

The Significance of Alcibiades' Speech in Plato's *Symposium*

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Abstract:

Critics of Plato's theory of love have maintained that he misrepresents the love of persons, treating them merely as a means to the love of the Good or as an image of the Idea in them, rather than the person herself. Other critics claim that Plato sees love as a purely acquisitive and egocentric desire that is fundamentally at odds with an ethical love such as Biblical agape. I will argue that the second of these criticisms is just wrong, and the first, overstated. Regarding the egocentric thesis, I will attempt to show that Plato views love not merely as a desire to possess, but also as a generative urge to create. Special attention will be given to the speech of Alcibiades in addressing both of these charges.

A common construal of Plato's theory of love might be summed up as follows: love is a desire, arising from a lack or deficiency within the lover, to possess the Good or Beautiful forever, where the Good/Beautiful is understood as an eternal, unchanging Idea or Form existing in some transcendental realm of eternal essences.¹ Because this love is characterized as a desire rooted in need, critics have sometimes seen it as essentially acquisitive and thus egocentric. As one such critic has expressed it, "Plato was fundamentally unaware of any other form of love than acquisitive love."² In the convenient language of C. S. Lewis, it is a *need* love rather than a *gift* love.

A second common criticism derives from the consideration that because the object of Platonic eros is a transcendent Form, Plato failed to understand the love of persons. These critics hold, among other things, that Plato "ignores, or largely misrepresents, the love of persons," treating them merely as a means to the love of the Good,³ or, in an alternative formulation, that for Plato, "what we are to love in persons is the 'image' of the Idea in them," rather than the person herself.⁴ Persons, the advocates of this criticism argue, can only be loved as *means* to the end of attaining the Good. In what follows, I will offer a reading of *Symposium* that responds to both of these criticisms.

Let's begin by following Plato's analysis of love as it unfolds in Diotima's instructions to the young Socrates. Through a succession of steps, Socrates learns that love is of beautiful things; the lover desires they become his; beautiful things are also good; possessing such things will make one happy; and finally, the lover wishes that they, and indeed the Good itself, be his forever (206A). It might appear at this point that a complete theory of love has been presented, summed up thusly by Diotima: "love is wanting to possess the good forever" (206A). What more, we might wonder, need be said?

But just here the theory takes a surprising turn. Diotima asks Socrates, "What is the real purpose of love? Can you say?" (206B). Rather than giving either of the obvious answers – happiness or possessing the Good forever – Socrates responds, "If I could [say], . . . I wouldn't be your student, filled with admiration for your wisdom, and trying to learn these very things" (206B). So the priestess provides the answer herself: "It is giving birth in beauty, whether in body or in soul." (206B) The locution, "giving birth *in* beauty," (emphasis added) was as peculiar in ancient Greek as in modern English. We can sympathize with Socrates, then, when he replies, "It would take

divination to figure out what you mean [Diotima], I can't" (206B). So, once again, Socrates' instructor in the art of love comes to the rescue, but this time with an even more outlandish story of how we are all pregnant, both in body and in soul. Pregnancy, it seems, is not, as we had always thought, the consequence of lovers' union; rather, it is the cause of it. "Pregnancy, reproduction," she explains, "- this is an immortal thing for a mortal animal to do, and it cannot occur in anything that is out of harmony," (206C). But "ugliness is out of harmony with all that is godly" (206D). Hence the work of eros is to draw lovers towards beauty, towards that which "is in harmony with the divine" (206D).

She next further astonishes her student when she adds, "You see Socrates . . . what love wants is not beauty, as you think it is." Hadn't she, after all, said precisely this only a moment before? (206A). So, in what I hear as a tone of exasperation, Socrates demands, "Well, what is it then?" Diotima's answer: "Reproduction and birth in beauty" (206E).

The transition is now evident. Love has been expanded from a desire to possess to the seemingly quite different need to reproduce. No longer merely an acquisitive urge, love is also a generative, creative one. And what is it that links these two sides of love? The answer, clearly, is the addition of the word "forever" to the original formula - love not merely seeks to possess the Good, it seeks to possess it *forever*.

The reading of *Symposium* that I wish to propose is that, abstractly, the Good/Beautiful is the object of love. But concretely, the way love manifests itself in our lives and in our relationships, can also be through the medium of reproduction, through "giving birth in beauty." Thus, we love not merely to gain the beauty lacking in ourselves (and possessed by the beloved), we love as well to create beauty and goodness *in* and *with* the beloved. If so, Platonic eros is not reducible to an acquisitive urge for something the lover lacks. It can arise from the lover's abundance and the need to give birth from that bounty. Was not Eros himself the child of both Poverty and Plenty?

The question to which I would now like to turn is, how does this generative side of love, this "giving birth in beauty," play out in interpersonal relationships? Fortunately, the *Symposium* provides some hints of the answer. Let it first be granted, however, that Plato's primary objective was not to present a theory of interpersonal love; his main concern was with love of the Absolute. But let us also remember that, for Plato, the particular not only *imitates* the Idea; it *participates* in it. This being so, the individual and the universal cannot be severed from one another. While the universal transcends the particular, through the medium of participation, it is also immanent *within* it. Loving another human being, then, at least one who is lower than oneself on the Platonic scale of values, is a matter of awakening in the beloved a deeper apprehension of the Good/Beautiful.

It is on this matter of the love of persons that the speech of Alcibiades is especially instructive. Plato presents his theory of love in its abstract, conceptual form in the speech of Socrates. Then, he has Alcibiades concretize that same theory by showing us how eros might play out in a particular human relationship.

Alcibiades, you will recall, arrived late at Agathon's *symposion* quite intoxicated, after all the others had spoken. When offered, he declines the opportunity to present his own speech in praise of Eros, not only because of his drunken condition, but also on the grounds that praising anyone in the presence of Socrates, even a god, would throw the philosopher into a jealous rage. So Eryximachus suggests that he offer instead an encomium to Socrates. At first, Socrates opposes this idea, thinking that Alcibiades intends to make fun of him. But when Alcibiades swears to tell the truth, the philosopher responds by saying that he would very much like to hear truth

from the young man (214E). However, before launching into his encomium, Alcibiades challenges Socrates to interrupt him if he deviates from the truth at any point in his account, a challenge twice repeated in the course of the speech (217B & 219C). The fact that Alcibiades never is interrupted suggests that Plato intends that we should regard what follows as an authentic account of what transpired between student and teacher.⁵

In the course of his speech, Alcibiades describes in detail his repeated attempts to seduce the older man, who, in usual form, has been flirting with the handsome youth for some time, much as we see him do with many bright young men throughout the dialogues. Convinced of Socrates' erotic interest, but thinking him too shy to take the initiative, Alcibiades provides him with increasingly obvious opportunities to express his love in the manner the younger man thinks appropriate. When Socrates fails to take advantage of these opportunities, the future general takes matters into his own hands. He invites the philosopher to dinner, holds him in conversation until late in the evening, and then suggests that, in view of the weather and lateness of the hour, Socrates crash at his pad for the evening. Here is the climax (or should we say anti-climax) of the scene:

The lights were out; the slaves had left; the time was right, I thought, to come to the point and tell him freely what I had in mind. So I shook him and whispered:

"Socrates, are you asleep?"

"No, no, not at all," he replied.

"You know what I've been thinking."

"Well, not really."

"I think," I said, "you're the only worthy lover I have ever had – and yet, look how shy you are with me! Well, here's how I look at it. It would be really stupid not to give you anything you want: you can have me, my belongings, anything my friends might have. Nothing is more important to me than becoming the best man I can be, and no one can help me more than you to reach that aim . . ."

He heard me out, and then he said in that absolutely inimitable ironic manner of his: "Dear Alcibiades, if you are right in what you say about me, you are already more accomplished than you think. If I really have in me the power to make you a better man, then you can see in me a beauty that is really beyond description and makes your own remarkable good looks pale in comparison. But, then, is this a fair exchange that you propose? You seem to me to want more than your proper share; you offer me the merest appearance of beauty, and in return you want the thing itself, 'gold in exchange for bronze.'

Still, my dear boy, you should think twice, because you could be wrong, and I may be of no use to you. . . . When I heard this I replied: "I really have nothing more to say. I've told you exactly what I think. Now it's your turn to consider what you think best for you and me." (218C-219B)

Not grasping the meaning of Socrates' response, and thinking that his frank words have "finally hit their mark" (219B), Alcibiades crawls under Socrates' cloak and spends the night embracing his extraordinary lover. Alas, as he confesses years later to his fellow drinkers, "my night with Socrates went no further than if I had spent it with my own father or older brother!" (219 D).

The question that begs to be asked regarding this episode is why Socrates engages in such peculiar behavior – flattering the young men he meets, telling them how beautiful and brilliant they are, how irresistible he finds them, and then, apparently, never following through in the manner expected of an erotic lover? This question can best be answered by considering another: what would the message be if Socrates did give sexual expression to his love for the young men of Athens? Once asked, the answer is obvious: he would be telling them that gold can, indeed, be exchanged for bronze, thereby fixating the young men's erotic development at step one or two on the ladder of love.

Socrates does genuinely love the promising young men of Athens, but not because they possess something he lacks and wants to possess. Occupying a place on love's ladder well above that of any of the young men he professes to desire, he has quite a different goal. After awakening their eros in the most obvious of ways, he holds them spellbound in conversation by means of which he strives to redirect their eros to higher and higher levels on what will later be called the great chain of being.⁶ Socrates is playing his familiar role of midwife here, but in this context he does so by assisting in the "birth in beauty," helping the student grow in his knowledge of the Good and in a fuller realization of it in his life.

Alcibiades is sincere in wanting to be a better man, but in his vanity and moral immaturity, and especially his inability to resist the adulation of the crowd (216B), he has little grasp of what that might involve. Had he understood, he would not have seen Socrates' rejection as an expression of hopeless arrogance and unbelievable insolence (219C). Recall that when Socrates first entered Agathon's house, the poet invited the philosopher to lie next to him so he might touch him and be filled with the wisdom just acquired on the neighbor's porch (175D). Like Agathon, Alcibiades too thinks that wisdom can be acquired through bodily contact.

The eros that Socrates has for Alcibiades is not merely the interpersonal love symbolized by Pausanias' Urania Aphrodite – a love directed towards the mind rather than the body – it is a more disinterested and other-regarding love. He loves Alcibiades not as a means to his own assent to the Good – that is already well underway, if not fully realized – but to awaken in his student the desire and motivation for that same assent. One who has attained the Good, to the degree that Plato's Socrates has, relates to others in an essentially non-acquisitive way. Bodhisattva like, he strives to assist others in their attainment.

Those who see Plato's vision of love as egocentric generally make two errors. First, they make the mistake of supposing that desire is inherently egocentric. From the fact that a desire is located *within* an agent, they seem to make the unwarranted inference that it must be *for* that agent. As one such critic pointedly remarks, "desire is always acquisitive."⁷ But there is nothing contradictory, or even unusual, in individual A having a desire for the well-being of individual B, as Aristotle's analysis of true or perfect friendship attests.⁸

The second error consists in neglecting to notice that the desire to possess the Good, to the extent that it is realized, renders the lover herself good. And good agents, even Greek ones, are not wholly self-interested. Moreover, individual A's possession of the Good takes nothing whatever away from B's doing likewise. Unlike objects of desire such as property or wealth, the Good is not diminished by any individual's "possession" of it. The opposite may well be the case: your attainment of the Good may aid my similarly directed efforts.

The second criticism of the Platonic theory of love, that Plato does not understand interpersonal love, has more merit – more merit, that is, if we were expecting to find there an anticipation of the modern ideal of interpersonal love as being a response to the unique individuality of the beloved. Plato, as far as we can tell, held no such ideal. Yet, as we have seen, Socrates certainly does not love Alcibiades merely as a means to an end. He sees clearly who the younger man is, sees both his remarkable strengths and weaknesses.⁹ Finally, in trying to assist Alcibiades in his wish to become a better man, he does not impose anything upon him against his will. He simply serves as midwife to Alcibiades higher potential (which, alas, is never realized).

To the critics' continued protest that Socrates does not value Alcibiades for being just the unique individual he is, we might respond by observing that Socrates does not have the ambition of establishing an intimate

relationship with him. Rather, he loves the youth as a devoted teacher loves a gifted pupil. A common pitfall of such teacher to student love is that the former seeks to impress the latter with his greater knowledge and skill, placing this objective above that of contributing to the well-being of the student. When this happens, the other-regarding nature of the love is corrupted, and the pedagogical efficacy of the lesson diminished.

Let us note in conclusion that Alcibiades' drunken confession actually provides us with two different models of how persons may be loved – as reflections of a transcendent Goodness (Alcibiades' love for Socrates) and for the beloved's potential to evolve to a fuller realization of that Goodness (Socrates' love for Alcibiades). Although not exhausting the possibilities of interpersonal love, both are credible and coherent forms of that love, even if neither offers all that a modern reader might want in an account of the love of persons. We can be sure, though, that with the latter of these two ways of loving a person – the generative rather than acquisitive – the beloved is not loved merely as a means to an end or as an instantiation of some good the lover lacks.

Endnotes

¹ As far as we can tell, in *Symposium* Plato uses “Good” and “Beautiful” as alternative names for the same reality.

² Anders Nygren, *Eros and Agape*, p. 176. Irving Singer makes much the same point in *The Nature of Love, Vol. 1, Plato to Luther*, p. 54 & 86.

³ Singer, *Op. cit.*, p. 84-6

⁴ Gregory Vlastos, “The Individual as an Object of Love in Plato,” p. 26-32

⁵ This is true at least of the literary characters in Plato's dialogue, but perhaps of the historical Socrates and Alcibiades as well. If the latter, Plato is once again defending his teacher from the charges brought against him in 399 BCE.

⁶ Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea*.

⁷ Singer, *Op. cit.*, p. 86.

⁸ *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VIII, 1156b, 9-12.

⁹ Perhaps if his countrymen had seen as clearly, the Peloponnesian War would have had a different outcome.

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