

Mauro Tulli / Michael Erler (eds.)

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# PLATO IN SYMPOSIUM

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Edited by

MAURO TULLI AND MICHAEL ERLER

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## **C. J. DE VOGEL LECTURE**



# Eros and Life-Values in Plato's *Symposium*

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A choral fragment from a lost (unidentified) play by Euripides contains the following description of the power of Eros:

παίδευμα δ' Ἔρως σοφίας ἐρατῆς  
πλεῖστον ὑπάρχει,  
καὶ προσομιλεῖν οὗτος ὁ δαίμων  
θνητοῖς πάντων ἥδιστος ἔφυ·  
καὶ γὰρ ἄλυπον τέρψιν τιν' ἔχων  
εἰς ἐλπίδ' ἄγει. τοῖς δ' ἀτελέστοις  
τῶν τοῦδε πόνων μήτε συνείην  
χωρίς τ' ἀγρίων ναίοιμι τρόπων.  
τὸ δ' ἐρᾶν προλέγω τοῖσι νέοισιν  
μῆποτε φεύγειν,  
χρησθαι δ' ὀρθῶς, ὅταν ἔλθῃ.

Eros is an education in lovely wisdom,  
The greatest education there is.  
To consort with, this daimon  
Is the most pleasurable of all deities for mortals.  
Bringing a joy free of pain  
He guides them to hope. But as for those uninitiated  
In his toils, may I never be one of them  
And may I live apart from their savage ways!  
The experience of *eros* is something I advise the young  
Never to flee from  
But to use correctly, when it comes to them.<sup>1</sup>

For anyone well acquainted with Plato's *Symposium*, this fragment (not cited, I believe, in any of the standard commentaries on Plato's dialogue) strikes a number of interesting notes. The depiction of Eros as “an education in wisdom” (παίδευμα σοφίας), a *daimon* with whom humans can “consort” (προσομιλεῖν),<sup>2</sup> a source of “hope”, the object of experiences into which it is possible to be “(un)initiated” (ἀτέλεστος), and something the young are urged not to flee from but “to use correctly” (χρησθαι [...] ὀρθῶς) – all these ideas prefigure details of language and thought found in the *Symposium* itself. Brilliantly original though the *Symposium* undoubtedly was, we should never forget that Plato could expect his first readers to be

\* This is a revised version of the Cornelia de Vogel lecture given in Pisa in July 2013. I am greatly indebted to the IPS organising committee, and especially Mauro Tulli, for their kind invitation.

<sup>1</sup> Euripides fr. 897 *TrGF*.

<sup>2</sup> Diotima uses the noun ὁμιλία at *Symp.* 203a for all divine-human interaction through the medium of Eros; cf. the verb at 209c (with Eryximachus's use of it at 188d). προσομιλεῖν occurs in a sexual context at *Phaedr.* 250e and is part of a sexual metaphor at *Resp.* X 603b.

familiar with a much wider range of earlier Greek attitudes to Eros/*eros* than we can now fully reconstruct, even when, as in the present case, we can sometimes detect their traces. Nor is the fragment just cited an isolated piece of evidence. Other Euripidean fragments too, not to mention passages in his surviving plays, attest ways of thinking about *eros* which split into a polarity of positive and negative, good and bad, and which conceive of the best type of *eros*, as do several speakers in the *Symposium*, as capable of being harmonised with such values as σοφία and σωφροσύνη.<sup>3</sup>

I have started with this observation on some of the partially submerged complexities of pre-Platonic reflections on the nature of *eros* not because I intend here to pursue the *Symposium*'s relationship to various literary antecedents, but as an indication of how Plato's dialogue must originally have carried an exceptionally strong set of cultural resonances. Although virtually everyone now pays lip service to the *Symposium*'s multi-layered texture of registers, voices and dramatic psychology, the dialogue is nonetheless standardly subjected to interpretations which effectively reduce the force of its "polyphony" by enlisting it in the cause of a doctrinal Platonism. This is above all the case with those many readings which treat the speech of Diotima (whom I regard as a fictionalised projection of Socrates's "mantic" persona: I shall return to this point) not just as a climactic moment in the work, but as the key to everything else around it. On the alternative hermeneutic principle adopted in this paper, the philosophy of a Platonic dialogue does not consist in a single message awaiting extraction and codification by readers – a process of extraction which, once achieved, would make further reading redundant. It is enmeshed, rather, in a web of relations between all the parts of a work. In the case of the *Symposium*, this principle encourages openness to the view that the speech of Diotima-Socrates, despite (or even because of) its extraordinary features, does not nullify everything else that surrounds it nor tell us exactly what we should make of the dialogue's other speeches. The work itself, in its totality, sets up a configuration of perspectives – each of them coloured by the elusive element of role-playing undertaken by the symposiasts, not least by Socrates himself – which makes it impossible for Diotima's account of mystical transcendence to resolve all the questions prompted by the larger interplay of ideas embodied in the fabric of the dialogue.

My aim here is to outline just one of the ways in which we can fruitfully engage with the whole structure of the *Symposium* and thereby avoid the reductivist trap of proceeding as though it is only part of Plato's text that really matters (an impression that some modern discussions come perilously close to creating). At the core of my necessarily selective remarks, which deliberately fall short of claiming to discover a comprehensive philosophical thesis in the work, will be a perception of how *eros* serves as a focus for all the participants' idealised meditations on life-values: values putatively capable of guiding, shaping and informing an entire life. At first sight this shared predisposition may seem surprising. In archaic and classical Greek culture, *eros* – whether conceived of as divine, personified, or purely naturalistic/psychological, and whether or not conjoined with Aphrodite – was predominantly associated with psychosomatic upheaval and loss of control: with types of experience, in other words, that violently destabilise the course of a life, threatening it with madness and even, in extreme cases, destruction. But we have already seen, in my opening quotation from Euripides, that this was not the whole story: before Plato, there was evidently scope for a more affirmative, idealised conception of the kind of contribution which *eros* could make to the meaning of a life. The resulting dichotomy between positive and negative forms of *eros* is significant, among much else, for differences between *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium*. In the

<sup>3</sup> Fragments of particular interest in relation to the *Symposium* include 136, 138, 269, 388, 547, 661. 21-25 *TrGF*. Cf. next note.

former, traditional ideas of the psychosomatic dangers of *eros* are given some prominence; in the latter, they are largely suppressed and *eros* is instead treated by almost everyone, with the special if obtrusive exception of Alcibiades, as a source of life-unifying meaning and motivation.

One concomitant of the main symposiasts' concentration on positive life-values is their convergence, I maintain (though not everyone concurs), on a "desexualized" understanding of *eros* – a distancing of it, that is, from the domain of physical pleasure and its conversion, even sublimation, into other kinds of motivating goals. More specifically still, all the main participants, with the conspicuous exception once again of Alcibiades, whose whole persona is stamped with a sense of intermittent and unstable impulses, seek to escape from a conception of *eros* that is tied to the overtly episodic workings of sexual desire. This is seen with particular piquancy, as well as some subtle *pathos*, in the contribution of Aristophanes. The ostensibly corporeal incompleteness of the divided figures in his fable might be thought to lend their yearning desire (πόθος, cf. 191a6) a superficially sexual tenor, and the same goes for their repeatedly stressed need for embraces and physical entwinement (with four occurrences of the verb συμπλέκεσθαι, 191a-e, whose senses certainly include sexual congress). Yet, in a delicious touch of dramatic irony, none other than Zeus himself *misunderstands* the predicament of the creatures whose separation he had caused. Overcome by pity, he thinks it sufficient to rearrange their genitals for the sake of specifically sexual συμπλοκή between them, thereby allowing them "to experience physical satisfaction/satiety (πλησμονή), cease from agitation, turn instead to work, and take care of the rest of their lives" (καὶ τοῦ ἄλλου βίου ἐπιμελοῖντο: 191c). Zeus's mistaken assumption is that humans' erotic desires are fundamentally bodily and can be dealt with – at any rate where males are concerned (191c5-6) – by a mechanism of merely somatic release. He also supposes that the bulk of a human life is (or can be) detached from *eros*. But the trajectory of the story tries to tell us otherwise. It discloses that the most urgent desire of human *souls* (192c7), not bodies, is for something different from sexual intercourse, as well as something they cannot consciously recognise but only instinctively "divine" (μαντεύεται: 192d; Diotima-Socrates is not the only "mantic" figure in the work).

Contrary to Zeus's sharp distinction between sex and "the rest of life", Aristophanic *eros* craves non-episodic satisfaction distributed across a whole lifetime (cf. διατελοῦντες [...] διὰ βίου: 192c). But a lifetime of what? That last phrase refers directly to partners who never live apart. Yet the allegorical wish-fulfilment of "fusion" into a single entity (192d-e) dissolves, rather than clarifying, the sense of what lovers want.<sup>4</sup> Notwithstanding its alluring and lasting appeal to the imagination (recall Montaigne's "Nous estions à moitié de tout"),<sup>5</sup> Aristophanes's formula for escaping the episodic dissolves the coherence of individual identity itself. It also suggests, paradoxically, that the truly fulfilled lover would no longer be a lover at all.

\*

Aristophanes, about whose speech I shall say a little more in sequence below, is not alone in drifting into the realms of fantasy. Plato could certainly have counted on his original readers' awareness that the conventions of the formal drinking-party provided a stylised, intense but also fantasised framework of experience. This should alert us to an "atmospheric" quality which Plato superbly captures in the dramatic psychology of the work. But it is a qua-

<sup>4</sup> The metaphorical application of συντήκειν (192d) for "fusing" or "welding" together, used also but less emphatically by Pausanias (183e), was older than Plato, as we see from e.g. Eur. *Suppl.* 1029, fr. 545a, 3 *TrGF*. But Aristophanes turns it into the expression of a psychologically extreme position.

<sup>5</sup> Montaigne, *Essais* 1, 28: Montaigne's account of "amitié" (with La Boétie), though explicitly contrasted with sexual love, borrows from Aristophanes' speech the imagery of two halves of a single self.

lity which also makes interpretation – both of the parts and of the whole – intrinsically more slippery. There are puzzles about every attempt in the *Symposium*, including that of Diotima-Socrates, to forge a connection between *eros* and the underpinning values of a life. It is possible to take Platonic philosophy with deep seriousness without assuming that definitive solutions to any of these puzzles are encoded, if only we are clever enough to find them, within the text itself.

Phaedrus, who sets a rhetorical tone of idealisation (which is also, in part, fantasy) for the whole discussion, has difficulty stabilising his perspective on *eros*. He switches between an asymmetrical *erastes-eromenos* paradigm and a more general conception which permits a wife like Alcestis to count as a “lover”; and even his use of the former vacillates over how far the workings of *eros* need involve an active-passive dynamic (see below). But those uncertainties do not prevent the speech from broaching one version of the crucial idea of *eros* as an inspirational and transformative power: a power, as Phaedrus specifically sees it, to build a whole life around a relationship between “self” and a special “other”.

Both dramatically and philosophically, it is essential to the interest of Phaedrus’s speech that it includes an unequivocal statement of the conviction that *eros* is a supreme life-value (178c-d):

“As regards that which should guide human beings in their entire life if they are to live well (ὁ γὰρ χρὴ ἀνθρώποις ἡγεῖσθαι παντὸς τοῦ βίου τοῖς μέλλουσι καλῶς βιώσεσθαι), this is something neither kinship nor honour nor wealth nor anything else can bring about in the way that *eros* can”.

The idea of “guiding” a life conveyed here by the verb ἡγεῖσθαι, and implicitly linked to the notion of life itself as a “path” or “journey”, recurs several times later in the dialogue: Aristophanes calls Eros our “leader (ἡγεμὼν) and commander (στρατηγός)” (193b); Agathon likewise twice calls Eros ἡγεμὼν (197d-e, adding musico-festive imagery to Aristophanes’s military metaphor; cf. 197a); and Diotima herself sees the ascent to perfect beauty as starting with a relationship in which an older person correctly “guides” and leads another (ὁρθῶς ἡγῆται ὁ ἡγοούμενος, 210a, with vocabulary that echoes the framing metaphor of progress in the mysteries).

Phaedrus’s assertion of *eros*’ capacity to guide a whole life follows immediately on the proposition that *erastes* and *eromenos* are the greatest good for each other. It thereby shifts the terms of reference of his speech beyond the specifically sexual. The sexual component in *eros* is in fact nowhere overtly addressed by Phaedrus. At most, he takes the operations of physical desire for granted: we can, if we choose, read into his case the unstated supposition that (initially) sexual impulses are channelled into the development of an ethically defined self. If we look for a latent theory of what sexual impulses *per se* amount to, Phaedrus’s only – and belated – answer seems to be that they are responses to bodily beauty: that is the entailment of his claim at 180a that Patroclus must have been the “lover” of Achilles, and not *vice versa*, since Achilles was the most beautiful of all heroes. It is worth noticing that this is the only reference to sensory beauty in Phaedrus’s speech; all his other uses of καλός vocabulary are ethically inflected.<sup>6</sup> But that same passage seems to rule out that an *eromenos* feels attracted to the body of the *erastes*, which consequently makes the mutual value of their relationship at 186c something other than directly sexual. Phaedrus’s account leaves no room for bodily gratification as the true goal of *eros*. On both his homoerotic and his gender-neutral models, physical desire is overlaid by the beloved’s status as a kind of ethical mirror for the lover’s self-image.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> For some contextualisation of this point, see further below in my section on Aristophanes.

<sup>7</sup> At *Phaedr.* 255d it is, of course, the lover who functions as a kind of erotic “mirror” for the beloved.



The formation of such a relationship appears to grow – if we perhaps charitably smooth out the wrinkles in Phaedrus’s speech – through a series of (overlapping) stages: first, a shame-centred desire not to be thought bad (178d-179a); second, the “philotimic” desire to be seen as good in the beloved’s eyes (178e-179b); third, the willingness to sacrifice self-interest, even to the point of death, for the benefit of the other (179b-180a). But Phaedrus blurs this picture by converting *erastes/eromenos* asymmetry into something more like reciprocity: the beloved will feel the same shame, the same *philotimia*, and even the same self-sacrificing impulses as the lover (178e-179a). He even hints at an element of emotional reciprocity too, making the beloved the subject of the verb ἀγαπᾶν (180b), the same verb later used of *lovers* by Pausanias (181c) and Diotima (210d). The bridge from asymmetry to reciprocity remains, for sure, very uncertain. Phaedrus’s idealism greatly exceeds any supporting “theory”. Yet for both his fellow symposiasts and Plato’s readers Phaedrus nonetheless sets a stimulating agenda by advancing the far from negligible thesis (or intuition) that *eros* can define a life by passionately motivating an individual to seek ethical self-confirmation and self-realisation in the perceptions of another.

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Pausanias’s speech, we must remember, does not respond explicitly to Phaedrus’s, only to the terms of his original proposal of the theme for discussion. Moreover, in the reference at 180c to other speeches omitted in Aristodemus’s report to Apollodorus, Plato ensures that any readerly desire for narrative completeness is thwarted. But the *Symposium*’s own design compels (or at least invites) us to notice the effects of its various juxtapositions. Pausanias differs from Phaedrus most obviously by openly acknowledging what the latter had, with some awkwardness of reasoning, relegated to the background: the (putative) roots of *eros* in physical desire. Given Pausanias’s claim that “there is no Aphrodite without Eros” (οὐκ ἔστιν ἄνευ Ἐρωτος Ἀφροδίτη: 180d) – *i.e.*, apparently (despite the suspicion of invalid logic), that *eros* is always part of Aphrodite’s “entourage” and therefore inseparable from sexual attraction – it might seem strange at first sight to discern any movement towards the “desexualisation” of *eros* in Pausanias’s case. But it is also true that Pausanias hedges round his notion of Uranian Aphrodite/Eros precisely by excluding many, even the majority of, actual practices and patterns of sexual desire: most sex is not true *eros*. In addition, he denies in passing that *eros* need be a response to physical beauty at all (182d7), thereby seeming to distance himself from Phaedrus’s premise at 180a though agreeing with him, in the end, in locating *eros*’s centre of gravity outside the sphere of the sexual.

Pausanias’s concern, reinforced by a prescriptivism lacking (we may notice retrospectively) in Phaedrus’s case, is to claim that what starts, and may continue, as a sexual impulse can be made the basis of a lifelong relationship between whole persons, not just their bodies. Pausanias conveys the point with striking emphasis. “Pure” lovers, those “impelled” by Uranian Aphrodite with attraction towards young males on the cusp of adulthood, “are prepared [...] to form lifelong partnerships and a fully shared way of life” (παρεσκευασμένοι [...] ὡς τὸν βίον ἅπαντα συνεσόμενοι καὶ κοινῇ συμβιωσόμενοι [...]: 181d).<sup>8</sup> “The lover of good character remains (*scil.* a lover) throughout life, since he is fused with something of lasting value” (ὁ δὲ τοῦ ἡθοὺς χρηστοῦ ὄντος ἐραστὴς διὰ βίου μένει, ἅτε μονίμῳ συντακείς: 183e). As with Phaedrus, there is a gesture here in the direction of reciprocity. Yet Pausanias feels a

<sup>8</sup> Pausanias underlines the idea of κοινωνία at 182c. Related vocabulary is used by Eryximachus (of dealings between humans and gods: 188c), Aristophanes (the “fused” life and death of united lovers: 192e), Diotima (the shared enterprise of philosophical lover and partner, 209c, echoing Pausanias), Alcibiades (of participation in philosophical “madness”: 218b), and Socrates (sarcastically to Alcibiades, 218e, of an exchange of different kinds of beauty).

need to retain a distinction between the lover's *eros* and the beloved's *philia* (citing the tyrannicides Harmodius and Aristogeiton as his example: 182c). To that extent, and in much the same way as Phaedrus, he leaves unanswered questions about what it means for such asymmetry to underlie "a fully shared way of life".

Because Pausanias's speech has been predominantly discussed in relation to historical reconstructions of the social mores and protocols of male homosexuality in classical Greece, and because he himself visibly takes pains to try to reconcile his version of "pure" *eros* with acceptance of sexual pleasure, it is easy to read his contribution to the symposium as a self-serving translation of his own erotic orientation into a statement of normativity. Many critics have succumbed to the temptation to treat that as the nub of the matter. But in the larger thematic structure of the dialogue his speech unmistakably adheres to a version of *eros* as a source of unifying value that reaches *beyond* sexual desire as such. What's more, unlike Phaedrus, who saw *eros* as drawing out the lover's (and the beloved's) better self through practical virtue, Pausanias sees this "better self" as realising itself partly through intellectual virtue. In this respect he stands in a particularly significant relationship to the later speech of Diotima-Socrates: after all, Pausanias alone of the first five speakers links his ideal of *eros* explicitly with the idea of "philosophy" (184d, cf. 182c), and he alone likewise brings the concept of *phronesis* into the equation (184d). Despite these verbal correspondences between Pausanias and Diotima, however, a gulf remains between them. Pausanias ties his whole case to the fulfilment of *eros* in a relationship between two persons; Diotima will abandon any such premise once "philosophical" *eros* has progressed beyond its earliest stages. That, indeed, will be part of what makes her vision so hard to rationalise.

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If Phaedrus and Pausanias, despite differences of nuance, agree in presupposing a relationship between two individuals as the matrix of ideal *eros*, Eryximachus is the first contributor, though not the last, to dispense with such an assumption. His alternative starting-point has something in common with older Greek sensibilities. The idea of Eros not as a specifically human phenomenon but a force manifesting itself in the cosmos as a whole is already present in Hesiod's theogonic account of the primeval emergence of Eros (*Theog.* 116-122). The quasi-Empedoclean traits of Eryximachus's theory have also, of course, been widely noted. But Eryximachus goes so far in expanding the scope of *eros*, and in equating it with a series of other values (especially *ἀρμονία* and *ὁμόνοια*, but also *φιλία*, *σωφροσύνη*, and *δικαιοσύνη*), that he produces a more diffusely generalised conception of it than anyone else in the dialogue. When he concludes that "all Eros, taken in its entirety, possesses all power" (*πάντα δύνανται ἔχει συλλήβδην [...] ὁ πᾶς Ἔρως*: 188d) it is impossible, as well as unnecessary, to distinguish between rhetorical hyperbole and theoretical universalism.

Eryximachus's interweaving of medicine, physics, and musical theory depersonalises (and therefore desexualises) *eros* to the point where relationships between individuals assume no more than a minor role within the larger scheme of things. Although he twice reiterates Pausanias's tenet that it is right for only good men to be allowed sexual gratification in homoerotic relationships, he does so both times by way of analogy to his own preoccupation with medicine and other arts (186b-c, 187d-e). It is open to readers, should they pause to pose the question at all, to draw further inferences about the conditions which such relationships would have to satisfy on Eryximachus's terms. Most significantly, they would have to instantiate reciprocal rather than asymmetrical or hierarchical desires, in keeping with the resounding principle of *ἐρᾶν ἀλλήλων* (186d, whose immediate context is once again medical; cf. "musical" *ἐρωτα καὶ ὁμόνοιαν ἀλλήλων*: 187c): Eryximachus at least puts himself in a position, unlike Phaedrus and Pausanias, to spell out the idea of erotic reciprocity unequivocally (and accordingly erases all use of the terminology of *erastes* and *eromenos*). Relations-

hips *à la* Eryximachus would also have to incorporate ethical virtue, since Eros/*eros* accomplishes everything μετὰ σωφροσύνης καὶ δικαιοσύνης (188d). But Eryximachus himself does little or nothing to encourage such direct extrapolations to human erotics as normally understood. It looks, indeed, as though one might practise Eryximachean values without ever being, in any sense, “in love” with another person at all – or, at any rate, with one individual more than any other. That means, it is true, that there is a degree of proleptic affinity here with Diotima. Yet the distinctive paradox in Eryximachus’s case is that *eros* is given such a pervasive presence in the world that it is impossible to disentangle it from all the other values that might be identified in a life.

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One of the *Symposium*’s many moments of dramatic irony occurs when at the end of his speech Eryximachus suggests that he has maybe “omitted many things” and invites Aristophanes to fill the gaps (188d-e). The comic poet will operate on a very different wavelength from that of Eryximachus, though he will pay him one implicit compliment by treating *eros* as the “cure” for humanity’s wounded condition (189d, 191d, 193d). For all the ostentatiously mythic apparatus of his speech, Aristophanes’s narrative turns out to have an intensely psychological kernel far removed from Eryximachus’s quasi-Heraclitean thesis about *eros* as a force that inhabits “practically everything that exists” (ὥς ἔπος εἰπεῖν ἐν πᾶσι τοῖς οὐσι: 186a). According to Aristophanes, *eros* makes only one thing really matter in life: “self-completion” in a unique and (despite some residual use of the asymmetrical lexicon of “lovers” and “beloveds”) perfectly mutual relationship to another soul.

I have already drawn attention to one strand in Aristophanes’s speech which it shares with those of the other symposiasts: its stress on the impulsion of *eros* towards a continuous, non-episodic state of being. But if we probe further into the allegorised core of his story, several points assume some prominence. One is a vein of pathos – remember Zeus’s pity (191b) – beneath the comic veneer. While all the speakers propose *eros* as the means for a human life to achieve supreme fulfilment, Aristophanes alone modifies such idealism by striking a note of radical uncertainty: few humans actually encounter their true beloved (193b). He also combines that point with a suggestion that leaves the moral of his story rhetorically hypothetical and perhaps contradictory as well. If we are pious to the gods, he suggests, we will all find our unique object of desire (193b). But that makes erotic fulfilment sound like an extrinsic and contingent reward, not an intrinsic process of completion. (Diotima will allusively criticise Aristophanes for moral ambiguity: 205d-e.) And how can it be that *eros* entails recovery of our “original” condition, when it was in that very condition that humans offended against the gods?

Another telling feature of Aristophanes’s contribution which might perplex us further about the sense of his allegory is that it implies a conception of human identities as essentially given and unchangeable, not something to be shaped or developed along extended life-paths. This is related to his emphatic appeal to “human nature” (189d, 191d, 192e, 193c-d). Apart from Diotima-Socrates (206c, 212b), Aristophanes is the only speaker to use this concept and indeed to identify it with erotic completion, thereby turning *eros* into a near-biological imperative. But the principle of a universal “human nature” does not itself generate or require the idea that each individual can find completion only with a single, uniquely suitable partner: the two notions might even be thought to be in tension with one another. There are perhaps two basic ways of assimilating that last point into a reading of the allegory. One is to allow the speech the full freedom of comic incoherence. The other, by sharp contrast, is to allow pathos to move closer to pessimism, leaving *eros* in most cases as a yearning for the unattainable.

There is one final element of Aristophanes's speech which is often overlooked and worth highlighting here. This is the fact that he is the only symposiast who makes no use at all of the vocabulary of the καλός word-group (or its antonym, αἰσχρός). Aristophanic *eros*, it seems, has no need for a concept of "beauty" (still the best general equivalent to the Greek vocabulary in question, for all the well-known pitfalls of translation). Can we say why that should be? Relations between the various speakers' usage of *kalos* terms are more complex than sometimes claimed. As we saw, Phaedrus made one passing (and belated) reference to physical beauty as a defining property of an *eromenos* (180a) and had otherwise consistently applied *kalos* terms to the virtuous actions prompted by *eros* (178c-d, 179c). Pausanias had followed Phaedrus's ethical emphasis (esp. 180e-181a, 183d) but diverged from him in the former respect: an *eromenos* need not be physically beautiful (182d). Either missing or ignoring that last detail (see 186a), Eryximachus generalised καλὸς ἔρως (186d) to make it coextensive with all relations of harmonious *homonoia*. Agathon will in turn complicate things by calling the (symbolic) god Eros himself κάλλιστος (195a) but also, at the same time, taking all *eros* to be a response to beauty (197b).

Where in this kaleidoscope of views does Aristophanes fit? I suggest, in brief, two reasons why he makes no space for beauty in the foreground of his picture. The first is that, unless beauty is subjectively perspectivised (which it had been, unforgettably, by Sappho 16 *PLF*, ἔγω δὲ κῆν' [sc. κάλλιστον] ὅττω τις ἔραται, and cf., more obliquely, Pl. *Resp.* V 474d-e), it would not sit easily with Aristophanes's emphasis on the *unique* fit between every pair of ideal partners. The second is that to make beauty the specific object of erotic desire would be hard to square with Aristophanes's disconcerting suggestion that the yearning soul cannot name, and therefore does not understand, the true object of its own desires (192c-d). Aristophanes might in principle have followed Phaedrus and Pausanias in applying *kalos* vocabulary to virtuous actions, especially given the ostensibly moralistic epilogue to his speech (193a-b; cf. above). But if he had done so, this would have been marginal to what makes his speech so memorable and thought-provoking. It is in the space between the image of a yearning for a lost part of ourselves and the haunting sense of an inescapable deficit of erotic self-understanding (like that of the beloved at *Phaedrus* 255d) that Aristophanes's story – whether comically, tragically, or tragicomically – engages the reader's own need for meaning.

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Agathon has not emerged well from most modern interpretations of the *Symposium*. Yet for anyone who assumes, as I do, that Plato did not lavish so much elaborate creative finesse on the composition of his speech for a merely reductive purpose, he deserves a little better than the superciliousness shown towards him by many scholars. He is a young poet high on his recent success and self-consciously thinks of himself as performing in the small, intimate "theatre" (194a-b) of his own celebratory party. He is also, as Socrates correctly notes, someone who can adopt a Gorgianically mannered rhetoric (198b-c). His speech (and this is itself a Gorgianic mode) is a kind of prose-poem – both stylistically and rhythmically. That inevitably has a bearing on how it might be heard and interpreted. But Plato's readers are not obliged to react in exactly the same way as Socrates.

Given the topic agreed by the symposiasts, Agathon's speech might seem *prima facie* surprising in having nothing at all to say about lovers and beloveds. He does, however, allude to sexual desire with the twin terms ἵμερος and πόθος (197d), the former used by no one else in the dialogue and the latter only by Aristophanes. (We might glance sideways here to notice that while both terms will be absent from the discourse of Diotima-Socrates, they are conspi-

cuously important for the “Stesichorean” Socrates of *Phaedrus*.<sup>9</sup> Agathon’s more expansive conception of *eros* clearly bears a certain resemblance to that of Eryximachus. But whereas the latter conceived of something like a general force of nature (186a) Agathon purports to give the description of a god. Taken strictly on that level, indeed, it is not actually refuted by the combined views of Socrates and Diotima: Diotima thinks gods are of necessity happy and in possession of goodness and beauty (202c), precisely what Agathon had predicated of Eros in the first place (195a).

The problem, of course, is that no one can plausibly take Agathon to be talking strictly about Eros in separation from *eros*. And once one tries to decode Agathon’s description of Eros as an account of human experience of desire, it does become vulnerable to a logical elenchus of the kind Socrates undertakes. Even so, one might still wonder whether a logical elenchus is the most appropriate mode of response to a prose-poem, and a serio-comic one at that (on Agathon’s own admission: 197e). Any doubt on this score is heightened by the fact that Socrates’s elenchus is almost wilfully partial: it picks on the idea of Eros / *eros* as beautiful while neglecting (till Diotima makes the point at 204c) the ambiguity that runs through Agathon’s speech between Eros/*eros* as subject and object of desire (for the latter see explicitly the love of beauty at 197b). But that is only one way of saying that Socrates seems unwilling to let Agathon celebrate “love” in his own poetic spirit. In fact, if Agathon’s speech is subjected to analysis it loses the modes of expression (associative, symbolic, evocative) which make it what it is. Agathon moves freely between different dimensions of the subject: typical objects of desire (youthful, beautiful people and things), states of mind arising from the contemplation of beauty (fluid, languorous sensuality), rewards of love (peacefulness, friendship, mutual virtue), and – here somewhat *à la* Eryximachus – cultural practices (most importantly poetry and music, but also medicine and other crafts) which put the principles of beauty creatively to work.

We can recuperate some of the interest of Agathon’s speech by seeing it as a poetic interpretation of *eros* which locates its status as life-value in a kind of erotic aesthetics – a self-referential aesthetics, moreover, in so far as the speech uses richly luxuriant language to evoke realms of experience characterised by softness and delicacy. Like all the other speakers, even Aristophanes, Agathon does not disconnect *eros* from ethics; he is careful to depict a “god” whose beauty is matched by his virtue (196b-d). But he nonetheless puts more emphasis than anyone else on sensory, formal and textural qualities associated (idealistically) with the experience of *eros*. He dwells above all on the phenomenology of “softness”, using *ἀπαλός* no fewer than nine times (see Diotima’s negative allusion at 203c), *μαλακός* five times, *ὕγρός* twice, and also *ἄβρός* (197d: cf. Diotima’s qualification at 204c). This is an aesthetics which, among other things, perfectly suits the sensuous intimacies of the symposium itself. But it also matters to the dialectic of ideas among the guests: no one prior to Agathon, as we glimpsed earlier, had given perceptual beauty such salience in their account of *eros*.

Socrates’s interrogation of Agathon, as I have already hinted, forms a kind of hinge in the *Symposium*: it represents the point at which readers are faced with a clash between fundamentally different kinds of discourse (poeticising evocation *versus* conceptual scrutiny). But it would be a superficial reading of the work which saw this as a clear-cut moment of transition. The “hinge” can turn in both directions. Socrates subjects Agathon’s poetic flights of fancy to logical analysis, and Diotima subsequently does the same to Socrates’s own thoughts. But as Socrates’s mantic alter ego, Diotima cannot get all that far, it will transpire, without turning back herself to a more visionary mode of discourse.

<sup>9</sup> See *Phaedr.* 251c-252a, 253e, 255c-d.

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Among the *Symposium*'s multiple perspectives on *eros* as a source of life-values, special weight is lent to the idea of philosophy itself as a unifying form of life. This point of view is marked programmatically at the outset: Apollodorus recounts how the three years since he became a devotee of philosophy have been orientated around nothing less than a daily obsession with the words and actions of Socrates (172e), and he bluntly tells his money-making friends that he pities their lives as wretchedly squandered on meaningless ends (173c-d). Diotima links philosophy directly with *eros*: at 203d Diotima characterises Eros as "philosophising throughout his life" (φιλοσοφῶν διὰ παντὸς τοῦ βίου); at 211d she describes contemplation of absolute beauty, in a somewhat odd trope (which seems to blur the spatial and the temporal), as the "place" in life where a human being should ideally live, ἐνταῦθα τοῦ βίου ... βιωτὸν ἀνθρώπου.<sup>10</sup> Concomitantly, Diotima condemns the body-centred way of life of many people (ironically including Socrates: 211d). The impact of Socrates himself on others' lives is underlined, but also complicated, by the psychologically tangled comments of Alcibiades: he sees Socrates as exercising a magnetic (Sirenesque) attraction but also as expressing, by his very existence, a reproach to the life that Alcibiades actually leads when apart from him.

Modern scholars have no difficulty accepting that the Platonic Socrates represents and incarnates an entire way of life. But when Socrates speaks *about* the philosophical life he is not always speaking transparently about himself: that is so, very obviously, in his idealised account of philosophers in the *Republic*. In the *Symposium*, the gap between Socrates the person and Socrates as mouthpiece for a vision of the ultimate inspiration/aspiration of a philosophical life is difficult to gauge, since it is embedded in Socrates's mantic "ventriloquism" of the views of Diotima. We cannot unqualifiedly *identify* Socrates with Diotima: if we do, we make Socrates generate a contradiction by accepting that the philosopher is not wise (204b), only in search of wisdom, yet at the same time calling Diotima herself σοφωτάτη (208b). By alternatively treating Diotima as Socrates's mantic persona,<sup>11</sup> we allow a psychological distance or split whereby Socrates the man is a philosopher in search of wisdom but is aware of his need for (cf. 206b9), and gives fictionalised voice to, a "higher", intuitive sense of transcendent mysteries.

For anyone seeking to understand a philosophical way of life, the central enigma of Diotima-Socrates's vision is how the ascent to apprehension of absolute beauty (with the finality of a sudden revelation: 210e) is expected to *inform* the rest of life. Diotima is emphatic that it can do so: ἐνταῦθα τοῦ βίου ... βιωτὸν ἀνθρώπου, to repeat that telling if peculiar formulation from 211d. And the formulation continues: θεωμένῳ αὐτὸ τὸ καλόν. That present participle reinforces the implication that the erotics of philosophy involve living in the constant, vivifying presence of a transcendent vision, just as the fleshly lover tries to live in the constant presence of the beloved, an analogy to which Diotima herself draws attention (211d, with an allusion to Aristophanes's speech). The emphasis is strengthened at 211e-212a, where again a form precisely of life (βίος) entails a continuous state or condition described by present participles (βλέποντος, θεωμένου, συνόντος). Yet because pure, unmixed, "divine" beauty is somehow independent of the material world, and indeed holds that world in contempt (211e), it must remain uncertain how a life conducted inside the latter can be given shape by the former.

<sup>10</sup> ἐνταῦθα τοῦ βίου might be expected to mean "at this point/stage in life" (see Plut. *Pomp.* 46, 1, for a late but clear illustration) but that does not fit properly with βιωτὸν ἀνθρώπου. Diotima seems to envisage a metaphorical vantage-point from which philosophical contemplation can occur: cf. her use of ἐνταῦθα at 210a, 210d, 212a.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. the self-consciously mantic Socrates of *Phaed.* 84e-85b.

The (literally) mysterious ambiguity of Diotima's vision is parallel to the ambiguity of Socrates himself, represented as a figure who both does and does not seem to have need of others. He is someone capable of engaging fully in social activity, even to the point of saving people's lives in battle (220d-e), but also of withdrawing, as we hear near both the start and end of the dialogue (174d, 220c), into his own impenetrable world of "noetic" absorption. Equally, however, others can oscillate between finding him bewitchingly appealing for his "inner" beauty and yet periodically wishing to run away from him, even to wish him dead (216c): that is the strange and terrible moral of Alcibiades's obsession with him. But that Socrates is unable to guarantee the virtue or happiness of others is entirely compatible with the highest reaches of Diotima's vision, which posits a form of contemplative communion not between souls but between the individual soul and the vision of pure beauty (212a). It is hard to see how this can be comprehended by anyone who has not experienced the vision for themselves: that is a caveat which Socrates's own mantic voice stresses (209e-210a). If we ask, therefore, whether the Socrates we hear about in the *Symposium* is supposed to be living a life informed by the perpetual contemplation of absolute beauty, we should hesitate before claiming that we are in a position to know (or before claiming, more generally, that we can comprehend him any better than Alcibiades does). The dialogue cannot, and does not purport to, answer the question for us. It leaves us to recognise the immense challenge of trying to make sense of both Socrates and Diotima (and of the other characters as well), but its own enticing rewards – the rewards of engaging dialogically as readers of Platonic philosophy – do not promise the availability of final answers within the text itself.