

Platonic Love for Persons

Vlastos (1973) raises a famous critique of Plato's account of love in the *Symposium*. The highest form of *erōs*, as it is described in Diotima's *scala amoris*, is not for any particular individual but takes as its object the form of beauty itself (211a1-d1). Furthermore, *erōs* for an individual features in this account purely as stepping-stone to the philosopher's comprehension of beauty. Not only is it difficult to understand what this impersonal *erōs* is, but it is difficult to understand why Plato thinks it is such an important part of a life well lived. So puzzled is Vlastos by the impersonality of *erōs* on this account that he ultimately finds it lacking in "kindness, tenderness, compassion," and "respect for the integrity of the beloved" (30). What is missing, he claims, is an account of love for "persons who are themselves worthy of love for their own sake."

Since the publication of Vlastos' critique, many have attempted to save Plato's account by showing that love of particular individuals is consistent with or important to the philosopher's pursuit of beauty (i.e. Price 1981, Nehamas 2007, Sheffield 2009, Urstad 2010). In other words, scholars have attempted to show that the impersonal love of the *Symposium* is not so impersonal after all. This paper takes a somewhat different approach; it argues that the impersonal nature of *erōs* in the *Symposium* is consistent with an overarching lack of esteem for personal relationships elsewhere in the dialogues. In the *Crito*, for example, Socrates appears largely unconcerned with the care of his sons, ranking his obligation to them well behind his duty to the laws (54b2-3). Similarly, in the opening lines of the *Phaedo*, he coolly sends Xanthippe and son away, opting instead to spend his final hours in philosophical conversation (60a). The *Republic* is impersonal to an extreme; Socrates argues that wives, children (423e-424a), and property (464c) will be held

in common in the perfectly just city. It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, to find a form of radically impersonal love in the *Symposium*; given Plato's views towards social and familial relationships, more generally, it hardly any wonder that the truly philosophical spirit ranks love of beauty itself above love for any particular person.

However, once we admit that the *Symposium* is wholly consistent with Plato's anti-individualistic tendencies elsewhere—and that Vlastos' observations about the impersonality of love in the *Symposium* are therefore apt—it also becomes somewhat easier to see that Plato's view is anything but disrespectful to the integrity of individuals. One needs only to look as far as Plato's justifications for his extreme brand of anti-individualism. For example, when discussing the draconian policies of the *Republic*, he ultimately claims that the goal is not to make any individual perfectly happy but rather to make the entire lot of them as happy as possible (420b). To illustrate he provides the metaphor of a statue: to paint any portion of the whole more beautifully than the rest would throw the end product out of harmony (420c-d). In this way, then, respect for the integrity of *all* people might lead one to never favor any one person in particular. What this paper concludes is that there is perhaps a similar rationale for why a truly philosophical spirit would move beyond the love of particular individuals—when he comes to love the form of beauty itself, there is a sense in which he thereby loves every beautiful individual equally. It is correct, then, to understand Plato's account of love as highly impersonal but wrong to assume that this in any way entails a lack of respect for individuals.

Bibliography

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