noting how he intends to pursue a different tack than that those who preceded him:

*Καὶ μὲν, ὦ Ἐρυξίμαχε, εἰπεῖν τὸν Ἀριστοφάνη, ἄλλη γέ πη ἐν νῶ ἔχω λέγειν ἢ ἣ σύ  
τε καὶ Πανσανίας εἰπέτην. (189c2–189c3)*

The approach of Aristophanes is to develop his theory by providing a mythological backdrop, and then using it to explain the attractions which occur between humans. At the surface, his argument would almost appear in the class of explanations which say that different kinds of love yield different kinds of inspiration, as Pausanias argued. And yet, I think it can be shown to be not so much that, but rather something a bit different.

In enumerating the different kinds of love-pursuit that may occur (that is, men pursuing women, women pursuing men, women pursuing women, and men pursuing men), Aristophanes distinguishes between different kinds of love: when men and women pursue each other, this is the spirit of adultery; when women pursue women, this is the spirit of lesbianism; but when men pursue men, this is manliness:

*ὅσοι δὲ ἄρρενος τμήμα εἰσι, τὰ ἄρρενα διώκουσι, καὶ τέως μὲν ἂν παῖδες ᾤσιν, ἅτε  
τεμάχια ὄντα τοῦ ἄρρενος, φιλοῦσι τοὺς ἄνδρας καὶ χαίρουσι συγκατακείμενοι καὶ  
συμπεπλεγμένοι τοῖς ἀνδράσι, καὶ εἰσιν οὗτοι βέλτιστοι τῶν παίδων καὶ μεираκίων,  
ἅτε ἀνδρειότατοι ὄντες φύσει. (191e1–192a2)*

And so, if we wished to characterize Aristophanes's analysis within the framework of the dual Eros, it would be the male homosexual relationships which are derived from the Heavenly Eros, and all the others from the Common one. And yet, such a characterization proves quite difficult to argue, if we consider the lines of causality between nature, love and inspiration.

Whereas we might well imagine that Pausanias would consent to the idea it is a person's nature which determines which kind of Eros will join him to his beloved (or vice versa), and that it is this in turn which determines whether or not his inspiration is virtuous, we cannot say the same of Aristophanes.

For to Aristophanes, the nature of a human (which is to say, whether he or she derived from a man-man, a woman-woman, or a man-woman) determines which Love they will experience; this much provokes no disagreement with the previous discourse, and merely augments it with a comical just-so story. But it is not *which* Love they experience that inspires them with civic and virtuous concerns, but rather their nature itself:

*καὶ γὰρ τελεωθέντες μόνοι ἀποβαίνουσιν εἰς τὰ πολιτικά ἄνδρες οἱ τοιοῦτοι. ἐπειδὴν  
δὲ ἀνδρωθῶσι, παιδεραστοῦσι καὶ πρὸς γάμους καὶ παιδοποιίας οὐ προσέχουσι τὸν*

νοῦν φύσει, ἀλλ' ὑπὸ τοῦ νόμου ἀναγκάζονται· ἀλλ' ἐξαρκεῖ αὐτοῖς μετ' ἀλλήλων  
καταζῆν ἀγάμοις. (192a6–192b3)

It is on account of being derived from a man-man that one is daring and virile, and it is on account of being that way both that one is inclined toward homosexual love, and that one is inspired to participate in the matters of the city. So, the inspiration in Aristophanes's framework does not derive from the Love, but rather issues directly from the primitive nature of the man himself, by which the kind of Love to be experienced is also determined.

Now then, Agathon begins by dismissing all the previous attempts at explaining Eros as missing the point, by failing to praise the god himself, but rather only congratulating the humans who are affected by him:

δοκοῦσι γάρ μοι πάντες οἱ πρόσθεν εἰρηκότες οὐ τὸν θεὸν ἐγκωμιάζειν ἀλλὰ τοὺς  
ἀνθρώπους εὐδαιμονίζειν τῶν ἀγαθῶν ὧν ὁ θεὸς αὐτοῖς αἴτιος· ὅποιος δέ τις αὐτὸς ὦν  
ταῦτα ἐδωρήσατο, οὐδεὶς εἴρηκεν. (194e4–195a1)

The analysis provided by Agathon is, to put it briefly, that Eros alights upon those who are soft and beautiful, and that he young and soft himself. He omits the notion of the dual Eros, and conceives that he looks for the beautiful and the good, and engenders it in everyone he touches.

Not to be outdone by Agathon, Socrates starts off by feining to have misunderstood what an encomium was, having expected to be able to simply say the most beautiful truths that could be said about the subject so well as he could, but being instead put to attribute all the greatest and most beautiful things to the subject, whether or not they are the truth.

ἐγὼ μὲν γὰρ ὑπ' ἐβελτερίας ᾤμην δεῖν τᾷ ἀληθείᾳ λέγειν περὶ ἐκάστου τοῦ ἐγκωμια-  
ζομένου, καὶ τοῦτο μὲν ὑπάρχειν, ἐξ αὐτῶν δὲ τούτων τὰ κάλλιστα ἐκλεγομένους ὡς  
εὐπρεπέστατα τιθέναι· καὶ πάνυ δὴ μέγα ἐφρόνουν ὡς εὖ ἐρῶν, ὡς εἰδὼς τὴν ἀλήθειαν

τοῦ ἐπαινεῖν ὅτιοῦν. τὸ δὲ ἄρα, ὡς ἔοικεν, οὐ τοῦτο ἦν τὸ καλῶς ἐπαινεῖν ὅτιοῦν, ἀλλὰ  
τὸ ὡς μέγιστα ἀνατιθέναι τῷ πράγματι καὶ ὡς κάλλιστα, εἴαν τε ἦ οὕτως ἔχοντα  
εἴαν τε μή· εἰ δὲ ψευδῆ, οὐδὲν ἄρ' ἦν πρᾶγμα. (198d3–198e2)

After some coaxing, Socrates agrees to deliver a praise speech in the way that he sees fit, distinct from the rest. In this way, Socrates wipes clean the slate and establishes his framework as one of the novel ones. Indeed, the theory which he claims to have gotten from Diotima is more divergent from all the previous speeches than any of them differed amongst themselves.

### 3 Conclusion

As I have shown, the last three speeches were novel, in that none of them could be combined with the ones that preceded to form a non-contradictory theory of Eros. Whilst nobody should be surprised that Socrates failed to agree with anyone on something, I suggest that in addition to him, it may be no coincidence at all that it was the poets of the company, Agathon and Aristophanes, who came up with original and non-derivative speeches.