Redefining *Erōs*: *Symposium* 204d-206b

Socrates' speech in the *Symposium* famously contends that philosophy is the highest form of *erōs* (209e5-210d6). The fact that philosophy, considered by Plato to be a purely rational activity, could be rightly categorized as a form of *erōs*, widely recognized by the Greeks as an irrational force capable of overcoming reason (cf. *Phaedr*. 249d4, 265e3; *Il.* 3.395-417; *Theog.* 120-23), is a bizarre and persistent puzzle. What is perhaps most puzzling is that, elsewhere in the dialogues, Plato treats desire as an unfortunate but unavoidable part of human nature, which stands in the way of knowledge, and in the most successful of cases, must be tamed or ruled by reason (cf. *Phaedo* 64a-67d, *Rep*. 442a-b). It is truly strange, therefore, that, in the *Symposium*, desire should be what stands at the heart of all philosophical activity, including the acquisition of knowledge and virtue. The question is, why?

In response to this puzzle, some have proposed that Plato's erotic dialogues, the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*, mark a shift in his thinking about the nature of philosophy; because these works identify philosophy as a variety of *erōs*, he must no longer conceive of philosophizing as a purely rational activity (Nussbaum, 1986). This paper argues for a somewhat different and subtler solution, one that does not require us to think that Plato has suddenly begun to think of philosophy as, at least in part, antithetical to reason. This paper proposes that the erotic dialogues, the *Symposium*, in particular, marks a change in Plato's thinking, not about the nature of philosophy, but about the nature of *erōs*.

It emerges from an often overlooked part of Socrates' conversation with Diotima that Plato does not conceive of *erōs* in a standard way. *Erōs*, on this account, is not merely the familiar sort of sexual desire, or the kind of longing one associates with being in love with another individual (Vlastos, 1999). Instead, Diotima argues (and Socrates agrees), *erōs* is a more general category of desire, which aims at what is good (205d1-206a1). On this view, "lovers" of money (businessmen), "lovers" of sport (athletes), and "lovers" of wisdom (philosophers) are rightly so-called, not because each feels sexual longing—i.e. the businessman is not sexually attracted to money—but because each aims to achieve some particular vision of what is good (205d1-9) (Sheffield, 2006). Thus, the *Symposium* proposes a more expansive definition of what *erōs* is; it is a motivational force for what is good, which includes sexual longing for another, but also undergirds a variety of other (if not all) human activities.

Once we see that *erōs* has undergone such an important definitional shift, it is easier to see why philosophy might be rightly cast as the highest form of *erōs*, or the right way to love. If *erōs* just is the persistent human desire for what is good, it is no wonder that philosophy, because it alone is capable of attaining what is good—bringing human beings into contact with the forms—is the best way of enacting *erōs*. Put simply, since *erōs* just is the persistent human desire for what is good, it is unsurprising that philosophy should be the right way to fulfill or satisfy that desire. For, philosophy alone is capable of actually *achieving* what is good. Other human activities, i.e. moneymaking, athletics, poetry, etc., aim at achieving some vision of what is good, but misses the mark. Philosophy alone aims at what is truly good, delivering its disciples to knowledge and virtue.

Bibliography

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