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The Concept of Love in Plato*

Paulette Marie Zych

The Platonic *Dialogues* comprise the most influential body of philosophy in the Western world. This paper presents an examination of the concept of love in selected *Dialogues*: the *Symposium*, the *Phaedrus*, and the *Lysis*. The divine nature of love, the kinds of love, the roles of the lover and the beloved, the power of love, and an analysis of the nature of friendship are discussed. Particular emphasis is placed on Socrates, who discourses on subjects of such universal and ageless interest as art, virtue, and the nature of love and beauty.

I. *The Divine Nature of Love*

“What a strange thing it is that whereas other gods have poems and hymns made in their honor, the great and glorious god Love has no encomiast among all the poets who are so many” (*Symposium*, 177A).

Plato’s *Symposium* includes many encomia to love by a variety of speakers: Phaedrus, Agathon, Aristophanes, and Socrates. According to Phaedrus, “Love is a mighty god . . . the eldest of the gods, wonderful in birth, and of his parents there is no memorial” (178). So Phaedrus attributes a divine nature to love and concludes that this god is the author and virtue in life and the bestower of happiness in death.

Within the same dialogue, Agathon strongly disagrees with Phaedrus’s notion of the god Love; for he says that this god detests age: “Youth and Love go together” (195B). And so Agathon maintains that Love is the youngest of the gods and remains youthful forever. Moreover, Agathon’s uncompromising criticism of praising the god Love for the benefits he confers upon mankind rather than because of his own divine nature is forceful. “In the days of old . . . dreadful things were done by gods, for they ruled by Necessity” (197C). With this, Agathon fashions the god Love, the Savior of the other gods, who restores to order the divine empire.

Aristophanes provokes an interesting analysis of the nature and types of love through an examination of the form and origin of primeval man. Like Phaedrus and Agathon, Aristophanes deifies love. Of all the gods, Love is the best friend of man. “Wherefore if we would praise him who has given to us the benefit, we must praise the god Love who is our greatest benefactor, both leading us on in this life back to our own nature, and giving us high hopes for the future; for he promises if we are pious, he will restore us to our original state” (193C). Aristophanes arrives at a useful and functional definition of love as he describes this primeval man: “The sexes were three, because the sun, moon, and earth are three; and *man* [emphasis by author] was originally the child of the sun; the *woman*, of the earth; and the *man-woman*, of the moon which is made up of sun and earth; and they were round and moved round and round like their parents” (190C-E). This ancestor of man was round with his back and sides forming a circle. He had four hands and feet, one head with two identical faces which looked in opposite directions, four ears and two sex organs. This creature’s mobility was phenomenal! He could walk upright, backward or forward, with equal

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facility. When he wanted to run fast, he would roll at a rapid pace. This original human nature appears grotesque, since within this frame resides a rebellious spirit. Terrible are the might and strength of this being. Zeus comes to the aid of the gods as a master surgeon who performs various operations on the three sexes. First, he cuts them in two and diminishes their strength; then, he increases their number and forces them to walk upright. The two halves of each *man*, *woman*, and *man-woman* "wander about longing after one another" (191B). Love becomes a desire and pursuit of the whole for Aristophanes, since human nature was originally one.

The three original sexes and the division of each are also used by Aristophanes to explain the imposed sexual characters of men and women dependent upon the nature from which they were originally severed: *man*, *woman*, and the androgynous *man-woman*.

They who are a section of the male follow the male while they are young, for they are halves of the original *man*. They keep company with men and are noble youth. When these reach manhood they are themselves lovers of youth and are not inclined to marry or beget children. If they marry and become fathers, "they do so only in obedience to the law" (192B). Throughout this dialogue, pederasty and male homosexual love are praised as noble forms.

The women who are a section of *woman* do not care for men but are attached to other women.

Men who are a section of the double-natured *man-woman* are lovers of women. Aristophanes places these in a demeaning position, for he says that among these the adulterer is bred.

For all three sexes, Love is the personification of individual pursuits of the original whole, and the gods will help man achieve this end.

Denial of the divine nature of love is made by Diotima of Mantinea, the instructress in the art of love who influenced Socrates. She relates the story of the conception of Love on the birthday of Aphrodite. The god Poros (Plenty) is one of the guests at the feasts of the gods. When the feast is over, Penia (Poverty) comes to the door to beg. Poros is drunk with nectar and goes into the garden of Zeus and falls asleep. Penia lies down at his side and conceives Love. Diotima explains that all the gods are happy and fair. According to Diotima, "Love is not a god at all because he is in want [son of Plenty and Poverty] and he desires those things of which he is in want" (202C).

For Diotima, Love is a mediator between gods and men. He is neither foul nor fair, neither good nor evil. He is not a divinity but a spirit (*δαίμων*) whose nature is somewhere between the divine and mortal. He partakes in neither extreme of his parentage. He represents the mean between ignorance and knowledge while he remains somewhat paradoxically the true philosopher.

II. *The Two Kinds of Love*

"Evil is the vulgar lover who loves the body rather than the soul inasmuch as he is not even stable, because he loves a thing which is itself unstable, and therefore, when the bloom of youth which he was desiring is over, he takes wing and flies away, in spite of all his words and promises; whereas the love of the noble disposition is lifelong, for it becomes one with the everlasting" (*Symposium*, 183E).

Aphrodite Pandemos and Aphrodite Urania are the two types of love of which Plato speaks.

Aphrodite Pandemos, the common love, is born of male and female, Zeus

and Dione. Chiefly physical, this kind of love is of the meaner sort of men who direct their attentions toward women, as well as male youths. The lover, skillful in such love, desires only to gain an end. No consideration is given to accomplishing this end nobly. This love, by its nature, does good and evil indiscriminately.

Eryximachus the physician speaks of a wanton love which gets the upper hand and affects the seasons of the year. For him the affairs of the heart are reflected macrocosmically in the laws of nature. This wanton love is the source of the pestilence and brings many forms of the diseases to animals and plants. "Hoar frost and hail and blight spring from the excesses and disorders of these elements of love" (188C).

Socrates describes this kind of love when he refers to ἔρρωμένος ἔρως (strong love). Irrational desire is its power. He characterizes the lover in such an enterprise with the following motives:

1. The lover is the victim of his own passions.
2. He is the slave of pleasure.
3. He desires that the beloved be inferior and subservient.
4. He banishes from the beloved any desire to pursue the good.
5. He chooses an effeminate person and makes him more effeminate.
6. He deprives the beloved of friends, parents, kinsmen, and every other good.

According to Socrates, "this irrational desire which overcomes the tendency of opinion towards right, and is led away to the enjoyment of beauty, and especially of personal beauty . . . that supreme desire by force of passion reinforced is called love" (*Phaedrus*, 238C).

Pedophilia, a more physical love than pederasty, is the example Socrates uses to mourn the fate of the beloved. For the lover, having effected the demise of the beloved in mind and body, abandons him.

Aphrodite Urania is another kind of love Plato discusses in his *Symposium* (181D). Her father is Uranus and her offspring are divine for she is born of the male only. There is nothing of wantonness in her, for her love is the love of the soul. When tested by time, her love is enduring. Through her the lover accepts his beloved for the sake of virtue. The lover and his beloved are eager to work for their mutual improvement.

Concerning this love, Eryximachus describes the seasons when the elements of hot and cold, moist and dry, come together to bring men, animals, and plants no harm, but health and plenty. A harmonious balance in the seasons results in this good end.

Pederasty and male homosexuality are special types of Aphrodite Urania. In one of his dialogues Plato uses as his setting the festival at Hermaea which provided an atmosphere where "young men and boys are all together . . . with no separation between them" (*Lysis*, 206D). Aphrodite Urania is the love of the faithful who intend a whole lifetime in the company of their beloved. Those who are inspired by this goddess turned to the male, for it was believed that males were of the more valiant and intelligent nature. Pederasty did not involve the youngest boys, but its object was that intelligent youngster whose reason was beginning to develop. This custom of the love of youth was coupled with the intense study of philosophy and virtue. The two were to meet in one, and then, and only then, "the beloved may honorably indulge the lover" (*Symposium*, 184D). Thus, the beloved in Aphrodite Urania,

who gives himself to the lover in the hope that he will be more improved in his presence, demonstrates virtue, even though the object of his affection be an amoral character. If the beloved is deceived, then he has committed a noble error.

In brief, Socrates presents two definitive types of love as he inquires into its nature. He considers both the advantages and disadvantages to the lover and the beloved in both Aphrodite Pandemos and Aphrodite Urania. Moreover, he concludes that male homosexual love is the purest form of Aphrodite Urania, for it possesses the noblest end: the pursuit of virtue for both the lover and the beloved.

III. *The Lover and the Beloved*

In his *Symposium* (184E), Plato presents the best of both possible worlds for the lover and his beloved only when both have virtuous intentions bestowed by Aphrodite Urania. When the lover and beloved come together in both the spiritual and physical unions, each believes he is doing right in performing any service for the other. The lover makes his beloved wise and good, for he is able to communicate wisdom and virtue. The beloved seeks constantly to acquire the two and "yields with honor."

Plato does not say that it is divine intervention which makes the two so harmonious. He is more specific, for he attributes to custom the encouragement which his society bestows on the lover. Pausanias makes a distinction between the allowances of custom and those of philosophy. Philosophy censors any motive of self-interest or desire for office or power; however, custom allows the lover license to "pray, entreat, supplicate, swear, lie on a mat at the door, and endure a slavery worse than that of any slave" (183B). Custom has dictated that the actions of a lover are highly commendable and possess a grace which makes them noble. There is no loss of character on the part of the lover.

In two other dialogues of Plato, the *Phaedrus* and the *Lysis*, the lover is not granted such limitless freedoms as custom allows. Lysias' speech seems to indicate a debilitating repentance overwhelming the lover who loses in love when passion has ceased (*Phaedrus*, 227B). Or Hippothales in the *Lysis* (206C) warns that all songs and discourses to the glory of love will only be in honor to the lover when he wins his beloved. But if the beloved is lost, the more praises sung to love, the more ridiculous the lover appears. He concludes that poetry may hurt the cause of love and the wise lover withholds all praise until his beloved has been won.

But even these two ostensible contradictions to the fortunes of the lover are blessed with legitimacy if the nature of love itself, rather than the roles of the lover and beloved, is examined. Which goddess do the lover and his beloved serve? It seems that custom facilitates happiness and virtuous actions for both the lover and his beloved in Aphrodite Urania. The passionate lover who desires the physical in Aphrodite Pandemos spoils the object of his affections.

Through the inspiration of Aphrodite Urania, Achilles proves his loyalty to his lover, Patroclus. Achilles's mother had told her son that he would not die if he abstained from slaying Hector; however, to avenge the death of his lover Patroclus, Achilles slays Hector and invites his own doom.

IV. *The Power of Love*

The power of love as a mediator has already been alluded to in Diotima's

definition of love found in the *Symposium* (203). As a spirit (δαίμων), love intermediates between the gods and men.

Another power of love which Diotima professes is that of the procreation involving the physical and spiritual worlds. Human nature, desiring regeneration, dictates the union of man and woman in beauty and not deformity. Their offspring preserve their immortality. Diotima also speaks of a pregnancy of a soul whose conceptions of wisdom and virtue are "fairer than any mortal children" (209). She praises those souls of men who conceive the beautiful and the good in wisdom and virtue. In brief, the divine power of love involves the conception and parturition of the beautiful, in both the physical and spiritual worlds.

A lovers' army overcoming the world is envisioned in the *Symposium* (179). An army is portrayed as a contrivance of the state. This army is composed only of lovers and their beloved. By the nature of his honorable love, each member would abstain from all vulgarity. So in fighting at each other's side, their power would indeed overcome any fortuitous harm.

Love's power is again demonstrated in Agathon's encomium within the *Symposium* (197). Love, as the creator of the arts, is the inventor of the following: the melody of the Muses; the metallurgy of Hephaestus; the weaving of Athena; the empire of Zeus over gods and men. Even the arts of medicine, archery, and divination were discovered by Apollo under the guidance of love and desire.

Socrates reveals the power of love as a madness of the noble sort among four types of madness: 1) the madness of prophecy as evidenced in the priestesses of Dodona and Delphi; 2) the madness of inspiration which purges away an ancient wrath as in the house of Atreus; 3) the madness of poetry; 4) the madness of love. With Socrates, "The madness of love is the greatest of heaven's blessings" (*Phaedrus*, 245D).

Socrates envisions the soul in this discourse as a pair of winged horses and a charioteer. The winged horses and charioteers of the gods are all noble and of noble descent. The charioteers and the horses of man cause a great deal of trouble, because one of the steeds is noble and the other is ignoble. From the soul's original nature of being assimilated with the divine and having a constant diet of truth, its sojourn on earth is intermittently interrupted by fits of madness wherein it sees the beauty of the earth. It is transported for a time through the recollection of true beauty. It is thought to be mad, says Plato, for it becomes careless of the world below and tries a temporary fusion with the divine. And so this power called love pilots the souls of man to divine intelligence and pure knowledge. For Socrates, love is a powerful gift because it deals with the waxing and waning of the immortal soul's contact with absolute beauty.

In Plato, love is not only the love of the good, but also the love of the everlasting possession of that good. Its power provides for conception and generation, the immortal principles of mankind. All humans are made immortal and participate in the divine because of this law of succession. Concerning this influence of love, Plato says, one should "marvel not then at the love which all men have of their offspring; for the universal love and interest are for the sake of immortality."

V. Friendship

Hypotheses on the nature of friendship are found in the *Lysis* (216). The hypothesis that like associates with like is introduced in this dialogue, and

is supported with the reason that all friends must be useful and valuable or they would not be friends. An argument is brought forth that the good have no need of friends; for to be good implies having all of one's wants fulfilled. Moreover, the bad would not associate with the bad; for the more a bad man associates with another, and the more nearly he is brought into contact with him, the more he will be likely to hate him because he injures him. According to Socrates, injured and injurer cannot be friends.

The second hypothesis is that the nature of friendship concerns itself with the attraction opposites share. Since the good have no need of friends, and, so too, the injured and injurer cannot be friends, then the good cannot be friends with the evil. They have no friends among the evil. A new element is introduced at this point by Socrates: that which is neither good nor evil. An analogy in the art of medicine is given. The human body, which is neither good nor evil, in itself may, by reason of the presence of evil, have need of the good (expertise in medicine). With this analogy the nature of friendship is considered in place of characterizing people attracted to others in friendship. Thus, friendship becomes the love the neither good nor bad has of the good by reason of the presence of evil. Friendship is the love of good when evil is present.

* * *

These, then, are some of Plato's main ideas concerning love and friendship.