

A Review of Plato's *Symposium*:

The Book for All Lovers

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At the end of Plato's book, *Symposium*, there is a gentleman who comes to the party, he was very late and very drunk, and in his drunken stupor, Alcibiades said to the entire party that he would not mind if Socrates were to die because of how ashamed he makes him feel. But, of course, Alcibiades loves Socrates terribly so and believes his being alive is what can eventually make Alcibiades a better man. What is unfortunate is how many people felt this way and therefore Socrates was cast away from making any more men come to their senses. However, in the book *Symposium*, which can be translated to mean a 'party,' the men there are quite fond of Socrates and his unique view of the world. There we, the readers, can see philosophers of all sorts: men of law and education, medicine and science, and men of comedy and tragedy, and from all of these perspectives, they paint a portrait of who and what they believe Eros is. In the simplest of terms, Eros is love and everything within it. Eros can be called Aphrodite; beautiful, common, or vulgar; it can also be divided into parts where there are prey and predators; but in the end, Socrates points straight to the direction of what True Eros is and attempts to correct all of the speeches given at the symposium.

Plato's book *Symposium* is a collection of speeches from a dinner party, being told from the memory of one of the guest's friends, Apollodorus. Within this collection, there are roughly eight speeches that are given: the commencing speech is from Phaedrus, and then Pausanias, then Eryximachus before Aristophanes, and then Agathon is last in preparation for Socrates, who

gives one small argument to Agathon and one grand speech to everyone, and finally, the aforementioned Alcibiades consummates the night with his oration to Socrates. The compositional structure revolving these speeches develops the idea of Eros and Love into the reader's mind through seven different points of view. With Plato writing in this manner, he is able to build-up philosophical concepts as well as utilize logical rules to break them down. Meaning, the themes covered in the speeches prior to Socrates' are addressed in his speech, but the way in which this is done is why it can be said that Socrates is giving a form of therapy to the group of free thinkers. With the use of making up a fictitious character, Diotima, Socrates is able to confront the arguments set forth by the previous speeches to thusly break them down into their logical truths and fallacies. In this paper, Phaedrus' speech will be used to show examples of how Socrates uses previously stated errors in lectures to persuade others to think otherwise.

Phaedrus is the first to deliver his thoughts on Eros; in Plato's book *Phaedrus*, together with his *Symposium*, Phaedrus is set out to be the father of the entire subject of Love. In his speech, Phaedrus establishes Eros as being one of the oldest gods in Greek mythology. In addition, he establishes Eros as being the greatest guide to being our greatest and most noble selves: when men go out into battle in love with another, then in their fight, they will try to be their best as they would not want to disappoint their lover and would save their life at any cost, "even if she's a woman" (179B, p. 10). And because lovers build up a strong and protective face, in order to be worthy of their recipient love, Phaedrus poses that Eros makes the men of Athens much more mighty, valorous, and virtuous than if the men were not all in love with one another. Phaedrus, who is at this moment coming from the view of a student in philosophy, is suggesting

that within a battle, it would be his honor to save his lover's life, vis a vie he-his, and it would bring virtue and appeasement from the gods to do so.

Similarly to the beginning of Phaedrus' speech, Socrates also starts his with historical mythology: how Love came to be born. In Phaedrus' myth, he pulls from three others that all agree "that Love is one of the most ancient gods. As such, he gives to us the greatest goods. I cannot say what greater good there is for a young boy than a gentle lover, or for a lover than a boy to love ... nothing imparts this guidance as well as Love" (178C-D, pgs. 9-10). Without parents, Love was born with Chaos and Earth before all other gods. And thusly Phaedrus sets the night forth, posing Love as a cultivator of goodwill and goodness—and with physical bonds, men can become better and most virtuous.

Contrary to this, Socrates begins his speech with a story of Love being born from two parents: Poros and Penia. Socrates says that on the day that Aphrodite was born, Poros was attending the birth's celebration and fell asleep in the garden of Zeus. This is when Penia decided to take a child from Poros, by laying next to him in the garden, and then Love was conceived. The names Socrates gives to the parents can be said to give a greater understanding of what, or who, Love is. In the Greek language, Poros means "resource" and Penia is "poverty," in addition, the mother of Poros is given, Metis, which means "cunning." In Socrates' myth, said through Diotima, Love is "always poor, and he's far from being delicate and beautiful (as ordinary people think he is); instead, he is tough and shriveled ... sleeping at people's doorsteps and in roadsides under the sky, having his mother's nature, always living with Need" (203C-D, p. 48). In his own subtle way, each paragraph, each phrasing, is a retelling of an aspect of one of the previous speeches. In this example, Socrates, with the help of his character Diotima, is able to

correct the false mythology that Phaedrus attempts to establish without directly saying to Phaedrus, “no my friend, you are mistaken, please allow me to say the myth the right way as to best appease the gods” or by interrupting his speech entirely. And with Diotima, in Socrates’ speech, talking to Socrates in a story he is telling, he is able to put on the faces of his party members and ask Diotima something similar to answer in a better way. Or in this instance, re-establish the mythology as a way of using the parents of Love as a way to better understand his nature. Love, or Eros, is not one of the oldest gods in Greek myth, but a humble being that was born shortly after Aphrodite, who serves her and lives for the virtuous beauty that she possesses.

Through the guidance of Love, Phaedrus believes being the most militant and valorous will both bring us to be our most virtuous self, and to be deserving of love from our lover. The way in which Socrates addresses this, in the therapeutical manner as mentioned before, is to allusively redirect what makes men actually deserving of a beloved or lover’s love. Socrates starts his speech saying that he has had similar thoughts as Agathon, the one who spoke just before him, but in all actuality, he touched on every argument made that night throughout the entirety of his speech. Socrates says that he has asked similar questions to a prophetic woman named Diotima on the subject of Love and Eros.

One of the first questions discussed between Diotima and Socrates addresses Phaedrus’ idea of deserving to be loved, but on first sight, it can look to be on a completely different thought: “who are the people who love wisdom, if they are neither wise nor ignorant?” (204B, p. 49). In establishing Love as something that wants Aphrodite’s beauty and does not possess it, Diotima also lays the foundation that Love, or Eros, also is not wise, nor ignorant, “neither

immortal nor mortal,” but rather, he is always in between the extremes and in love with the virtues. Just as his parents, Poros and Penia were also two far extremes from one another; and so Love is not in a constant state of virtue, he lies in want, in need, and in love with all great virtues. This is when Socrates hints to Phaedrus, through Diotima, he says “I think that’s why Love struck you as being beautiful in every way: because it is what is really beautiful and graceful that deserves to be loved, and this is perfect and highly blessed; but being a lover takes a different form” (204C, p. 49). And while it was toward another speech that Socrates was correcting Love as not being the most beautiful, Socrates does reaffirm to the group what in man is most deserving of a lover’s love: to be beautiful, not to be the most militant.

Throughout his speech, Socrates builds Eros’ desires as being one of immortality, but not at all in the life-saving way that Phaedrus proposed with a military made up of lovers and their beloveds. In Phaedrus’s mind, this type of army would be the best and most honorable. Whereas Diotima’s account of honor in immortality lies its bearing on the offspring of the love of one’s own mind or body. Phaedrus gives another small myth of when Alcestis sacrificed herself for her husband, and then another of Achilles doing the same for his lover; attempting to argue that Achilles’s lover and beloved self-sacrifice was held at a higher honor than a wife to her husband because of the strong Love that bonds lovers together when it is between a man and a boy. In either case, of Socrates or of Phaedrus, immortality in honor through love is a common ground across these two speeches. What can be appreciated about Diotima’s sense of immortality is that in addition to birthing children, the children of philosophers, writers, artists, and so on, is the work that they create, which can be said to be much more honorable and everlasting than a

family lineage. And brings the reader's attention to the author himself, Plato, the deathless, timeless, and imperishable originator of so many thoughts still thought of to this day.

### References

Plato, Nehamas, A., & Woodruff, P. (1989). *Symposium*. Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co.