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# The Labour Of Love

In the European intellectual tradition, rationality has long been identified as the very antithesis of the human passions. Cold intellectualism contrasts with inflamed emotion, the objective facts oppose the subjective illusions. The crowning achievement, to show my bias, of the intellectual tradition, and the very seed from which it sprung, is philosophy: the alpha and omega of western thought. It is only natural, then, that the image of the philosopher has for ages been married to that famous and somber representation of the thinker solidly perched with his chin resting on his hand. When too much passion or madness finds its way in to the realms of philosophy, it becomes preferable to consider it poetry or literature. For many years cooler heads have prevailed. But what of the origins of philosophy, both etymologically and historically? Analysis of the word 'philosophy' itself reveals layers of meaning, just as study of the great ancient master Plato destroys complacency in the above view. The word philosophy, coming from the Greek *philosophia*, means literally 'love of wisdom.' The philosopher is a lover of wisdom and the philosopher who lives the Platonic vision is a lover in the most erotic sense. Just as madness and passion grip the soul of the human swept up in fleshy lust and infatuation, the soul of the Platonic philosopher burns with a fire for the beatific vision that lies beyond all corporeal manifestations. But in the philosophy of Plato these passions are intimately connected. Whereas *philia* expresses love of family, friends and lovers indifferently, *eros* is love's more lusty cousin representing more passionate feelings and sexual desire. Eros is an essential component to the psychology and phenomenological experience of the philosopher as s/he journeys towards apprehension of the highest truth, and this apprehension is that towards which all philosophy deserving the name takes aim. In the following pages I will explore the essential role of eros in Platonic philosophy by drawing on views expressed in *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*. I will then consider an objection to the notion that eros is essential to philosophy and then attempt to answer these objections. Ultimately I will argue that a passion for virtue and truth is the very essence of philosophical motivation.

Much imagery and allegory cloaks Plato's discussions on the topic of philosophical eros. In *Symposium*, Plato represents Socrates as recounting a discussion between himself and the mysterious Diotima on the true nature of eros. The qualities and characteristics of the entity Love are discussed followed by the more metaphysical account of the nature of philosophy and that which it pursues. The account in *Phaedrus* differs from *Symposium* in many respects, taking the form of a stirring metaphor recounting the soul's journey through heaven and its highest purpose on Earth. Both dialogues, however, describe the hierarchical ascent of the philosophically inclined soul towards the realm of the Forms. It is in this realm where its greatest good is realized. First I will discuss, in-depth, the ideas expressed in *Symposium*, followed by those in *Phaedrus*, and conclude with a synthesis of the two accounts.

In *Symposium*, Agathon and Socrates agree that there is nothing that wants what it already possesses, and that desire must always be rooted in some lack:

'At the time he desires and loves something, does he actually have what he desires and loves at that time, or doesn't he?'

'He doesn't. At least, that wouldn't be likely,' he [Agathon] said.

'Instead of what's likely,' said Socrates, 'ask yourself whether it's necessary that this be so: a thing that desires something of which it is in need; otherwise, if it were not in need, it would not desire it. I can't tell you, Agathon, how strongly it strikes me that this is necessary. But how about you?'

'I think so too.' (Steph., 200A-B)

The philosopher is a lover of wisdom so it follows from the above that s/he cannot be entirely wise. Wisdom is pursued, hence, wisdom cannot already be possessed. But the philosopher is not in a state of perfect ignorance either -- "For what's especially difficult about being ignorant is that you are content with yourself, even though you're neither beautiful and good nor intelligent. If you don't think you need anything, of course you won't want what you don't think you need" (Steph., 204A). So the philosopher finds themselves in between ignorance and wisdom, aware of the lack but lacking all the same. Further, love is directed towards wisdom because love is always love of beauty and (in a key Platonic move) "wisdom is extremely beautiful" (Steph., 204B).

Intimately connected with desire is the notion of possession. He who loves and desires wishes to possess that which is loved and desired. But why does she who is in love with beautiful things wish to possess these things of beauty? In another key Platonic move Diotima shifts focus: "Suppose someone changes the question, putting 'good' in place of 'beautiful,' and asks you this: 'Tell me Socrates, a lover of good things has a desire; what does he desire?'" (Steph., 204E) Socrates answers that the lover of good things wishes to possess them, for in possessing them he will have happiness (translators indicate that the Greek word *eudaimonia* isn't fully captured by 'happiness' as it expresses also well-being, human flourishing, and the good life -- a central concern to the philosopher. The universal concern of all for *eudaimonia* means that we all want to possess the good and achieve the fullest intimacy. The good in longer duration is, of course, superior to it in lesser duration so it follows that desire is for the good forever. This notion of eternity is closely connected with the idea of immortality and the pregnancy/reproduction metaphors that follow.

We learn from Diotima, expressed from the perspective of those in love with the good, what their aim actually is: "It is giving birth in beauty, whether in body or in soul" (Steph., 206B). Diotima teaches that we are all pregnant in our soul and that when in the presence of beauty, the desire to 'give birth' wells up within us, just as in the presence of ugliness it retreats. This metaphor links together several aspects brilliantly. When *eros* grips us, its physical expression is in sexual lust. Sexual activity is the method by which humans produce offspring and thus touch the realm of immortality. Immortality is required to satisfy our desire to possess the good forever. In an interesting parallel the notion of immortality being linked with the pursuit of the good was later resurrected during the European Enlightenment in Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*.

A beautiful body makes us wish to reproduce physically, and hence activates sexuality, but a beautiful soul makes us "instantly teem with ideas and arguments about virtue -- the qualities a virtuous man should have and the customary activities in which he should engage" (Steph., 209C). The ideas birthed are more beautiful than physical offspring. This is so because the ideas are closer to the eternal, they exist on a plane free from physical decay, and, being more beautiful, they are more greatly revered. Here we see that in Plato the spiritual planes are of far greater importance than the physical realm. The 'final and highest mystery' elaborates this further.

In the pursuit of beauty the lover becomes enchanted with a single beautiful body. Eventually, through the intellect's capacity to abstract and generalize, the lover recognizes that the beauty present in every beautiful body is not many but one. Individual cases of beauty are but manifestations of a single Beauty. Recognition that beauty transcends its physical manifestations, coupled with the fact that spiritual objects are closer to the immutable and eternal, leads the lover to

desire the beauty of the soul over that of the body. The abstraction continues as spiritual beauty is recognized in conceptualized laws and customs, and in the higher source of these: knowledge and wisdom. Suddenly the goal of the lover's pursuit is recognized when "he will catch sight of something beautiful in its nature; that, Socrates, is the reason for all his earlier labors..." (Steph., 210E). And this is the immaterial, unchanging, Absolute Form of Beauty that transcends and informs all manifestations of beauty.

Socrates' mythical account in *Phaedrus* explains that all human souls have fallen to Earth and taken corporeal form following experiences in the heavenly realm of the gods. Plato offers, in morally charged language, a vision of the soul as a tripartite whole consisting of a charioteer, which is the intelligence (nous), and two winged horses, one good and obedient, and one bad and unruly. While in heaven, prior to Earthly existence, the souls make a divine ascent to glance upon "the place beyond heaven" (Steph., 247C). In this place beyond heaven the intelligence glances upon the deepest Reality: "What is in this place is without color and without shape and without solidity, a being that really is what it is" (Steph., 247C). What the intelligence gains is a view of the eternal Forms. The journey to the Forms is difficult as the charioteer fights to control the bad horse while having to compete with all the other souls for a look at the Forms. If the intelligence doesn't see the Forms, forgetfulness creeps in and the soul is weighed down; she falls to Earth and is born a human. Those humans who have had the clearest view of Reality in the spiritual realm become philosophers on Earth. For their intelligences most strongly yearn for the Truth once observed and all but forgotten. Others who have seen more become "lovers of beauty, or [one] who will be cultivated in the arts and prone to erotic love" (Steph., 248D). So, continuing the metaphor, the embodied soul has lost its wings but yearns to take flight in heaven once again where it can have a chance to experience the vision of perfection. The philosopher lives in closest contact with the truth in her devotion to correct judgment and clear intellectual vision:

For just this reason it is fair that only a philosopher's mind grows wings [in a shorter time than others], since its memory always keeps it as close as possible to those realities by being close to which the gods are divine. A man who uses reminders of these things correctly is always at the highest, most perfect level of initiation, and he is the only one who is perfect as perfect can be. He stands outside human concerns and draws close to the divine; others think he is disturbed and rebuke him for this, unaware that he is possessed by a god. (Steph., 249C-D)

This possession is like a form of erotic madness that grips the philosopher's soul as it tries to recollect the ecstatic vision of Beauty that once filled the intelligence. These notions will become clearer in the following as I turn to Plato's account of the phenomenology of eros.

When eros grips the human who sees the beauty of an earthly human body, the elements of the soul are instantly pulled in competing directions. A form of madness grips them "...and they are startled when they see an image of what they saw up there. Then they are beside themselves, and their experience is beyond their comprehension because they cannot fully grasp what it is they are seeing" (Steph., 250A-B). The 'bad horse' lustfully charges forward, caught in the desire for sex, while the intellect and 'good horse' are restrained and hold back, expressing temperance. Here, and as we saw in *Symposium*, the desire for corporeal pleasure and beauty is actually the soul's recollection of the perfect, undifferentiated Beauty that lies beyond. The philosopher, on more intimate terms with truth, is more swift to realize the spiritual nature of the beauty expressed in corporeal form. This Earthly beauty "...warms him and melts the places where the wings once grew, places that were long ago closed off with hard scabs to keep the sprouts from coming back." (Steph., 251B). The clearest recollector sublimates his/her sex drive, restraining the 'bad horse,' since s/he realizes that the true objects of eros are the immaterial Forms themselves. We see

everywhere the highly moral quality of Platonic philosophy, described in the Earthly battle between bodily and spiritual pursuits, and the profound assertion that the philosopher must lead, not merely intellectually identify, the most virtuous life. The ultimate 'ought' of morality is that one ought to pursue the beautiful, the good, in a way most appropriate to its high spiritual stature. As Diotima says: "The love of the gods belongs to anyone who has given birth to true virtue and nourished it, and if any human being could become immortal, it would be he" (Steph., 212A-B) and, "...so that in the end he comes to know just what it is *to be beautiful*" (Steph., 211C [italics added]). And finally, as was later claimed by the Stoics: "...he who has that [virtue] has everything; that he, and only he, is rich, is beautiful, is a king" (J.S. Mill, *Utilitarianism*, Hackett, p.20).

Plato's views are saturated with metaphysical speculation and mythical vision, the bulk of which have been challenged by some of the most powerful intellects of the last 2500 years. The objection that I will consider is this: that the passions must be silenced before the intellect can be purified and the clear vision of truth obtained. Eros must be avoided, and the madness that goes with it, since it distracts the mind and biases judgment. Philosophers must distance themselves from the belief that truth is beautiful under the realization that reality may not be aesthetically satisfying at all; 'the truth hurts.' It could be held that the risk for one in the throws of eros to project into the beloved and idealize their vision is too great for the disinterested philosopher to allow. There is plausibility here since these psychological mechanisms are well known, and the judgments of one in the heat of emotional frenzy are frequently hasty and distorted. But it must be considered what Plato has in mind as the ultimate object of love. The deepest Reality, the highest level of Truth, is the true object of pursuit; and it is towards this that the philosopher directs his/her eros. I maintain that the pursuit of truth must be an almost fanatical enterprise highly analogous to corporeal lust. I offer the following comparison: The true lover of sex avidly pursues the sex act to the detriment and sacrifice of their seemingly most important concerns. They will squander wealth, destroy friendships, neglect their career or educational endeavours and sacrifice their reputation. Some of the greatest philosophers in the pursuit of truth have demonstrated all of the above as well. Epictetus renounced material possessions; Wittgenstein mercilessly attacked Russell's work, gave away a fortune and signed away his rights to *Tractatus-Logico Philosophicus*; Hegel directed attacks against the philosophy of Schelling; Nietzsche broke with Wagner; Jung broke with Freud, etc., etc. Those who pursue truth very much resemble individuals gripped in eros. The pursuer of truth must often face the reality that the object of desire resides outside of received wisdom and currently enforced cultural customs and norms. Some notables published and perished by offending contemporary authority and some wrote in secret. In pursuit of truth to even entertain certain ideas has historically been perilous; courage resounds in one who would make themselves such a pariah. I assert that the title *Philosopher* must only be conferred upon those whose devotion to truth overwhelms all other concerns. Only those whose bones and flesh and soul ache for the truth have earned the title, if the title is to maintain its integrity and not become the equivalent of a mere political figurehead: theoretically powerful but actually impotent.

The preceding has explored views expressed in *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*. In this work I have attempted to demonstrate the essential role of eros in Platonic philosophy. The two dialogues are rich with imagery and metaphor describing the phenomenology and psychology of the erotically aesthetic experience. Under Plato's hierarchical schema, the desire for erotic love is first directed towards the love of a single body, then to the love of several bodies, then to the love of the attributes of the soul, including knowledge and virtue, and finally to the Form that infuses beauty into them all. After considering the objection that the philosopher must be free from the dangers of lust and passion, I argued that the true philosopher must possess the most passionate zeal, bordering on erotic obsession, for the truth that is their desire. I conclude that the true philosopher is someone who is mad with love for the truth.