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CLAREMONT MCKENNA COLLEGE

What's Love Got to Do with It? An Exploration of the *Symposium* and Plato's Love

SUBMITTED TO

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BY

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For

SENIOR THESIS

FALL 2013
DECEMBER 2, 2013

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Acknowledgements

It is an onerous task, deciding who to thank. One must first decide how much help is worth acknowledging. The polite answer – and perhaps the *right* answer – would be to thank everyone for even the slightest bit of help received.

But alas, if that were the case the list would be never-ending. I would need to thank strangers for the look I received in passing that lifted my spirits. I would need to thank Mr. Ryal for providing me with a computer lab to use. I would need to thank numerous people in the limited space I have here.

Thank you to Shea and Pascal Pinson, my loving and beloved parents, for showing me what it is to love. Throughout this process you both have been an incredible source of love and support. Let this small acknowledgement be an everlasting token of my undying appreciation for you and everything that you do and have done for me. I love you both.

Thank you to my extraordinary friends for keeping me sane. Thanks to you all, I have tasted the unique and beautiful form of love that is friendship, and I am ever-grateful for that.

Thank you to Daniel Shane, whose thesis (unbeknownst to him) served as a formatting model for mine. And thank you for your wise words of encouragement, as always they meant more to me than you know.

Thank you to Megan Latta, for revealing to me what it is that a thesis is supposed to be.

Thank you to Professor Obdrzalek for agreeing to read my thesis and sticking with me through the difficult stretches that are inevitable in this process.

And finally, a blanket thank you to any and all who went unnamed that helped me in any capacity. Know that your efforts did not go unnoticed, and that I appreciated every bit of assistance. I trust those reading this to know who you are – thank you so very much.

Abstract

To many people love is special, sacred even. Love plays a countless number of roles for a countless number of people. Contemporary ideas about love, however, are more in alignment with the philosophies of Aristotle, and not of Plato. Aristotle held that love could exist as many people see it today – wishing well for others purely for their own sake. But Plato disagreed. Plato claimed that love was a way by which one could better themselves and become wiser. In this thesis, I explain Plato’s theory of love put forth in the *Symposium*. I also explore the textual evidence for the selfish nature of Plato’s love.

Introduction

Gregory Vlastos, in an *objection* to Plato's theory of love, offered the following praise for Socrates' disciple: "Plato is the first Western man to realize how intense and passionate may be our attachment to objects as abstract as social reform, poetry, art, the sciences, and philosophy – an attachment that has more in common with erotic fixation that one would have suspected on a pre-Freudian view of man." (Vlastos 1981, 27) There are a couple of things about Vlastos' comment worth noting: For one, only a special breed of respect impels objectors to credit their opponents with such insight – precisely the type of respect that Plato commands. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, Vlastos hints at both the notion of attachment and eroticism that are central to Plato's theory of Love.

Before going further, it is essential to recognize that Love is an extraordinarily expansive term. In the English language, Love can be taken in a romantic context or in a familial or friendly context; it can be taken to be erotic or devoid of sexuality; it can be in reference to hatred (i.e. "loving to hate" something); ultimately it can be described as a strong sense of affection or admiration for something, erotic or not (although Plato's use of the term is saturated with eroticism). Love's expansiveness in English, however, pales in comparison to its Greek predecessor Eros. Eros, best defined as an erotic longing for sexual attraction and gratification, is an even more comprehensive term than Love, which would partly explain the wide spectrum across which Plato's Love operates. As broad a

term as Love is in English, Eros occupied an even larger linguistic space in Greek. As such, in spite of the breadth of Love's applicability, there is something lost in translation from Eros to Love. In spite of its slight inaccuracies, Love is simply the translation best suited to do justice to Eros. As Vlastos says, "'Love' is the only English word that is robust and versatile enough to cover [eros]." (Vlastos 1981, 4)

For this paper's purpose, it is Love – and Plato's take on it – that is concerned. Of the many dialogues for which he is responsible, *The Symposium* is devoted chiefly to Love. Depicting a party, of sorts, at which numerous historical figures are placed, love – both the God and the idea (eros) – is discussed at length and from numerous perspectives. Each present member puts forth a story about love intended to convey to the others his particular argument for its purpose and its importance. *The Symposium* will be the focus of this paper in evaluating Plato's arguments regarding love.

It is right, at this moment, to draw attention to what John M. Cooper notes in the introduction to *Plato: Complete Works*: "it is in the writing as a whole that the author speaks, not in the words of any single speaker..." (Cooper 1997, xx) What Cooper intends to convey to his reader, and what I hope my reader will note as well, is that Plato's ultimate message is contained not in one character's words but in the entirety of the dialogue. Effectively, Plato trusts the reader to decipher what it is that he means.

What has been noted by academia, and by Patrick Miller of The University of North Carolina in particular, is that Plato's *Symposium* is devoid of the traditional argumentative interaction between characters that is fundamental in many of his other dialogues. (Miller 2000) Instead, Miller argues, *The Symposium* is what he calls a

“synthetic” argument: one which can be gleaned from drawing fragments of information from several sources and synthesizing them into a final, comprehensive position. (Miller 2000)

In what follows, I will argue for the claim that Plato’s Love is a selfish brand of Love; a spirit infused not with the benevolence and other-caring essence of contemporary Love, but rather a force rooted in self-actualization that propels personal ambition.

A caveat, however, before I continue: selfish in colloquial terms tends to take on a negative connotation, a sense that the act at hand is done not only without concern for others but with the knowledge that such an act would deprive others of a certain type of pleasure or disrupt their well-being. That is *not* the sense in which I mean to use the word selfish. I wish only to draw on the literal meaning of the word and to expel the negative connotation that often accompanies it. Each time I use the word *selfish* going forward, it should be taken only to mean *done exclusively out of self-interest*, but *not* simultaneously to detract from anyone else’s well-being.

This thesis will be structured using two sections. Section One will present Plato’s argument for love and its purpose. Section Two will use the understanding developed in Section One to explain my analysis of Plato’s theory of love as selfish.

Plato’s version of Love may strike many as incompatible with the form of Love most popular in today’s society. Aristotle’s idea of Love – that to love a person we must wish for that person’s good for that person’s sake, not for ours – may fit much more nicely within the framework of the contemporary idea of Love. (Vlastos 1981, 6) But exploring ideas that challenge the status quo and force to mind thoughts about important

themes is usually a productive exercise, and one that can further inform opinions regarding the most important questions in life. Because often the most important questions – for instance, what is love? – refuse to be answered, and developing an informed opinion is the only adequate alternative.

Section One

Before it is possible to recognize Plato's theory of love as selfish, it is necessary to develop a comprehensive understanding of the argument that he makes in the *Symposium*. As was addressed in the introduction, Plato's use of dialogue is unique in that his message is woven within the voices of numerous characters and not exclusively a primary protagonist. Accordingly, the reader is often charged with the responsibility of identifying relevant themes and collecting them such that a coherent claim may be made.

To begin, I will outline Plato's theory of love in its entirety. In doing so, I will highlight the relevance of important aspects in each solitary character's speeches. Such an exercise is fruitful because each character in the *Symposium* describes a part of love that Plato holds as important; the problem is that the individual speeches do not do justice to Plato's theory as a whole. Each of the characters claim that their particular praise of Love is right, but Plato intends for his theory to be more robust than what the individuals offer. As Patrick Miller of the University of North Carolina argues, "[e]ach [character] commits the mereological fallacy...each has described a part quite accurately, but erred insofar as he took that description to apply to Love as a whole." (Miller 2000, 12) Only in aggregate do the ideas about love in the individual characters' speeches combine to produce the complete Platonic theory on love.

Socrates' speech – although it might rightly be said to be Diotima's – will be paid more attention to because his is a synthesis of those who came before. (Miller 2000, 16)

Miller writes that Socrates is in a position to expound upon the theories of those who came before him because he is ultimately the one who recognizes both the limitations of his colleagues' accounts as well as how their accounts mesh together. (Miller 2000, 12) What follows is my interpretation of Plato's account regarding Love.

To Plato, love is a force compelling lovers – guiding them, even – to seek something. Guidance is one of the overarching themes apparent in the dialogue, and several speakers in the *Symposium* make clear the guiding nature of Love: “[We will find wholeness] if Love is our guide and our commander,” says Aristophanes; (Plato 1997, 476) “There is a certain guidance each person needs for his whole life,” says Phaedrus, “if he is to live well; and nothing imparts this guidance...as well as Love;” (Plato 1997, 463) “Medicine, therefore, is guided everywhere by the god of Love,” says even Eryximachus, who plays a minor role in the *Symposium*. (Plato 1997, 470) The prevalence of Love acting as a guiding force would suggest that it guides towards goodness – or at least something worth being guided towards.

But Love, oddly, is understood to be neither good nor bad; neither beautiful nor ugly. Pausanias introduces this idea when he relates his view to the others in attendance that he believes nothing to be inherently good or bad but instead dependent on the resulting behavior. “Considered in itself,” he says, “no action is either good or bad, honorable or shameful...and my point is that exactly this principle applies to being in love.” (Plato 1997, 465) This teleological take on Love seems odd, because the dialogue is centered on praising Love. Praise is usually reserved for that which people deem to be praise-worthy, an implication that the topic is good. Diotima, however, corroborates

Pausanius' insight. She, too, claims that Love is an intermediary and not definitively one thing or another. She insists that just as Love is neither good nor bad, neither, even, is it a proper god or definitively mortal. "He's a great spirit, Socrates," claims Diotima, "everything spiritual, you see, is in between god and mortal." (Plato 1997, 485) Love is the bonding element that links the two definitive sides between which it exists, which becomes evident as Socrates relays Diotima's wisdom regarding spirits: "Being in the middle of [gods and men], they round out the whole and bind fast the all to all." (Plato 1997, 486) Love operates in a bizarre gray area that is the reason for, in large part, its power and its energy. Ultimately, Plato's love is a catalyst, of sorts.

Given its binding nature, however, Love has an attractive quality – it draws lovers to whatever it is that they seek. But what is it that lovers seek? At the beginning of his speech, Socrates asks Agathon, "[i]s Love the love of nothing or of something?" (Plato 1997, 482) The query is intended to establish something about the nature of Love, to establish whether or not there is something to be sought after for which Love would be useful. Soon thereafter, the two agree that love is, in fact, the love of something – that there exists an object of love.¹ Interestingly, Plato suggests that the object of love changes as one gets more acquainted with it. The object of love is not constant until one has identified – and subsequently taken part in – the ultimate goal: Beauty itself. The ultimate goal of Platonic Love is to encourage individuals to seek the Form of Beauty, but such an end is one that requires careful refinement and keen awareness – two

¹ Gregory Vlastos provides what is often referenced as the most coherent objection to Plato's theory of love in the form of an essay titled *The Individual as an Object of Love in Plato*. His essay will be looked to numerous times in this thesis, both to provide guidance and to provide interpretation with which to disagree.

qualities that, frankly, not everyone possesses.² As such, realizing the pinnacle of Platonic Love is a process, and one that occurs in stages. Only extraordinary individuals – individuals consumed with curiosity and desirous of wisdom – will take part in the highest form of Platonic Love. Others will be incapable of ascending to the next stage and will instead remain arrested at a subordinate stage of love – one whose object is inferior to that of Beauty itself.

But what of the objects of Love? An accurate synopsis of their evolution is given by Luce Irigaray and Eleanor H. Kuykendall: “From the attraction to a single beautiful body (the lover) passes, then, to many; and thence to the beauty residing in souls. Thus he learns that beauty is not found univocally in the body and that someone of an ugly bodily appearance can be beautiful and gentle of soul; that to be just is to know how to care for that person and to engender beautiful discourses for him. Love thus passes insensibly into love of works [oeuvres]. The passion for beautiful bodies is transmuted into the discovery of beauty in knowledge.” (Irigaray and Kuykendall 1989)

As Irigaray and Kuykendall note, the first object of love, the object of young, unrefined love according to Plato, is a beautiful body. It is by recognizing that beauty exists in a body that one is to appreciate many bodies – beautiful bodies in general. Going from one to many is the first step in generalizing Love. It is important to note that in this

² It is interesting to note that Plato’s take on love is – at least partially – elitist. Pausanius, who captures nicely, if crudely, the hierarchical aspect of the author’s perspective on love, says “it is the common, vulgar lover, who loves the body rather than the soul, the man whose love is bound to be inconstant, since what he loves is itself mutable and unstable...How different from this is a man who loves the right sort of character, and who remains its lover for life...” (*Symposium*, p. 468, 183e) Merely by acknowledging the existence of those who are sick with “vulgar love” implies that not everyone achieves the end towards which Love strives. The value judgment placed on “vulgar love” is aggressively negative, and one that permeates the *Symposium* in almost every member’s speech. As such, it appears that Plato willingly excludes some people from experiencing the pinnacle of what his love has to offer.

pre-mature stage of Love, what is to be appreciated is the physical beauty. Plato's Love allows for, indeed it requires, a submission to the instinct most people have of attraction to a certain physique – the caveat is that such an impulse, by Plato's standards, is eventually to be superseded by a less tangible, more permanent Love of the soul. Ultimately, Love's aim is to inspire those within whom it operates to pursue the purest and most general iteration of beauty – the Form of Beauty. In order to do so lovers must begin with the basics.

According to Plato, however, bodily, aesthetic beauty is an immature and subordinate level of Love at which to remain. It is a necessary stepping stone from which one can move to yet a higher object of Love, but those who remain infatuated with bodily beauty are just that – infatuated – and have not realized the essence of Love and its purpose.

Consider how Pausanius describes Love, as a whole composed of two parts: “common,” and “heavenly” love. (Plato 1997, 465) The point at which Love's object is beautiful bodies, at which a person is attracted to physical beauty and nothing more, is categorized by Pausanius as “common” Love. (Plato 1997, 465) Of common Love Pausanius says, “[t]his, of course, is the love felt by the vulgar, who are attached to women no less than to boys, to the body more than to the soul, and to the least intelligent partners, since all they care about is completing the sexual act.” (Plato 1997, 465-466) Critiquing tone is difficult when dealing with translations, but the use of the word “vulgar” and the phrase “all they care about is completing the sexual act” give the sense that a Love whose object is physical beauty is an inferior and incomplete brand of Love.

From “vulgar” it seems as though those who appreciate *only* bodily beauty are disgusting or vile, and that merely “completing the sexual act” is a profound misappropriation of Love’s purpose. “These vulgar lovers,” says Pausanius, “are the people who have given love such a bad reputation...” (Plato 1997, 466) Pausanius goes almost so far as to suggest that “vulgar” Love acts more as a disease that *infects* persons rather than guides them towards true Beauty.³

Heavenly love, by contrast, is “considerably older and therefore free of the lewdness of youth,” and is intended to represent the love that manifests itself in an attraction to what is “stronger and more intelligent.” (Plato 1997, 466)⁴ “How different from [“common” Love],” says Pausanius, “who loves the right sort of character, and who remains its lover for life...” (Plato 1997, 468) He also lauds Love’s capacity to facilitate the acquisition and development of virtue:

“It follows, therefore, that giving in to your lover for virtue’s sake is honorable, whatever the outcome. And this, of course, is the Heavenly Love of the heavenly goddess. Love’s value to the city as a whole and to the citizens is immeasurable, for he compels the lover and loved one alike to make virtue their

³ Here Pausanius’ claim that “considered in itself, no action is either good or bad, honorable or shameful...and my point is that exactly this principle applies to being in love,” (Plato 1997, 465) becomes more meaningful. Far from being inherently good, misappropriated Love can beget vulgarity and an attitude that is worthy of scorn. Love has both the potential to guide lovers in the direction of greatness or to ground lovers in an obsession with pedestrian physical beauty.

⁴ This is the first explicit mention of the superiority of homosexual relationships to heterosexual ones. As Plato’s theory is expounded upon it becomes clearer why exclusively male relationships are regarded as better than relationships between males and females, but Luce Irigaray provides a clear explanation of the phenomenon that will be of use going forward. “Love becomes... wisdom...the more its objective is distanced from an individual becoming, the more valuable it is...this, moreover, is how it comes to pass that *love between men is superior to love between man and woman*. Carnal procreation is suspended in favor of the engendering of beautiful and good things. Immortal things.” In more explicit and clearer terms than Pausanius, Irigaray sheds light on the fact that because the physical beauty of bodies is regarded as less important and intellectual prowess is regarded as more important, men are to seek other men because they are to seek wisdom, and men are the wisest beings – barring gods – in existence. (Irigaray and Kuykendall 1989)

central concern. All other forms of love belong to the vulgar goddess.” (Plato 1997, 469)

Here Pausanias makes it clear that begetting virtue is, in his mind, Love’s highest purpose. Only when Love “compels the lover and loved one alike to make virtue their central concern” is Love being properly applied; anything else is an instance of vulgarity. Thus it come to be that virtue, in some form, is Love’s next object. It becomes clear that the transition must be made from appreciating physical beauty to recognizing that there is more to Love.

For the extrapolation of Love’s next object, virtue, we must now turn to the speeches of Agathon and Socrates. The first mention of the ethereal nature of Love’s higher objects comes in Agathon’s speech: “[Love] makes his home in the characters, in the souls, of Gods and men...” (Plato 1997, 478) Here Agathon makes it clear that Love is linked to the souls of humans. Previously, it was made known that there exists a Love hierarchy, a “scala amoris” as Vlastos calls it, but with his speech Agathon cements Love’s soulful character. (Vlastos 1981) Given the importance that Plato places on the soul – and perhaps most importantly the *immortality* that he awards the soul – placing Love in the soul’s capable hands is a definitive sign that Love’s higher aims are of great importance. (Prince 2011)

But Agathon notes that soulful Love (Love whose object is something more permanent than the body) is not immediately available to everyone. He says that “when

[Love] encounters a soul with a harsh character, he turns it away,” meaning that Love discriminates against those who are not fit for Love. (Plato 1997, 478)⁵

At this point, it is right to look to Socrates for more color. His recollection of his dialogue with Diotima will shed light on the ultimate (highest) object of Love. The two banter for a bit before coming to the understanding that when a lover of good things comes to possess the things she desires, it follows that she is happy. “The main point is this,” says Diotima, “every desire for good things or for happiness is the ‘supreme and treacherous love’ in everyone...That’s because what everyone loves is really nothing other than the good.” (Plato 1997, 488-489) At long last the highest object of Love is made clear:

“In a word, then, Love is wanting to possess the good forever...This, then, is the object of Love.” (Plato 1997, 489)

This final stage in the *scala amoris* is a synergy of two understandings. For one, it is the understanding that what people truly desire is the good. Everything that people desire is a manifestation of the good. Secondly, those who desire the good desire to possess it for as long as possible – they desire to have it forever.

The question thus becomes how does one go about acquiring the good forever?

Diotima replies with an admittedly bizarre answer. By “giving birth in beauty,” responds

⁵ Again, this is an instance of Plato’s Love being elitist. It is clear that Plato makes room in his theory for certain people to remain arrested at a subordinate level of Love, and he also appears here to allow for people to possess a pre-disposition that renders them incapable of loving. Perhaps the two are akin to one another, or multiple forms of the same idea. Regardless, it is plain that Plato’s Love is discriminatory: there are people for whom Love is impossible. It is also implied that those who remain stuck on lower “levels” of Love are subordinate to those who partake in higher ones. As such, it follows that those who do not Love at all are the worst off.

Diotima. (Plato 1997, 489) Behind the odd, cryptic answer lays a simpler, more easily understood notion. How does one achieve the good forever? By producing beauty such that one is immortalized for it. “Giving birth” or “begetting” is Plato’s word for reproduction. Love is the force by which individuals are compelled to behave in ways that produce immortality.

Is not, however, immortality impossible? Surely Plato has wisdom enough to know as much. Immortality, though, is in alignment with the rest of his theory. Just as bodily beauty is a subordinate form of beauty in Plato’s eyes, so it is with bodily immortality. Plato’s immortality is meant in the sense that one’s legacy is made such that it is not forgotten.

Given that individuals desire the good, and that beauty is good, “giving birth in beauty” – doing beautiful things that ensure one’s legacy is remembered – is the key to being in Love. Procreation in the literal sense is one instance of immortality. One’s essence is preserved and passed along, together with a partner’s, in the form of a child. But again, the intangible elements of humanity are always, for Plato, superior to the tangible, aesthetic ones. Diotima reveals to Socrates, “[e]veryone would rather have such children than human ones, and would look up to Homer, Hesiod, and the other good poets with envy and admiration for the offspring they have left behind – offspring, which, because they are immortal themselves, provide their parents with immortal glory and remembrance.” (Plato 1997, 492)

Ultimately, Love for Plato is a means by which to become wiser, to become more virtuous – to become more Form-like. That the pursuit of betterment is riddled with

impediments, Plato grants, but he maintains that anything less than recognition of – and subsequent birth *in* – true beauty is falling short of Love's potential.

Section Two

L.A. Kosman, in his essay titled *Platonic Love*, mentions that one of the primary objections to Plato's theory of Love is that it is too selfish and egoistical to account for the love that is clearly present between people. (Kosman 1976, 54) "Love on Plato's theory," Kosman says, "is basically egoistical and selfish. A person cannot, according to Plato, love or desire another for the sake of that other, i.e. for the other's good, but only for his own sake, that is, for whatever good that other might provide him." (Kosman 1976, 54)⁶ In what ways, though, is Plato's Love selfish?

There are two fundamental pillars involved in the selfishness of Plato's account of Love, with the second being related to the first. The first pillar pertains to the deficiencies in human beings. People are want for things that they see in others, or at the very least that they see as external to themselves and therefore not their own. As such, people aim willfully to acquire the object of their desires for themselves. The second pillar, linked closely to the first, is that of usefulness. Plato holds that those who love others do so because those whom they love are of some use to them – of use in acquiring the very things that they simultaneously seek and lack.

A bit uttered by Socrates in the *Lysis* is often cited as evidence supporting the first of the two pillars. Gregory Vlastos indicates as much when he remarks, "[t]he egoistic

⁶ Note that Kosman's description of Plato's Love rightly exempts it from the negative connotation that often accompanies the word selfish. Selfish means only *done for one's own sake, for whatever good that other might provide him or her*, and nothing more.

perspective of ‘love’ so conceived becomes unmistakable when Socrates, generalizing, argues that ‘if one were in want of nothing, one would feel no affection...and he who felt no affection would not love.’” (Vlastos 1981, 8) Socrates’ phrase in the *Lysis* is an excellent place to begin the exploration of Plato and his selfish Love because of the similarities it shares with something that Socrates says in another dialogue. Socrates’ insight in the *Lysis* mirrors closely what he says in the *Symposium* regarding the same topic. “A thing that desires,” begins Socrates, “desires something of which it is in need; otherwise, if it were not in need, it would not desire it.” (Plato, *Symposium* 1997) It is the latter part of what he says in the *Symposium* that is here relevant. What Socrates says in the *Lysis* and what he says in the *Symposium* suggest that “want” or “need” – both of which could perhaps be founded in lack, which leads subsequently to need or want – is a necessary pre-requisite for “affection” and “desire.”⁷ Clearly Socrates goes one step further in the *Lysis*, suggesting that affection, on top of want, is a necessary pre-requisite for Love, but the parallel structure and mere semantic differences between the texts allows for an extrapolation: love is the force that helps remedy a weakness – a deficiency – in lovers.

That the weakness is mortality does not fracture his theory, nor does it make Love any less selfish. It may be audacious of Plato to consider one of the only veritable certainties of life a weakness, but his theory does not suffer for it. The significance of a deficit creating the void for which Love is useful in filling is that Love thus becomes a means to an end – a selfish end. Love’s purpose is not to help improve the lot of those

⁷ Martha Nussbaum mentions in her paper titled *The Speech of Alcibiades: a reading of the Symposium*, that in Aristophanes’ speech what compels individuals to pursue erotic satisfaction is “an unnatural, contingent lack...” (Nussbaum 1986)

around the lover. Love's purpose is to help the lover herself secure an existence beyond one that the body is capable of.

What makes the aforementioned dynamic definitively selfish, however, is the fact that Love helps remedy the weakness *within the wanting lover*. Lovers, recognizing deficiencies in their partners, have no compulsion to better their counterparts. That is not to say that relations rooted in a selfish desire to acquire for oneself something deemed to be good cannot result in mutually beneficial relationships, it is only to say that by Plato's standards, Love acts as the catalyst for individual enlightenment only, with counterparty benefits being a mere coincidence.

Consider evidence for the second pillar in the selfish analysis of Plato's Love, again found in the *Lysis*. "Well, then," questions Socrates, "are we going to be anyone's friend, or is anyone going to love us as a friend in those areas in which we are good for nothing?" (Plato, *Lysis* 1997, 694) Socrates here is in the process of making clear to *Lysis* that in order to be loved, one must provide some sort of benefit to other. Socrates takes on a business-like tone – he is almost corporate in his approach: if someone is not productive, they are not worth keeping around.

"But if you become wise, my boy, then everybody will be your friend, everyone will feel close to you, because you will be useful and good. If you don't become wise, though, nobody will be your friend, not even your father or mother or your close relatives." (Plato, *Lysis* 1997, 694)

Usefulness, then, according to Socrates, becomes wisdom. Fitting, this is, given his account of Diotima's Love story in the *Symposium*. Love is only present when someone is useful; usefulness is the potential for the acquisition of wisdom; Love is only present

when there is potential to become wise. This is in wonderful alignment with Plato's ultimate goal for Love: giving birth in beauty and wisdom. In order to "give birth in beauty," one must acquire wisdom. The acquisition of beauty is best done by loving someone wise. As such, Love facilitates becoming wiser, with the ultimate goal being creating beautiful, good things and leaving a legacy that outpaces death – a legacy that ensures immortality.⁸

At this point we will consider more subtle evidence corroborating the claim that Plato's Love is selfish. It is telling, for example, that Plato maintains even the Gods are not exempt from the selfishness of Love. In Aristophanes' account of Love in the *Symposium*, the Gods use Love to their advantage. After having mounted an offensive against the Gods, humans had to be punished. Human worship (an iteration of human Love) and the sacrifices humans make (a result of human Love), however, provided the Gods with energy and power, and eliminating these sources of energy would be detrimental to the Gods' existence. Humans thus provided the Gods with something that they could not do without. "They couldn't wipe out the human race...as they had the giants," recalls Aristophanes, "because that would wipe out the worship they receive,

⁸ It is worth noting here that in light of its telos, Plato's theory of love may take on a meta-selfish quality. One cannot help but notice that the highest aim of Plato's love is to achieve a level of immortality by virtue of wisdom and/or knowledge – both of which Plato has, by all accounts, mastered. This is not to say (at least not definitively) that Plato was self-serving in his theory of love, but it is well known that Plato was not considered to be a very aesthetically attractive man. Plato's Love would hold, however, that he – even in physical ugliness – might be beautiful. As such, a theory of love that holds virtue, wisdom, and knowledge – all of which Plato was extremely well-versed in – above physical beauty can be seen to be selfish. Notice that he does not *discount* physical beauty, for surely he recognized that physical beauty can rightly be appreciated, but he maintains that it is a lower realization of love. Plato extols an arena in which he excels over one in which he does not, which is to say that if he believes in his own theory and desires that others do as well, he himself would be one of the most attractive lovers one could desire to have. Putting forth a theory of love in which the creator falls into place conveniently as incredibly attractive may be called selfish in the sense that, were his theory to be believed and acted upon, his theory might facilitate encounters that promoted Plato's self-interests.

along with the sacrifices we humans give them.” (Plato, Symposium 1997, 473) Here it becomes evident that even the Gods, as a third party, use Love to their advantage. Humans are split in two and Love is injected into humans so as to keep them from mounting a rebellion against the Gods and to ensure the continuation of human worship and sacrifice that so empowers them. This selfish employment of Love is but Plato making clearer the theme of selfishness that characterizes his Love: even the purest of beings, those well-acquainted with the Beauty towards which humans strive – those who have achieved the highest goal of Love – use Love to their advantage. If even the Gods – devoid of anything that is not good – are selfish with Love, then surely humans would be far from reprimanded for doing the same.

There is also a dynamic that exists between humans and Gods that resembles the relationship between lovers, as described by Pausanias. Humans have always been subordinates, but Eryximachus says with regards to the relationship between men and Gods that, in that realm too, “love is the central concern.” (Plato, Symposium 1997, 472) According to Eryximachus, “divination...is the practice that produces loving affection between gods and men...” (Plato, Symposium 1997, 472)

But if the Gods *punished* humans, what loving dynamic could exist between the two? Precisely the loving dynamic that Plato approves of and precisely the dynamic that finds itself depicted in Pausanias’ speech. Humans, relegated to the role of subordinate, look to the Gods for betterment – to find virtue and live virtuous lives. The Gods, on the other hand, provide humans with assistance under the condition that humans continue to honor them in the form of sacrifices and piety.

Notice that this is exactly the type of Love that Pausanias lauded only two speeches before Eryximachus'. Humans play the role of the young lover who subjects himself to the will of the Gods because they think it will "make [them] better in wisdom or in any other part of virtue..." (Plato, Symposium 1997, 468) And the Gods play the role of the older lover who "realizes he is justified in doing anything for a loved one who grants him favors..." (Plato, Symposium 1997, 468) Pausanias holds that only when both conditions are satisfied is love acceptable. "Then, and only then," says Pausanias, "when these two principles coincide absolutely, is it ever honorable for a young man to accept a lover." (Plato, Symposium 1997, 469)

Of Plato, Professor Gregory Vlastos says that "a proper study of [Plato's theory] would have to take account of at least three things about its creator: He was a homosexual, a mystic, and a moralist." (Vlastos 1981, 24-25) Given that Plato was a mystic who believed strongly in the cosmos, it is only fitting that he would characterize the relationship that humans have with the Gods – one of the ancient Greek's most important relationships – as a loving one.

To conclude, there is yet another instance of selfishness in Love that Plato mentions subtly, but importantly. Speaking of Achilles, Plato writes, "they sent him to the Isles of the Blest because he dared to stand by his lover Patroclus and avenge him, even after he had learned from his mother that he would die if he killed Hector, but that if he chose otherwise he'd go home and end his life as an old man." (Plato, Symposium 1997, 464) At first glance, Achilles' death appears honorable and incompatible with the selfish form of Love being purported in this essay. And yet, a closer inspection reveals

quite the opposite. It appears as though Achilles gave his life so as to avenge his lover, Patroclus. It is critical, however, to remember that Achilles was told of his assured death were he to kill Hector and avenge Patroclus. He was effectively given the choice: kill Hector, avenge Patroclus, and die with honor, or live quietly without anyone remembering your name. Driven by love for Patroclus, Achilles chose the path of immortality. He chose to die, heralded for his bravery, remembered for his honor. In Plato's eyes, this is an instance of Love compelling a man to reach his potential. Love was the reason that Achilles created his own story of bravery. By virtue of providing his peers with an example of magnificent bravery, honor, and love, Achilles created – gave birth in – beauty such that his legacy would remain long after his body had deteriorated. Achilles ended his life poetically, beautifully, lovingly, and he was remembered for it.

Conclusion

Being selfish is often taken to be an undesirable characteristic in people, a personality trait that leads one to put oneself before others in a world that is in dire need of compassion and benevolence. Selflessness, on the other hand, is far more frequently lauded and encouraged than its counterpart. Selflessness is also linked to compassion and, loosely, to love. Contemporary ideas about love hold that loving someone is to care for them, to value their interests as much as, if not more than, one's own. But Plato disagreed.

Plato's vision of love was one in which self-interest was a central component – his love was a selfish one. But the selfish nature of Plato's love was devoid of the distasteful connotation commonly associated with self-interested behavior. Plato's love was a way for individuals to seek betterment. It facilitated the pursuit of wisdom and virtue – the most important attributes that a person could have, according to Plato.

Thus, love was for Plato simply an incredibly powerful force for good. Put in those terms, it now seems as though Plato's account of love is, in fact, not so different from the commonly understood, contemporary view on love. Currently, it is in vogue to claim that the route to a better, more equal, less dysfunctional, and altogether happier society is an increased sense of compassion for one another – an increase in *love* for one another. But what if the problem is not that people care too little for one another? What if the problem is that people care not enough about bettering themselves in the right way?

What if too much energy is spent concerning one's wealth, status, and power, and the misuse of energy is deteriorating society? What could possibly remedy that?

Plato's love could remedy that. If people understood that love was the dynamic by which they could recognize beauty and become virtuous, wise people, then compassion for others would follow as a necessary consequence. By pursuing the good, by acquiring wisdom, by bettering themselves, people would behave better in general. It is the premise behind the structure of the society in Plato's *Republic*. "The idea society of the *Republic*," says Gregory Vlastos, "is a political community held together by bonds of fraternal love...[citizens] are expected to have the same solicitude for the welfare of the polis which men ordinarily feel for that of their own family. Those appointed to govern must excel not only in intelligence and all-around ability but also in their concern for the welfare of the polis, which is said to be a function of their love for it..." (Vlastos, 1981, pp. 11-12)

So perhaps Plato's selfish love is not at odds with contemporary ideas about love, after all. It may be that in bettering oneself – in becoming a wiser and more virtuous person – one shows compassion for others; that caring for oneself enough to seek what is good is in fact the gateway to loving others – that true love must be found within oneself before it can be shared with others.

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