



*Platonic love**

L. A. KOSMAN

It is not surprising that love, like other concepts which seem to have their first home in individual and personal contexts, should have assumed for Plato cosmic and mythic proportions. Throughout the dialogues may still be heard the voices of Hesiod and Empedocles, the voices of poets, philosophers, and myth-makers for whom the human soul is a miniature of the world soul and Eros and Philia principles of cosmic magnitude.

In Plato, the cosmic dimensions of love are most explicitly articulated in the early *Symposium* speeches, in Erixymachus' invocation of Er $\acute{\alpha}$ s as a principle operative not simply "ἐπὶ τοῖς ψυψαῖς τῶν ἀνθρώπων, in the dealings of human life," but "ἐπὶ πᾶν, everywhere in the universe, in all matters human and divine alike";¹ in Agathon's pompous and cliché-ridden account of Eros as that by which all living things are begotten and come forth, a principle governing alike the Muses, Apollo, Hephaestus, Pallas Athene, and Zeus himself, who by love attained "the governance of gods and men."² These cosmic descriptions of love are not simple mythological atavisms which Plato overcomes in directing his philosophical attention to the moral questions of human intercourse. For in general, even in the earlier and middle dialogues, the apparently local moral concerns have much broader and more ambitious overtones, metaphysical and epistemological in nature, every bit as much as does the much later search for the Sophist.

Nor is this a feature of those concepts alone which have clear and determinate histories as mythic personalities in Homer or Hesiod. Justice, as much as Eros, is writ small, so to speak, in the human soul, and although finally it may be that habitat which most concerns Plato in the *Republic*,³ δικαιοσύνη is undeniably a principle by which

* I did not know Robert Miller during his lifetime, but I have learned something of him from knowing those he loved, including Plato, and from the considerable love others had for him. What I know makes me honored to dedicate this essay to his memory. The memory of the righteous, my people say, is a blessing to us all.

the universe itself is apportioned according to the virtues of its parts, a principle by which the good distributes itself properly into forms and then into particulars, and thus perhaps the fundamental metaphysical principle according to which each thing is itself in conformity to its true nature. The ultimate justice is thus the justice of appearance to being, i.e. of the "lower" to the "higher" world.⁴

So with Eros; as each thing in the world of appearance strives to incorporate its nature, i.e. to 'imitate' its true form, it exhibits and acts out that world's erotic striving toward the world of being. But appearances are not outlandish; they are citizens, ambassadors perhaps, sometimes in exile, but citizens nonetheless of that higher world, and their striving is thus revealed to be, as it were, auto-erotic, the eros of a world in love not with some alien empire, but with its own true order, that which is to it φύσει οἰκεῖον.

I

None of this is surprising given the proximity of Plato's to an older and still vital, if already ironically appropriated mythopoeic view of the world. Indeed what philosophers have found disturbing about Plato's views is not that they are confined to those contexts of interpersonal love which most of us would take as paradigmatic instances of love, but that it is precisely those contexts which they fail to give an adequate account of or positively exclude.

Two basic objections to Plato's theory of love are by now commonplace in the literature, and both find that theory inadequate precisely in so far as it fails to account for the love between persons, the love between parent and child, man and woman, lover and lover, friend and friend.

(1) Love on Plato's theory is basically egoistical and selfish. A person cannot, according to Plato, love or desire another for the sake of that other, i.e. for the other's good, but only for his own sake, that is, for whatever good that other might provide him; indeed as Gregory Vlastos writes:

if A loves B, he does so because of some benefit he needs from B and for the sake of just that benefit... no reason is offered why we could love anyone except for what we could get out of him. The egoistic perspective of "love" so conceived becomes unmistakable when Socrates, generalizing, argues that "if one were in want of nothing, one would feel no affection; ...and he who felt no affection would not love".⁵

(2) Proper love on Plato's view is not love of an individual person, but either (ideally) love of beauty itself, love of that unchanging, ungenerated, perfectly proportioned καλόν revealed veiledly in the final ἐποπτικά of Diotima's speech, or at best love of the cluster of beautiful and desirable qualities instantiated in the individual.

This seems to me the cardinal flaw in Plato's theory. It does not provide for love of whole persons, but only for love of that abstract version of persons which consists of the complex of their best qualities. This is the reason why personal affection ranks so low in Plato's scala amoris.⁶

The Platonic lover does not love *anyone*: he loves only the Good, either in abstraction or in concrete manifestations.⁷

These objections are independent of one another, though sometimes they're confused, and sometimes merged into a portmanteau objection, according to which Plato's theory allows as the object of legitimate love only the collection of egoistically useful characteristics which merely happen to be instantiated in an individual. But that the two are independent is clear. A theory of love might fail to allow individual persons as appropriate objects of love without being egoistic. A theory e.g. which assimilated love to worship either of gods or of impersonal and admirable universals might maintain that the love of individual persons is idolatrous, without locating the origin of love for an appropriate object in the benefit which such love or that object might occasion for the lover.

Conversely, a theory of love might recognize individuals as proper and appropriate objects of love while still being egoistic, that is, while still maintaining that the love of another is only for the benefit or advantage which might accrue to the lover. It may be that such a theory ought ultimately to be described as deficient in that the individual is not loved for his own sake; but to make that out, it will be necessary to add some argument to the effect that individuals are being loved *qua* individuals only when they are being loved for their own sake, and that argument couldn't be generated from the concept of an individual alone.

The two objections might be thought to be connected in the following way: it is precisely because of the egoistic nature of Plato's love, precisely, that is, because the love is directed toward and conditional upon specific qualities which are instantiated in the beloved and considered to be advantageous to the lover, that the beloved individual is, so to speak, bypassed.

We cannot love another person for himself, but only as a vehicle and partial embodiment of what we really want — the Good. By seeing that this is the real object of his love, the Platonic philosopher disintoxicates himself from the interest in persons as such. For what is a person but a conglomeration of accidental properties that chance and nature have thrown together? No, Plato would say, to love anyone is really to love the goodness which is in him.⁸

But it is not a condition of this bypassing occurring that the qualities for which and conditional upon which the individual is said to be loved should be advantageous to the lover. To generate the paradox that conditional love of the individual is not love of the *individual*, it is necessary only that the love be conditional, that is, bestowed in response to and on the condition of qualities which the individual happens to have, whatever the independent relation of these qualities to the lover. To say of a theory that it understands love to be determined by or conditional upon the worth of the beloved is thus not the same as to say that the theory is egoistical. A non-egoistical theory might distinguish between worthy and unworthy objects of love in such a way as to generate the same difficulties. This makes clear that if we're to escape the difficulties attributed to Plato's theory we shall need something more than a non-egoistical theory of love; we shall need a theory in which love is unconditional, given regardless of the worth or worthlessness of the object. As long as love is in response to or conditional upon the object's worth, or in general its being *lovable*, then it would seem to be those features in virtue of which the object is lovable which constitute the true and proper objects of love, not the individual who happens to have them. Note that this is a feature of a theory of love which is the result not of it being a theory of *love*, but rather of the demand that it be an *individual* who is the object of love. What we are asking for is some axiological analogue of *de re* necessity. We are demanding, so to speak, *de re* and not *de dicto* valuation; but valuation seems possible only under some description, and then it doesn't seem to be of the individual, who only *accidentally* enjoys that description. If then we wish love of an *individual*, it seems that we had best resign ourselves to dispensing with the valuation.

In fact, it is in accordance with just such reasoning that the second criticism has been directed against Plato, contrasting the Platonic theory unfavorably with what Nygren and others have characterized as the agapic, Christian view, a view according to which love is not

conditional and contingent upon worth, but unconditional and creative, spontaneous, uncaused, indifferent to human merit.⁹

There may be much to be said in favor of a love of this sort, but it doesn't seem to me that one of the things which can be said is that it restores the individual as the proper object of love. For what is demanded when we demand that an individual person be the object of love is not simply that love be directed toward the individual, *per accidens*, but that it be directed toward the individual *qua* that individual, that is, that love recognize the individual as particular and unique and as loved for being precisely who he is. But wholly unconditional love cannot provide this recognition; it is again only *accidental* that *I* am loved. Since there's nothing about me which has occasioned the love, there's no important respect in which I, in contrast to the person who happened along in this place at this moment, am loved. I have become, so to speak, the recipient of an erotic lottery.

The difficulty of articulating a theory of love which recognizes the individual *qua* individual as object of love thus seems perplexingly to infect any theory, whether it views love as conditional or unconditional. The individual frustrates our efforts by a maddening transparency. Insofar as I love him for his qualities, the qualities seem to constitute the proper object of my love; insofar as I love him irrespective of his particular qualities, it becomes unclear in what sense I may be said to love, specifically, *him*.

The problem may be put in another way; we want a theory which will account for our prereflective paradoxical demands that love be charitable and unconditional, yet not independent of features of the beloved which the lover recognizes and values. We want our lovers at once to accept us as we are and admire us for what we are. In theology, this is the problem of reconciling God's merciful love and demanding a problem which, as the prophets testify, God Himself was not comfortable with. We may wish, if we find the demand finally an impossible one, to choose for other reasons in favor of what Plato's critics have characterized as agapic love; but we ought not to characterize this as a choice in favor of a love which recognizes individuals.

II

In the *Symposium*, Socrates' speech introduces a fundamental shift in the direction and understanding of the nature of eros. In the

first place, beginning with the conversation with Agathon,¹⁰ Socrates reveals or first makes explicit a) the intentional, object-saturated character of love, and b) the separation of love from its object, the fact, that is, that the object which defines and determines love is always something which love lacks. These facts, in the second place, lead to an important shift in the description of the nature of eros, a shift strikingly represented in the mythological account of Eros no longer as a god, but as a daimon poised in metaxy, in intermediate state, between being and non-being, and thus not itself good and beautiful, but of, that is in love with, the good and beautiful.¹¹ This shift, finally, is connected with a change in rhetorical strategy, as Socrates turns from a praise of love to a praise of love's object, a praise which culminates in the moving if problematic description of αὐτὸ τὸ καλόν with which Socrates' speech ends.¹² The importance of this last move may be overlooked. If love is intentional of an object not yet realized, then the love or praise of love will constitute a project essentially selfcontradictory in nature, for in constituting love with the opacity of an object, it will frustrate the intentional transparency which love must have toward *its* proper object. The love of love, the establishment as a *goal* of the unconsummated erotic stance, constitutes a project represented in the worse elements of the courtly love tradition, a project to whose dangers and attractiveness the Greek philosophical sensibility was always sensitive.¹³ Much of the brilliance of the *Symposium* rests in the subtlety with which we are led to the very threshold of this position, and at the last minute averted by Socrates' rhetorical transformation, his move from a *praise* of love, an encomium of eros in λογῶ, to an exhibition to love, an encomium of eros in ἐργῶ, in the form of a speech praising the beautiful.

The metaxy of eros does not come upon us completely by surprise in the dialogue; it has run as an undercurrent in several of the previous speeches, and is most importantly prefigured by the startling statement of Socrates at the beginning of the evening that the subject of τὰ ἐρωτικά is the one subject on which he is an expert.¹⁴ This claim does not contradict his more usual profession of ignorance; for that profession is essentially a claim to be situated between ignorance and wisdom, a claim to be a philosopher, a lover of wisdom, where that love is revealed in and constituted by the recognition of ignorance, the recognized separation from and desire of wisdom. These two states of intermediateness are brought together in the earliest part of Diotima's reported conversation.¹⁵

I have rehearsed these obvious features of Socrates' speech as preparatory to focusing attention upon the important question, what according to Plato is the proper object of eros. Two further points must be made prior to turning directly to that question, one methodological, one a minor point of phrasing.

The methodological point is this: no unambiguous answer to the question, what did Plato hold, can be obtained by mere attention to the views put forward by Socrates. I say this not because of a difference between the views of the historic Socrates and the historic Plato, a difference often thought to be signalled in the *Symposium* by the presence of Diotima and her warning that Socrates may not understand fully the "higher mysteries",¹⁶ but because of the differences of view between the fictional Socrates and the authorial Plato. Plato is a philosophical poet, which means that the arguments we encounter are mimetic; they are imitation arguments, not of Plato, but of the fictional Socrates, Theaetetus, Lysis and so on. The reasoning in favor of and consequences of this claim, which I think are of the utmost importance to understanding Plato, would take us far afield here. But as a methodological principle I shall try to avoid taking the speech of Socrates, especially at the end of the *Symposium*, as unqualifiedly and in its totality representing Plato's position.¹⁷

The second is a minor point, but one which opens up the important question of love's proper object. Plato's love is sometimes described as desire for an object not possessed. But this is a seriously misleading representation of the view found in the dialogues. It is true that in the *Symposium* eros is characterized as loving that which it loves when it doesn't have it: οὐκ ἔσων αὐτὸ οὐ ἐπιθυμεῖ τε καὶ ἐρα.¹⁸ But that characterization does not specify an essential feature of love's object; it specifies rather an accidental consequent of a stronger feature, namely that love is the desire for that of which the love is ἐνδεής, the desire for what one *lacks*.¹⁹

That of which one is ἐνδεής is not simply that which one does not have, nor which one wants in the sense of desires, but that which one *lacks*, or wants in the sense of needing, missing and requiring for the fulfillment and completion of some nature. That of which a person is ἐνδεής is thus something to which he has, under some description and relative to it, a claim or right. Only relative, of course, to that description: a person might desire something upon which he had no claim, which in no sense belonged to him, and still, relative to that desire, be ἐνδεής of the means of acquiring it.

When we understand that, an important and perplexing discussion in the *Lysis* becomes somewhat clearer, though far from clear. In the course of the complex and important discussion of whether like loves like, Socrates and Menexenus have been led to say that that which is neither wholly good nor wholly bad loves what it loves for the sake of the good because of the bad which it despises. For the sake of health, for example, we love the art which leads to health, the τέχνη ἰατρική. But then, of course, we must love health, and if so, we must love *it* for the sake of some good, and we thus stand at the edge of one of the dizzying and wearying regresses which so fascinated Plato and Aristotle after him. Mustn't there then be, Socrates concludes, some πρώτον φίλον, a first love for the sake of which we love all else that we love and of which all our other loves are εἰδωλα, images, and which alone is ἀληθῶς φίλον or τῷ ὄντι φίλον, which is alone our sole *true* love?

The argument, after a short interlude, proceeds with Socrates' claim that what desires, desires that of which it is ἐνδεές, and therefore loves that of which it is ἐνδεές. Suddenly three further conclusions materialize as if out of the air: 1) that which lacks lacks that which has been taken away from it, 2) eros, love and desire are therefore (sic!) of that which is φύσει οἰκεῖον, that which naturally belongs to us, and so 3) the φύσει οἰκεῖον is seen to be that which we necessarily love.²⁰

The logic here is sketchy, as the perplexity of *Lysis* and Menexenus attests to and the "rapturous blushing" of Hippothales ironically underscores. But the conclusion is clear and interesting, for it suggests that the πρώτον φίλον is that of which we may be said to be *properly* ἐνδεής, and this is our own true but fugitive nature, that which is for us φύσει οἰκεῖον, even if we are separated from it.

The proper object of erotic love is thus understood by Plato to be τὸ οἰκεῖον καὶ ἐνδεές, that which belongs naturally to oneself, but from which one has been separated. Erotic love is thus primarily for Plato *self-love*, for it is finally our true self which is at once native to us and lacked by us. "Self-love" does not here mean love of *love*, like the understanding of understanding in the *Charmides*, but one's love of one's *self*. Nor does it mean *selfish* love, the vanity and egocentrism which is assailed in Book V of the *Laws*.²¹ It means at the human level that erotic self-striving which characterizes all being: the desire of each thing to become what it is.

As is generally true in Plato, a manifold of false images of the true

understanding is possible. Just as there is a wide variety of ways to misunderstand the sense in which the philosopher practices the art of dying, so there might be a wide variety of ways to misunderstand the sense in which the philosopher's love is self-love. I take it that in part Phaedrus, Agathon, perhaps above all Alcibiades, represent, in ways that would be interesting to spell out, modes of that false understanding.

The most striking articulation of this view of eros as self-love is in the speech of Aristophanes.²² Aristophanes' myth invokes for us in comic fashion the fugitive sense of that dearer self we see in dreams and in rare moments of lucid vision or action. The force of the myth lies in its claim that that self is *my* self, the self which I am not but am (as Sartre might say) in the mode of always being about to become. Central to Plato's vision as articulated comically in Aristophanes' myth is that the self which I am about to become, my "ecstatic self", is ideally no mere projection of my fantasies or desires, but is my true nature from which I am only in some accidental sense, by a willfull and jealous act of the gods, alienated.

To recognize my erotic striving as fundamentally directed toward my true being is to recognize, with Aristophanes, Eros as that "great god who leads us εἰς τὸ οἰκεῖον..., εἰς τὴν ἀρχαίαν φύσιν, who restores us to our native selves, to our true and original nature."²³

III

That human eros is most properly auto-erotic is only an instance of the fact that for Plato the world itself is auto-erotic. But if this is true, three questions arise. (1) Why is it that in the final sober sections of the *Symposium*, that is, in the speech of Socrates, it is the beautiful and the good, αὐτὸ τὸ καλὸν and αὐτὸ τὸ ἀγαθόν, which is described as the proper object of philosophic love. (2) What does it mean anyway to talk of one's "true self". (3) What after all about the love of others?

The first two questions can be answered only provisionally. *Good* as we know is an *incomplete predicate*, as is *beautiful*. To say of something that it is good must always be relative to some description under which the entity said to be good is specified. In the most revealing cases, cases of the sort which greatly interested Plato, one and the same individual may be good and bad under alternative descriptions. One and the same copper is at once a good conductor and a bad insulator; one and the same pickpocket a good thief and a bad

person to be standing next to. Predications of good take the form "x is a good Ø", where "Ø" specifies some description which provides the criteria for determining the truth of the predication, the description in terms of which the entity is said to be good. There is then, as Aristotle was quick to note,²³ no being good neat, any more than there is just being. Where we employ predications of the form "x is good" (period), these stand (just as with being) for more replete predications of the form, "x is a good Ø", where "Ø" states what x is essentially. 'Abromowitz is a good philosopher', '... is a good backgammon player', '... is a good lover', are clear. 'Abromowitz is good' 'neat, means generally, I suggest, 'Abromowitz is a good *person*' (except in contexts—in the classroom, over the board, in bed—which make clear that some other description is implicitly understood.) So with *beautiful*, except that here we are more ready to link the predicate with an essential description, more reluctant to conditionalize by some qualifying accidental description. 'She's beautiful' will have a different descriptive content depending on whether she is a crystal formation, a giraffe, or a woman who has taken my fancy. The concept of my being beautiful is dependent upon and specified by my being *what* I am.²⁵ To love the beautiful in me is thus to love my essential being, my 'realist' self. Alternatively, that is beautiful in me which is my essential self, and which is that which I properly love. Philosophy, as the discipline which trains us in seeing things as they are, is thus at the same time the discipline which trains us to know what to love in ourselves, i.e. teaches us what we really *want* by teaching us what we really *are*. Thus it is philosophy which is that therapeutic art of which Erixymachus speaks,²⁶ the art which teaches us what is proper and improper in our loves, which by teaching us what is good in us, teaches us how to and what to love in ourselves.

Provisionally and within the context of self-love, I suggest then that talk of beauty as the proper object of eros is talk of eros as directed toward what is truly native to us, and that in turn (i.e. circularly) may be thought of as the self which manifests our good and beautiful nature, i.e. the nature which we love.

The fact of my being and not being my true self, like the fact of two sticks being and not being equal, is the source of the fallenness of the world, the source of the separation (but also of the non-alienness) of being and appearance, of the world of forms and the world of particulars. It is also, at some deep level, the source of the recurrent motif throughout the *Lysis* and *Symposium*, of the aporiai concerning

love and its relation to the like and the unlike. In self-love, lover and beloved are one; but such love is always love of the "ecstatic" self. What is loved, the self that is, which one is not but always about to become (given the notion of a true nature which one ought to or would truly love to become, given, that is, a Platonic rather than Sartrean view) is at once like and unlike the lover. The self is thus itself a metaxy, poised between, so to speak, that which it just "is" and that which it *is*.²⁷

IV

I've said that one central kind of erotic love is self-love, where that means the desire to become what one truly is, to be that self descriptions of which one can find throughout Plato, a self which being like and unlike the self which loves, constitutes at once the true *φίλον* of the *Lysis* and the archaic *οἰκεῖον* nature of Aristophanes, as corrected by Diotima:²⁸ lovers aren't looking for any old other half, but the good, the better half, as we might once have said.

What now about other people? If erotic love is desire for the possession of that which one lacks, then the only rationale for the erotic love of another in this strict sense could be comic and mythic as in Aristophanes. For otherwise the erotic love of another would constitute seeing the other as part of oneself which one is desirous of possessing and making one's own. I have no doubt that love often enough takes that pathological form with others. But if the criticism of Plato's theory is that it makes impossible erotic love of other individuals in *this* sense, and of *this* sort, then it strikes me as strange we should count it a criticism.

It now becomes possible to say something about the claim that Plato's theory of love is egoistical. Plato's theory is said to be egoistical since according to it, A loves B only insofar as B produces some good for A. But surely a theory which holds that A *loves* insofar as or because B produces some good for A is not an egoistic theory in any normal sense unless we make one of the following qualifications:

1) A *desires* B only insofar as B produces some good for A, or 2) A loves B only insofar as *loving* B produces some good for A. Without one or another of these qualifications, A's loving B for some good B produces for A could no more be said to be egoistic than could A's thanking or rewarding or praising B for some good B produces for A. But (1) has now been ruled out, and (2) represents simply the *general* problem of egoism in moral theory.

That's a problem I've never quite understood, but it does strike me as odd, as it struck Bishop Butler and others, to claim that because I fulfill a desire of *mine* in wishing or doing good for another it somehow fails to be the case that the wishing or doing has been real. For years I've wanted to give you, because I love you and know how much you love Dante and Rauschenberg, a prohibitively expensive edition of Rauschenberg's illustrations to the *Comedy*. One day, trying to counter melancholy, I decide to give myself a present which I have long since denied myself and which will give me great pleasure. I give you the Dante illustrations. The genuine love of others can satisfy selfish needs, as can genuinely altruistic acts on their behalf. Indeed, we should feel some apprehension if we thought our lovers didn't get satisfaction from their love of us. I don't mean by this that all love needs to be requited (this may or may not be true), but that A's love of B is cause for concern if loving B does not itself give A satisfaction.

If I love A because of $\emptyset$, is what I love in A the object of my love and different from A in such a way that what I really love is $\emptyset$ and not A? Is there any way to escape the difficulty concerning love of the individual of which we spoke earlier? Here I want to translate what we said concerning self-love to the love of others. If I love A because of $\emptyset$ or love the $\emptyset$ in A, I should not be said to love something other than A if $\emptyset$ is *what* A is. Thus to love A for its beauty is to love A for itself. 'You only love me because of my money, (body, connections, whatever)' means 'that's not what I am; you don't love me for *myself*.' But loving another for himself is not totally unconditional agapic love, because in loving A for himself, I don't love what A *happens* to be, but A *qua* beautiful, and this means loving A for what he *is*, in spite of what he may happen to be, or for the mode of his being what he is. My love is the condition of my asking the other that he be himself, i.e. the self which I love and which I recognize as in the accidental being of that other, even perhaps in the mode of non-presence.

Love on this view is *recognition*; it is seeing another as what that other might be, not in the sense of what he might be other than himself, but how he might be what he is. It is, in other words, coming to recognize the *beauty* of another. (Compare great portrait painters, who evoke the beauty of their (often plain) subjects not by artifice or camouflage, but by their skill in capturing the subject in just that attitude, in just that light, in which their true beauty is revealed.)

The love which does not unconditionally accept another's accidental being, so to speak, but calls the other to be his true self, is a love which at once recognizes and bids the other to his true virtue and beauty.²⁹

This is the thrust, in comic and half-understood form, of Aristophanes' myth, and in more serious and subtle form, (though in imagery no less sexual) of the first part of Socrates' speech. Love is the power by which, recognizing the beauty in another, we bring forth that beauty by eliciting it, calling it forth. We thus call forth the other's true *virtue*, for virtue is, as we know, ontologically like goodness and beauty; it is the mode of an entity's *being itself well*. So cosmically love is that principle which draws the world toward *itself*, not just, as Erixymachus claimed, toward something else, but toward its own good and beautiful being.

To see that love recognizes the present but unrealized beauty and virtue of another and bids him to the impersonation of that beauty is to see love's generative power and the proper telos of that power. It is here that Aristophanes' myth is transcended in a typically Platonic fashion, the archaeology of love taken up in its teleology.³⁰ This is the force of Diotima's insistence that love is not simply a bringing forth upon the beautiful, but *is* itself directed toward, is a longing for that conception and bringing forth.³¹ Love, as Aristotle clearly recognized, is thus a virtue, not merely a passion. We need to ask not simply what leads us to love another, but what is the discipline by which we might learn to love another. How may we develop the virtue which elicits beauty, which brings virtue to birth? In this respect it is important to recall that the majority of those we love—parents, family, children, perhaps above all one's self,—are not people we are necessarily attracted to or choose, but people in whose lives we find ourselves implicated, whom we discover ourselves fated to love and must learn to love. So, I think Plato would say, with the world itself.

The philosophical nature begins, as we know from the *Republic*, with a love of spectacle, and is, in its more refined form, simply a love of τὰ ὄντα, of the world as it truly is.³² Just as proper self-love is merely a special instance of the universal erotic striving of the universe for itself, so authentic personal love is merely a particular, special instance of the philosophical love of the world in its true being. To recognize shining through this world the world of forms, to see the world aright through that discipline of philosophical κάθαρσις which is generated by and results in love of the world's true nature,

this is according to Plato the task and goal of the philosopher; proper self love and love of others is simply this visionary and accepting power focused upon human beings in the world. These two loves are not unconnected. Eros as self-love, in recalling us to our own true nature, frees us from the desire to practise homophilia upon our friends and loved ones, that is, frees us to give them in our heterophilia (whether homo- or hetero-sexual) their own other, being, frees us to the shared joy we experience when those we love are capable of erotic self-love.

The beautiful is the description under which τὰ ὄντα are given insofar as they constitute the object of our desire and love. Like *true* and *good*, *beautiful* is thus an intentional description; in the case of *beautiful*, of love's object. To describe the philosopher as coming to love *beauty*, or *the beautiful*, as Diotima does in her revelation to Socrates, is thus to describe him as coming to understand what *is* beautiful, i.e. as learning to love things as they are. Loving things as they are, the philosopher will then not be seduced by the appearances of beauty, exchanging one beauty for another. As in the *Phaedo*,³³ true virtue consists not in the exchanging of one pleasure for another, but in the kathartic wisdom which detaches the philosopher from pleasure and pain, and allows him to accept but transcend his pleasures and pains, so true philosophic love is the result of a katharsis which allows the philosopher to exhibit the detached, non-erotic love of the saint. It is this love which is true "agapic" love, a love in which the philosopher, by transcending the world to a vision of its perfect form, is able to accept it as an appearance and manifestation of that form.

The ascent to this vision and detached love is the ascent which Diotima speaks of. It is part at once of the genius and of the mystery of her description, that the practice of eros is an important element of the κάθαρσις which leads to this state, and not, as we might be tempted to think, its sublimation. As Descartes courts doubt to transcend doubt in that calm certainty which can accept doubt, and as in general philosophers of various persuasions have realized that salvation from finitude can come only in the joyous acceptance of finitude, so Plato shows us eros as the ladder to that state in which eros is transcended, but transcended in the mode of acceptance. To deny eros, to flee from it into the arms of false chastity, is, as Hippolytus learned, to flee into its destructive snares; Cypris is benign only to those who pay her homage.

The ascent described in Diotima's higher mysteries is that typically

Platonic ascent out of the cave and into the real world, that is, into this world seen aright, and thus seen as beautiful, recognized for what it is, and consequently to be loved. If then we feel called upon to say that for Plato "the Idea, and it alone is to be loved for its own sake; the individual only so far as in him and by him ideal perfection is copied fugitively in the flux,"³⁴ we must remember that that fugitive copying, which other traditions have called incarnation, is the highest mystery. Understood, it reveals the deceptive fact that the luminous world of forms is this world seen aright. That seeing (itself fugitive)³⁵ is accomplished by the katharsis which makes appearance transparent, which allows the world itself to shine through its appearances. The philosopher, unlike the sophist, recognizes the world as image, that is, as its own appearance, and loving it, thus calls it to itself.

I shall end with a remark now almost traditional in discussions of Platonic eros. Several scholars in their accounts of Plato's views have directed our attention to the similarities between the erotic ascent described in Diotima's speech and the poet's upward journey at the end of Dante's *Comedia*, a journey whose motive principle and goal are also love, that love which, just as it moves the poet's will and desire, moves the sun and other stars.³⁶

These similarities are invoked on the supposition that ascent—*ascent from the cave, the ascent in the Symposium, the poet's ascent from purgatory to paradise*—are ascents to abstract visions of a transcendental being beyond the world around us, the world so cunningly called *this* world. But it is important to remember the nature of the poet's final vision in *Paradiso*, for it is not a vision of the sphere, but a vision of the sphere incorporate in the image, a vision, that is, of nothing less than the incarnation. Anything short of such a vision might be wondrous, but would hardly be a mystery. And surely it is such a mystery to which Diotima alludes: the mystery of loving being itself incorporate in the world, of loving in my very beloved himself humanity incarnate.

Notes

¹ *Symposium* 186A.

² *Symposium* 197A-B.

³ As we learn at *Republic* 443D and 592A.

⁴ Cf. *Republic* 361A.

⁵ Gregory Vlastos, "The Individual as an Object of Love in Plato," in *Platonic Studies* (Princeton, 1972), p. 4.

- ⁶ Vlastos, p. 31.
- ⁷ Irving Singer, *The Nature of Love: Plato to Luther* (New York, 1966), p. 87.
- ⁸ Singer, p. 72.
- ⁹ Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros* (English Translation, New York, 1969), cf. Vlastos. *op. cit.*
- ¹⁰ *Symposium* 199Dff.
- ¹¹ *Symposium* 202Cff.
- ¹² *Symposium* 211Aff. But see the qualification below, toward the end of section IV.
- ¹³ Because of its fundamental concern with making means transparent to ends (appearance transparent to being). A discussion in full of how this operates in Plato, which would involve a discussion of the relation between the philosopher and the sophist, would, I think, reveal the heart of Plato's thought. I have touched on this theme in "Aristotle's Theory of Motion," *Phronesis*, XIV, p. 60 ff.
- ¹⁴ *Symposium* 177D9. This claim is echoed elsewhere, e.g. *Lysis* 204C2.
- ¹⁵ *Symposium* 202A. This point is highlighted by the fact that the description of eros in Socrates' speech is a description of Socrates himself, i.e. of the philosopher. Cf. Diskin Clay, "Socrates' Mulishness and Heroism," *Phronesis*, XVII, p. 58, n. 12. In fact, each speaker describes eros as he would wish to see or describe himself.
- ¹⁶ *Symposium* 210A1.
- ¹⁷ I do not fully exploit this principle here; a full spelling out of the view which I am suggesting in this essay would demand a careful and detailed study of all the speeches of the *Symposium* and their relation to one another in light of such a principle.
- ¹⁸ *Symposium* 200A5.
- ¹⁹ *Symposium* 200C9, *Lysis* 221D-222A.
- ²⁰ *Lysis* 218D-222B.
- ²¹ *Laws* V 731E.
- ²² *Phaedo* 64B.
- ²³ *Symposium* 193D.
- ²⁴ At *Nicomachean Ethics* I.6, 1096a23ff inter alia.
- ²⁵ I mean 'what' to be a translation of 'τι' in 'τι' ἔστι'.
- ²⁶ *Symposium* 186D.
- ²⁷ Much of the conversation concerning like and unlike takes place in a context in which homosexual love makes problematic the condition of otherness which is seen to be essential to eros. I take it, that is, that a problem for homosexual love is how to constitute the beloved as an *other*. This is to be sure no less a *problem* for heterosexual love, in that we are always tempted to devour the other, and to transform heterophilia into homophilia. But homosexual love often founds itself on the promise of escaping that problem, hoping that homosexuality by erasing a fundamental mode of complementary alienness, will guarantee homophilia and thus avoid the issue of otherness.
- ²⁸ *Symposium* 205D-E.
- ²⁹ This is the meaning of Diotima's definition of love at 'τόκος ἐν καλῷ' at *Symposium* 206B7. Love calling the beloved to his own beauty and virtue is mirrored in the recurrent theme throughout the *Symposium* of love's

- engendering of *αἰσχύνῃ*, shame. The centrality of this theme in the dialogue, first introduced at 178D and interestingly articulated by Alcibiades at 216B, was called to my attention by Sara Ruddick.
- ³⁰ I mean 'taken up' to English 'aufgehoben'. Here, as elsewhere, I am indebted to Sara Ruddick.
- ³¹ *Symposium*, 206E.
- ³² *Republic* 475Dff., 501D.
- ³³ *Phaedo* 68Dff.
- ³⁴ Vlastos, *op. cit.* p. 34.
- ³⁵ As the love of which I'm speaking is fugitive and difficult; Alcibiades is always in the wings.
- ³⁶ *Paradiso*, XXXIII.144.