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Plato's Theory of Eros in the Symposium

ABSTRACT

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Recent work on Plato has rekindled interest in his theory of love. Several studies offer partial exegeses and critical assessments of the theory. Yet a systematic reconstruction of the theory does not exist, and disagreements remain about its central features and its virtues and defects. In this paper I offer such a reconstruction. In a larger study I attempt to understand and assess the theory relative to its cultural context and relative to recent, empirically oriented theories of love in the social sciences and biology.

It must be remembered that while in English the single, all inclusive word 'love' covers a wide variety of feelings, attitudes, and behavior, in Ancient Greek three different words were used to cover different, perhaps overlapping portions of this variety. *Eros* was used to cover primarily the case of sexual love, and *philia* the cases of familial love and friendship, while *agape* represents a significant concept perhaps only later, in the New Testament. Here we are concerned only with Plato's theory of eros in the *Symposium*, though comparisons to *philia* and *agape* are useful and illuminating.

To understand and assess a theory of love it is useful to place it in at least two wider settings. One is the cultural setting of the writer. This is important because some of the things a writer make take as characteristic of love or as data for his theory may be culture bound; for example, sexual attitudes and customs, courting and mating practices, perceptions of beauty. In the speeches of Phaedrus, Pausanias, Eryximachus, and Aristophanes Plato provides a partial cultural context for the theory expounded by Socrates and Diotima. Plato's theory must be placed in its cultural context. Perhaps the most sig-

nificant elements of this setting were the high incidence of male homosexual love, the considerable appreciation of male beauty, and Agathon's notion that eros is concerned with beauty. Moreover, in Plato's own special case, since he had theories about many other things—human motivation, the right and the good, the Forms—these theories must be kept in mind in so far as he relies on them in constructing his theory of eros.

The second wider setting in which it is useful to place a theory of love is other theories of love. Such comparisons give us a theoretical grasp of what a theory of love is, what questions it seeks to answer, what are data for such a theory; they also help us see the virtues and defects of various theories, and possibly point toward a construction of a cross-cultural theory. Here I confine myself to constructing a list of the questions which we may reasonably expect a theory of love to answer.

- Q1 What sorts of things can love and what sorts can be loved?
- Q2 What is love?
- Q3 What are the characteristic effects of love?
- Q4 What are the causes of love?
- Q5 How are objects of love chosen or selected by the lover?
- Q6 What is the relation of love to sexual desire?
- Q7 Is love egoistic?
- Q8 Are some kinds of love better than others?

Plato explicitly raises and answers questions 2,3, and 8 about eros, and his theory contains implicit answers to all the others. I do not claim that this list is complete, but I do claim that it is "reasonable" or "non-arbitrary" in at least the sense that these are questions that various theorists of love have thought important and sought to answer.

I

As I reconstruct it, Plato's theory has four parts: I. His deficiency model of desire and his egoistic model of desire are

applied to eros. II. A definition of generic eros is constructed on the basis of I and other elements. III. A definition of eros proper—not in the text—is reconstructed by me on the basis of elements in the text. IV. A “ladder of love” is constructed—the normative part of Plato’s theory.

Here I have space only to list the propositions that constitute Plato’s theory and make some very brief comments. Propositions explicitly about eros I mark with the letter ‘E’, propositions about other things on which he relies I mark with ‘P’. Derived propositions are preceded by ‘Hence.’ While the noun ‘eros’ presumably signifies the relation of loving, Plato often uses it to signify the lover *qua* lover; I do not translate this noun, but for the cognate verb I use ‘love.’

I. THE DEFICIENCY AND EGOISTIC MODELS OF DESIRE APPLIED TO EROS.

- E1. Eros desires that of which it is eros. (200a)
- P1. Of necessity, a desiring subject desires something it lacks, and when it does not lack something it does not desire it. (200ab)
- E2. Hence, eros lacks that which it loves. (201b)
- E3. Eros loves and desires only beauty or beautiful things. (201a)
- E4. Hence, eros lacks beauty or beautiful things. (201b)
- P2. Good things are also beautiful things. (201c)
- E5. Hence, eros lacks also good things. (201c)
- P3. The gods, being happy, do not lack good and beautiful things. (202c)
- E6. Hence, eros (a lover) cannot be a god. (202d)

This result, a consequence of the deficiency model of desire (P1) applied to eros, shows perhaps one essential difference between Platonic eros and Christian agape. Perhaps another interesting consequence, not brought out by Plato, is that there cannot be Platonic eros of oneself (self-love).

In reply to Diotima’s question, “The lover of beautiful things, what does he love?” Socrates answers “That they may be his”; but he is unable to answer the further question, “What

does he have who gets beautiful things?”). Diotima switches to two parallel questions about the lover of good things, which Socrates finds easy to answer:

- E7. The lover of good things loves that the good things be his. (204e)
- P4. He who gets good things will be happy, since the happy are happy by the acquisition of good things—and there is no need to ask further why anyone wants to be happy. (205a)

Here the *aim* of the lover of good things is to make them his own, for the sake of his own happiness. This makes Platonic eros of good things essentially egoistic.

II. THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE DEFINITION OF GENERIC EROS.

Socrates and Diotima agree that the desire for the acquisition of good things and one’s own happiness is common to all men; but Socrates is puzzled by the fact not all men are accordingly *called* lovers. Her explanation is that in this case the name of the whole is commonly applied only to a part, and she offers the parallel case of *poiesis*: generically, *poiesis* is the art of composing anything (buildings, shoes, poems), but only that part of it concerned with metres and music is *called poiesis* (poetry) and only *its* practitioners are called *poietai* (poets). Similarly,

- E8. Generically, eros is all desire for good things and happiness. (205d)

Rapidly now Diotima constructs the definition of generic eros out of two previous elements—that eros is desire for good things and that the lover loves the good things to be his—and a new element:

- E9. Men love the good to be theirs forever. (206a)
- E10. Hence, eros is for the good to be one’s own forever. (206a)

This is the definition of *generic* eros, of something which, Plato explicitly recognizes, was not commonly called eros.

Plato is deliberately extending the use of the term, and the philosophers of the *Republic* are *erastai* in this extended sense. The intentional object of generic eros is the good rather than the beautiful, and generic eros satisfies the deficiency and egoistic models of desire. Given P4 and E8, the definition also contains an implicit reference to happiness.

III. THE DEFINITION OF EROS PROPER

Diotima next asks for the characteristic effect (*ergon*) of what is commonly called eros, and answers:

E11. The characteristic effect of eros proper is the begetting of offspring on a beautiful thing by means of body or soul. (206b)

This proposition and her next two moves give us the essential elements of eros proper. First, in a puzzling inference, she derives a desire for immortality from the definition of generic eros:

From what has been admitted it is necessary that we desire immortality no less than the good, if eros is for the good to be one's own forever. It follows necessarily from this definition that eros is of immortality. (207a)

Next, in an extended passage (207a-209e), she consistently argues that this desire for immortality is the cause (*aition*) of the desire to beget offspring on a beautiful object by means of body or soul. She begins with the case of mating, begetting, and offspring-rearing behavior of animals, and moves on to the case of biological begetting of humans; then she explains similarly even sacrificial acts of love (Alcestis, Achilles), and finally she explains similarly non-biological begetting of poems (Homer, Hesiod) and constitutions (Solon, Lycurgus). Diotima takes all these to be cases of what is commonly called eros, she characterizes them all as cases of begetting offspring on a beautiful object, and in all of them she explains the desire to beget by appeal to the desire of the lover for his own immortality, rejecting alternative, non-egoistic explanations. I construct the definition of eros proper on the basis of E11, the derivation of the desire for immortality and these explanations:

- E12. Eros proper is the desire for begetting offspring on a beautiful object by means of body or soul for the sake of the lover's own immortality.

This definition offers an analysis of the complex intentional object of eros proper: it consists of a beautiful object and two desires or aims, the immediate desire for begetting and the final desire for the lover's own immortality. Possession of a beautiful object is rejected as an aim of the lover (206e); rather the role of the beautiful object is as the attracting object that releases the desire to beget; and later, in the ladder of love, the beautiful object also becomes the model for the creation of offspring. In the case of human begetting at least, the definition makes implicit reference to reason or cognition: knowledge or belief that by begetting offspring one will become immortal as far as this is possible for humans (207b). Diotima distinguishes two kinds of immortality: strict or divine immortality, remaining the same forever with respect to all properties, which presumably only the Forms have; and human immortality, remaining the same in the lesser sense of replacing oneself with something similar, the only immortality humans can attain. The desire for immortality satisfies the deficiency and egoistic models, and the apparently non-egoistic behavior of caring for one's offspring is explicitly explained egoistically by reference to the lover's desire for his own immortality.

The relation between the two definitions, of generic eros and eros proper, is somewhat unclear, partly because the relation of the beautiful to the good is unclear in Plato. If the beautiful can be in some sense subsumed under the good, the attraction of beauty, essential in eros proper, can be subsumed under desire for the good. The basis for the ranking in the ladder of love points in this direction.

IV. THE NORMATIVE PART OF THE THEORY: THE LADDER OF LOVE

I interpret the ladder of love to be about eros proper, rather than generic eros: it is concerned with the beautiful rather than the good, at every step there is begetting of offspring, and at the highest step the ultimate desire for immortality is explicitly brought in (212a).

The ladder of love is normative in the sense that it ranks evaluatively cases of eros proper from the third lowest to the highest, the two lowest ones—eros in animals and biological begetting in humans—having been ranked earlier (209c).

The ascent from step to step has been well analyzed by Moravcsik. Though he does not put the ladder in the context of the whole theory, his main results accord with our reconstruction.

Here I confine myself to questions regarding Plato's basis for the ranking.

Earlier we have an explicit ranking by Diotima: at 209 she explicitly ranks soul-eros above body-eros:

Equally with him he shares the nurturing of what is begotten, so that men in this condition enjoy a far fuller community with each other than that which come with children, and enjoy a far surer friendship (*philia*), since the children of their union are more beautiful and more immortal.

Aside from the interesting implications of this passage for the relation of eros to *philia*, it is clearly suggested here that as we go up the ladder the offspring of eros is more beautiful and more immortal, and that this is part of the basis for the ranking. If we suppose that at each step the offspring is modeled after the beautiful attracting object, degrees of beauty and immortality of the offspring will depend on degrees of beauty and immortality of the attracting object, and the latter becomes the more basic criterion for the ranking. This coheres well with Plato's making the Form Beauty the attracting object of the highest step: since he characterizes the Form Beauty as strictly immortal and as lacking nothing in beauty (211a), nothing can be more immortal or more beautiful than it, and no offspring modeled after anything else below the top of the ladder can be more beautiful or immortal than offspring modeled after it.

But why should higher and higher degrees of beauty and immortality make eros better and better? I argue that the theory of the Form of the Good in the *Republic* provides an answer to this question. This theory, at least as interpreted by me in a recent (unpublished) paper, enables us to see how for Plato "more beautiful" and "more immortal" are "better-making characteristics." It also enables us to see how beauty might be subsumed under goodness, and how love of beauty might be subsumed under desire for the good.

IV

I hope that the present reconstruction will help resolve disagreements on central features of the theory and illuminate major criticisms. There is no radical break or incoherence in the move from generic eros to eros proper (Marcus). The desire for immortality is an essential element of eros proper—a fact perhaps not sufficiently appreciated (Moravcsik, Vlastos)—and both generic and eros proper are certainly egoistic.

Plato's theory has several remarkable features. One is the connotative extension of the term *eros* to generic eros, an extension that serves Plato's subsumption of beauty under goodness and love of beauty under desire for the good. Another is his extension of the range of objects of eros proper, from persons in the common use to inanimate objects and abstract entities in Plato's theory. This extension, together with his assigning to beauty the central roles of attracting object and model for offspring, lead Plato to construct what amounts to a theory of creativity in the arts and sciences, rather than a theory of interpersonal love. When we add to all this the application of the deficiency and egoistic models of desire to eros, another remarkable feature of the theory, we begin to appreciate the weight of Vlastos' criticism: that the theory fails to account for the highest type of interpersonal love, loving a person for his own sake. The theory "fails" equally relative to other ideals of interpersonal love: for example, Freud's, whose "normal" love obtains when there is a confluence of sensuous feelings and feelings of affection; or Maslow's, whose love among "healthy" or "self-actualizing" people does not arise from deficiency needs and is not egoistic. It is doubtful that Plato's account of *philia* makes up for these "deficiencies." The non-normative part of Plato's theory also contains serious defects. One of them is the surprising omission of the concept of pleasure: no pleasure of any kind is assigned a role in eros. Another is that the theory seems innocent of developmental facts, of how the experience of eros is developed in human beings; recent psychological theories suggest that maternal love is central to this development, and non-egoistic theories are constructed around this central case. Despite all these defects, Plato's theory is grand and coherent, and combines impressively some of his deepest convictions of the middle period: his rationalistic and egoistic

moral psychology, the conception of Forms as ideal exemplars, and his intuitions about beauty and goodness. Its influence is understandable and deserved.

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