

# Love for goodness' sake: plato's symposium

[Life](#), [Love](#)



Socrates says, “ In a word, then, love is wanting to possess the good forever” (206B). Naturally, it would be my inclination to agree with this statement; however, love is much more complex than Socrates’ definition. Love is the desire to always be happy, and finding goodness is the key to happiness. Love brings the good out of our souls to guide our lives. We search for goodness in love, yet surrendering to love and desire (eros) is what brings out our goodness. The happiness that love provides encourages the individual to be his or her best self, which is how we ultimately live our lives around goodness.

Plato’s Symposium teaches this catch-22: in searching for goodness in love, we discover the goodness within our own souls. A person faces choices every day; with every decision there is the option of acting morally or shamefully. Most people aim to make moral choices, but regardless of the decisions people make, every person has an inherent ability to distinguish acting shamefully and morally. Whether this ability is something a person is born with or is developed through education from one’s parents is irrelevant; it’s important to notice that individuals are aware of their acts before they love someone.

When someone falls in love—or is overcome by desire—he or she becomes acutely aware of his or her actions and usually makes a conscious effort to make good choices. In seeing the goodness of the ones a person desires, he or she is reminded of the importance of portraying one’s good qualities. This is the heart of Phaedrus’ argument, that “ there is a certain guidance each person needs for his whole life...and nothing imparts this guidance...as well as Love” (178D).

He continues to argue that the best possible society would be full of lovers and their beloveds because all of its members would be constantly aware of being their best selves in the presence of their loved ones. Phaedrus contends that surrendering to eros brings out an individual's goodness, but he doesn't address whether this goodness exists when a person is living without Love. Aristophanes discusses his belief that people fall in love when they find the their "other half" who fills them with a sense of completeness. He states, "It's obvious that the soul of every lover longs for something else; his soul cannot say what it is" yet he pursues the feeling of unity and completeness that love provides (192D). This sense of wholeness comes from finding the goodness within oneself when a person is with his or her matching half. Socrates disagrees with Aristophanes' argument because he doesn't know that each person's other half is good. The concept of having a matching half may provide comfort to some, but it implies that each person should only have a desire for one person.

It is very common for people to love multiple people through the course of their lives. Aristophanes may not be incorrect in saying that every soul is searching for its matching half, but the key part of his argument in this context is that when a person finds someone he or she loves, that person feels a sense of fullness. I believe this sense of feeling of fulfillment comes from rediscovering the good within oneself. The argument in the Symposium that most emphasizes this point is that of Socrates. He believes that everyone is pregnant, either physically or mentally.

Those who are pregnant physically bear children; this is their way of spreading life and goodness into the world. Those who are have a pregnant soul bear wisdom, creativity and beauty into the world. Both forms of pregnancy leave behind a small piece of goodness and the process of pregnancy proves that this goodness begins within the individual. A woman has most of what is required to make a baby within her body before finding a lover. She has healthy organs that make her body function, and she is capable of maintaining her body. She has eggs in her ovaries that are waiting for a lover to fertilize them.

When she finds a lover, his sperm combines with her egg and a beautiful baby develops. Both the man and the woman have all of the ingredients to create offspring, but the unity of the lovers is required to complete the process. In the same way, each individual has wisdom within their souls, but it's necessary to combine two souls to expose the goodness to society. The process of bringing beauty and wisdom into the world through spiritual pregnancy is more abstract than physical pregnancy, but is equally important. In the same way that a physical lust develops between lovers, souls can crave each other.

Socrates states that the soul is drawn to other beautiful and developed souls, and these people connect through intellectually stimulating arguments—they give birth to new ideas and thoughts. He believes that, “ when [a person] makes contact with someone beautiful and keeps company with him, he conceives and gives birth to what he has been carrying inside him for ages. And whether they are together or apart, he remembers that beauty” (209C).

Here, Socrates says that the beauty, truth, knowledge, and goodness were all contained within the lover before the relationship was established; it is through dialogue that this beauty is exposed.

Being aware of displaying our good behaviors and trying to impress our loved ones can be a good thing, but sometimes one's heightened awareness of goodness can make him or her feel inferior. When Alcibiades crashes the philosophers' dinner, he begins his speech of praise for Socrates, but quickly Alcibiades reveals his overwhelming sense of mediocrity when in Socrates' presence. " Yes, he makes me feel ashamed," Alcibiades confesses, " I know perfectly well that I can't prove he's wrong when he tells me what I should do; yet, the moment I leave his side, I go back to my old ways" (216B).

Alcibiades believes he will never be good enough for the pious and goodness-filled Socrates. Alcibiades admits that he strives to be his best self in front of Socrates, but he lapses into old habits when they are apart. Alcibiades declares, " my whole life has become one constant effort to escape from him and keep away, but when I see him, I feel deeply ashamed, because I'm doing nothing about my way of life, although I have already agreed with him that I should" (216B). Therefore, Alcibiades is aware that he has the potential to be good, but he only has the strength to be noble when he's with Socrates.

The tragedy is that Socrates doesn't want to take Alcibiades as a lover, leaving the latter to suffer through life feeling lonely and inadequate. Alcibiades should remember that he has the power to be moral and display his goodness, which could in turn lead him to another lover. All of the

philosophers whose ideas I've discussed above reveal that love brings out the good in each of us, but I believe that the good is contained within the individual before exposure to a lover. We seek lovers because we crave the reminder to always be our best selves.

We take pride in acting morally, and we feel good when others recognize our good behavior. We have desire for someone when we see his or her beauty and goodness, and we hope to be desired for our goodness as well. When two lovers come together, there is a feel of unity because there's an understanding that both people will be noble for each other. People are compelled to stay with a lover for the entirety of their lives because they want to continue to be full of goodness. When we are without a lover, we may feel lonely and can lose touch with our internal goodness.

We crave love because we need the constant reminder to be our highest selves—the self we are most proud of. Because Love makes us extra aware of our goodness both internally and behaviorally, it's important to remember that we have the power to be our noblest selves at any time, with or without a lover. Therefore Socrates was right after all: love is the desire to hold on to the good in our lives forever, and being with a lover is the best way to constantly be aware of being our best selves.