

**Phi 260: History of Philosophy I**  
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### **Plato's *Symposium***

Although we will be looking at the *Symposium* as work of philosophy, its literary qualities should not be ignored. It can easily be read as a Comedy in three acts (see below), with a prologue (the conversation between Apollodorus and his friend) and an epilogue (Alcibiades' drunken, tragic (?) account of his love). Consider also the narrative complexity of the work. By the time we get to Diotima's speech, we have the following levels of narration: *Plato says that Apollodorus says that Aristodemus says that Socrates says that Diotima says...* Why is there so much distance placed within the narration? Is it supposed to show us how far away the Truth lies?

The six speeches given by the attendants can be group into three pairs: Phaedrus and Pausanias; Eryximachus and Aristophanes; and Agathon and Socrates.

#### 1<sup>st</sup> speech: Phaedrus

- There is no greater good for a young boy than a gentle lover, and for a lover a boy to love.
- Consider Phaedrus' suggestion regarding the nature of the relation between lover and beloved: "if a man in love is found doing something shameful... then nothing would give him more pain than being seen by the boy he loves. ... If only we could have cities and armies of lovers..." (178d-179a) *So, gays in the military would actually be a good thing, right?*
- Gods honor virtue most highly when it belongs to Love. (180b)

#### 2<sup>nd</sup> speech: Pausanias

- There are two kinds of love: Urania, or Heavenly Aphrodite, and Pandemos, or Common Aphrodite. (181b-d)
- Things or actions are not good or bad in themselves. What matters is *how* things are done.
- The common or vulgar lover loves the body and not the soul.
- The true lover is attracted to the male: "they find pleasure in what is by nature stronger and more intelligent." (181d)
- Plain condemnation of Love reveals a lust for power in the rulers and cowardice in the ruled. (182d) *What do you think? Are social/sexual mores **determined** by the rulers? [Think about what Thrasymachus says in Book I of the Republic about the nature of justice.]*
- Vile vs. honorable man. (183d-e)
- Conditions under which one may enter into a relationship. (184c-e) *Note that the majority of us probably have something of a problem with this kind of age-structured relationship. Why? Probably because we think that love should be a relationship between **equals** in some sense.*

### 3<sup>rd</sup> speech: Eryximachus

- ‘Eryximachus’ means “battler of belches.”
- Continues with the distinction made by Pausanias.
- Love is not just something that occurs in the soul; one finds this throughout nature.
- Our very bodies manifest the two species of love.
- The point of Eryximachus’ speech is that Love is a *natural* kind of harmony or concord among opposing forces.

### 4<sup>th</sup> speech: Aristophanes

- Myth: the original state of human beings. Three kinds of human beings: male, female, and hermaphrodite. Male, offspring of the sun; female, the earth; hermaphrodite, the moon.
- Love is born into every human being; it call back the halves of our original nature; it tries to make one out of the two and heal the wound of human nature. (191d)
- “Love” is the name for our pursuit of wholeness, for our desire to be complete. (193)
- Notice that Aristophanes is saying something similar to Eryximachus – that love is a kind of natural harmony of parts – but he is saying through myth and poetry what Eryximachus says in ‘scientific’ way.
- Notice, too, that there is a certain similarity between Aristophanes’ story and the *Genesis* account of creation: there is something missing in us that is made whole by love. Of course, in Aristophanes’ myth, men *and* women were the original beings; a woman was not somehow derived from the first being: man.

### 5<sup>th</sup> Speech: Agathon

- We should speak first of the nature of Love itself and then move on to its or his deeds and consequences.
- So, first, Agathon says Love is delicate, young and makes his home in the souls of men with soft and gentle characters. (195d-e)
- Second, Love is ultimately the source of all our virtues.

### 6<sup>th</sup> Speech: Socrates

But, first, a refutation of Agathon:

- Is love of something or nothing? I.e. love has an object (199d)
- Love doesn’t have actually what it desires. (200a-b)
- I.e.: If  $x$  desires  $O$ , then  $x$  doesn’t have  $O$ .
- Whenever you say, *I desire what I already have*, you mean, *I want the things I have now to be mine in the future as well*. (200d)
- Now, according to Agathon, Love is a desire for beauty. (201b)
- If love is a desire for beauty, it doesn’t have beauty yet.
- Or, if love desires beauty, it can’t now be beautiful.
- Since beautiful things are also good, Love can’t have good things now, either. That is, Love can’t now be good in itself.

Socrates now recounts his conversation with the priestess, Diotima, who taught Socrates the art of love. Note: after the discussion of these men, it is finally a woman who explains the nature of love.

- Socrates had given Agathon's arguments to Diotima, but Diotima countered them the way Socrates just did with Agathon.
- Just because Love is not good or beautiful, that doesn't mean that it is bad or ugly. There is an intermediate stage. (202b)
- Love is not a god at all. Love is between mortal and immortal. (202d)
- Love is the son of *Poros* (resource) and *Penia* (poverty). (203b)
- Love is between wisdom and ignorance. (204a)
- Love is in love with what is beautiful. Since wisdom is beautiful, Love is a lover of wisdom. That is, Love is a philosopher. (204b)
- The lover of beautiful things desires that they become his own; substitute "good" for "beautiful". (204d)
- When the lover of good things has that which he desires he will have happiness. (205a)
- Every desire for good things or for happiness is a kind of love. (205d)
- But it's only when people are devoted to one kind of love that we say that they are lovers.
- Love is wanting to possess the good forever. (206a-b)
- What do lovers do? – They give birth in beauty. (206b)
- More specifically, Love is not just desire of beauty, it is reproduction and birth in beauty. (206e)
- Love and reproduction → immortality (207)
- Some are pregnant in body and therefore turn to women, providing themselves through childbirth with immortality, remembrance and happiness. (208e)
- Others are pregnant in soul; they give birth to wisdom and virtue, and this can relate to the proper ordering of cities. (209a)
- ***The Ladder of Love***
  - First comes love of the body, and then the lover sees the similarities with all beautiful bodies; (210a-b)
  - From love of the body to love of the soul;
  - From love of the soul to love of the activities and laws that improve souls;
  - From customs to kinds of knowledge. "The result is that he will see the beauty of knowledge and be looking mainly not at beauty in a single example...but the lover is turned to the great sea of beauty, and, gazing upon this, he gives birth to many gloriously beautiful ideas and theories, in unstinting love of wisdom, until, having grown and been strengthened there, he catches sight of such knowledge, and it is the knowledge of such beauty..." (210d-e)
  - The Form of Beauty: it always *is* and neither comes to be nor passes away; it is not beautiful now but not later, nor beautiful in this respect but not that respect, and so on. (More on the Forms later.) (211a-b)

- “This is what it is to go aright, or be led by another, into the mystery of Love: ones goes always upward for the sake of this Beauty, starting out from beautiful things and using them like rising stairs: from one body to two and from two to all beautiful bodies, then from beautiful bodies to beautiful customs, and from customs to learning beautiful things, and from these lessons he arrives in the end at this lesson, which is learning of this very Beauty, so that in the end he comes to know just what it is to be beautiful.” (211c-d)
- That is, one arrives at love of beauty itself (the Form) and of virtue. (212a)
- Beauty and virtue and our knowledge thereof. (212)

#### Epilogue: Alcibiades

- Arrival of the “plastered” Alcibiades, the jealous lover of Socrates.
- Alcibiades’ speech: Socrates is like statue of Silenus and Marysas.
- In the presence of Socrates, Alcibiades feels that his life is worthless.
- Alcibiades recounts his hopes of being seduced by Socrates. (217)
- Socrates presents himself as a lover – but doesn’t “follow through”. (222b)
- Socrates is absolutely unique. (221d-e)
- Note: if Love is supposed to produce virtue in us, then this surely hasn’t worked in the case of Alcibiades, who is a moral wreck. Or, Alcibiades simply doesn’t or can’t love in the right way (see below).

A potential problem with Socrates’ account – a problem that Alcibiades’ story brings to light – is this: If true love is love of the Beautiful, why should it matter whom *in particular* I love? In other words, if, when Jane loves John, she is loving The Beautiful in John, why couldn’t she just as well love Jim? Alcibiades, in saying that Socrates is unique, is also saying that, in some sense, he can love only Socrates. Now, one could say that Alcibiades does not love Socrates *in the right way*. But, again, if one loves in the way suggested by Diotima and Socrates, does it matter who my beloved is? Or, given the Ladder of Love account, is it correct to think that I actually ought to *overcome* my love for a particular person?

So, what, in the end, is Love?