

## What is this thing called Love?

### Desire, Psychotherapy and Plato's Symposium

Onel Brooks

University of Roehampton

#### Abstract

The platonic dialogue, *Symposium*, is approached here through client work. This rich and complex text is not rushed through as if the point of a conversation must be its swift and clear termination, rather than how potentially fruitful, generative and transformative it is or may come to be when we reflect or engage in further conversation. This paper suggests that *Symposium* presents us with two ways of thinking about relating to another, and ends with some remarks about this platonic dialogue and psychotherapy that could, of course, could be followed by more conversation.

**Keywords:** Love, longing, conversation, community, the soul's children

#### A memory of a consultation

In my first meeting with a young man referred to me by his GP for “depression” and “suicidal ideation,” it is easy to get into conversation with him. He tells me he has thoughts about killing himself, not plans, and indicates that he has found himself thinking about some other things that he had not spoken to his GP or anyone about. I try to follow him. What other things? He often thinks about evolution and biology, and wonders about the fact that his mother, being a female animal would have been biologically programmed to love him, because animals are programmed to look after their offspring. He said that he did not know, however, whether the fact that she is programmed to love him meant that she is **just** programmed to do this, so she does **not** really love him. In response to this I

heard myself remark that he seemed to think that if her love is biological, instinctual, then it might not be real; he was not thinking that if it is biological and instinctual, it might be stronger and more real than something that she could choose to do or not do. He seemed to be interested in this, and we continued our own discourse on 'love' and his concern that he might not be loved by his mother. Eventually, he said there was another thing that often occupied him that he did not talk to anyone about: it was **his** theory that everyone has another person, their 'other half' that they were seeking, and that life was about finding this 'other half'.

It is not surprising that a practitioner with some appreciation of Rank (Coren 2001), Fairbairn (Fairbairn 1952) and Winnicott (1965) might wonder whether 'other half' is a reference to mother. Yet I found myself aware that he had taken us into questions about free will and determinism, the purpose of human life, and Plato's *Symposium*, both in the notion of the 'other half', and in his questioning of his mother's love. In fact, this platonic dialogue raises many issues named or implied by this client, such as, the nature of love, there being better and worse forms of love, and what is maternal and female love and desire, as opposed to male love and desire? I try to stay with my sense that he is telling me something of his doubt and distress, as well as his sense of hope, and to hear how his doubt about his mother's love seemed to be related to the idea that there is one other person out there who would complete him, and his reported difficulties forming relationships with women.

These are conversations gone by. I no longer remember the details, but I remember having the sense that there was some room to move, that I was in a conversation with someone who could be quiet as well as speak and who was clearly interested in speaking and being listened to. Although pausing for long spells, repeating himself and struggling to put his thoughts and feelings into words, he was a young man who wanted to talk about his

relationship with his mother, about his relationships with women, about not attending the course he was supposed to be studying, not working and not making friends. He was quite similar in our second meeting, claiming that he found our first meeting helpful and wanted to continue meeting with me. I gently tried to follow his lead, bringing cautiously together what he had to say about mother and 'girls', his sadness, isolation and many thoughts and feelings.

I think it was our third or fourth meeting that felt very different. We were approaching Christmas and he had brought me a small box of chocolates, a gesture that left me uncomfortable, and suspicious. In addition to this, it did not feel as if we were in the give and take of conversation. He now stated that as his mother **is** programmed to love him, as mammals are programmed to love their young, therefore, she could not really love him. There was nothing about the hope of finding "the one. I worried about his leaving the conversation to become a man of conviction.

Commenting on his seeming to be different today, I asked directly about suicidal ideas or plans. He smiled and denied this. I was more unnerved by his simile and insistence that he did not have any such ideas. In previous sessions he had acknowledged that he had such ideas and had spoken relatively freely about them. Now he does not speak and denies their existence. I bring this back a little later: his seeming so sure now about his mother's love, whether that is something that might be part of an increase in his feelings of sadness, and whether this led him to more thoughts about suicide. He again reassured me that he was not thinking about this. Rather doggedly I raised the issue of his giving me a present: was it was a goodbye present? He responded with ridicule, pointed out that it was nearly Christmas and claiming that it was just a small way of saying thank you. Something

about the laugh bothered me too. Sometimes you feel that you know why someone is laughing; sometimes you are not so sure.

The session ended; he left, but I was still left with him. It may have been the next day, a few days later or when he failed to arrive for his next appointment that I rang the referrer to say I felt concerned about him and asked her to contact him. The referrer, his GP, found out that he had made a 'suicide attempt'. The client had notified the hospital himself, and was recovering in hospital. The GP seemed to think that as I had 'known' that he was suicidal, I should have prevented this client leaving his last session with me and phoned the ambulance, and that trying to engage him in conversation about his suicidal ideas rather than more actively preventing him was a mistake.

This memory of a series of conversations, incomplete and fallible as memories are, will be followed by an engagement with the *Symposium*, making use of three interrelated themes present in the client work illustrated above and in Plato's dialogue. First, the notion of following: my attempt to follow my client's words and emotional states, and to lead him so that he can follow me into a discussion about his feelings, thoughts and how he lives his life. Second, the idea that a maternal and therefore female instinctual and bodily kind of love or desire ought to be relegated or rejected in favour of something that is more rational, less instinctual and less related to bodily processes such as birth and to the care of an infant. Third, the question of what we are to make of this young man's desire, longings, sense of not having something that he should have, conveyed in what he had to say about his mother's love and his desire to find 'the one'. There is also the more general question about our desire and longings. What do we want when we are in the grip of longing or desire? What, Plato seems to ask us in *Symposium*, is our passionate desire a desire for?

### **The political and cultural backdrop to the *Symposium***

The *Symposium* is a tale told by Apollodorus, a follower of Socrates, about the drinking party held in Agathon's honour on the night after Agathon first won the prize for tragedy. We learn very early that that party is the subject of many conversations although it happened about 416BC, about sixteen before the time of this retelling of it.

There could be many conversations about the details of the cultural and political significance of this dialogue, but perhaps it is safe to say that it has something to do with how Socrates is presented, and his coming to be charged with 'introducing strange divinities and corrupting the youth', the accusations involved in his being put to death. It also gives us an account of Socrates' relationship with one of the other characters at that drinking party, the brilliant, dissolute, celebrity Alcibiades (Plato 2002: 80). At the time of this drinking party, Alcibiades was at the height of his fame and influence, a man known for his flamboyant and excessive life style, politically powerful and ambitious, beautiful and desired by both men and women, with a long list of sexual conquests. Alcibiades, a proponent of the 'Sicilian Expedition', that led to further war with Sparta and a series of events that was disastrous for Athens, who was implicated in a political and religious scandal (Heaton 1994), a man who fled to Athens' enemy, was clearly associated with Socrates. But how was this to be seen? Was he not a student or follower of Socrates? Therefore, how much is Socrates and his teachings implicated in how Alcibiades has behaved and turned out? Here is my first theme, that of following. How was Alcibiades a follower of Socrates? How are we to see and think about this relationship?

The *Symposium* acknowledges, undermines and perhaps tries to change or influence a social practice of its time in which an older man would teach or help a boy to advance himself socially and politically in return for sexual favours. If this is a practice, in some part of society at least, how is it related to the ways of talking and thinking about masculinity available in this society, and therefore ways of thinking about femininity and the treatment of women? In this dialogue, the soul is taken to be superior to the body; the body is more strongly associated with women and the soul with men. This is clearly related to my second theme identified above: the idea of relegating and rejecting maternal and therefore female, instinctual and bodily love in favour of something said to be more rational, higher and less or not bodily.

It is clear that for many of the men at this drinking party, a man's desire for another male - the paradigm case being the older man's desire for a boy- is a higher form of desire when compared to a man's desire for a woman. It is important that women are banished from the drinking party, and this raises the question of what is being banished or put out of sight by this action. It is important too that there seems to be something about men being hard and tough. We might say that part of the cultural politics of the book is to undermine and influence these assumptions, ways of thinking and talking, and to raise the issue of the soft, tender more receptive side of men (Plato 2002:81). Plato's work raises many questions about desiring. What is it that we desire when we are in the grip of passionate desire? How are we to think about this? What is it that we really want when we feel that we want what we want? This is the third theme identified above.

### ***Symposium***

The work begins with Apollodorus, a follower of Socrates, talking about the conversations and events of the famous drinking party. Apollodorus tell his companion that Aristodemus, another follower of Socrates, told him of the events of that evening. Here is Apollodorus' account of Aristodemus's account of something that took place sixteen years before.

Aristodemus met Socrates washed and wearing sandals, so he knew that Socrates must be on his way to some important event, because Socrates is usually barefoot. Socrates tell Aristodemus that he is on his way to Agathon's house to celebrate Agathon's victory for tragedy in the Dionysian contest the night before, and suggests that Aristodemus comes along to the party although he has not been invited. Aristodemus does as Socrates bids: he follows Socrates to the party.

This is the first theme: following, which contains following on from, being a disciple of, and being educated by. This leads us to the question, what does it mean to follow someone or to be educated by someone? The teacher can teach but she cannot control what is learned. Are there creative followers and not so creative ways of following? If Socrates goes around barefoot, are you a good follower of him if you also do not wear sandals? If Freud has a beard, and you grow a beard, is this a very different way of following on from Freud than reading his works carefully and critically? And what is this passionate desire to follow or be educated by a particular person a desire for?

On the way to Agathon's house, Socrates, as is his wont, lags behind, deep in thought and encourages Aristodemus to go on ahead, so he now walks behind Aristodemus. Does this mean he is following someone who follows him? Does this mean that he is leading from behind? Does it mean that he cannot be followed? When Aristodemus arrives at the party and walks through the open door, he is asked why he has not brought Socrates. He turns

around expecting to see Socrates behind him, to see Socrates following him, but there is no sign of Socrates. Socrates has stopped outside one of the neighbouring houses, is lost in his own thoughts and will not come in, although a slave is sent to bring him in. Aristodemus prevails on the others to leave him be, saying that Socrates will come in when he is ready.

When Socrates finally comes in, Agathon, the host and the most handsome man at the party invites Socrates to lie close to him. Rather than drink heavily as they had the night before, they decide that they will be moderate and have conversation with their wine. So a space is being created for a conversation. A conversation about desire or the god Love. At about this point they send the flute girl away. This seems to be part of setting the conditions for the conversation. Now flute girls were at such drinking parties to play music, dance and, it seems, to have sexual relations with the men. It is important that the flute girl is banished to go and play to the women in the household or to herself. It is clear that love or passionate desire or sexual desire has as its paradigm case in this context, the relationship between an older male, the lover, and a younger male, the beloved. There is no space for women in this. Love and sexual desire for women is being pushed out of the picture and relegated to at best second place in this game of praise of love.

The first theme, that of following, might include following on from, being a disciple, being educated by. The second theme might be referred to as an attempt to banish or relegate the body and women in favour of what is higher than the body and women. This second theme is related to the notion of higher and lower desires, men and women, the body and giving birth.



In the speeches and discussion that follow, it is clear that one of the central questions is what is the place of passionate desire in a human life? This, my third theme, might raise the question of what is our passionate desire a desire for. What is of interest, in terms of the speeches, is not only who follows whom but how what is said by one speaker is taken up or followed by subsequent speakers. For example, Phaedrus, who is the first to speak, claims that Love is a mighty and most ancient god who has no parents. Love makes us noble and honourable. An army made up of lovers would be unstoppable; they would never run from danger, nor leave their lover in danger. The speakers who follow Phaedrus follow him by questioning his claims; they argue that Love is not the oldest but the youngest of the Gods, they name Love's parents, they argue that there is not one but two Loves, they talk about the goddess Aphrodite rather than the god Eros. They argue that Love is not a god.

We should notice too that Plato possibly presents Phaedrus as undermining his own argument. For he begins by assuming the superiority of passionate desires between men, but one of his examples is of a woman, Alcestis, who is willing to die for her husband. In this, the conversation that is the *Symposium*, like much of our speaking and interacting with each other is alive, threatening to go here and there, in danger of leading us somewhere other than we think we wanted to go. Pausanias is the second to speak. He claims that there are two Loves: one is entirely masculine and has no mother, who inspires male desire for other men, the other is the younger Love that partakes of both masculine and feminine nature and has a mother. The latter is the vulgar or common Love (Plato 2002 :15). The superior love, we might say, to paraphrase him, has nothing to do with the mother's love or body.

Aristophanes is due to speak next, after Pausanias, but he cannot because he has the hiccups. Is this an indication that although there is an attempt to banish women and the body in order to talk about higher things, the body is still very present in their discourse and interactions? The body is present in what they say about a man's desire for another male (who is identified by and with a body), in the flirting and banter with each other, and now the body seems to be asserting itself and making it impossible for Aristophanes to take his turn. He asks the doctor Eryximachus for help with his hiccups and to take his place as the next one to speak. Eryximachus now gives a long speech in which he has much to say about the body, over eating and 'evacuation' (Plato 2002:22). Indeed Eryximachus seems to be a materialist, reductively explaining love in terms of the body and the body's love. The body is not so much back, but by now it is evident that it had not really been banished from this group of men who are so concerned with beautiful male bodies, youth and ageing, who have just eaten and are now drinking and talking.

With Aristophanes' account we are very clearly concerned with the body. It is where we start from. What Aristophanes has to say is more clearly relevant to what the client I began with had to say about his mother and his 'theory' about the 'other half'. Aristophanes claims that the 'ancient' nature of human beings was very different from what it is now. Human beings were not divided into two sexes, male and female, but into three, there was a third sex. 'Ancient' or primal human beings were round beings who had four arms, four legs, two sets of genitals and two heads. So they faced two different ways at once; they could run very fast by tumbling on their eight limbs, and armed with four swords, strong and fast, they dared even to storm Olympus and challenge the gods. One sort of human being had two male genitals, another sort had two female genitals; the third sex had both male and female genitals, the androgynous sex, halfway between completely masculine

and completely feminine. This notion of being in between, the area between the extremes of absolutely male and absolutely female seems to be crucial for the *Symposium*.

As punishment for their insolence Zeus devised a scheme to cut the original humans in half and turn their heads around so that they no longer faced their backs but they could see and remember how they were so severed. Immediately after this, these half beings began to throw themselves at each other, desperate to grow together again and began to die of hunger and weakness, because they would not even eat, such were their desire to become one again. The gods watched these half beings throwing themselves against each other, but failing to become whole again, longing, in despair, perishing. Zeus took pity on them by inventing something for their longing, and lack of wholeness. He invented sexual intercourse. Before this, humans reproduced by shedding their seed on the earth and their genitals were on the sides of their bodies. By moving their genitals to the front, Zeus made it possible for the male and female to reproduce by intercourse and for males to be satisfied from intercourse although no children are produced.

Sexual intercourse then is a gift from the gods to alleviate our sense of longing, loss and lack. It is a temporary return to our primal state of oneness and connectedness, that allows us to be able to continue with our lives in our reduced, inconsequential, lonely and alienated state.

It is important to note that Freud's thinking about sexual intercourse is at odds with what Plato has Aristophanes say here. For Freud, tenderness, for example, is a sublimation of sexual desire. Sexual intercourse is what we want, but we might defend against this or sublimate it to more artistic form, such as, for example, creating works of art (Laplanche and Pontalis 2004:431-433). Plato through Aristophanes is telling us a different story. He

is telling us that when a half being 'has the good fortune to encounter his actual other half, affection and kinship and love combined inspire in him an emotion that is quite overwhelming' (Plato 1987:63); they want to live out their lives together and to never be parted. Aristophanes continues

It is people like these who form lifelong partnerships, although they would find it difficult to say what they hope to gain from one another's society. No one can suppose that it is mere physical enjoyment which causes the one to take such intense delight in the company of the other. It is clear that the soul of each has some other longing which it cannot express, but can only surmise and obscurely hint at (Plato 1987: 63).

If lovers visited by a god during the act of making love are asked what they want from each other, what they are hoping to gain from each other, we are told that they might not be able to answer, but if the god were to offer to weld them together forever, they would not be able to refuse such an offer. Love, Aristophanes tells us, is simply the name for this desire to return to a state of wholeness (Plato 1987: 63-64).

Such passages however, may be said to open up the possibility that being welded together forever is but one way to think of satisfying the longing we feel, but it may not be the only way, that it might be a proposition to accept, and therefore one that might be declined in favour of another possibility. This gets us back to the question related to our third theme about the place of passionate desire in a human life. What is passionate desire a desire for? What do we want the other person for? Even in what Aristophanes has to say, Plato does not tell us that what we desire from the other is intercourse, but, as Freud states, that this may be sublimated into something that is less obviously to do with genital pleasure. Plato tells us here that what we want is difficult to say, that we might not be able

to answer, that we have a longing or longings that we cannot express, but that we can only surmise and hint at.

The comic playwright amuses but we do not need to work hard to appreciate the tragedy in his account of what it means to be human. We are half beings, half made up, longing to escape from our sense of being insignificance, inconsequential, by returning to some sense of wholeness that we can glimpse or remember, or imagine, which we associate closely with sexual intercourse. And surely these are important idea for a practitioner listening to a client expressing her desire? What is difficult to say may not be due to repression and refusal. Perhaps we have longings that we cannot express. This might be contrasted with Freud's account of sexuality (for example, Freud 1905), and we may wonder whether a therapist following Plato rather than Freud here might be in a different place with her client.

Our temptation, post Rank and Ferenczi, post Lacan and Winnicott is to think in terms of a traumatic separation from the mother for both my client and the rest of us; but Plato is just getting into his stride. There is a lot more to be said, but none of the characters in the *Symposium* seem to be trying to tell us that separation from the mother or what we do with our genitals is the answer.

Agathon's offering is next, and, as you might, expect what he has to say is rhetorically accomplished, clever, charming. Love, he claims, in contrast to the sense of longing, loss and despair in Aristophanes' contribution to the conversation, has all good things. For Socrates, Love cannot have all good things: to love and desire is to acknowledge that we are wanting or deficient in some way. Love takes after its parents Plenty or Resourcefulness,

his or her father and Poverty, his or her mother. Can we say that love can fill us with feelings and help us to be resourceful as it makes us acutely aware of what we desire and do not possess, how we are poor? Is this the sense in which it is between plenty and poverty? There is a sense of lack in our desiring; however, Socrates' account does not follow Aristophanes in saying that what we really desire when we desire is to be welded to our other half.

### **Discourses of Diotima**

As well as being rude to his host, reducing a crowned master of words to helplessness at his own party, Socrates claims that he had misunderstood or he would not have agreed to join in this game of speaking about Love. He did not realise that the idea was that they should say anything about Love, attributing everything possible to him. He, Socrates cannot do this, produce something rhetorically accomplished but empty; he is only able to tell the truth about Love. Here we can say that this is just another rhetorical device to claim that he speaks the truth; but perhaps what is more interesting is that Socrates' speech introduces a degree of critical engagement into the game of praise, and undermines much that is taken for granted by those around him. I am suggesting that we pay less attention to the notion of 'truth', more to speaking truthfully and to critical engagement with the ideas and practices that are culturally dominant. This, of course, is a dangerous path, likely to leave you vulnerable to criticism or punishment.

Women have been banished from this party but Socrates reintroduces a woman in the form of his teacher, Diotima, a priestess of Mantinea. In a situation where male superiority is taken for granted, the desire of a male for another male is the paradigm case of passionate or sexual desire, the men are in competition with each other for who is most able to speak of love, Socrates introduces a woman as his teacher and as the wisest person when

it comes to the subject of love. Diotima is the voice of authority in this work, far wiser than anyone at the party including Socrates (Harrison and Nightingale 2009). By giving an account of her patient protracted attempt to teach him, his difficulties following what she tries to teach him, and her amusement at his efforts, Socrates to some extent softens his rough treatment of Agathon (Harrison and Nightingale 2009).

Throughout the dialogue there is a relationship between what is said and what is done. Diotima quickly tries to move Socrates from his tendency to think in stark contrasts or binary oppositions, from being someone who says that if a thing is not beautiful it is ugly, if Love is not a God then it must be mortal, if something is not good then it must be evil. She tries to open up for him the intermediate area between the two opposites, to teach him to speak and think with more subtlety, to think about what is intermediate, half way, not clearly one thing or its opposite. Perhaps the route to 'delicacy of sentiment' and thinking clearly and well, (Plato 2002:47) is, as Nietzsche and Wittgenstein tried to teach us, through sensitivity to words, to shades, tones, nuances. For Diotima, Love is not a god and not mortal, but in between the gods and mortals; it is an intermediate spirit or being or 'Daemon'; he has a mother as well as a father and being conceived on the goddess Aphrodite's birthday, Love is a follower of Aphrodite. He is not a god who does not have anything to do with women. What Diotima says and does in her verbal intercourse with Socrates might be read as following on from the notion of the being that is in between male and female, the being together that is the coupling of a male and female half being; so in her presence and position in the dialogue and in what she says, she makes a place for women and a woman fruitfully engaged with a man, for androgyny, for difference and the idea that some coming together may be more fruitful than others.

Diotima argues that we do not desire most of all to be reunited with our other half, to repossess what we once had or what we feel belongs to us, to return to our past, to find the familiar. What we desire is to give birth in beauty. Rather than sameness and return, she emphasises creation, bringing forth something new, the opening up of possibilities that may not have been glimpsed previously: fruitful intercourse. For all human beings have this desire to procreate in body and soul. Those who are pregnant in body bring forth physical children, but those who are pregnant in soul bring forth the soul's children. These are different ways to achieve immortality. Sexual intercourse between male and female is presented as divine because through it we can make a bid for immortality, although we remain mortal. There does seem to be the idea here that we are pregnant in soul and our words and deeds are our children; we give birth to them in the presence of the beautiful (Plato 2002: 50-51), and this seems to be why beauty is so important. Perhaps it makes some sense to us that our actions and words in the presence of the beautiful other may reveal what our soul is pregnant with; we engage in intercourse with others because our soul is pregnant. Does this mean too that we might become pregnant as a result of intercourse or conversation?

Diotima tells us of the steps or the ladder that leads from the contemplation of the beautiful body to the beauty of bodies, up through contemplation of the beautiful in ideas, mathematics, laws, to contemplation of the good and the beautiful which are immortal or eternal. I am not interested here in the details of Plato's metaphysics but in emphasising that Plato through Socrates and Diotima has presented Socrates as following a woman, as being educated by a woman, and so has brought women back into the conversation about love. Rather than banishing women and the body, the love of the beautiful body is potentially a beginning, a first step on the ladder of love. The image of the pregnancy of the soul clearly



owes so much to bodily pregnancy. Pregnancy has been given the supreme role in this dialogue: in body and soul, pregnancy pushes us towards eternity, immortality. Furthermore, Plato has provided us with a possible answers to the question 'What is it that you want?' One such answer might be 'To give birth to what is in my soul'. So the talking therapies might be spoken and thought about as places where people might give birth to what their souls are pregnant with, which is a sort of seeing what we have and are, and through these conversations may feel further simulated to gestate and create.

### **Alcibiades**

Socrates' intoxicating and undermining account of love is hardly over when Alcibiades and his entourage make their loud disruptive appearance. Too drunk to stand up and roaring at the top of his voice 'Where is Agathon? Lead me to Agathon' (Plato 2002: 59, Alcibiades is led in supported up by the flute girl and with his entourage. (Is it irrelevant that the woman who was sent out in the creation of a space for conversation, returns with the intoxicated and unruly Alcibiades, as if her presence would have been too intoxicating?) He has to be propped up against the door because he cannot stand. He has come to crown Agathon from the crown of ivy and ribbons on his own head. Although he acknowledges that he is 'excessively drunk already' he wants to drink more and to make others drink. He is so drunk and unable to see what is around him that he does not see Socrates until he sits down between Socrates and Agathon and has crowned Agathon.

Thus he has already been presented as a man who cannot see what is before his own eyes. Socrates claims to be alarmed by Alcibiades' passionate impulses and to need protection from him. Although this might be heard as partly in jest, it might be heard as serious and prophetic, if his relationship with Alcibiades is thought of as playing some role in his being put to death. Alcibiades, we might say, is a kind of tyrant: unruly, excessive, one

who satisfies his desires as they arise and in disregard of the consequences, one whose life is more of a monologue of impulses and desires, rather than a moderating, modulating ongoing conversation with himself and others. Socrates does not quite say, but might, that Alcibiades will be the death of him.

Alcibiades is submerged in and is the embodiment of passionate desires, an embodiment of Dionysus, the god of wine and the drunken orgy. When he is encouraged to make a speech about Eros, he declines and praises Socrates instead. He speaks of how he and many others are moved by Socrates' conversation to feel as if the life they live is wretched, that they really need to change how they live, that they are wasting their lives on what is of little consequence. Socrates makes the heart leap and tears flow when he speaks. Alcibiades admits that he has to stop his ears and flee from Socrates: he has had to get away from Socrates and the conversations Socrates tends to give birth to.

In telling the party of his attempts to seduce Socrates, Alcibiades seems to be telling them of his attempts to capture and possess Socrates. Being the most beautiful young man, one who is desired by both men and women, Alcibiades thought his beauty must have some power over Socrates. What he seems to seek in his desire to seduce Socrates might be said to be Socrates' wisdom, but it does look as if he wants the power that such wisdom would give him. Does it seem as if he wants to possess a more powerful version of himself? It does seem as if he would like to possess Socrates. He tells of arranging for the two of them to be alone together and nothing happening. He challenges Socrates to wrestle naked with him on two occasions, but again Socrates does not try to take things any further. He invites Socrates to supper, so that they can be alone in an intimate space. On the first occasion Socrates ate then left. On the second occasion he persuades Socrates that it is too late for him to go home, so Socrates tried to sleep on the couch. He propositions

Socrates and climbs into bed with him, trying to persuade him that he is willing to offer himself to Socrates in return for being taught the wisdom that Socrates has, but Socrates is mocking of his efforts to seduce him. In the morning, Alcibiades tells us, it was as if he had slept beside his father or elder brother. Alcibiades might be said to have made a mistake by assuming something in line with the cultural practices of his time and place, taking Socrates' interest in him as an indication of Socrates' desire to have a pederastic relationship with him rather than one based on conversation without obvious sexual activity. And perhaps another mistake made by Alcibiades is the idea that where a conversation or a book might lead us to is something that might be conveyed to us more directly in statements, just given to us or injected into us, rather than a complex matter of how we are involved, with whom, when and where and what we can do with and in such intercourse with others, including how the play of the conversation continues in us.

Alcibiades then is someone who cannot or will not follow Socrates in the sense of looking to his own life and how he lives it, his love of celebrity and glory. He is too passionate, impulsive, calculating and destructive. This is my first theme, that of following.

With Alcibiades the body and impulses, the inability to be satisfied or to step back clearly begin to dominate the party. This is my second theme about the body and instincts and appetites.

The immortality Alcibiades seeks is not the philosopher's quest for the eternal and unchanging: it is the quest for fame or notoriety. This is the third theme and one possible answer to what our passionate desire is a desire for. If we can we say that what Alcibiades

desires when he desires Socrates is a more powerful version of himself, and that he desires to possess Socrates, then we can say that this is a version of desire that follows Aristophanes in being a desire to become so powerful that we can challenge the gods.

The *symposium* ends with a number of revellers crashing the party, closing down the space for conversation further and turning it into the sort of party where 'every one was obliged to drink a great quantity of wine' and where people pass out or fall asleep from drinking too much (Plato 2002: 74). When Aristodemus woke up, only Aristophanes, Agathon and Socrates are still awake and still drinking: the comic poet, the tragic poet and the philosopher. This conversation is terminated by Socrates forcing the other two to confess that the same person is able to compose both tragedy and comedy. Socrates is the last man standing as the new day dawns.

Of course Plato has shown us in this dialogue that he can write something that is both tragic and comic that might be envied by comic and tragic poets alike, but might we also read this as a comment about the lives we live being both tragic and comic and the difference between one and the other being small and subtle? I am tempted to say that in the *Symposium*, Socrates and Alcibiades are in the quick: alive, pregnant with possibilities, at large in Athens, drinking, arguing, teasing, flirting. We know though, that they will soon be dead. In the *Symposium* they are between the quick and the dead. I am also tempted to read the remarks about comedy and tragedy as reminding us that life does not come neatly divided into comedy and tragedy: there is just life and we are, in life, in both the tragic and the comic.

### **Conversation and psychotherapy**

In this paper I have used three themes to link my client work with Plato's *Symposium*: first, the theme of following; second, that of trying to relegate and reject the body and the female body in particular, in favour of something higher; and third, a question about our passionate desire, namely, what is it that we desire when we are in the grip of passionate desire? What is our longing a longing for?

The first theme raises the issue of how we follow or fail to follow our clients, as well as how they may or may not follow us into an exploration of some of what they raise with us. Perhaps for therapists there will always be questions about how well we follow and lead our clients so that they might follow us, and the direction the conversation between us takes. With the client discussed above, we might wonder whether I failed to follow him because I was in front of him; for it might have seemed to me that the changes in him were likely to lead to or be a part of an increase in his distress, sadness and sense of isolation, but I might have been talking to him about this before he began to feel this increase in his sense of desperation. The second theme, that of the devaluing of the body, the female body and desire for women is related to this client's desire to reject and relegate his mother's love as **just** an animal instinctive love, inferior to another kind of love, a kind of love that the giver can decide to give or withhold.

I have argued that the *Symposium* provides us with at least two powerful and evocative possible responses to this question about what we want. My client echoes Aristophanes' speech which tells us that we want to be reunited with our other half, to be restored to the wholeness that we once were. This though is a returning to what is familiar, a return to the same as me, to what belongs to me, a matter of making myself bigger and more powerful, and a matter of possessing the other person, seen as, or made into my other half. I have

suggested that Alcibiades' desire may also be read in this way: as a desire to make himself bigger and more powerful through possessing or incorporating Socrates' wisdom.

For some, this argument against the Aristophanic picture may evoke Emmanuel Levinas' comments to the effect that 'Man's relationship with the other is better as difference than as unity: sociality is better than fusion. The very value of love is the impossibility of reducing the other to myself, of coinciding into sameness. From an ethical perspective, two have a better time than one' (Levinas in Kearney 1984: 58). For the Aristophanic picture reduces the other to the other half of me; by taking him in, I make of myself something larger and more powerful. For some, what Aristophanes has to say may lead them to Nietzsche's argument that what we often mean when we say we know is that we have reduced something strange and unfamiliar to what is familiar -our 'will to uncover under everything strange, unusual and questionable, something that no longer disturbs us' (Nietzsche 1887/1974; Gay Science section 355). The conversation may be a way of keeping alive what is strange, unusual, questionable and disturbing, a way of not searching for sameness, unity and perfect fit.

In contrast, Diotima's discourse does not tell us that we desire to be welded to our other half. In emphasising creativity and climbing up the ladder of love towards the beautiful and eternal she indicates sustained effort and the notion of a liberation earned, a moving towards open seas, a process of coming to find and gaze at what is beautiful, fascinating and to be wondered at in the world. We might consider the difference between a friend, lover, spouse or therapist on the Aristophanic model in contrast to one on the model sketched by Diotima, and we may say that psychoanalysis consists of both the Aristophanic model and the direction indicated by Diotima's discourse with Socrates. Perhaps we might say that Winnicott (1965; 1971) and those who follow him, having emphasised

how the object or person or mother is able to do so much for the child in helping her to discover, enjoy and be creative with the world, are followers of Diotima; the mother is regarded as a 'new developmental object' able to offer a relationship that opens up a person to herself and to the world (Sternberg 2006: 46; Bollas 1987). To some extent, we might think that we see a parallel between the idea of the therapist as a transference object (experienced as the same as someone else, an other who is the same as, or somehow taken as involved in projective engagement) and, on the other hand, as a new object (as someone who strange and curious is threatening to open up a new perspective on what it is to be and to relate). We might think of psychotherapy as a space that has both Aristophanic and Socratic tendencies and possibilities, in which a tendency to seek sameness, what is familiar, to experience the other person as the same as us or someone we think we know, is at work alongside a more Socratic possibility to be more open to, curious about and able to wonder at the life we live and the world we live in.

This paper has discussed the details of Plato's dialogue, but perhaps it might be said that what the work shows is that these details may not be as important as the fact of people coming together to eat, drink and speak to each other. To be without community and conversation, or to have only an emaciated version of this, as my client above did, is a great deprivation. For it is often in speaking to others in these sorts of situations -over food and drink, working or travelling together, in forms of talking therapies- that we get some sense of others being similar to us, and very different from us; this helps us to open up that which might have previously felt safely or suffocatingly sealed. We cannot underestimate the human value of being with others, although its risk and potential torture is also very real, even if we do not equate hell with other people. I have already suggested above that we might follow Diotima in thinking of therapy as a place for pregnant souls to become aware of what they are pregnant with and to give birth to this in conversation. We often come to

know more about what is in our soul when we hear ourselves speak. A part of my client's story, of his despair and longing, is his being isolated, living on his own, without friendship, community and conversation. His isolation can be taken as intimately linked to his relationship with his mother, his uncertainty of her love, and we may add to this the difficulties indicated by his comments about his attempts and lack of success with 'girls'. It may not be clear what he is desiring or demanding, but he seems to believe that he might have been given a higher love, superior to ordinary maternal, bodily and instinctual love. We might be tempted to say something similar to what Hannah Arendt said in a slightly different context: to try to relegate or reject maternal animal love as something that is inferior to some other kind of love is to underestimate its power and importance, and perhaps it is part of our attempt to escape from our awareness of our human condition of being dependent on maternal love and mother's body, an attempt to discredit and devalue what is crucial to us and to favour something that we have dreamt up ourselves (Arendt 1958: 2-3).

I worry though that this leaves out an account of the society we are, as we fall in with a neat causal and nearly ineluctable story (not unknown to Romantics and Jesuits) about the child being parent to the adult, without any reference to our society and how we seem to undervalue community and like Alcibiades overvalue something called "success" and "achievement", as we think in terms of 'individuals' and "individual achievement". Perhaps we also overvalue "knowing" in psychotherapy, rather than that struggle to climb to a place where we might see a little more clearly, although it is not a final resting place, as there can be no such place. The referrer spoke of my knowing that this 'suicidal' young man was going to make some sort of suicidal gesture. I would say with Diotima that it was neither the case that I 'knew' nor that I had no idea at all. I suspected, I feared. I was between 'knowing' and having no thought about it at all. I was trying to get to somewhere from which I might see a little more clearly.



Plato's work, this drinking party, may perhaps be taken as an illustration that a space can be made for conversation and that this involves some sort of regulation of our bodies, our instincts, urges and greed. In this sort of space, under the shadows of our cultural assumptions and practices, something interesting and important might be said and thought about. Sometimes such spaces are made in psychotherapy, but clearly such spaces can arise outside of formal psychotherapy. However, such spaces are always in danger of being reclaim, invaded by the impulses and chaos we have temporarily quietened or tried to banished, diminished by the cultural assumptions and practices that seem obvious or indispensable to us. Even if psychoanalysis might be said to teach us that the barbarians are already inside the gate, in that we are already the barbarians we claim to fear and our individual destructiveness in the form of our urges, greed, jealousy, envy and the like are the usual suspect when it comes to what is likely to shrink the spaces for conversation, community, being together and speaking freely, our experience is that such spaces are also in danger from those who, in the name of the "protection" of society, "civilised values," "ethical codes" and "systems" take it as their duty to control conversations, interrogate interactions, audit intercourse or communion, so that the possibility of free association between people and the speaking freely continues to diminish. How many practicing therapist today would see one of the characters from the *Symposium*, or hear about a drinking party at which similar issues were discussed without wondering whether there was something to 'report' to some authority in the name of being responsible?

## References

Arendt H, 1958, The Human Condition, London, University of Chicago Press

Bollas C, 1987, The Shadow of the object. Psychoanalysis of the unthought known, Free Association Books, London

Coren A, 2001, Short-Term Psychotherapy: A Psychodynamic Approach, Hampshire, Palgrave Macmillan

Cushman R E, Therapeia. Plato's Conception of Philsosophy, London, Transaction Publishers

Freud S, 1905, Three essays on the theory of sexuality, London , Penguin Books

Harrison R and Nightingale A, 2009, Entitled Opinon: Plato, Stanford, radio broadcast, November 25, 2009

Heaton J M,1994, How can we discuss the erotic? Plato and Freud compared, in Robin Cooper et al edited, Thresholds between philosophy and psychoanalysis. London, Free Association Books

Kearney R, 1984, Dialogues with contemporary continental thinkers, Manchester, Manchester University Press

Laplanche, J and Pontalis JB, 2004, The Language of Psychoanalysis, London, Karnac Books

Nietzsche F, 1887/1974, The Gay Science, New York, Vintage Books

Plato 1987, The Symposium, Translated by Walter Hamilton. Middlesex, Penguin Books

Plato, 2002, The Symposium of Plato, Translated by PB Shelly. Indiana, St Augustine's Press

Sternberg J, 2006, 'Not simply "doing"', in Monica Lanyado and Ann Horne edited A Question of Technique, Routledge, London

Winnicott D W,1965, The Maturational Process and the Facilitatng Environment, karmic Books, London

Winnicott D W, 1971, Playing and Reality, Routledge, London