

9

PLATO ON LOVE AND SEX

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Romantic relationships in ancient Greece were somewhat complicated. In his *Politics*, in order to show how conflicts can arise in a city, Aristotle tells a story of two unnamed but influential men in Syracuse, on the eastern coast of Sicily. While the first man was away from the city, the second man seduced the first man's boyfriend. The first man, upon learning about this, became enraged and seduced the second man's wife. This started a civil war (V.4, 1303b17–28). Back in Athens, the brilliant and beautiful Alcibiades, who was once Socrates' boyfriend, angered his own wife so much that she tried to divorce him, because he brought courtesans and (female) prostitutes into their family home (Andocides: IV.14).

Given the messy entanglements between homosexual relations, heterosexual relations, sex, marriage, fidelity, pederasty, and prostitution, one would hope that ancient philosophers had something to say about how to conceptualize and evaluate different kinds of romantic and sexual relationships.¹ Modern readers, however, may be left disappointed on this point when they read Plato's most famous work on love (*erôs*), the *Symposium*. In the first place, the dialogue is composed of seven speeches from different people who do not seem to be talking about the same thing (further complicating the picture about what *Plato* thinks). Then we find Socrates telling us that love is originally inspired by a beautiful body, but that those who love properly will move their attention from one beautiful body to many beautiful bodies, then to beautiful souls, then to beautiful customs and laws, then to different kinds of knowledge, then ultimately to the Form of Beauty (210a4–211d1). But most people don't fall in love with laws and it's unclear how we're supposed to love a Platonic Form (whatever that is). Thus, overall, the *Symposium* seems to analyze romantic *relationships* tangentially at best. The lack of resonance between what we call love and what Plato is discussing in that dialogue has led prominent scholars to claim that Plato either has an unsatisfactory theory of love that has no place for the individual as an object of love, or that he's not even talking about love at all.²

While the *Symposium*'s literary brilliance is beyond question and much insightful work has been done on the interpretation of its text, if we want to know what Plato thinks about the complicated romantic relationships of his historical context and what we call love, we should look elsewhere in his corpus. My project here is to take Plato's discussion of love from the less-studied passages in the *Laws* and then use that as a framework to analyze the dynamics of the vivid relationships in the *Phaedrus*.³ As we will see, Plato's fundamental point is that some lovers just want to use your body for sex and pleasure, whereas others genuinely love who you are as

a person. Interestingly, these two forces of attraction can conflict with each other in the same person, but they can also be harmonized in good people. Thus, Plato's account of love is one in which we have to fight within ourselves to overcome our baser desires, which lead us to use our beloved, and to encourage our better desires, which lead us to appreciate the true beauty of our beloved and make both lover and beloved better people.

Two Kinds of Love; Three Kinds of Lovers

Let us begin with the important passage from the *Laws* where the Athenian Visitor (who I take to be Plato's spokesperson in the *Laws*) explains the conceptual relations between love, friendship, and desire. Because the passage is the basis for my understanding of Plato's views on love,⁴ I will quote it in full:

If you want to get these things straight, you have to analyze the nature of friendship and desire and "love", as people call it. There are two separate categories, plus a third which is a combination of both. But one term covers all three, and that causes no end of muddle and confusion.... When two people are virtuous and alike, or when they are equals, we say that one is a "friend" of the other; but we also speak of the poor man's "friendship" for the man who has grown rich, even though they are poles apart. In either case, when the friendship is particularly ardent [*sphodron*], we call it "love".... And a violent and stormy friendship it is, when a man is attracted to someone widely different to himself, and only seldom do we see it reciprocated. When men are alike, however, they show a calm and mutual affection that lasts a lifetime. But there is a third category, compounded of the other two. The first problem here is to discover what this third kind of lover is really after. There is the further difficulty that he himself is confused and torn between two opposing instincts: one tells him to enjoy his beloved, the other forbids him. The lover of the body, hungry for his partner who is ripe to be enjoyed, like a luscious fruit, tells himself to have his fill, without showing any consideration for his beloved's character and disposition. But in another case physical desire is a secondary concern [*parergon*] and the lover prefers looking to lusting [*orón de mallon ê erón*—a desire of soul for soul. That body should sate itself with body he'll think outrageous; being reverent and respectful, self-control, courage, greatness of soul and wisdom will make him always want to be pure with a pure beloved. This combination of the first two is the "third" love we enumerated a moment ago.⁵

(837a2-d2)

First, love [*erós*] is a species of friendship [*philia*], but it has greater intensity. We needn't be puzzled by this initial move insofar as *philia* covers a wide range of relationships, including the love that a mother has for her children, brotherly love, and paradigmatic friendships. The Athenian then explains that there are two kinds of relationship, one of which is "violent and stormy" and tends to be one-sided, whereas the other is "calm" and involves reciprocated feeling. As the Athenian will go on to condemn it in later passages, let us call the love exhibited in the first kind of relationship "bad love" and that of the second kind of relationship "good love."

The bad kind of love involves a desire primarily directed at the beloved's body, and (though explained with ancient reticence) aims at gaining sexual pleasure from him. The good kind of love, however, is directed at the beloved's soul—i.e., his character, or who he is as a person. In the good kind of love, there is still clearly physical attraction, but it is a "secondary concern" [*parergon*] and the lover is happy merely to look upon the beloved.⁶ Thus there are two kinds of

love with different objects (body and soul). Notably, though, there are *three* kinds of lover, as we can be torn between the two kinds of love. This also means both kinds of love can coexist in the same person, though the coexistence makes it difficult to determine what the third kind of lover really wants. After all, it can be hard to work out whether you really love the *person* or whether you just enjoy the pleasure they bring you.

While this discussion of love in the *Laws* is interesting, we do not get much of an idea about what these different kinds of lovers are like. Luckily, Plato's *Phaedrus* seems to use the same conceptual framework but gives us a more vivid and dramatic depiction of how these lovers behave. "We should think," Plato's Socrates says, "that there is in each of us two things that rule and guide, which we follow wherever they lead: the one is the innate desire for pleasures, but the other is the acquired belief to pursue what is best" (237d6–9). When the desire for the pleasure of food rules someone and overpowers their belief about what is best, we call them a glutton; when it is pleasure of drink, we call them a drunk; when it is pleasure of the human body, we call that person a lover (238a6–c4). As we have seen, the kind of love that is directed toward bodies is only one of the kinds of love in the *Laws*, and Socrates in the *Phaedrus* will later give a second speech about a better kind of love—but first let us see what this first kind of pleasure-driven lover is like.

The goal of the lover who is ruled by the desire for pleasure is to "train his beloved to be as pleasant to him as possible" (238e4). Because he does not want the beloved to resist him in any way, the lover tries to make the beloved inferior to him however he can, so the lover makes the beloved ignorant, cowardly, ineffective at public speaking, and slow-witted (239a1–4). This desire to prevent the beloved from being improved means that the lover is jealous of the beloved's company, preventing the beloved from spending time with anybody who might benefit him as a person. In particular, the lover is eager to keep the beloved away from philosophy, as such education will cause the beloved to despise and look down on the lover rather than rely on the lover completely (239a7–b6). The lover will also prevent the beloved from developing physically as much as possible. Because he wants him to seek pleasure, the lover will stop the beloved from going to the gymnasium (Plato thinks a benefit of habitual physical exercise is that it stops you from thinking that pain is a bad thing). Thus instead of getting a tanned muscular body from working out in the sun, the beloved will become soft and pale, adorning himself with cosmetics—the kind of appearance that would fill an enemy army with confidence and your allies with worry (239c3–7).

Socrates then explains that the pleasure-driven lover will keep his boyfriend away from his family, try to cut him off from his family's wealth, and will "hope that his boyfriend will be unmarried, childless, and homeless for as long as possible" so that he can enjoy ongoing pleasure from his boyfriend (240a6–8).⁷ The lover will also be obsessive and clingy, following the beloved around day and night (240c6–d4). This causes the beloved to become disgusted with the lover over time, frustrated at his constant guarding, excessive and unwarranted compliments, and false accusations and insults—especially when the lover isn't even that handsome (240d4–e7)!

With the lover becoming more obsessive and the beloved more frustrated, the relationship inevitably begins to fall apart. As he stops getting the pleasure he wants, the lover's love fades, and he breaks the promises he made to his beloved. The lover becomes a different person, ashamed of how he acted in the past, but doesn't dare tell his boyfriend that he isn't going to follow through on what he said he would do for his beloved. Fearful of becoming as he once was, the lover becomes a fugitive, fleeing the now-angry boy who chases him around demanding that he fulfill his promises.⁸ Thus the beloved ends up frustrated, having given himself to someone "untrustworthy, hard to please, jealous, disgusting, harmful with respect to his property, harmful with respect to the state of his body, and most of all harmful to the development

of his soul” (241c2–5). Socrates says that people who are dominated by the desire for pleasure love their boyfriends in the same way that wolves love lambs (241c6–d1).

Having given this speech about how harmful love is, Socrates feels ashamed, for Love (*Eros* = Cupid) is a god and a god shouldn’t be responsible for something harmful. You would have had to have been brought up by the most vulgar sailors to think that the pleasure-driven kind of love was the only kind of love (243c6–d1). Socrates thus redeems himself by giving a second speech about a different kind of love—a love which is beneficial and philosophical, where the lovers are ruled by a rich conception of goodness and not simply by pleasure.

In order to explain the dynamics and psychologies of the philosophical lovers, Socrates introduces the image of the tripartite soul as a winged chariot with two horses, one white and one black. The charioteer represents the reasoning part of the soul, which desires truth and knowledge; the white horse represents the spirited part of the soul, which is responsible for our feelings of shame, anger, and the desire to be honored; the black horse represents the appetitive part of the soul, which is responsible for our desires for bodily pleasure; the black horse is unresponsive to reasoning and has to be kept in check with beatings and threats (253c7–255a1). Socrates explains that the soul is immortal and that when disembodied our souls embark on a cosmic circuit following the gods of the Greek pantheon around the outer heavens, where our souls see the Forms, including the Form of Beauty—i.e., what beauty really is. There is much to say about this bizarre story, but what is important is that on this circuit the bad horse tries to drag the soul away from the Forms and that the stronger your wings are, the better chance you have of staying close to the god you are following and to see the Forms. After the circuit is complete, the soul is reincarnated and it retains a memory of the Forms it saw, though the memory is dim, especially if you were distracted by your bad horse and dragged away from getting a good look at them.

Because it was the most radiant in appearance, the memory of the Form of Beauty is most easily reawakened in our embodied state (250c8–e1). Importantly, beauty is most obviously seen in a beautiful body. Some people, upon seeing a beautiful body, surrender to pleasure and pursue sex with the person. But others, those with a clearer memory of what they saw when they were disembodied, are struck by the divinity of the image before them. They respond with reverence and awe, being reminded of the god they followed by the face of the person they see (250e1–251b1).⁹ Socrates describes this kind of lover as at one time shuddering and being chilled at the image of divine beauty, but then that feeling is replaced by warmth and sweating as streams of beauty pour into his eyes, nourishing the wings of his soul so that he feels a swelling and throbbing; the soul aches, itches, and tingles as the wings grow, and the lover is filled with joy (251b1–d1). When separated from the beautiful boy, the lover becomes pained and longs to be back in the presence of such beauty, and he is joyful whenever he is near the boy again. But this alternating pain and joy causes a kind of madness in the lover, making it difficult for him to stay still, or to sleep at night (251d7–e3). For somebody in this state, nothing is more important to them than the beautiful person and they are completely unwilling to give them up (252a1–2).

Though he is initially inspired by the physical beauty of the beloved, the philosophical lover directs his attentions to improving the character of the beloved, fashioning him to be more like the god of whom he is already an image. Thus those lovers who followed Zeus make their beloved grow in wisdom and in guiding others, and similarly with the other gods of the pantheon. If the lovers themselves realize that they are unfit to help somebody grow in this way, they take it upon themselves to learn so that they can progress too. They are inspired by the beloved to live in a more godlike way, so that both they and their beloved can follow the customs and practices of the god. Such a lover is not jealous or ungenerous but is devoted to their beloved, joyed to see them improve (252d1–253c2).

Socrates then explains in more detail how the parts of the lover's soul respond while in the presence of the beloved. While the whole soul is filled with warmth by the beauty of the beloved, the black horse experiences sexual desire and seeks to jump on the boy. The white horse, however, is ashamed at the thought of using the beloved in this way and so pulls against the movements of the black horse. Part of the soul draws the lover to be physically close to the beloved, but the lover's sense of shame and self-control keeps them respectfully apart (253e5–254c3). The lover thus desires to spend time with the beloved and so he stays near him, but he follows the beloved in awe and reverence, not forcing himself upon him in lust (254e8–255a1).

Over time, the beloved comes to notice the goodwill of the lover and appreciates the good things that the lover is doing for him. The beloved and lover become friends with each other, as "good is never not friends with good" (255b2). Spending more time together (and occasionally touching), the beloved then comes to love the lover back.¹⁰ Socrates describes this experience vividly:

Think how a breeze or an echo bounces back from a smooth solid object to its source; that is how the stream of beauty goes back to the beautiful boy and sets him aflutter. It enters through his eyes, which are its natural route to the soul; there it waters the passages for the wings, starts the wings growing, and fills the soul of the loved one with love in return.¹¹

(255c4–d2)

Thus friends also become mutual lovers and their desires are the same, seeing in each other a kind of reflection of themselves. Now the beloved too wants to touch, kiss, and lie down with the lover, though once again the white horse and charioteer prevent them from having sex (255e2–256a6). If the couple continue to win this battle within themselves and follow the path of philosophy, they live a blessed life on this earth together, of one mind and orderly in what they do (256a7–b2). Such lovers are also rewarded in the afterlife, having lived a good life and nourished each other's wings for the next cosmic circuit.

Socrates also mentions a second-best kind of lover, who, though their love is still beneficial, adopts a lower way of living than the philosophical lovers, having replaced philosophy with the love of honor (256c1). Such lovers get caught off guard by their black horse when they have been drinking or are careless for some other reason, and thus have sex with each other. These people have sex over the course of their whole lives together, but because they do not fully endorse what they are doing, they do so sparingly. Nonetheless, these lovers live in mutual friendship and remain with each other because they refuse to break the promises they have made to one another and become enemies (256b7–d3).

While contemporary readers are unlikely to accept the details of Plato's metaphysics, the story is supposed to be illustrative of more than cosmology. What Plato is giving us are models of different ways in which people love. Some people use their lovers merely to get pleasure—especially sexual pleasure—out of them. Others genuinely care about the development of their beloved's character, and, while they are attracted to their beloved's body and experience sexual desire, sex is a secondary concern for such lovers. They see their beloved's beauty as inspirational, something that is to be respected, something that generates feelings of awe and joy, not something that is to be devoured for your own personal gratification. Plato thinks that we will find both of these desires in ourselves and that these forces will fight against each other for superiority. We should thus strive to cultivate the beneficial and divine kind of love, and, to the best of our abilities, suppress the harmful kind of love.

The Sex Question

While most readers find the description of the relationship in the *Phaedrus* beautiful, an obvious question arises: *why don't the best lovers have sex?* Plato repeats his position unequivocally: in the *Symposium*, even while in bed together, Socrates refuses to gratify a persistent Alcibiades (219b3–d2); in the *Phaedrus*, the philosophical lovers are chaste; in the *Laws*, homosexual sex is prohibited by law. Plato's reasoning to support this position is unclear, though, so we should try to get to the bottom of it. In the *Symposium*, Socrates tells Alcibiades that exchanging Alcibiades' body for Socrates wisdom wouldn't be a "fair trade"—it would be like exchanging bronze for gold—and wisdom is not something that Socrates could provide anyway (218e1–219a4). But this reasoning only works for Alcibiades' context, where Alcibiades thinks that Socrates can make him wise and that sex is a (partial) means to that. Why couldn't philosophical lovers, who have a more enlightened view about how to achieve wisdom, engage in sexual activity? The *Phaedrus* only really gives us one clue, which is that this would be shamefully going after a "pleasure contrary to nature" (251a1). But that response only pushes the question back: why would their sex be contrary to nature?

Luckily, the *Laws* gives a fuller justification for why homosexual sex should be prohibited. Plato there seems to provide two related justifications for the chastity of homosexual lovers: the first is that the natural function of sexual activity is the production of good children, and so any non-procreative sex is contrary to nature;¹² the second is that engaging in sexual activity leads to intemperance, because the pleasures involved in sex are *intense* and (unless you are making children) *unnecessary*. Thus while Plato endorses a certain form of homosexual *love*, he does not endorse any form of homosexual *sex*.

In the *Laws*, the Athenian explicitly says that the only use of sex in accordance with nature is in producing children (838e6; cf. 636c1–6). Because men don't have a womb, Plato is committed to the position that all homosexual sex is contrary to nature. Notably, however, he stresses that the same point applies to masturbation, sex with infertile women, and couples who would not produce good children (838e8–839a3). As the discussion of marriage from Book VI makes clear, Plato does not just think that *any* procreative sexual activity is good, but only that which produces good children. Marriages are carefully arranged to ensure that parents are of complementary psychological types and that they are in the optimal physical state for producing good children (772e7–773e4),¹³ for example, neither the wife *nor the husband* are to be drunk when copulating, as alcohol compromises the quality of the seed (775c4–d4); moreover, only people of certain ages are to produce children, and for no longer than 10 years (783d8–785b9). The prohibition on homosexual sex is interesting insofar as it is (to my knowledge) the only non-Judeo-Christian criticism of homosexual sex as an act-type rather than as a possible manifestation of intemperance in antiquity.¹⁴ But note that Plato is not targeting homosexual sex because it is *homosexual*; he is targeting it because it is *non-procreative*. Thus the prohibition on homosexual sex falls out of a more general teleology.

If sex is for the production of children, non-procreative sex is *unnecessary*. But so what? Isn't the fact that it's enjoyable and intensely pleasurable reason enough to think that it's good? Not for Plato. Recall from the *Phaedrus* that there are two contrary principles competing for supremacy in us: the innate desire for pleasure and the acquired belief about what's best. Because we want our judgments about what's best to be supreme and we want the rational part of our souls to rule over our appetites, we need to *resist* the temptation to engage in activities that produce bodily pleasure. Throughout his corpus, Plato emphasizes that the more we feed the appetites for bodily pleasure—the desires to eat, drink, and have sex—the bigger they grow and the harder they are to control (e.g., *Rep.* 558d4–561c8, 571b2–572b1; *Gorg.* 493d5–495a4,

505a6–b12). If we let our appetites get too strong, they will overturn our judgments about what is best all-things-considered and make us like a slave, ordered around by whatever appears most pleasant to us. The danger that we might become like animals who just eat, drink, and sleep all day is bad enough for Plato, but because sex is the most intense bodily pleasure, controlling sexual desire is paramount if we are to become temperate.

Thus, in the *Laws*, the Athenian claims that it is an additional benefit of the prohibition on non-procreative sex that it promotes temperance. If men have their sexual activities restricted such that they only sleep with their wives (at certain times), then these men will be less likely to commit adultery, less likely to be excessive with respect to food and drink, and more likely to be affectionate toward their own wives (839a6–b3). After a long history of promoting abstinence and monogamy, we might be skeptical of Plato's optimism here, but what is interesting from an historical perspective is that *Plato* anticipates that his audience is going to be completely unconvinced by his proposals too. The Athenian imagines a young man "bursting with seed" (as Saunders translates it) standing alongside them listening to the discussion, calling their proposals stupid and impossible (839b4–6). Apparently for Plato's Athenian readers, the idea of a monogamous, heterosexual sex life is ridiculous.

To help soften this apparent shock, Plato has the Athenian Visitor give a number of strategies to convince people that there could be a city where the citizens were self-controlled enough only to sleep with their spouses. First, he says, we could encourage people to think about homosexual sex as religiously prohibited like incest, where one doesn't feel any sexual desire for one's brother or sister, even while recognizing that they are attractive (838a4–e1). Second, athletes are capable of showing self-control and discipline in not having sex in the period leading up to a competition, and they are less well trained and lustier than people brought up with the kind of education that Plato recommends (839a5–840b1). Third, birds and other animals are capable of controlling themselves such that they only have sex during the appropriate mating seasons, and some animals are even monogamous for life. If animals can live this way without the guidance that reason, spirit, and law can provide, then humans should be able to do the same thing much more easily (840c11–e7). Finally, the Athenian suggests that by cultivating a culture where people are ashamed to engage in sexual activity or talk about it publicly, the appetites for sexual pleasure will be starved because the pleasures will always be mixed with the pain of feeling ashamed for engaging in sex. Thus decency and disgust will help to ensure that the citizens only have sex when they need to make children (841a6–c2).

These passages are not quite as charming as those we find in the *Phaedrus*, and we may find ourselves siding with the seed-full young man in the face of these implausible and puritanical proposals.¹⁵ Nonetheless, Plato's desperation in laying out these strategies should alert us to just how far he is departing from the cultural norms of his day. Of course, we can retain much of what Plato says about the different kinds of love without buying wholesale into his theories about the proper role of sex. In the first place, we could deny either (a) that sex has a function, (b) that sex has a *single* function, (c) that the function of sex is the procreation of children, or (d) that the function of sex is normative. Any of these options could get us out of the claim that non-procreative sex is unnatural. The temperance argument, however, is harder to rebut, and many people find Plato's model of the appetites plausible. Indeed, the intensity of the pleasure of (e.g.) heroin leads us to think that one cannot enjoy it in a temperate and self-controlled way—it's so addictive because it feels so good, and taking the drug once or twice a month won't satisfy the craving.¹⁶ Now, cheesecake is also pleasurable, but we do think we can eat cheesecake temperately on occasion without becoming slaves to its delicious charms. Thus the task for the person who is generally friendly to Plato's views on love but who rejects his views on sex is to explain why sex is more like cheesecake and less like heroin. If it were shown that one could

have sex in such a way that neither led you to become intemperate nor led you to treat your beloved as an object to use for your own pleasure, then I see no reason why Platonic philosophical love couldn't involve at least some sexual activity. At any rate, hopefully we can understand why Plato himself thought that the best homosexual lovers are to remain chaste with each other.

Taking a step back and appreciating Plato's arguments, it is easy to see why the question, "Was Plato against homosexuality?" is somewhat misguided.¹⁷ While sexual orientation is no easy thing to define, most people have some intuitive notion that homosexuality regularly involves being attracted to, loving, having sex with, and being in relationships with people of the same gender. But we cannot give a straight answer to whether Plato was against *that*, because the philosophical love between men he endorses includes lifelong commitment but not marriage, physical attraction at the other's beauty and physical affection but not sex.¹⁸ Thus we should remember that sexual orientation is part of our conceptual framework but probably not Plato's.

Given that women have been largely absent from this discussion except as vessels for producing children, a final question about Plato's views on love and sex remains: is it possible to be a *heterosexual* philosophical lover, and, if so, could *they* could have sex? Presumably the reason that Plato focuses on erotic attachment between males is that females weren't typically educated in ancient Greece, so if a male were pursuing a female, it may have been assumed that he was after her for her body and not for the good qualities of her soul.¹⁹ Thus any male erotically attached to a female must be a pleasure lover. Now, in fact, this argument is too quick, as Plato in the *Republic* thinks that women can be philosophers and so attain the same kind of knowledge that makes men virtuous.²⁰ Plato clearly thinks that women can have the kinds of souls that are worthy of love. Notably, though, Plato takes the quasi-feminist arguments of the *Republic* to be controversial and there is only so much you can argue for in one dialogue. Therefore, though he never says as much explicitly, it seems consistent with Plato's views that philosophical love could occur between men and women.

Should a philosophical heterosexual couple have sex, then? Certainly not often. Plato's arguments from the *Laws* will still apply to the heterosexual couple as much as to the homosexual couple. The pleasure from sex is still intense and thus dangerous from the standpoint of temperance and self-control, which means it should be minimized. Moreover, our heterosexual philosophers should only have sex insofar as they need to produce children. Given this goal, heterosexual sex between philosophical lovers will probably aim less at generating pleasure for oneself and one's lover and more at efficiency.

Conclusion: Are Platonic Lovers Just Friends?

We can end by reflecting on a problem I raised early in the chapter, namely whether Plato is even talking about love at all. *Erôs* can easily be translated as "desire" and *erôs* was explicitly defined in the *Laws* as a species of friendship (*philia*). So are these non-sexual Platonic lovers really just friends?

I don't think so. First, the emotion they experience is described as being perceptibly more intense than that of friendly fellow-feeling. Moreover, the person is initially inspired by their partner's *physical* beauty and, while this develops into a profound love of their character, we are not told that the attraction ever fades—only that we come to think that who they are is more important than how they look. Also consider how Plato describes how the person feels when in the presence of their partner: they are filled with warmth, excitement, tingling, swelling, and joy. The Greek is as euphemistic as the English here, and it would be strange to claim that the

best kind of friendship entails this kind of phenomenology. I care deeply about my friends and think that they are wonderful people, but they don't make me tingle and I am not filled with streams of warmth when our gazes connect. What Plato is describing is *love* and while it has much in common with friendship, it is also more than friendship. Finally, while Plato does not think that engaging in sexual activity is necessary to have the best kind of loving relationship, it's not obvious that we think it is necessary now either. We recognize that (especially older) couples who no longer have sex can still be deeply in love with each other. Nor do we think that sex is even necessary for couples to be in love in the first place: many couples are sincere in their wedding vows before they have had sex, and insofar as we recognize asexuality as a genuine phenomenon, we can see how two people might love each other deeply without also assuming anything about what they do with their genitalia.

What is distinctive about Platonic love, then, is the intense longing for the beauty of the beloved in both body and soul. I can like a friend for who they are, but Platonic lovers are *drawn* to their beloved in a way that goes beyond mere approbation. They want to be with them, see them grow into a better version of themselves, and they want to develop their own character so that they can better benefit their beloved in their life together. No doubt this kind of Platonic love is rare, but Plato's point is to highlight the importance of the struggle between the two kinds of love in us. The philosophical lovers are aspirational—we should try to be *more like them* in our relationships, even if we fall short. Nonetheless, there is nothing impossible about the kind of philosophical lovers Plato describes. Even if we disagree with him on the sex question, Plato is surely right in thinking that the way in which the philosophical lovers are disposed toward each other is a truly beneficial and divine thing.²¹

Notes

- 1 Most say surprisingly little about love, though this is largely due to the fragmentary nature of the texts. Aristotle's discussion of friendship in Books VIII–IX of the *Nicomachean Ethics* mentions romantic relationships only in passing; Epicurus thinks that love is always irrational and so should simply be purged, though we may engage in casual sex with friends under certain circumstances (see Arenson (2016)). The Stoic texts are extremely fragmentary, but the early Stoics appear to have distinguished between a good form of love that includes sexual activity and a pathological form of love which ought to be purged (see Gaca (2000); Inwood (1997); Schofield (1999)). For a helpful summary of the different philosophical views in antiquity, see Nussbaum (2002).
- 2 See Vlastos (1981) and Sheffield (2012). Of course, there is much to be said about love in the *Symposium*, but this initial reaction is at least common among my students. Sheffield herself (2011) suggests that the *Phaedrus* is a better place to look in Plato for an account of interpersonal love, and I owe much to her excellent work on this topic.
- 3 For a thorough treatment of this topic in the *Laws*, see Moore (2005: chapter VII).
- 4 The Middle Platonist commentator Alcinous also takes this passage to be the best presentation of Plato's views on love (see *Handbook of Platonism*: 33.3).
- 5 Trans. Saunders, with modifications. Translations are mine unless stated otherwise.
- 6 In Greece, your *ergon* was your job or the main skill (*technē*) at which you made a living; your *parergon* was your hobby or what you did on the side. Thanks to Emily Hulme Kozey for this point.
- 7 The Athenians thought that there was an appropriate period of time that one could stay in a homosexual relationship. Once one started showing the signs of manhood, most importantly the ability to grow a full beard, it was expected that the older lover in the relationship would encourage the younger lover to marry a woman and start a family, breaking off their relationship. Socrates' point here is that the pleasure-lover doesn't care about the social consequences for the younger beloved, who should be entering the next stage of his development. Emily Hulme Kozey has also pointed out to me that Greeks often inherited their parents' wealth when they were married, so stopping a man from getting married amounted to keeping them from inheriting.

- 8 These relationships often involved the older lover giving material and political advantages to the younger beloved in exchange for sexual gratification.
- 9 See Nussbaum (2001: chapter 7).
- 10 For the importance of the reciprocal nature of love in the *Phaedrus*, see Halperin (1986).
- 11 Trans. Nehamas and Woodruff.
- 12 It may be thought that Plato is making a fallacious argument here, insofar as he is appealing to what is natural as a standard for what is good. Plato, like most ancient philosophers, is using “natural” in a normative way that is not vulnerable to this objection (see Annas (1995: chapter 3)). Nature is an ideal—not what happens regularly or innately.
- 13 Clark is right to highlight the importance of the different psychological types for Plato’s theory of marriage in the *Laws*, but he is wrong to think that this is directly relevant for the condemnation of homosexual sex. Clark (2000: 23, 27) claims that the problem with homosexual lovers is that they are too similar and that homosexual lovers tend to go after those who are most similar to themselves. But this is contrary to the text quoted in the first section where the Athenian says explicitly that in the bad form of love, homosexual lovers tend to go after those who are *most opposite* to themselves (837b2). Plato’s problem is not that homosexual lovers are picking mates who are too similar to themselves and thus producing psychologically unbalanced children—his problem is that they are *not producing children at all*.
- 14 Nussbaum (1994) argues that it fits the more common intemperance model, but *Laws* 839a6–7 makes clear that prohibiting sexual activity being beneficial for developing temperance is an *additional* reason for favoring the law *on top of* its naturalness.
- 15 Plato recognizes that even these strategies might not be enough, so he suggests a second-best approach, whereby men are allowed to go to prostitutes just as long as they don’t tell anybody about it and don’t get caught—and if they do get caught, they will lose their citizen rights (841c4–842a2).
- 16 This is why Plato describes trying to satisfy pleasures as like trying to fill leaky jars (*Gorg.* 493d5–495a4).
- 17 This became a topic of legal controversy during the 1993 Colorado case of *Evans v. Romer*, during which professors of Classics and Ancient Philosophy, Martha Nussbaum, John Finnis, and Robert George, were called in as expert witnesses. As I understand the case, much of the argument rested on the fact that Nussbaum was right about the status of homosexual *love* in Plato, while Finnis and George were right about the status of homosexual *sex*.
- 18 As we saw in the *Phaedrus*, the philosophical lovers lie down together, touch each other, and kiss each other. But how *sexual* we find this depends, I suspect, on whether we were brought up in the British-American cultural milieu rather than that of, e.g., France or the Mediterranean (and post the homophobic panic the Oscar Wilde trial generated).
- 19 Importantly, females were generally kept separate from men in ancient Athens and marriages were arranged. So other than the women of his family, most women an Athenian man would have interacted with would have been paid for their services (see Davidson (1998: part II)). Thus because Plato wants to emphasize the voluntary, respectful, mutual affection between philosophical lovers, male–male relationships are the obvious candidate to exemplify this dynamic.
- 20 See Annas (1976).
- 21 Thanks first to my students at the University of Arizona in my classes on Love, Sex, and Friendship in Ancient Thought, who helped to clarify my thinking on this topic. Thanks also to Julia Annas, Mark Barnard, Dylan Barton, Emily Hulme Kozey, Adrienne Martin, Suzanne Obdrzalek, Levi Patel, Sasha Rasmussen, Rachel Singpurwalla, Eric Solis, and Robert Wallace for comments on earlier versions of this chapter.

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Plato on Love and Sex

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Further Reading

The landmark works on Greek homosexual and romantic norms are:

- Foucault, M. (1986), *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 2, The Use of Pleasure*, Vintage Books; Dover, K. (1989), *Greek Homosexuality*, Harvard University Press. For a more recent (and highly entertaining) study, see Davidson, J. (1998), *Courtesans and Fishcakes: The Consuming Passions of Classical Athens*, St. Martin's Press.

There is an enormous body of literature on love in Plato's *Symposium*. For a judicious and thorough treatment, see Sheffield, F. (2009), *Plato's Symposium: The Ethics of Desire*, Oxford University Press. Other seminal works on this issue include: Vlastos, G. (1981), "The Individual as an Object of Love in Plato", in *Platonic Studies*, Princeton University Press, 3–34; Denyer, N. (2001), *Plato's Alcibiades*, Cambridge University Press; Kosman, A. (1976), "Platonic Love", in Werkmeister (ed.) *Facets of Plato's Philosophy*, Assen, 53–69; Nussbaum, M. (1986), "The Speech of Alcibiades: A Reading of Plato's *Symposium*", in *The Fragility of Goodness*, Cambridge University Press, 165–95; Price, A. (1989), *Love and Friendship in Plato and Aristotle*, Oxford University Press.