

The role of love in plato's symposium



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Life is filled with dualities and opposing figures: love and hatred, light and dark, male and female, life and death. Aristophanes addresses a duality in the context of love in Plato's The Symposium. The Symposium raises the question of what love truly is and means. Aristophanes brings the idea of soulmates to the party. Aristophanes explains it through the use of a myth. This myth discusses how people came to love who they love. Aristophanes brings forth the idea of soulmates or a life time partner. The myth assists the divulging of the origins of this idea. This idea is also played out by other characters in the dialogue, concluding that while one looks for a soulmate they also must recognize that they are independent beings. Whether you are in a relationship or not you are still an independent being who makes choices and must face consequences, good or bad. The idea of love is necessary to address due to its important role in Greek society and culture. Despite there being multiple pleasing aspects to loving someone, the ultimate desire is to feel whole, and once someone has found their soulmate, they become a better person.

Aristophanes' speech shares this theme of love bringing gifts of goodness to the people that praise him. He chooses to explain to the group why humans desire one another so strongly. He uses a myth as the back bone of his speech. The myth is used to explain the meaning of eros and its origins. Aristophanes explains that there were originally three genders, male, female and androgynous. These people had four arms, four legs, two heads, two sets of genitals, these beings were double of what humans are now. Males were descendants of the sun, females of the earth and the androgynous people came from the moon, as Aristophanes describes, "...because the

moon is a combination of sun and earth” (Plato 190b, p. 23). These beings were very powerful and threatened to attack the gods. Zeus, in order to humble these beings, decided to cut each person in two to stop these attacks (190d, p. 23). These beings longed for their original state and they began searching for their missing half. When their other half was found they would run to each other, embrace and not long for anything else, “ since their original nature had been cut in two, each one longed for its own other half and stayed with it” (191a, p. 24). This caused people to die due to hunger and lack of movement, so Zeus took pity and moved their genitals around so they could have sexual intercourse. This gave the beings something to do and also the ability to procreate, “ the aim of this was that, if a man met with a woman and entwined himself with her, they would reproduce and the human race would be continued” (191c, p. 24).

Aristophanes explains that this is the origin of desire for another human. “ It draws the two halves of our original nature back together and tries to...heal the wound in human nature” (191d, p. 24). Aristophanes saying this shows the true nature of love, to improve things. When someone finds their other half, they are overwhelmed with feelings for this person. These could be feelings of love, affection, anger, concern or even sadness or jealousy. The love one feels for another makes them act in certain ways around their lover. The love between two people can make them better people, and make them feel whole, as was their original state. “ The reason is that this is our original natural state and we used to be whole creatures: ‘ love’ is the name for the desire and pursuit of wholeness” (192e, p. 26). The concept of soulmates is so that people can become their whole selves once again.

Zeus' threats are a reminder that eros can bring moral improvement.

Aristophanes states that if humans are disobedient to the gods, Zeus might split them in two once more, so people must strive to behave according to the wishes of the gods. It is told that when humans were their whole selves they were pleasing the gods, but because of their wickedness, they were separated. So this gives humans a reason to be good if they hadn't had a reason before. " There's a danger that, if we aren't well ordered in our behaviour towards the gods, we'll be split up further..." (193a, p. 26). In the beginning of his speech Aristophanes states that people need to understand the power of love, " I think people have wholly failed to recognize the power of Love; if they'd grasped this, they'd have built the greatest temples and altars for him..." (189c, p. 22). This quotation shows that Aristophanes believes in the importance of praising eros. Along with feeling whole, the people will also prevent any future punishment from Zeus. If one lets love rule over them, they can only be good, and if they are good there can not be evil. Aristophanes urges that people should let love be their guide. If love is your leader in life, you can do nothing but good things. "...if we show reverence towards the gods, he will restore us to our original nature, healing us and so giving us perfect happiness" (193d, p. 27), Aristophanes is saying that if everyone found their love and returned to their natural selves that the whole world would be happier. If one praises love and is reunited with their soulmate, that feeling of wholeness will be gifted to them from the gods.

The other speeches in this dialogue also echo the idea that love brings goodness. Phaedrus' speech is described as one praising eros, "...saying that Love was regarded by humans and gods as a great and awesome god for

many reasons, especially his origin” (178a, p. 9). Phaedrus shares that love is a god that is to be praised. Phaedrus states that if you do praise eros and worship eros you will be gifted guidance and goodness. Phaedrus' speech introduces the idea that love brings virtuous actions to those who praise the god. By praising the god of love one receives his gifts and shares them with others. In Agathon's speech, he describes love as the youngest god. Agathon shares that love brings peace to humans. “ So, in the case of Love, the right thing is to praise his nature first, and then his gifts” (195a, p. 28). He then goes on to say that love carries the four cardinal virtues, which are justice, moderation, bravery and wisdom. Agathon explains that love can never be touched by violence. Those who feel love are not violent. Love faces no injustice. Love is moderate, love has power over its pleasures. Moderation is the ability to have power over your pleasures and passions. Agathon shows love's wisdom by equating it to love's poetry. Love is the greatest poet, making it the most successful and wise, says Agathon. He ends his speech by praising eros, taking the reader back to Aristophanes' views on praising the god of love and desire. Praising eros brings one goodness.

It is shared throughout Plato's entire dialogue that love does make people better. Love creates something to aspire to. That feeling of wholeness will give you happiness. Finding your soulmate helps you to strive to be better. Aristophanes uses the myth of the original humans to display this idea. The world would be a much happier place if humans were reunited with their soulmates. While life is filled with dualities, one that is faced every day is the choice between right and wrong. The Symposium shares that love helps humans with this trial.