

Comparative Humanities Review

Volume 2 *Symposium 1.2: A Collection of Essays by
Students of Love (Summer 2008)*

Article 12

2008

The Symposium as Metanarrative

Steven McClellan
Pennsylvania State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.bucknell.edu/chr>

Recommended Citation

McClellan, Steven (2008) "The Symposium as Metanarrative," *Comparative Humanities Review*: Vol. 2 , Article 12.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.bucknell.edu/chr/vol2/iss1/12>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Comparative Humanities at Bucknell Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Comparative Humanities Review* by an authorized editor of Bucknell Digital Commons. For more information, please contact dcadmin@bucknell.edu.

~*~

The *Symposium* as Metanarrative

Steven McClellan,
Pennsylvania State University

Plato's *Symposium*, while quite brilliant as to the insights that it has traditionally been interpreted to have offered in the realms of emotion, love, knowledge, and human relationships is a primary example of a metanarrative. It expresses the need for the construction of a universalizing theory that gives legitimacy to the particular subject being described, in this case, love. Plato uses those particular justifications of this subject and transpose them to legitimize an overarching brand of knowledge, in this case, philosophy. A metanarrative is a "[hi]story" in which "knowledge is no longer the subject, but in the service of the subject."¹ Those who create these metanarratives do so in order to legitimize their own functions:

If they feel that the civil society of which they are members is badly represented by the State, they may reject its prescriptions...This reintroduces the critical function of knowledge. But the fact remains that knowledge has no final legitimacy outside of serving the goals envisioned by the practical subject, the autonomous collectivity.²

In this essay, I argue that this was Plato's very purpose for writing the *Symposium*. It was an attempt to justify and legitimize a way of life that had been called into question by the trial and death of Socrates. Plato's *Symposium* was the attempt at inverting the narratives of the society that condemned Socrates and construct a new narrative, based on love of knowledge. First, I discuss the *Symposium's* construction as a narrative, and how Plato uses this

particular construction to build caricatures of normal authorities of Athenian culture, inverting them. Then I discuss the threat that Socrates apparently posed to society, and why Plato chooses love, or Eros, to build his case against this argument. Finally, I will argue that Plato's argument that only philosophers can truly understand Eros, breaks down the normal conception of love, and places it at the hands of a way of life that was thought to be threatening to ethical life of the community.

The *Symposium* is the story of a gathering that took place during the crucial years of the Peloponnesian War, just a year before Alcibiades' Sicilian expedition. Athens at this time is an empire on the brink, although final defeat is not yet in sight. This gathering is said to have occurred in 416 B.C., and the telling of it occurs in 404 B.C., the latter being after the war is lost by Athens to Sparta.³ Present, of course are Socrates, perhaps the greatest Athenian philosopher, as well as the great comic and adversary of Socrates, Aristophanes. He is the only other contemporary of Socrates to actually speak about him besides Plato, and his words are not kind; naturally he is present. If there is a comic poet, then there must be one of the tragic stock, and he is presented in Agathon; although he is but a shade of the great Sophocles and Euripides, his youthful vigor provides one of the driving points throughout the *Symposium*. Also present, and offering up their services in specialization, are Pausanias, a realist and Agathon's lover; Phaedrus, an idealist, Eryximachus the doctor, and finally Alcibiades, the very lively embodiment of the glory and splendor of a heroic tragedy. These are the main characters that give a speech during the *Symposium*. However there are other important personages, such as Diotima, and Apollodorus. Each one of these characters has a role to play, as Plato makes use of them to emphasize a particular point during the narration.

The *Symposium* itself is being told by an outsider who admires Socrates; in turn, the narrator heard the story from another enthusiast of Socrates, who confirmed the story with no other great authority than Socrates himself. One could only imagine that if anything resembling the gathering took place, where Plato fit into this chain of hearsay. This highlights the extent to which word was spreading around Athens of the kinds of conversations Socrates and his group of followers were having.

The telling does offer us the unique and descriptive insight that a narrative supplies, and can provide the actions of the speaker, as opposed to the reader doing the blocking in his own mind.

The moment in time that the *Symposium* takes place is important for several reasons. As said, it takes place at the time right before the collapse of the Athenian war effort, which is brought on by the failure of Alcibiades' famed Sicilian expedition, a campaign in which Thucydides claimed that the participants had an "Eros" for Sicily, one of the few mentions of Eros by the renowned historian.⁴ This was the time in which the Athenian people were beginning to mistrust both Alcibiades and Socrates, and the former had once been the star of the public eye. This again makes the timing of the symposium important because of the accusation by both the Athenian state, and later by Nietzsche that Socrates was the greatest threat to artistic and noble inclinations.⁵ There is truth to this argument, and Plato even acknowledges it by the occurrence of the *Symposium* immediately after Agathon's victory in the Lenaean Festival, one of the greatest expositions of tragic poetry. And as Allan Bloom rightly points out, "if philosophy did not destroy Athenian culture, it prospered in its demise."⁶ It is in this atmosphere of controversy in which Plato is attempting to rescue and legitimize philosophy against the "noble" arts. He does so by stripping away one of the major characteristics of poetry, Eros, and transposing it to philosophy.

The *Symposium* begins when an unidentified friend calls out to Apollodorus, a follower of Socrates. This friend has heard an account of the discussion of Eros that occurred between the great minds of Athens, and wishes to know what was really said. However, Apollodorus was not present either, and can only offer, as said, a secondhand account that was provided by Aristodemus. It is then that Apollodorus claims that he makes it his business to know exactly what Socrates does and says each day (Plato 172c). Apollodorus explains that until he did so he "simply drifted aimlessly...in fact, I was the most worthless man on earth as bad as you are this very moment: I used to think philosophy was the last thing a man should do" (173a). This provides both the example of the almost cult-like following received by Socrates, and the one that is mocked by Aristophanes in *Clouds*; after all, Aristodemus, who Apollodorus has received the story from, is so far gone that he walks barefoot like his mentor (173b). It also displays well the fact that many in Athenians do not hold

philosophy in high regard. The purpose of this opening is clear, and Plato is trying to focus on the exterior of Socrates, and thus the imitation of him. As shall be seen later, Alcibiades inverts this exterior, by being the figure of beauty and virtue, while Socrates becomes the ugly, vulgar, almost criminal being that Nietzsche displays (215b).⁸ This is the mere beginning of Plato's inversion of the norms of Athenian society, which he moves from Socrates actually bathing and dressing for the occasion (174a), to him reversing the normal pederastic norms between himself and Agathon throughout.

It would appear that Plato chose an interesting manner of making his narrative. Love and the erotic are not entities that necessarily breed agreement and consensus in a community, and indeed very much of our understanding of relationships are contrary to the community. But what Plato wants to do is to liberate Eros from the laws and restrictions that place boundaries on what is possible, and by the fact that he addresses almost immediately the issue of pederasty (which does not mean that he accepted it) suggests that he was required to begin from the prejudices of the symposium's participants. Plato is here making a clear distinction from what was being taught in Judaism, and what will later become the Christian faith. According to Jewish law, there is nothing beyond the law, other than God who gave it, whereas Plato, as with the other Greeks, looked to nature to provide laws based on reason and understanding nature. Jewish law is based predominately on the procreative action, and God is seen as the ultimate Father. In the *Republic*, the family is effectively destroyed by the relative indifference to sacred prohibitions, and the desire to create the best citizens. To Plato, the family becomes the mere means to the end that is the city and the intellect. This is in blatant contradiction to the Judeo-Christian tradition, and it is interesting that so many Christian neo-Platonists could accept this opposition. This arises out of the Greek habit of seeing the family as imperfectly natural because it, "more than perhaps anything else in human life, requires myths, conventions, and prohibitions to hold it together, all of which stand in the way of the full development of man's powers, particularly the intellectual ones."⁹

For Plato, the development of these intellectual abilities is the purpose of life, and the drive is Eros, which creates the important concept of seeing things as part of the whole. The philosopher sees not the particular, which ordinary people

experience, but rather the general; they see the permanent rather than the changing, they see the intelligible rather than the visible. In short, he understands Forms. It is this ability to look at everything in a general way and have a complete understanding of human nature that allows them to come to true knowledge. Plato again is quick to criticize those such as Eryximachus who proclaim that those who are specialized in specific fields are more practical. This is the sum of the *Symposium* as a text: individual speakers give their innermost thoughts on love, creating a dialogue of specifics that, taken as a whole, represent the general. Therefore, the speakers create a form of metanarrative that moves from the distinctly individual as it is presented by the speaker, to a general explanation as to the meaning and purpose of Eros, the god of love.

It must be made clear that when one speaks of Socrates, one implies Plato, the true author. Socrates becomes the mouthpiece for his student, and the relation that ends up being concluded as a true "Platonic love" is the one that is realized in the relationship between Plato and Socrates (the point that Alcibiades misses). Therefore, it is essential that a hermeneutical approach be taken in terms of understanding the composition of the text itself. Plato utilizes all three kinds of classical rhetoric in *Symposium*: Phaedrus begins with the conventional epideictic rhetoric, the typical public speech; Pausanias displays the deliberative, "the tool of the political man in attempting to influence public discussions about war and peace and the enactment of laws";¹⁰ the third kind, forensic rhetoric, which is used in the courts (in terms of defense and accusation) is most closely displayed by Alcibiades, who accuses Socrates of corrupting him.

We also have the typical Socratic dialectic of dialogue, which is honestly what makes Plato a great writer as well as great philosopher. The *Symposium* differs however, from other Socratic dialogues in that Socrates is limited in his ability to simply question the other speaker and allow him to divulge his own conclusions; in fact, Socrates is himself engaged in this manner by Diotima. The nature of the *Symposium* as a gathering of a community of individuals already sets limits on the manner in which Socrates can speak; he prefers to take people personally, and the great ability of Socrates is to "force individuals to listen to him and to agree with him even when they passionately do not wish to do so," a point made by Aristophanes.¹¹

The role of individuality is essential to what Socrates tries to put forward, for it is this singular nature of the philosophic process that makes it erotic. This is why Socrates attacks Agathon, and (nearly) gets him to admit that he would be shameful addressing a crowd of wise men – the poet is not erotic. Socrates concerns himself with the crowd only inasmuch as he can draw out the individuals and seduce them with his brand of knowledge. For Socrates, rhetoric is about persuasion, and dialectic is about truth; this is why he was disappointed in Agathon's speech. Socrates attempts to change the style of the speakers who give their praise of Eros. He not only wants to do this because he seems more comfortable with engaging in interpersonal dialogue, but he also asserts that, like a lover, he needs a response. This is the connection between Socrates and the other, which makes his particular kind of philosophy erotic. Socrates begins his dialogue with Agathon by trying to get him to admit that love is not simply love, a point that Agathon completely missed, but love of *something*. But Socrates he is not implying the kinds of love between family, or even friends, because what is a son or daughter without a mother or father? Socrates is reaching for something more deep and profound here, something that is more shameful, more uncomfortable, more unexamined – something erotic. This is another part of what makes the Socratic brand of questioning so erotic.

For probably neither of us knows anything noble and good, but he supposes he knows something when he does not know, while I, just as I do not know, do not even suppose that I do. I am likely to be a little bit wiser than he in this very thing: that whatever I do not know, I do not even suppose I know.¹²

This is the famous line uttered by Socrates while standing trial for the corruption of the youth of Athens in the *Apology*. However, Socrates replies to Eryximachus' suggestion for a discussion on love in the *Symposium* with enthusiasm, for "How could I vote 'No,' when the only thing I say I understand is the art of love?" (177d). This line could be seen as a quip by Socrates, another example of that famous Socratic irony. Perhaps Socrates assumes that knowledge is something that cannot be obtained and readily held on to: it constantly fluctuates, and is something that must be striven for continuously. If this is so, then there are to be serious repercussions for the Platonic system itself.

Nonetheless, Plato seems to accept some version of this theory himself: in the *Symposium*, Diotima argues that “everything mortal is preserved, not like the divine, by always being the same in every way, but because what is departing and aging leaves behind something new, something such as it had been” (208a-b). How can one have absolute knowledge on a condition such as love, or justice, if it is always changing, and is not stable? Does Socrates here attempt to claim that love is something which does not change and remains static? These are the questions that are fundamental when Socrates comes to speak towards the end of the *Symposium*, and he not only claims to be the only person who understands what is love, or the erotic, but he does so in a very insulting manner. He understands the other speakers to be merely trivial tourists to the soul and body, while he, as a philosopher (the distinction between the various professions of the speakers becomes highlighted here), can solely understand that love (Eros) is the most liberating element for the soul. As Diotima will make clear, the philosophic life is the highest rung on the ladder to which a human being can climb, and it is one that is only reserved for those lovers of knowledge. Socrates understands that his life is finite, and this is something that many miss. Eros is the recognition of finitude, and Socrates accepts Aristophanes’ idea of human incompleteness. For Socrates, this incompleteness is this finitude, and not only does he accept it, but is also comfortable with it.

Plato seems to attempt to legitimize the rules of his own game, namely philosophy. He understands that in society, one does not need philosophy like one needs other kinds of trades which legitimize the narratives of the community (priests, poets, artists, statesmen, generals, prophets, etc). These kinds of narrators have arisen in all societies, yet only in ancient Greece did philosophy appear and persist, later being passed to the Romans and Muslims. For Plato, philosophy is not merely a manner of thought or a way of explaining complex ideas, it is not a dogma, or even a doctrine – it is a way of life. He must therefore find a way to show that philosophy not only matters as a respectable kind of narrative, not only on specific topics such as nature, ethics, God, society, or love, but also that it matters for philosophy itself. Another one of Plato’s inversions then, is that philosophy is not love of something, such as knowledge, it is love itself. The *Symposium* is his attempt at showing how philosophy, the “love of

knowledge," can be a respectable and legitimate way of life.

ENDNOTES

1. Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 1984), pg. 36.
2. Bloom, Allan. *Love and Friendship*, (Simon and Schuster: New York, 1993), pg. 441.
3. Ibid, pgs. 446-7.
4. Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, Book VI, Chapter 24 (Penguin Classics: New York, 1954).
5. Nietzsche, Friedrich. "Twilight of the Idols." *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. Walter Kaufmann, (Viking Penguin Inc.: New York, 1976), pgs. 473-9.
6. Bloom, pg. 447.
7. From here on, the author will cite quotations and references to the *Symposium* directly within the text.
8. Nietzsche, pg. 475.
9. Bloom, pg. 441.
10. Ibid, pg. 454.
11. Ibid, pg. 494.
12. Plato. *Apology of Socrates*, 21d, (Penguin Classics: London, 1993).