



Philosophy as an Erotic Pursuit

AMANDA COEN

October 1997

Class: Plato

Introductions: character 1 - Lila: unhappy philosophy student, (perhaps pretentious) lover of poetry. character 2 - Laurel: happy philosophy student.

Scene: After yet another of their philosophy classes, Lila races after Laurel, who is wandering over to the university fountain.

Lila: O lovely lucid poetic attention! Sadly I miss you, and in philosophy gain naught but a clouded conflict of voices, speaking arid, abstract assertions in logical languages. O analytic academics! Exercise more than my argumentation!

Laurel: Quit raving, Lila, and tell me what's wrong!

Lila: Oh it's terrible! I started to notice it already in the second week of school. The philosophy that I'm assigned to understand, to digest, well, it becomes my only meal! In other words, after all the effort that I must direct towards engaging my mind with philosophy, there's no time for snacks or side-dishes, much less dessert! I'm malnourished Laurel, and I'm afraid that my beautiful poetic vision of clarity will crumble, if I don't focus my life on poetry instead of philosophy!

Laurel: Wow, sweetie, hold on! Exactly how does your study of philosophy conflict with your "poetic vision," and just what is this vision anyway?

Lila: There's a conflict because philosophy searches for answers within a logically coherent framework, period. In contrast, when I'm attentive to my "poetic vision," I know there are things that I understand other-than-logically; however, I can't incorporate this "poetic vision" of knowledge into my pursuits in philosophy -- precisely because this knowledge is not and cannot be known logically! For example, let's pretend that I have a very clear and distinct emotional understanding of my relationship with a forest near my home. Even as I'm telling you this and remembering the relationship, I feel like I know something very clearly and yet cannot articulate what it is that I know. If I do try to dissect what's going on, I might say that it's beautiful, it feels good, and it's as if there's a strong presence of the forest in me. But the clarity and profound meaning become dim when I try to articulate or understand logically. See what happens in philosophic evaluation? I abstract my thoughts about my relationship to the forest from their emotional meaning by setting them out on a surgical table of analysis, and then re-evaluate the meaning of the reassembled thoughts according to how they can be supported logically. But some thoughts just won't grow in logical soil! Am I to conclude that these thoughts are meaningless, that they don't contribute to my

knowledge? I think philosophy demands a "yes," and I want to cry "NO"! But the more immersed I become in my studies of philosophy, the more weak my voice becomes, and I find myself slipping into disunity, self-abuse, and ultimately, I fear that I'll drown in a lazy black stream of logical confusion. So you can see that if I want to stir my soul to something other than frustration and defeat, I must simply live poetically, pursue poetry, and give up my struggles in philosophy.

Laurel: Well, I can see you're unhappy! But Lila, I must say that your vision of pursuing poetry sounds rather idealistic. Why do you think that poetry, as a pursuit, can nourish your soul more wholly than philosophy?

Lila: Poetry is a forum for the integrity of emotional, intuitive, and imagistic clarity. The process of poetics is so significant because I think that trying to write and understand poetry is an erotic pursuit. It's erotic because there's a painful-beautiful-urgent-loving struggle to relate a scene in which one's vision is momentarily transformed, so as to see the naked space that escapes our grasp and possession. Poetry expresses the desire to unfold-caress-see the nude clarity; whereas philosophy tongue-twists this desire to see clearly, into an itch to carve and construct the world with rational scalpels. So, to answer your question, I think that poetry as a pursuit is more nourishing because it compels one to love clarity, with an urgency that's like erotic love.

Laurel: Hmm ... I can see why you might find rationality offensive. But let's see if I understand you correctly: you appreciate poetry as a process that invites and promotes clarity, by virtue of its being an erotic pursuit. And an erotic pursuit is a loving, urgent desire to facilitate clarity, informed by whatever music one is mindful of, so to speak? -- That sounds right.

Laurel: And poets are mindful of such things as emotional, imagistic, and intuitive clarity? -- Yes!

Laurel: And philosophers are mindful of logical clarity? -- Mmhmm...

Laurel: And would you agree with me that some of the philosophers that we've studied thus far seem to be passionate about pursuing logical clarity? -- Well, yes, I agree.

Laurel: But then, aren't both pursuits (capable of being) rooted in a passionate desire to facilitate clarity? -- ...I suppose.

Laurel: Then perhaps philosophical pursuit is also capable of being erotic. Now, if you appreciate poetic pursuits because they are erotic, shouldn't you also appreciate passionate, philosophical quests for clarity?

Lila: When you put it that way, Laurel, it seems like I surely should! I am a little more sympathetic to philosophical pursuit now than when I came to you in an agitated stream of emotion. Nevertheless, I can't be swayed from thinking that philosophy is too rigid and exclusive in its pursuit of logical clarity!

Laurel: You know what's interesting, Lila? When you assented to my previous conclusion, I had a vision of you (as you were thinking through my argument) coming to some sort of logical, lucid understanding.

Lila: I think that's true: when I understood what you meant, after following the logical sequence of your ideas, there was a meaningful focus for and lucid quality to my thoughts. But why is this so interesting, Laurel?

Laurel: Well, I'm trying to understand why you still think philosophy is exclusively logical, and poetry is exclusively otherwise. See what I mean: an experience of logical clarity was helpful for you, being the one who is compelled to live poetically, to understand something that your emotions alone didn't reveal to you. So, I just wonder if it isn't profoundly clarifying for us if we envision that different ways of knowing lucidity strengthen each other, and should work together in any pursuit of understanding. If so, then I think that philosophy and poetry can strengthen each other.

Lila: Well, philosophers would first have to be mindful of different ways of knowing!

Laurel: That's exactly what I mean. There are some philosophers in the field who choose to equate knowledge with logical clarity. But you also, with your thoughts about poetic clarity, will have to re-evaluate the significance of logical clarity.

Lila: Hmm... maybe you're right... O imagine, Laurel, if philosophy can embrace with dignity what is feeble in the swift tuck of logical certitude! Then the threat of tense intolerance between poet and philosopher is like a little bubble that spills into a wondrous sea of possible clarity! But wait -- how can our new vision of philosophy be reconciled with the way it's taught in school?

Laurel: In my opinion, there's much philosophy that we, who are only in our second year of studies in this department, don't yet know ! However, I think that some ancient Greek philosophers that we already know about actually invite ideas like ours, concerning what philosophical pursuit means. For example, let's think about Socrates. I think that Plato presents Socrates as a philosopher who integrates "poetic" ways of knowing in a very profound way.

Lila: What? I'll have to disagree. I mean, let's consider Protagoras, the dialogue that we just studied in class. There's a scene where Hippocrates comes to Socrates in the night, full of desire and excited emotion. Hippocrates is responding emotionally to Protagoras' presence town, which for Hippocrates, symbolizes the possibility of becoming knowledgeable. As the morning sun rises, Socrates reveals Hippocrates' ignorance by asking questions that reflect the "light of reason." I think that Plato has Socrates do this in order to set up a conflict between an approach to knowledge that is clear and rational, and an approach to knowledge that is confused and emotional.

Laurel: I know the passage you're talking about Lila, but I think that one can interpret it differently. I agree that Plato seems to set up the conflict between reason and emotional desire, but I think that it's set up in this way so we can see the necessity of emotional desire as a motivation for reasonable, intellectual inquiry. Hippocrates wouldn't have realized the rational questions that he really needs to consider if he hadn't been driven by a strong desire to pursue knowledge. I think this is an illustration that emotional desire, in particular, erotic love, is basic to any philosophical pursuit.

Lila: Well I can see the possibility. But what about philosophers like Descartes and Kant, to whom love (or any other emotion) is not an intelligible part of the pursuit of knowledge? When we study their philosophies, how can we still maintain that philosophy is an erotic pursuit?

Laurel: We can pursue the study erotically! What I mean is that if we want to pursue clarity erotically, then our love for logical clarity (as one way of knowing) will drive our study of analytic philosophy. Furthermore, in studying the philosophical tradition, one develops the ability to logically articulate their own intuitions and reasoning. It's important to develop one's logical articulation, poetic articulation and other artistic expressions into a harmony of voices, so as to reach out with more hands in the pursuit of clarity.

Lila: Oh, but Laurel! I must say that now you sound rather idealistic!

SOPHIA

Journal of Undergraduate Philosophy