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WISE WOMAN VERSUS MANIC MAN: DIOTIMA AND ALCIBIADES IN PLATO'S *SYMPOSIUM*

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The dilemma Martha Nussbaum sees Plato posing in the *Symposium* is choosing either the earthly, bodily dimension or the spiritual dimension of human nature. Laura Kaplan has drawn on Luce Irigaray's interpretation of Diotima's speech to argue that loving her husband is an example of a practice that successfully mediates between the two horns of this dilemma, thereby dissolving it. Yet I believe that the conflict Nussbaum finds between Alcibiades' carnal emotionality and Socrates' spiritual purity is stubbornly real. Kaplan argues that for Alcibiades, unrequited love is symbolic of the tragedy of human life: we love the divine, the spiritual, which we cannot reach through love. I will argue that Alcibiades' love fails precisely because of his tragic belief that the divine can be reached through his own tormented, passionate, intoxicated, and manic love, whereas Socrates, the lover of wisdom, successfully loves because he wisely believes that the divine can be reached through calm, sober reason. Thus I disagree with Kaplan on this point: Plato did *not* reject the idea that Alcibiades' unrequited love is symbolic of the tragedy of human life. Rather, Plato recognized that Socrates' rational, reflective love, learned from the wise Diotima, is the only means of achieving secure, self-sufficient happiness and so the only way to avoid tragedy in human life.

Let us examine Diotima's speech more closely. Diotima observes that everyone desires immortality. Some people are pregnant in body and provide themselves with a kind of genetic immortality through childbirth (Plato, 1989, 208e). Others are more pregnant in their souls. Diotima says that what is fitting for a soul to bear and bring to birth is "wisdom (*phronēsis*) and the rest of virtue" (209a3–4). Moreover, "by far the greatest and most beautiful part of wisdom," Diotima claims, "deals with the proper ordering of cities and households, and that is called moderation (*sōphrosunē*) and justice" (209a6–8). Diotima argues that the parents of psychic children "have much more to share than do the parents of human children, and have a firmer bond of friendship (*philia*), because the children in whom they have a share are more beautiful and more immortal" (209c4–7). Psychic children, the offspring of souls, are virtues and ideas, and these brainchildren are immortal. So since the parents of brainchildren have immortal offspring, these offspring "provide their parents with immortal glory and remembrance" (209d3). The beneficial

effects of virtuous deeds and good ideas that spring from great minds survive long after their creators. It is these virtuous thinkers who are celebrated and honored by their people, not the parents of human children. Making human babies is commonplace. Diotima explains that the gods love the person who has used reason, the mind's eye, to see the forms themselves, and thereby gives psychic birth and nourishment to true virtue, "and if any human being could become immortal, it would be he" (212a6–7).

Who is this paragon of virtue, this human who approaches the divine? It is Socrates. In Alcibiades' speech Socrates' virtues of character are vividly related. We are told that no one has ever seen Socrates drunk (214a), that he is a sober, temperate man (216d), that he saved Alcibiades' life in battle (220d–e), and that he is a very brave man (221b). Alcibiades says that he could not help admiring Socrates' natural character, his moderation, his fortitude, and how Socrates' strength and wisdom went beyond his wildest dreams (219d). Socrates was also indifferent to bodily pleasures and pains. He was unbothered by both hunger and feasts; he did not much like to drink, yet he could drink the best drinkers under the table without getting tipsy (220a). Socrates was impervious to bitter winter cold (220a) and was totally unmoved by Alcibiades' attempted seduction (219c; cf. Epictetus' *Discourses* 2.18.22). These virtues inside Socrates strike Alcibiades as "godlike—so bright and beautiful, so utterly amazing" (216e7–217a1). But his godlike virtue is only part of Socrates' bizarreness (215a). His other extraordinary powers (216c) include supreme intellectual tenacity (220c–d); Alcibiades reports that Socrates "never lost an argument in his life" (213e3–4). At the very end of the *Symposium*, after all the other symposiasts have either gone home or fallen asleep, Socrates' *logoi* (arguments, reasoned utterances) endure, as he tries to prove to the sleepy Agathon and the half asleep Aristophanes that the skillful tragic dramatist should also be a comic poet (223d). Socrates' philosophical stamina prevails, and at dawn, after Aristophanes and Agathon have nodded off, Socrates gets up and spends the day at the Lyceum as he routinely does. Thus Socrates' brainchildren outlast the prize-winning tragedian Agathon, the comedian Aristophanes, and everyone else.

Alcibiades tells us that Socrates "is so bizarre, his ways and his ideas are so unusual, that, search as you might, you will never find anyone else, alive or dead, who is even remotely like him. The best you can do is not to compare him to anything human, but to liken him, as I do, to Silenus and the satyrs, and the same goes for his ideas and arguments" (221d2–6). If we remember that Socrates fathered three sons with his wife Xanthippe, we can now see the insight of Diotima's remark that those whose souls give birth to virtues and to good ideas "have much more to share... and have a firmer bond of friendship" (209c5–6) than those whose bodies give birth to children. Socrates' ideas and arguments might look ridiculous superficially, but, as Alcibiades explains:

if you go behind their surface, you'll realize that no other arguments make any sense. They're truly worthy of a god, bursting with figures of virtue inside. They're of great—no, of the greatest—importance for anyone who wants to become a truly good man. (222a2–6)

Socrates' brainchildren are extraordinary, immortal, godlike, and divine. Socrates' philosophical ideas are of the greatest importance for becoming truly good.

How was Socrates able to ascend the Ladder of Love (210a–211d) which Diotima depicts so eloquently? Socrates' dialectical ability, his mastery of the method of *elenchus*, and his powerful *logoi* enabled him to understand the forms. His love of wisdom leads him to love the other virtues—moderation, courage, and justice. This wisdom is only achieved through the exercise of sober, judicious, stable reason. Socratic love is rational, self-controlled, and the source of unshakable equanimity. Alcibiades, in contrast, has been “snake-bitten” in his soul by “the madness (*mania*), the Bacchic frenzy of philosophy” (218a2–b4). But Alcibiades' frenzied love is a manic, passionate love of a *philosopher*, not the pure, spiritual love of *philosophy*. Socrates says he is terrified by Alcibiades' fierce passion (213d5–6). Alcibiades' passion is drunken, uncontrolled, and dangerous because it can do violence. Socrates' virtue, born of philosophy, is rock-solid reliable since the wisdom he has won by reason cannot be taken from him. In stark contrast, Alcibiades' passionate, manic, intemperate love drives his obsessive desire to win over Socrates and to possess him in both body and soul. Alcibiades' crazed love of a flesh and blood person plunges him into the most wretched emotional slavery. Try as he may to win over Socrates, it is not in his power. Socrates' rational love, in sharp contrast, depends on nothing but his own mental concentration and investigative stamina. Consequently, it is up to no one but himself. Socrates is free to win the object of his love: understanding, wisdom, and virtue. Alcibiades is doomed to frustration, enslaved by his passionate obsession with an *erōmenos* he cannot resist. These are clearly two very different types of love.

Does it matter that Alcibiades' passionate love for Socrates is for a man? No. Nussbaum observes that Alcibiades had a famous mistress, a courtesan named Timandra. Socrates' wife Xanthippe is a woman too. Heterosexual intercourse can produce offspring, of course, whereas homosexual union cannot. For this reason Alcibiades' desire for immortality cannot be satisfied through childbirth, and so his passionate love of Socrates is futile in this respect too. What matters is not whether the love is homosexual or heterosexual, but whether it is drunken, passionate, insatiable, intemperate, frenzied, Bacchic, uncontrollable, potentially violent, manic, and so ultimately a pathological illness, or sober, self-sufficient, rational, calm, temperate, stable, secure, and mentally healthy. In the *Symposium*, though perhaps not in the *Phaedrus*, Plato presents these two types of love as mutually exclusive. We

cannot have both. There is no way to mediate between the two since vacillating back and forth between them can satisfy neither. The intellectual discipline and commitment of reason required in Socratic love precludes entanglement in the emotional chaos and psychic pain of Alcibiadic love. Socratic love is divine, humane, salutary, and immortal. Alcibiadic love is bestial, ferocious, and fleeting. Between the two types there can be no compromise. Our choice is therefore both radical and real.

When Socrates first arrives at the symposium, Agathon invites Socrates to sit down next to him in the hope that by touching Socrates, he might catch a bit of Socrates' wisdom. Socrates replies, "How wonderful it would be, dear Agathon, if the foolish were filled with wisdom (*sophia*) simply by touching the wise. If only wisdom (*sophia*) were like water, which always flows from a full cup into an empty one when we connect them with a piece of yarn" (175d). Even if, lying together under their cloaks, Alcibiades could have sexually touched Socrates, he would have grown none the wiser because he would not have reached the vast sea of beauty (210d4), the beauty of knowledge (210c7).

The tragedy and comedy of human life is that finding one's Aristophanic "other half," one's love mate or soul mate, as we say, is a matter of luck. But achieving *sophia* is a matter of the strength of our reason and our courage in the pursuit of knowledge—that is, it is a matter of hard work. That is ours to choose.

Works Cited

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