

Aristophanic Tragedy

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I. Introduction

At the close of the *Symposium*, we are left with a striking image. All the other symposiasts have departed or fallen asleep, and only three are left, Agathon, Aristophanes and Socrates, seated side by side, drinking wine from a common cup, while Socrates attempts to prove to the comic poet and the tragedian that the truly skillful dramatist should be a master of both arts. The reader cannot help but wonder what we are to make of this stricture – should it somehow inform how we read the speeches of both playwrights? In fact, Aristophanes frames his speech on both ends with warnings not to take it as pure comedy (189b3–7, 193b6–7, 193d7–8). Of course, foreswearing comic intent is a standard trick in the comic's arsenal; Aristophanes' speech, with its grotesque depictions of the various transmogrifications of the human body, is not without comic appeal. But in this chapter, I want to suggest that we take Aristophanes' warnings seriously, that beneath its comic veneer lies an account of the human condition that is both tragic and philosophically rich.¹

The significance of Aristophanes' speech to the dialogue is highlighted by various means. In the first place, given that the *Symposium* self-consciously emphasizes the ordering of its speeches, Aristophanes' merits attention due to his disruptive role. When it is his turn to speak, Aristophanes is overcome by the hiccups, and Eryximachus is forced to take his place;

¹ In claiming that Aristophanes' speech is tragic, I do not mean to suggest that it belongs to the genre, tragedy. Indeed, following Dover 1966: 41–5 and Kurke 2011: 310–11, I believe that, stylistically, its greatest affinities lie with fable. Rather, I mean that it is tragic in a broad sense – it portrays us as unable to achieve happiness due to our lacking understanding of our own natures and the nature of happiness. In attributing this broad sense of the tragic to Plato, I follow Halliwell 1996 and Trivigno 2009: 93. I also do not mean to deny the extent to which Aristophanes' speech is comic. Though Aristophanes' speech is not stylistically linked to his comedies, it is deeply humorous, particularly in how it reduces the romantic pretensions of love and sex to a series of grotesque bodily contortions. In calling Aristophanes' speech tragic, my intention is to highlight the fact that its core message is pessimistic, a fact that is typically overlooked by interpreters.

as a result, he is placed in a triumvirate with Agathon and Socrates. This grouping is mirrored at the close of the dialogue, when Aristophanes, Agathon and Socrates are left drinking together, replicating the order of their speeches, and suggesting that they should be understood in relation to one another. The significance of Aristophanes' speech is further emphasized by various anachronistic cross-references that Plato establishes between his speech and Socrates'. In his speech, Aristophanes compares the condition of his divided humans to that of the Arcadians (193a2–3); this comparison is jarring because it refers to the events of 385 BC, whereas the dramatic date of the dialogue is 416 BC, thirty-one years earlier. One might dismiss this as a mere slip on Plato's part, were it not for the fact that Diotima is said to be a woman of Mantinea, one of the Arcadian cities divided by the Spartans. Diotima, in turn, famously makes a further anachronistic reference when she opposes Aristophanes' account of love, though, supposedly, her speech was delivered to Socrates before the actual symposium (205d10–206a1). All these details suggest that Plato wishes to emphasize that Aristophanes' speech stands in a crucial relation to Socrates'.

Modern responses to Aristophanes' speech tend to fall into two groups. According to the first, Aristophanes' speech contains nothing of philosophical significance; according to the second, Aristophanes' speech alone proposes an appealing, and even true account of love. On behalf of the first camp, Guthrie, for example, refers to the speech as "comic burlesque" (1975: 384); Taylor describes it as a piece of Pantagruelism, its purposes solely humorous and dramatic (1936: 209, 219); and, more recently, Rowe has suggested that it is meant as an "imaginative but otherwise useless aetiology of sexual intercourse" (1998: 9).² To turn to the second camp, though Nussbaum acknowledges the pessimism of Aristophanes' speech, she also claims that it is unique in emphasizing the significance of human individuals as love-objects to be valued for their own sakes (1986: 173–4). Against these two interpretive strategies, I want to advance two claims. Against the first, I shall argue that Aristophanes' speech is of the utmost philosophical significance to the dialogue. In his speech, he sets forth a view of *erōs* as a state of lack and a corresponding desire for completion, which is the starting-point for Diotima's subsequent analysis. Against the second, I shall propose that Aristophanes' speech contains a pessimistic account of love. *Erōs*, for Aristophanes, is not the appreciation of another person as a unique and irreplaceable individual; rather, it is an irrational urge, incapable of satisfaction.

² See also Destrée 2015: 364–5 and Hunter 2004: 70.

In the first part of my chapter, I shall offer a close reading of the initial physical transformations undergone by Aristophanes' humans. I shall argue that these offer an account of human nature as incomplete, an account that is later adopted by Socrates. In the second part of my chapter, I shall examine the various solutions Aristophanes considers for the human predicament. I shall argue that within Aristophanes' speech, Plato subtly indicates that these are all futile.³ In the third part of my chapter, I shall ask what, non-metaphorically, is Plato's objection to the pursuit of wholeness through union with one's other half. I shall argue that the problem with Aristophanic love is that it is irrational. It is this very irrationality that precludes Aristophanes' lovers from achieving the partial satisfaction of erotic desire that is open to their Socratic counterparts.

2. Aristophanes on Human Nature

To turn to Aristophanes' speech, he begins by observing that humans did not always possess their current form (189d5–190b5). There were originally three kinds of humans: male-male, female-female and male-female composites. These proto-humans were round in shape, resembling two persons joined at the midline. They had two arms, two legs and one set of sex organs on each side. Their two faces, the same in every way, were adorned with four ears, and faced opposite directions on a common head, placed on a rounded neck. Possessed of great pride and ambition, these men attempted to scale the heavens in order to attack the gods (190b5–c1). The Olympians were hard-pressed to find a solution; they could not let this threat go unchecked, but, being dependent upon human worship, the gods could not afford to kill their would-be usurpers. At last, Zeus found an ingenious solution. He would split the humans in half, thereby disabling their strength, while increasing his number of worshippers. Having

³ In what follows, I argue that Plato views Aristophanic *erōs* as problematic. Though he presents some of his concerns directly, placing them in Diotima's mouth, he presents others indirectly, weaving them into the details of Aristophanes' speech. Before I proceed, it will be helpful to clarify why I believe that Plato adopts this second, indirect, strategy. To answer this, we should ask ourselves what we are to make of the argumentative structure of the *Symposium* as a whole. Suppose that Plato most fully endorses Socrates' speech. In that case, what are we to make of his inclusion of the other speeches? Like many interpreters, I believe the reason Plato includes the earlier speeches is twofold: on the one hand, he wants to present a variety of commonly held views about love, while on the other, he wants to critique certain aspects of these views. Were this an ordinary Socratic dialogue, this critique would be enacted via the *elenchos*, and, indeed, Agathon's speech, coming directly before Socrates', is subject to elenctic cross-examination. But given the sympotic setting, direct cross-examination is not an option for the others. Instead, Plato inserts subtle markers into the speeches themselves, as well as into the dialogue as a whole, to indicate his objections.

sliced them in half, Zeus commanded Apollo to bunch their skin together to form a navel and to turn their heads to face their scars (190c1–191a5).

Deprived of their original other halves, the half-men would weave their limbs together, and, unable to eat or drink, would soon perish. Taking pity on their pathetic state, Zeus came up with a new plan. He ordered Apollo to relocate their genitals to the fronts of their bodies so that they might have intercourse. If the embrace happened between a man and a woman, they would have offspring, while if it occurred between two men, they would have the satisfaction of intercourse, and could cease embracing and look after their other needs (191b5–c8).

As each of us is the matching half of a human whole, our desire for partners of the same or opposite sex can be explained by the nature of our original whole (191d3–192a2). When humans find their matching halves, they are struck from their senses with a feeling of belonging. Though they finish their lives together, none is able to say what he wants from the other. However, should Hephaestus offer to weld them together, none would refuse. He would achieve what he had always wanted, to melt with his other half and become one (192b5–e9). The name given to this longing is *erōs*. Should we be friendly to *Erōs*, eventually he may restore us; should we quarrel with him, we risk being split in half again (192e10–193b6).

The first thing to observe about Aristophanes' speech is that it opens with an analysis of human nature; its analysis of *erōs* emerges from and is dependent on this account of human nature. Throughout the speech, we see a contrast developed between two senses of human nature: our ancient nature, which represents a state of wholeness to aspire to, and our current nature, one that is debilitated as a result of the transformations we have undergone. What, then, was our ancient nature, the nature of the original circle-men? Three things are striking. First, Aristophanes emphasizes their circularity: they are round, their back and ribs form a circle, they move by rolling, their round shape resembles their heavenly parents and so forth. Second, Aristophanes highlights their complete symmetry: every bodily part is mirrored across the circle-men's axis; their faces are identical; indeed, the only difference between the two halves is their genitalia, and this difference only holds for the hermaphroditic pairs. Third, their primary characteristic is that they are strong, outwardly directed and ambitious.

What about our current nature? Where the circle-men were strong and ambitious, our central characteristic, according to this myth, is that we are weak. Their circularity signified a kind of perfection and self-containment: they were round because they resembled their parents,

who were heavenly bodies; in the *Timaeus* Plato states that the sphere is the most perfect shape (33b1–7). By contrast, we are circles that are thwarted, cut in two. In his speech, Aristophanes compares our state to that of a sliced egg (190e1–2); this image is poignant, suggesting that our genesis from the circle-men is a sort of perverse anti-birth at the hands of the gods. The portrayal of the gods in the myth is not flattering either. Where Diotima portrays them as self-sufficient and free of desires (202c6–d5), Aristophanes' deities are dependent on human acknowledgment (190c3–5). Their treatment of humans, in turn, is far from philanthropic. Ironically, it is Apollo, the god of healing, who twists our heads so that we are made forever aware of the wound inflicted on us by the gods (190e2–191a5). It should be noted that there was no physical necessity for our heads to be turned towards our scars; in fact, if our heads had been left facing outward, then it would have been unnecessary to later move our genitals. It appears that Apollo's primary motive is spite, and that Aristophanes' intention is to draw attention to the bleakness of our current condition.

The pessimism of Aristophanes' account comes to a cusp at 191a5–b5, where he describes how the half-men intertwine themselves and, unwilling to detach, waste away. One detail is striking: when the now half-humans weave themselves together, they embrace, face-to-face. But this is no replica of their original condition. Their original condition was outward-facing; they now turn inwards. This physical disanalogy mirrors the complete transformation of their natures: the circle-men were outwardly directed, bold and ambitious; the half-men are inwardly directed, sickly and inactive. This inversion also suggests that the half-men may not even be trying to regain their original nature. Aristophanes writes that their longing for their original nature caused them to interweave their limbs in a debilitating embrace. But if they wished to resume the closest proxy to their original condition, they should stand back-to-back, facing outwards, ready to take on the world. In turning inwards, the half-men respond to their yearning for wholeness not by trying to replicate the state of wholeness, but by turning away from the world and losing themselves in the embrace. In fact, it is not even clear that it is their unique other halves that they seek to embrace. Aristophanes write that if one half dies before the other, the survivor will find another with whom to enmesh himself; his language even implies an indiscriminateness of sexual orientation – “whether the half was from a whole woman . . . or a man” (191b3–5). The humans do not appear to seek their unique other halves; instead, they stumble from one partner to the next, pursuing any embrace that will blunt their sense of longing.

Let us pause and take stock. What is Aristophanes' view of human nature? Our central feature is that we are incomplete; this gives rise to the desire for completion. The desire for completion, in turn, causes us to seek to embrace another – either as a futile means to regaining our original state or as an attempt to forget our yearning for completion. Human nature and the *erōs* it gives rise to are centrally characterized through imagery of sickness; Aristophanes later writes that *erōs* is inborn in man, trying to heal human nature (191c8–d3).

Aristophanes' characterization of human nature, though dark, is psychologically compelling. Many people are subject at times to an inchoate sense of lack. This can give rise to a search for meaning, which many individuals make one of their central life-projects. Though this might take the form of religious devotion, altruistic endeavors or intellectual exploration, for many, the search for meaning is expressed in the attempt to find someone to love. We are so much in the grips of an Aristophanic way of thinking about love, that the expression “my other half” is commonly used to denote one's spouse, and popular fiction and film depict true love as encountering the one person who is, as it were, made for you. The sense that there is another person who is uniquely suited to you, and who could make you complete, is ubiquitous.

This account of human nature as incomplete, and of *erōs* as the desire for completion, stands at the heart of Socrates' speech. In questioning Agathon, Socrates' central point is that *erōs* is a desire, and hence must be the desire for something, specifically for what the lover lacks (200e8–9). Socrates further develops this characterization of *erōs* as grounded in incompleteness when he presents *Erōs* as a spirit and not a god, precisely because *Erōs* does not possess, but desires, the beautiful and the good (202d1–e1).⁴ Socrates goes on to maintain that *erōs*, understood as the desire for the beautiful and the good, characterizes all humans (205a5–7); if this desire is grounded in lack, then the implication is that human nature is, at its core, incomplete. In what follows, Socrates gives a more rigorous presentation of the source of our incompleteness. According to Socrates, humans are in a constant state of decay; nothing about us is stable, from our physical constitution to our beliefs. As a result, we are incapable of true immortality, but must seek a mortal proxy thereof, through reproduction. It is this constant perishing which gives rise to *erōs*, the desire to surmount

⁴ This is further reflected in the myth of Poros and Penia (203b1–204b7), where, in naming Penia, poverty, *Erōs*' mother, Socrates emphasizes its origins in need, and where he describes *Erōs* as poor, homeless and needy.

our mortality via reproduction (207c9–208b6). Significantly, in this context, Socrates, echoing Aristophanes, refers to *erōs* as a sickness (207a7–b1). Socrates' analysis of the human sense of lack is more fully worked out than Aristophanes'; rather than relying on myth, he points to a specific feature of human nature, mortality, which is its source. However, the insight is the same, that *erōs* arises from a sense of lack endemic to human nature.

3. Aristophanes' Pessimism

According to my interpretation, Aristophanes' speech is fundamentally tragic. However, if our sense of incompleteness can be surmounted, if *erōs* can, in fact, make us whole again, then it would turn out to be optimistic. In the next section of my chapter, I shall turn to the two solutions to *erōs* that Aristophanes considers, sex and union with one's other half. I shall argue that Plato subtly indicates that neither of these is satisfactory, either because they do not offer us true completion, or because what they aim at is impossible.

Let us begin with Aristophanes' presentation of sex. According to Aristophanes, when Zeus saw us wasting away, he moved our genitals to the fronts of our bodies so that we would be capable of interior reproduction and, as a result, of detaching from one another (191b5–c8). The details of our physical transformations merit closer scrutiny. Why, exactly, does Zeus need to relocate our genitals to the fronts of our bodies? If the need is for our heads and genitals to face the same direction, then an alternative would have been for Zeus to untwist our heads back to their original orientation; he does not do so because of the need for us to remain aware of our wounded natures. Perhaps if we were not aware of our wounded state, we would cease to feel incomplete and hence to waste away. But this gives rise to a further question: why do our genitals need to be relocated for us to be capable of intercourse? We can find an answer to this question if we look more closely at Aristophanes' language. He writes that Zeus moved our genitals "so that at the same as the interweaving embrace (*en tēi sumplōkēi*), if a man happened upon a woman, they would have intercourse and the race would be reproduced, while if a man happened upon a man, they might have the satisfaction of intercourse" (191c4–7). Intercourse occurs at the same time as the *sumplōkē*, the interweaving embrace. In the preceding passage, the humans died because, throwing their arms around one another and interweaving themselves (*sumplekomenoi allēlois*), they would not abandon one another (191a5–b1). Thus, the reason the humans' genitals have to be relocated

to the fronts of their bodies is that they are not willing to abandon the face-to-face embrace in order to copulate; Zeus therefore has to make it possible for them to copulate within this embrace. Intercourse functions as a continuation of the embrace, but in such a manner that we are able to subsequently abandon it. But if the embrace does not, in fact, recreate our original position, then neither does intercourse.

The way in which Aristophanes presents sex is disconcerting; he writes that it enabled the humans to “stop embracing and turn to their work and look after the rest of their lives” (191c7–8). Sex does not resolve their sense of incompleteness by making them one. Rather, it enables them to stop caring that they are incomplete so that they can let go of one another and get on with their lives. It represents a palliative and not a cure. But it is not even certain that this palliative will succeed. Aristophanes writes, “Whenever the lover of boys or anyone else meets his other half, then they are wondrously struck from their senses by affection, love and belonging, not wishing to be apart from one another for even a moment” (192b5–c2). So it turns out that we are back to where we started – what we really want is to be united with our other halves, and once we achieve this, we will not willingly detach. Aristophanes raises the supposed solution of sex to show that it is a non-starter. People in the grips of *erōs* do typically long for sex with their beloveds, as though this would offer them true union; what Aristophanes reveals is that this gets them nowhere. In the imagery of his myth, when the halves engage in intercourse, they remain inwardly directed inversions of their original selves; more fundamentally, they remain insurmountably separate – though they become physically closer, they still do not become one. Aristophanes goes on to explicitly reject intercourse as the object of *erōs*: “no one would think that the union of sex is [what the lovers desire]” (192c4–5).⁵

⁵ Hooper argues for an opposing interpretation, on which Aristophanes’ point is that sex is indeed the solution to *erōs*, since it enables us to temporarily lose the absurd desire for unity (2013: 577–9). Against Hooper, if Aristophanes did take sex to be the solution to *erōs*, precisely because it enables us to lose the desire for unity, then it is unlikely that, immediately after discussing sex, he would go on to state that sex is not what the lovers truly want (192c4–7), to define *erōs* as the pursuit of wholeness (192e10–193a1), and to conclude with a rousing call to worship the gods in order that they may someday reunite us (193a7–d5). Perhaps one might maintain that even if Aristophanes does not consider sex a solution, he ought to. If sex can temporarily dampen our longing for unity, then so much the better. While I am sympathetic to this position, I do not take it to constitute an argument against my reading of Aristophanes’ speech, but rather an argument against the speech, as I have interpreted it. It is also worth noting that this objection accepts Aristophanes’ diagnosis of our predicament, but proposes that, since it is insoluble, we are best off distracting ourselves. But if his diagnosis of our predicament is correct, then perhaps there is something worthwhile in facing it head-on, even if this results in a sense of dissatisfaction.

What, then, is the object of *erōs*? Complete union with the beloved. However, the details of his story create significant doubts as to whether this is achievable.⁶ In the first place, it is not clear how we might go about finding our other halves. How would we even know what they look like? In his myth, Aristophanes specifies that the heads are positioned in opposite directions on a joint neck (190a1–2); they are therefore physically incapable of seeing one another. Perhaps we could recognize our other halves because they would possess features we lack. However, in his myth, Aristophanes lays great emphasis on the complete symmetry of the two halves. His use of the image of the tally (*sumbolon*, 191d3–4) suggests that they might recognize one another by some brute physical fit. But the image of the egg cut by a hair (190e1–2) pulls us in the opposite direction, suggesting that the cut is smooth, not jagged. At any rate, Apollo has so reworked our bodies that there is no hope of preserving an original cut line, nor, for that matter, of recognizing one's original other half in his mutilated descendent. Even if we could find our other halves, it is uncertain whether we could become whole. Our bodies have been so mutilated that it is not clear that we could ever resume our original configuration. Non-metaphorically, Aristophanes' suggestion is that even if there is one person in the universe who can complete you, it is not clear how you would go about finding this person, nor how you could become unified with him.

Suppose, though, that we could achieve full unification with our other halves – would this be a desirable outcome? On the one hand, insofar as *erōs* is the desire to become complete, and insofar as we believe that this can only be achieved by union with another person, then it does seem that the fullest expression of this would be to be completely conjoined with that other person. But this solution is, at the same time, horrifying. And Aristophanes deliberately presents this solution as problematic. It is Hephaestus who offers to weld us (192d3). Lest we miss the mythical reference, in the very next speech, Agathon refers to the tale of Hephaestus punishing Aphrodite and Ares by ensnaring them in the midst of their embrace, forcing them to remain entwined for all the gods to see (196d1–2). Complete union with the beloved might, in some sense, represent the culmination of erotic longing, but even imagining this state reveals that it is far from desirable; this suggests that the longing of *erōs* cannot be resolved by romantic love of another individual.

⁶ See also Benardete 1993: 51–5 and Nussbaum 1986: 174–6.

4. Plato's Critique of Aristophanes

Thus far, I have made the case that Plato subtly indicates that the proposed solutions to *erōs* – intercourse and union with the beloved – are unsatisfactory. In the next section of my chapter, I would like to raise the following question: what philosophical issue does Plato have with Aristophanes' treatment of love? My response will proceed in two stages. In the first, I will argue that Plato objects to Aristophanes because Aristophanes treats human nature and *erōs* as irrational. In the second, I will argue that Plato objects to Aristophanes because he assigns the wrong object to *erōs* – union with a human beloved, rather than contemplation of Forms. These are not unconnected: since Aristophanes' circle-men are irrational, it is impossible for them to transform their love of persons into love of Forms.

Let us begin with Aristophanes' portrayal of human nature and *erōs* as irrational. Dramatically, this irrationality is first presented in the person of Aristophanes. He is depicted as someone who is unable to speak due to a ridiculous and involuntary bodily convulsion, the hiccups. At the conclusion of Socrates' speech, Aristophanes attempts to respond, but is again prevented from speaking due to the noisiness of the incoming revelers (212c4–7). Just as Aristophanes is rendered mute, so are his half-men. They are not presented as speaking; this speechlessness is reflective of a deeper ignorance – they do not know what they want.⁷ When they first meet, the halves are described as struck from their senses (*ekplēttontai*, 192b5–c1). Though they finish their lives together, they cannot say what they want from one another (192c2–4). They do not wish for sex, but for something else, but are unable to say what it is (192c4–d2). When Hephaestus asks them what they desire, they are dumbstruck (*aporountas*, 192d2–5). Aristophanes repeats three times between 192c and 192e that the lovers are unable to say what they want and, in the end, it is Hephaestus who supplies the answer for them – union with their other halves (192d5).

⁷ The one exception to this is 192c7–d2, where Plato writes, "But the soul of each clearly wishes for something else, but is not able to say what, but it has a dim presentiment of what it wishes for and *ainittetai*." *Ainittetai* is standardly translated as "talks in riddles" (Rowe 1998; see also Nehamas and Woodruff 1989, and Howatson and Sheffield 2008). However, as Dover notes, it can also mean to express oneself elusively or incompletely (1980: 119). To talk in riddles would suggest that Aristophanes' half-men know what they want but conceal it, a possibility ruled out by Plato's repeated statements that they cannot say what they want. At any rate, for my purposes, the significant point is that they appear to be speaking incoherently, in a manner that reflects their inability to articulate what they actually want.

But even here, they do not reply; instead, Aristophanes observes to his audience that no one would refuse such an offer (192e5–6).

Thus, the first sense in which Aristophanes' humans are irrational is that they are unable to articulate what they want. Their *erōs* resembles a blind urge or a bodily ache – they engage in semi-purposive activity in order to alleviate it, blundering about in search of a mate, but are not sure what they are pursuing, nor what they will achieve once they secure it. They resemble the animals caught in the grips of *erōs* that Diotima describes at 207b6–c1: whereas humans, she claims, protect their young due to reasoning, in the case of animals, we must seek another explanation, their instinctual drive for reproductive immortality.

Now it is clear that Aristophanes' humans do have a goal that they pursue: reunification with their other halves. But even if they were able to articulate this goal, there would remain a further source of irrationality: they fail to connect it to the good. This causes Diotima to object:

There is a certain story according to which lovers are those who seek their other halves. But my story says that *erōs* is not of the half or the whole, unless, my friend, it turns out to be good. For men are even willing to cut off their own hands and feet if it seems to them that they are bad. I do not think that anyone cherishes what is his own, unless he calls the good his own and the bad another's. (205d10–206e7)

Diotima's objection is susceptible to two different interpretations. Her objection could be that all *erōs* is of what is in fact good. This interpretation is supported by her initial formulation of the objection: "*erōs* is not of the half or the whole, unless . . . it turns out to be good." On this interpretation, Diotima's concern is that what Aristophanes' humans desire, their other halves, is not in fact good. In what follows, I will argue that Diotima objects to Aristophanes on precisely these grounds. However, the second half of her objection suggests another interpretation. Here, she focuses on how things appear to the agent: "... men are even willing to cut off their own hands and feet if it seems to them that they are bad." This suggests that, just as it is possible for a man to cut off his limb when it is not in fact sick, but merely seems such to him, so it is possible for someone to love what merely appears good to him. That Diotima takes *erōs* to be of the perceived good is further suggested by her discussion of honor-lovers at 208c2–e1. Here, she observes that we would be astonished by their irrationality if we did not bear in mind "how terribly they are affected by *erōs* for making a name for themselves and for 'laying up immortal glory for all time.'" Given Plato's treatment of honor-lovers in other dialogues, it is doubtful that he takes their goal to be genuinely good; nonetheless, he still

treats their desire for glory as *erōs*. On this interpretation, Diotima's issue with Aristophanes is that his portrayal of *erōs* does not make reference to the perceived good of the agent. His humans pursue completion *tout court*, independently of, and indeed lacking any conception of, its connection to the good. Literally, what they desire is to regain their original configuration by being fused with their other halves. But it is not clear why this should offer them completion in any desirable sense: after all, we do not yearn to be reunited with our toenail clippings. Non-metaphorically, what Aristophanes' humans desire is a state of wholeness, where they are unable to articulate what this wholeness would consist in and why it is desirable. In treating *erōs* as a blind urge, one that does not aim at the good, Aristophanes perhaps seeks to build upon popular portrayals of *erōs* as a form of madness, one that is both beyond the reach of reason and, as a result, immune to rational assessment. But it is precisely this portrayal of *erōs* that Diotima rejects, when she treats it as the desire for the good, which ultimately aims at a philosophical grasp of Forms.

Thus far, I have argued that Plato takes issue with Aristophanes' speech because he portrays human nature as irrational, both because his humans cannot articulate what they want and because they are unable to articulate why the sort of completion they pursue is good. The way in which Socrates portrays Diotima functions as a carefully crafted rebuke to Aristophanes' characterization of human nature as irrational. As I noted earlier, Socrates specifies that Diotima is a woman from Mantinea, thereby linking Diotima to Aristophanes' half-men, who have been cut in half like the Arcadians (201d2). But Diotima, though a Mantinean, differs fundamentally from Aristophanes' humans. Where they are mute, she gives the central speech of the dialogue; where they are in a state of *aporia*, she is wise; where they are sick, she is a healer; where they are alienated from the gods, she knows just which sacrifices to make to appease them. In investing Diotima with these attributes, Socrates is suggesting that humans are not as irrational as Aristophanes makes out; our rational capacities, in turn, offer us the hope that our erotic longing can somehow be healed.

To discover how this healing can be effected, we must turn to the second aspect of Plato's critique of Aristophanes: Aristophanes assigns the wrong object to *erōs*. This concern is expressed in Diotima's second, implicit, critique of Aristophanes, when she states:

There, if anywhere in life . . . should a person live, beholding the beautiful itself. If ever you see it, it won't occur to you to compare it to gold or clothing or beautiful boys or youths who, if you see them now, strike you from your senses, and make you and many others eager to always see and

be with your beloved, if it were possible, not eating or drinking, but only seeing and being with them. But how would it be if someone got to see the beautiful itself, absolute, pure, unmixed, not polluted by human flesh and colors and any other great mortal nonsense, but if he could see the divine beauty, one in form. (211d1–e4)

Diotima's language here is deliberately reminiscent of Aristophanes'. She refers to boys who strike you from your senses – the same verb, *ekplētein*, is used by Aristophanes when he writes that, should one find his other half, he would be struck from his senses (192b5–c2). Diotima describes these boys as making you eager to be with them, not eating or drinking; Aristophanes' men die of hunger, because they are not willing to detach (191a5–b1). So Diotima appears to explicitly contrast her solution to *erōs* with Aristophanes'. The central difference lies in its object: Aristophanic love is directed at mere humans, Diotimic love ultimately at Forms.⁸

On a surface level, the difficulty with Aristophanic love is that its aim, complete union with the beloved, is one that cannot possibly be secured. In the language of Aristophanes' myth, this could only ever be achieved by an act of god, by the complete transformation of our physical natures. As things stand, the best we can hope for is to embrace or copulate with a beloved; clearly, this will not make us into one person, nor make us whole. The other person will always remain separate. His thoughts and feelings can never be directly or fully known to you. His experience will always be different from yours. Even if you find your other half, the risk remains that your romance will dissolve or that you will lose your beloved to death. But even if one could achieve full union with the beloved, a further difficulty remains: unless we subscribe to Aristophanes' myth, there is no reason to think that this should offer us completion. For Plato, the sense in which we are incomplete is that we are mortal and imperfect. Romantic union with another does not promise to make us complete in this sense.

But it is not just that romantic love could not possibly make us complete; Plato's doubts run deeper than that. If *erōs* is the desire to be complete, and hence to be a being that is not dependent or lacking in any way, then this desire is surely one that cannot be fully satisfied. In Diotima's speech, Plato suggests that we are beings who are incomplete. We are subject to constant perishing, and cannot achieve the true form of

⁸ On my interpretation, Plato holds that Forms are the proper object of *erōs*, that persons are less worthy of love than Forms, and that love of persons that does not give rise to love of Forms is problematic. However, my interpretation does not require that the lover of the ascent cease to love persons altogether upon completing the ascent, nor that he see persons as having no value. For further defense of this intellectualist reading of the ascent, see Obdrzalek 2010.

immortality – everlasting changelessness – which pertains to the gods (207c9–208b6). The closest we can come to possessing the good forever is to grasp a truly good object – the Form of beauty – but this grasp is merely intellectual and does not constitute full possession; it makes us virtuous, but our virtue is a merely mortal form of perfection.⁹

Why should the fact that Diotimic love aims at Forms offer a better solution to *erōs*, conceived of as the desire for completion? Here, we might pause to ask ourselves what a fully complete, non-dependent object would be. Not a human, I have suggested. In fact, such an object would be a Form. Plato describes the Form of beauty as eternally existing, not waxing or waning – it achieves the true immortality which we mimic via reproduction (211a1–b5). The Form is not in relation to anything and not affected by anything – it is without any sources of dependence or deficiency. It exists by itself with itself, one in form and always; surely this is what it would be to be perfect, complete and non-dependent. We cannot ever become such. However, if we spend our lives contemplating such perfect, complete objects, we become as perfect and complete as a human can be. We see this in how Socrates is presented. On the surface, he appears to be erotic: he pretends to be forever in a tizzy over beautiful boys such as Agathon and Alcibiades. However, as Alcibiades notes, Socrates is in fact unaffected by male beauty: he remains utterly impassive when Alcibiades does his best to seduce him. Similarly, Socrates is someone who is beyond being affected by hunger, thirst, cold or fear. Twice in the dialogue, we hear of how he stands, in a state of complete detachment from this world, absorbed in contemplation (175b1–3, 220c3–d5). In a certain sense, Socrates remains erotic – a lover of Forms – but this does not fill him with a sense of dependency and incompleteness. This is what we are offered should we achieve a philosophical grasp of Forms.¹⁰

⁹ In this way, Diotima's speech, as well as Aristophanes', reflects a tragic outlook. (I owe this observation to Franco Trivigno.) However, as I shall argue, Diotima's speech is not as pessimistic as Aristophanes'. While she holds that human nature is not fully perfectible, she does allow that we are rational and that we can achieve a partial form of completion through our (imperfect) relationship to the Forms.

¹⁰ This raises the question of what degree of understanding of the Forms Socrates has achieved. The textual evidence is unclear. On the one hand, in the opening of the dialogue, Socrates describes his wisdom as "inferior and debatable, existing as if in a dream" (175e2–4). But shortly thereafter, he claims that he knows nothing but *ta erōtika* (things concerning love, 177d7–8). Later, though, he declares that he was mistaken to call himself an expert concerning *ta erōtika* (198c5–d3); while his statement appears ironic, it creates further confusion regarding his degree of initiation into *ta erōtika*. Finally, before commencing the ascent, Diotima expresses doubts as to whether Socrates can be initiated into the highest *erōtika* (210a1–2). My sense is that Socrates has achieved at least a partial glimpse of the Forms, but that he is unable to sustain it; Plato therefore portrays him as both

Aristophanes' speech leaves us with the following puzzle: why are the Aristophanic lovers stuck attempting to lose themselves in a destructive embrace, while their Socratic counterparts are able to find at least partial fulfillment through their relationship to the Forms? Both begin by falling for a person, or at least a body; why, then, are only the Socratic lovers able to transcend? The kind of love that Socrates employs as his starting point in the spiritual ascent must be of a very different nature than the love described by Aristophanes. But where exactly does the Aristophanic conception differ from the Socratic?

Here, we should turn to a puzzling feature of Aristophanes' account. Given that he portrays the lovers as seeking their other halves, we might expect him to highlight the differences between them, each possessing unique features that make him the other's complement. Instead, his emphasis is on their complete symmetry: their faces are exactly alike (189e7–190a1), and their bodies identical, with the exception of the genitalia of the hermaphroditic pairs. He compares them to halves of apples and of eggs (190d7–e2).¹¹ Aristophanes never presents one half as loving another for his virtues or even his quirks – indeed, he never tells us what they love in each other beyond their belonging to one another. This feature of Aristophanes' account, I suggest, follows from his portrayal of his humans as irrational. They pursue completion as such, understanding it in purely physical-historical terms, independently of its connection to the good. But in that case, they cannot be said to love their other half for any of his qualities beyond the fact that he is their other half;¹² they fail to love their other half because his goodness and beauty offer them a path to securing the good. In Diotima's speech, what makes the spiritual ascent possible is that the lover responds to the beauty of his beloved's body. As a result, he is able to generalize – to see that all beautiful bodies are alike, to abstract – to value bodily beauty as such, and to ascend – to respond to other forms of beauty, such as beauty of souls or laws. Aristophanes' lovers, on the other hand, do not respond to the beauty or goodness of their beloveds. It is this feature of Aristophanic love that makes it immune

ignorant and knowledgeable of *ta erōtika*, and as cycling in and out of contemplative trances. Thus, I do not mean to suggest that Socrates has achieved a full and permanent understanding of the Forms; even if he had achieved this, this would not ensure him *eternal* possession of the good. Rather, I take Plato's intention to be to portray the way in which a life spent in even an imperfect relationship to the Forms offers Socrates fulfillment.

¹¹ The one exception to this is 191d3–4, where Aristophanes compares them to tallies.

¹² Note that the quality of being one's other half has the peculiar feature that, by definition, it has only one instantiation; it is therefore not susceptible to the generalizing move that we see in the ascent, where one recognizes that the beauty of all bodies is akin and comes to love all beautiful bodies.

to Vlastos' (1981) worry about replaceability, but the flip side is that it ceases to be love of the individual *qua* individual; instead it is just the yearning for wholeness. In the ascent, Socrates' lover starts by gazing upon his beloved and ends up gazing at the Forms. The difficulty with Aristophanes' lovers is that, pressed against one another, their limbs interwoven, they are unable to see one another. Love at its best requires that one recognize the separateness of the beloved so that one can really see him; this is impossible if one is completely preoccupied with one's own incompleteness.

5. Response to Dover and Nussbaum

We are now in a position to see how Dover and Nussbaum have misunderstood the significance of Aristophanes' speech. In his article, "Aristophanes' Speech in Plato's *Symposium*," Dover draws a distinction between sexual desire and preference (1966: 48–9). Sexual desire is a response to objectively desirable qualities. Preference, by contrast, can be felt for someone who is not conspicuous for objectively desirable qualities and is therefore unshaken by the availability of a more objectively desirable partner. According to Dover, the form of *erōs* that Aristophanes describes corresponds to preference, not sexual desire (49). Nussbaum offers a complementary reading of Aristophanes' speech in *The Fragility of Goodness*. She proposes that Aristophanes' speech offers us "much of what Vlastos wanted from an account of love" (1986: 173). Vlastos famously objects to Plato's treatment of love in the *Symposium* because it holds that we love others only insofar as they instantiate valuable properties; as a consequence, it fails to be love of whole persons, and it is subject to the transferability of affection. Nussbaum argues that Aristophanes' speech is intended to function as a counter to Diotima's because its analysis of *erōs* invokes just those features that Vlastos found lacking in Diotima's. Nussbaum maintains that Aristophanes treats love as a response to whole persons, "entire beings, thoroughly embodied, with all their idiosyncrasies, flaws and even faults" (173). Such love is non-transferrable, since "the individual is loved not only as a whole, but also as a unique and irreplaceable whole" (173). Both Dover and Nussbaum treat Aristophanes' model of *erōs* as a more realistic and attractive depiction of interpersonal love than Socrates'.

Before we can consider whether Nussbaum and Dover capture Aristophanes' model of *erōs*, we must first get clear on what model they are attributing to him. Both authors emphasize that Aristophanic *erōs* is

not a response to objectively desirable qualities; Nussbaum adds that it is a response to the whole person, including his idiosyncrasies and flaws. On this model, *erōs* is a response to the entire set of qualities that make up the individual, warts and all; this set of qualities is peculiar to the beloved, thereby securing the non-transferability of affection. But this characterization of *erōs* gives rise to the question of what it is about this set of qualities that occasions *erōs*. One compelling response might be that we find this set of qualities to be better than any other that we have encountered. But this would return us to the model of *erōs* as a response to objective value, to which they claim that Aristophanes offers an alternative. But if the lover does not respond to the value of the beloved's set of qualities, then why does he love precisely that person? And can this response even be called love?

Whatever we make of this model of *erōs*, it is not what we are offered in Aristophanes' speech. We do get some version of it in Alcibiades' speech, when he presents Socrates to us in all his idiosyncratic glory – he loves Socrates not just for his wisdom, but also for his slovenliness and his penchant for dowdy examples. Arguably, Plato intends this to show us the risks of Diotima's *scala amoris* – one might become so caught up in an individual in his particularity that one becomes unable to ascend to better examples of beauty. But Aristophanes' speech does not present us with anything along these lines. Where Alcibiades offers us a vivid and poignant depiction of his beloved Socrates, Aristophanes tells us nothing about why the halves are lovable to one another, beyond their role in enabling the return to wholeness. Within the myth, the quality which occasions love is simply the physical-historical quality of being one's other half. When we demythologize Aristophanes, his idea may be that it doesn't really matter what qualities the beloved possesses; it is simply his being designated your beloved that makes him lovable. On the one hand, this does secure us some of what Vlastos was looking for: the other is loved as a concrete particular, and not as a congeries of valuable qualities; furthermore, this love could not possibly be felt for anyone else. But it brings with it attendant moral risks. From Plato's perspective, the risk is that the lover does not even get to the first rung of his ladder of love – he cannot even be said to love a *beautiful* body. From our perspective, there is a concern that this form of love does not involve the recognition of the beloved; it is not a response to “the individual in all the uniqueness and integrity of his or her individuality.”¹³ Furthermore, far from desiring to benefit the beloved for

¹³ Vlastos 1981: 31; cf. Nussbaum 1986: 173–4.

his own sake, the Aristophanic lover treats him as a means to his own pursuit of wholeness. Perhaps one might respond that this complaint is inapt – if Aristophanic lovers truly are halves of the same whole, then they cannot be viewed as using one another in seeking to become reattached.¹⁴ But this brings us to our final concern: insofar as Aristophanes' lovers aim at subsuming their beloveds within themselves, they cannot be said to respect the individuality and autonomy of their beloveds.

6. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued for two theses. First, that Aristophanes' speech is of the utmost philosophical significance in relation to Socrates'. Second, that despite its comic veneer, it is fundamentally tragic. In mythic form, it articulates a view of human nature as incomplete. It proposes that this sense of incompleteness lies at the heart of *erōs*. It expresses the common hope that we can achieve completion through interpersonal love. And, finally, it demonstrates the futility of this hope. Thus, on the one hand, it articulates a view of human nature and of the problem posed by *erōs* with which Plato agrees. And on the other hand, Plato uses it to express his view that interpersonal love cannot make us whole, thus opening the way to his proposal that love of Forms alone can offer us a mortal form of completion.¹⁵

¹⁴ I owe this objection to Rachel Barney and Jennifer Whiting. For an alternate response, see Ludwig 2002: 56.

¹⁵ I would like to express my gratitude to Pierre Destrée and Zina Giannopoulou for inviting me to contribute this chapter, as well as for their hospitality at the workshop they held at the Université Catholique de Louvain. I am also indebted to audiences at Northwestern University, U. C. Berkeley, U.C. Riverside, the University of Toronto, and at the International Plato Symposium in Pisa; to Franco Trivigno and Nick Smith for serving as commentators; and to Yahei Kanayama and Frisbee Sheffield for their written comments.

PLATO'S *Symposium*

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