

"the origin of eros":
the foundation of
platonic love and
affection in plato's
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Plato's "Symposium" is an essential piece of philosophical literature that concerns itself with the genesis, purpose and nature of love, or eros. Love is examined in a sequence of speeches by men attending a symposium, or drinking party. A symposia, or drinking party in ancient Greece, was an occasion for passing the cup, reciting poetry, singing songs, telling jokes and performing pantomimes. These were generally masculine affairs filled with wine and song, with no female presence. In the case of the "Symposium," Plato uses the symposia as a literary device that allows him to explore the power and nature of the erotic and how it relates to issues of ethics, epistemology and ontology. Plato explores eros and the nature of love through a series of speeches, each delivered by an important figure of the time in ancient Greece. Each speech represents a rhetorical performance on the part of their speakers. The speeches also reflect the character, profession, and values of their speakers. Employing these speeches, Plato explores how love shapes our moral character, informs our ethics, raises questions of being, and drives the philosophical enterprise as a whole.

The first essential sentiments shared with the group of scholars are delivered by humanist scholar, Phaedrus. Phaedrus begins the investigation into eros with great force and economy. He explains that Love is an old god that does the most to promote virtue in people: "Eros is a great god, a marvel to men and gods alike." (Plato 178b) He justifies Love's age by explaining that Love has no parents, therefore making him one of the oldest and most honored gods:

Eros has no parents, either in reality or in works of prose and poetry. Take Hesiod... All he says is that in the beginning there was Chaos... Acusilaus

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agrees with Hesiod, that after Chaos there were just these two, Earth and Eros... So there is widespread agreement that Eros is of great antiquity. And being very old he also brings us very great benefits. (178c)

Phaedrus also explains that Love is the benefactor of humankind and the inspiration for honor. Simply put, only lovers would be willing to die for each other and a man would rather die than appear as a coward in front of his beloved: "Imagine a man in love being found out doing something humiliating, or letting someone else do something degrading to him, because he was too cowardly to stop it. It would embarrass him more to be found out by the boy he loved than by his father or his friends or anyone." (178d) In this sense, Love represents the spirit of self-sacrifice, as a lover desires to live up to the expectations of the beloved and lovers are often ashamed to fail in front of each other: "What is more, lovers are the only people prepared to die for others." (179b) This makes Love, as a god, great because people would not do these things without his help. People have a greatness and desire for love, and the relationship between the beloved and the lover is like that of the relationship between humans and gods. Love benefits both the lover and the beloved and it is the affection of the beloved that reinforces the guidance of the lover. Following this will result in rewards from the gods, according to Phaedrus. In order to further his point, Phaedrus chooses to cite famous Greek heroic and not so heroic relations, such as Hesiod, Acusilaus and Parmenides, Orpheus and Eurydice, Achilles and Patroclus and Alcestis and Admetus. In terms of Alcestis, Phaedrus explains how she pleased the gods:

[Alcestis] alone was willing to die for her husband... in so doing she was thought, by men and gods alike, to have performed a deed of supreme excellence. Indeed the gods were so pleased with her action that they brought her soul back from the underworld- a privilege they granted to only a fortunate handful of the many people who have done good deeds. (179b-d)

Phaedrus also explains the fault at which Orpheus was at in comparison to Alcestis:

Orpheus, on the other hand, was sent away from the underworld emptyhanded; he was shown a mere phantom of the woman he came to find, and not give the woman himself... The gods thought he was a bit of a coward, lacking the courage to die for his love, as Alcestis did... They punished him further, giving him death at the hands of women. (179d)

Phaedrus states that in cases such as Achilles and Patroclus, there is a military advantage to male and male couples, as both men want to impress each other and therefore fight harder: " If there were some way of arranging that a state, or an army, could be made up entirely of pairs of lovers, it is impossible to imagine a finer population." (178e) The erotic ideal in this case is thoroughly homoerotic, and privileges the moral power of male bonding. Phaedrus' ideas portray Love as a coveted god who inspires lovers to form a spirit towards honor and self-sacrifice with one another.

Following Phaedrus' speech were the words of Pausanias, a Sophist, or legal expert. Pausanias' speech draws from history and social customs, and is presented with a subtle approach. According to him, there are two

Aphrodites, and therefore two Loves, and Love is inseparable from the
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goddess herself: " If there were only one Aphrodite, there would be one Eros. However, since there are in fact two Aphrodites, it follows that Eros likewise must be two." (180d) Pausanias makes the distinction between Common Love and Heavenly Love, or upper and lower Aphrodite. Common Love is concerned with simple and mindless desire, and is opportunistic: " The Eros associated with Common Aphrodite is, in all senses of the word, common, and quite haphazard in his operation. This is the love of the man in the street." (181a) Common Love involves seeking immediate gratitude, especially of a sexual nature. It is also considered a younger sort of Love, and is therefore immature: " He picks the most unintelligent people he can find, since all he's interested in is the sexual act... This love derives its existence from the much younger Aphrodite, the one composed equally of the female and male elements." (181b) Inversely, Heavenly Love is gained by those attracted to noble, strong and intelligent individuals. Heavenly Love always occurs between a man and a boy, where the boy makes love to the man in exchange for an education in wisdom and virtue: " Those inspired by this love turn to the male, attracted by what is naturally stronger and of superior intelligence." (181c) Heavenly Love is considered older than Common Love. Pausanias also argues that Heavenly Love only has a father, exemplifying the idea of superior male nature, where Common Love has both a mother and a father, which explains the mixed nature of Common Love. Pausanias explains that Eros is centered on the relationship between individuals. He also articulates that the ideal love relationship is a coincidence that involves both the fact that the lover's willing subjugation is neither servile nor reprehensible, and that the beloved seeks subjugation of the lover purely for the pursuit of wisdom. Pausanias also explains that the <https://assignbuster.com/the-origin-of-eros-the-foundation-of-platonic-love-and-affection-in-platos-symposium/>

act of love is beautiful if done for beautiful reasons, but shameful if done for shameful reasons: " Love is neither right nor wrong in itself. Done rightly, it is right; done wrongly, it is wrong. It is wrong if you satisfy the wrong person, for the wrong reasons, and right if you satisfy the right person, for the right reasons." (183d) He introduces the idea that no action is inherently good or bad in itself, but how the action is performed is what designates good from bad. This translates as practical advice to the party of scholars. Pausanias' argument is homoerotic and non heteronormative, similar to Phaedrus', and is considered to many present scholars as the " hymn of homosexuality" in the work as a whole, which reflects on the Greek bias of male superiority.

Eryximachus completely shifts the tone of the conversation on eros, bringing a plain argument without ornament, conceptualizing love in naturalistic terms: " I am a doctor by profession, and it has been my observation... that Eros is aroused by many other things as well, and that he is found also in nature- in the physical life of all animals, in plants that grow in the ground, and in virtually all living organisms." (186a) As a doctor, Eryximachus has high regard for his own expertise and believes that his position as physician is to distinguish noble love from ugly love. For this particular scholar, love exists in two forms: healthy and unhealthy, as it is able to transform the body's desires and affect its health: " The nature of the human body shows this twofold Eros, since it is generally agreed that health and sickness in the body are separate and unlike, and that unlike is attracted to unlike, and desires it. So there is one force of attraction for the healthy, and another for the sick." (186b) He argues that love promotes moderation and orderliness. Eryximachus also expostulates that love governs medicine, music and

astronomy; providing a professional and mechanical definition, as medicine, like music, creates an agreement by producing concord and love between various opposites, and may be able to cure the diseased. He theorizes that love does not restrict itself to human interaction and can be found in everything in the universe: " In music and medicine, and in all other spheres of activity, human and divine, we must keep a careful eye, so far as it is practicable, on both forms of Eros. For both are present. The seasons of the year likewise fully illustrate their joint operation." (187e) To him, love is the source of happiness, good fortune, civil order, and most importantly, concord with the gods:

So great and widespread- in fact, universal- is the power possessed, in general by all Eros, but in particular by the Eros which, in the moral sphere, acts with good sense and justice both among us and among the gods. And not only does it possess absolute power; it also brings us complete happiness, enabling us to be companions and friends both of each other and of our superiors, the gods. (188d)

For Eryximachus, love functions as a transition from the narrow definition of love as a physical desire to love as an intellectual concept that is highlighted later in Diotima's speech. This argument counters the cultural conventionalism of both Phaedrus and Pausanias, as it takes the theory of multi-level love farther. Eryximachus explains that eros is a destabilizing force, made up of higher and lower Aphrodite. Lower Aphrodite translates to a man wanting a boy solely for his body, and Higher Aphrodite represents love in the mind and intellectual abilities. Love functions by creating a harmony between these two types of love, according to Eryximachus. The <https://assignbuster.com/the-origin-of-eros-the-foundation-of-platonic-love-and-affection-in-platos-symposium/>

key to this is to find a method of enjoying the pleasures of Earthly love without falling into debauchery, and once this love is attained, it should be protected, according to Eryximachus. By conceptualizing love in terms of the human body and the health of an individual, Eryximachus brings a much more technical and direct definition of eros than the speakers before him.

Aristophanes, the comic playwright, takes the topic of conversation an entirely new direction following Eryximachus. From the start, Aristophanes explains his intention to take a completely different approach than the other speakers prior: "It's my opinion that mankind is quite unaware of the power of Eros... Eros is the most friendly towards men. He is our helper, and cures those evils whose cure brings the greatest happiness to the human race."

(189c-d) His speech itself is considered almost the comedic relief or satirical portion of Plato's "Symposium," as it is almost poking fun at Greek myths.

That said, Aristophanes begins with a myth involving the first people on Earth. The original inhabitants of Earth were three different sexes:

Our original nature was not as it is now, but quite different... There were three sexes, rather than the two we have now. The third sex was a combination... Its name has survived, though the phenomenon itself has disappeared. This single combination, comprising both male and female, was, in form and name alike, hermaphrodite. (189e)

The world we lived was a world where the males descended from the Sun, the females from the Earth and the androgynous individuals from the Moon.

These individuals had two faces, eight limbs and two sexes that were interchanged within each other: "Each human being formed a complete

whole, spherical, with back and ribs forming a circle." (189e) These beings were extremely powerful, and would roll around the Earth: " They were remarkable for their strength and vigour, and their ambition led them to make an assault upon the gods." (190b) These individuals threatened the gods, specifically Zeus, who wanted them destroyed. Zeus was aware that he could not destroy the human race, though, as humans provide ritual sacrifice to the gods. In response, Zeus chose to cut these humans in half, leaving a marking on the stomachs of these new humans: " I'm going to cut each of them in two. This will have two advantages: it will make them weaker, and also more useful to us, because of the increase in their numbers... Apollo twisted the faces round and gathered up the skin all round to what is now called the stomach, like a purse with strings." (190c-e) The entirety of the new human race entered a state of recovery, trying to recover their primal nature and find their other halves. Once found, the two halves would never want to be separated again, and the beings would be a whole orb instead of halves. As a consolation, Zeus granted the new human race the concept of sexual pleasure:

He moved their genitals to the front, and made them use them for reproduction by insemination, the male in the female. The idea was that if, in embracing, a man chanced upon a woman, they could produce children, and the race would increase. If man chanced upon man, they could get full satisfaction from one another's company, then separate, get on with their work, and resume the business of life. (191b-d)

With this quest to find one's other half, the concept of love as the desire and pursuit of the whole was born, as people should be guided by love to seek <https://assignbuster.com/the-origin-of-eros-the-foundation-of-platonic-love-and-affection-in-platos-symposium/>

wholeness: " Each of us is a mere fragment of a man... we've been split in two, like filleted plaice. We're all looking for our ' other half.'" (191d)

Aristophanes explained that love is a need whose satisfaction is more than physical, and involves a longing to regain a lost happiness that, when found, will be life affirming. Aristophanes proposed a type of relationship that endures beyond mere sexual intimacy and satisfaction, and that all the passion in the world is still considered eros of Higher Aphrodite. Aristophanes also expostulates that once people find their " soul mates," they remain together forever yet cannot articulate why. One of the more revolutionary concepts of Aristophanes' theory was the acknowledgement of men being couples, women being couples and men and women being couples together. He also introduced the concept that people must understand human nature before they can interpret the origins of love and how it affects the present time. Aristophanes ends his speech with a warning, stating that men should fear the gods and should not neglect worshipping them, for fear that Zeus will split us in half again by our noses: " The danger is that, if we don't treat the gods with respect, we may be divided again, and go round looking like figures in a bas-relief, sliced in half down the line of our noses... That's why we should all encourage the utmost piety towards the gods." (193b) In his theory, Aristophanes utilizes love in terms of health, similar to Eryximachus, by classifying that love is motivated by an attempt to heal a wound.

Following Aristophanes rather comedic speech, is Agathon's beautifully formal speech, stating the object of love is beauty. He begins by speaking of Love's physical character, and then describes his moral character. Agathon's theory of love, is the opposite of Phaedrus', stating that Love is the youngest

of the gods and is an enemy of old age: " He is the youngest of the gods. He proves this himself, by running away at top speed from old age. Yet old age is swift enough, and swifter than most of us would like. It is Eros' nature to hate old age, and steer well clear of it." (195b) Love shuns the very sight of senility and clings fiercely to youth, as the old are no longer capable of love, and that the young cannot love the old. To him, Love is young, beautiful, sensitive and wise, and is the happiest of all gods because he is the most beautiful. Love is also dainty, delicate, soft, supple, graceful, balanced, fluid and has exquisite skin and coloring Agathon chooses to describe the physical characteristics of Love's physical beauty as his own: " Very young, then, and very delicate. Another thing about him is that he's very supple. He can't be rigid and unyielding, because he wouldn't be able to insinuate himself anywhere he likes, entering and leaving men's hearts undetected." (196a) Agathon argues that all speakers before him have neglected to praise the god himself, and that they simply celebrated the benefits that accrue from Love: " All the speakers so far have given me the impression that they were not so much praising the god as congratulating mankind on the good things the god provides." (194e) He complains that the previous speakers also made the mistake of congratulating mankind on the blessing of love, yet have not acknowledged Love directly. He sees Love as responsible for implanting all virtues in the human race, and that the presence of Love settles discord: "[Eros] gives us the feeling, not of longing, but of belonging, since his the moving spirit behind all those occasions when we meet and gather together." (197d) Love is also a poet to Agathon, which opens up the conceptual door for the expressionist model of art in the Greek world. He also states that love creates justice, moderation, courage and wisdom- which

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were considered the cardinal virtues within ancient Greek culture. In terms of moral character, Agathon's argument is semantic, as one doing something for love cannot be forced. Overall, Agathon's speech is self-consciously poetic and rhetorical, as it is composed in the way of the Sophists.

The largest shift in direction occurs when Socrates articulately dominates the conversation. Socrates' speech can be broken into two phases, beginning with his interrogation of Agathon. Though Socrates' speech as a whole could be paired with Agathon's in terms of basic intention, their strongest disagreement can be found in their views on the nature of love. Agathon's argument states that love, by nature, is inherently good and beautiful. Socrates challenges Agathon in this view, stating that love must be the love of something. He also states that Love itself loves things of which he has a present need: " Consider this proposition: anything which desires something desires what it does not have, and it only desires when it is lacking something." (200a) Love consists in being conscious of a need for a good not yet possessed. Socrates' responses to Agathon is considered a classical socratic dialogue of Plato, as Agathon refutes many of his previous statements, once prompted by Socrates. Socrates explains to Agathon that Love is not a god, but rather a spirit that mediates between people and the objects of their desire. He states that Love is neither wise nor beautiful, but is the desire for wisdom and beauty. Humans see good and beauty in other human beings, as well as the world around us, according to Socrates. He sees Love in terms of nature, and explains that Love expresses itself through pregnancy and reproduction. By reproduction, Socrates is referring to both physical, sexual reproduction as well as the sharing and reproduction of

ideas over a period of time. Though he argues that Love is not immortal and that everything spiritual is between the gods and mortals, he states that our desire to be immortal is controlled by the concept of reproduction, so we continue to do so. To Socrates, humans have the erotic desire of trying to reproduce, which furthers his argument once he introduces his interactions with Diotima.

Diotima, meaning "honored by Zeus," argues that Love is a spirit who is half-god and half-man. Diotima taught Socrates the art of love, and is considered to many scholars to be his erotic teacher of sorts. Diotima questioned Socrates about love in terms similar to those by which Socrates interrogated Agathon. Love is neither immortal nor mortal, beautiful nor ugly, but rather, comes to life when he encounters the object of his desire but perishes when he does not, according to Diotima:

He acts as an interpreter and means of communication between gods and men. He takes requests and offerings to the gods, and brings back instructions and benefits in return. Occupying this middle position he plays a vital role in holding the world together... There is no direct contact between god & man. All association & communication between them, waking or sleeping, takes place through Eros. (202e-203a)

She explains that Love is the son of Resource and Poverty, and because of this, Love is beggarly, harsh, and a master of deception who is always scheming, but also balanced and resourceful. Love's conception occurred at the birthday party of Aphrodite, according to Diotima. Due to where he was conceived, Love becomes a follower and servant of Aphrodite, and does not

satisfy the criteria to be a god. Love becomes a lover of beauty, and therefore loves wisdom because it is beautiful. Yet Diotima explains that Love himself is not delicate nor beautiful because of his parents, and is tough, shriveled and homeless instead: " Eros' attributes are what you would expect of a child of Resource and Poverty... he's always poor, and so far from being soft and beautiful... he is hard, unkempt, barefoot, homeless. He sleeps on the ground without a bed, lying in doorways or in the open street. He has his mother's nature, and need is his constant companion." (204d-e) Diotima chooses to define love overall as the ability to attain approximation to perpetuity through procreation, as it is between wisdom and ignorance. Personally, Diotima advocates for a multi-step process of love, beginning with the actions of men who have love for a particular beautiful person. Following this instance, the man should love a person for general beauty, then physical beauty, moral beauty, and finally attain the love of wisdom. This process is the origin concept of platonic love, and Diotima's views on Love and his conception inspires Socrates' argument.

The speeches of the evening come to a close with the entrance of Alcibiades, also known as the soldier of fortune at the party. Alcibiades enters the party filled with questions; questions particularly aimed at challenging previous speakers. Alcibiades begins by asking if eros is all the same, and questioning how there can be Higher and Lower Aphrodite if all life is erotic, according to Socrates. Alcibiades argues that physical sexual relations does not make someone special, as it is a common occurrence in society and sex is the one thing that we share with all living creatures. When one discovers their sexuality, Alcibiades states, you are not stumbling upon a great secret. One

of the greatest points Alcibiades expostulates is that eros is not immortal, as desire fades and can die. The eros that does not die, Alcibiades says, is the exclusive definition of Higher Aphrodite. Examples of this form of eros are beauty, the good and truth, as they are eternal. Alcibiades also introduces the idea of platonic love, using his rejection by Socrates as an example: " I fell asleep, and when I woke up in the morning I'd slept with Socrates all night, but absolutely nothing had happened. It was just like sleeping with one's father or elder brother... I was humiliated and yet full of admiration for Socrates' character- his restraint and strength of mind." (219c-d) He states that Socrates may present himself as your lover, but to be careful in this situation, as true love involves reproducing one's idea in another through communication, which his love for Socrates is lacking. Alcibiades, along with Diotima, set up the development of platonic love.

One of the most impacting results of Plato's " Symposium" was the introduction of platonic love into philosophy. By definition, platonic love is heterosexual companionship without sexual desire. The type of love Plato seems to have admired most was that in which one man loved another because of his intelligence or virtue, rather than because of his physical attractions - a love of the idea of beauty more than the physical appearance, and a love of a person is a lesser love to that of absolute beauty, the ideal form. Platonic love is chaste, non sexual, and is love as a means of ascent to the contemplation of the divine. This is vital because the most correct use of love of other human beings is to direct one's mind to the love of divinity. Genuine platonic love is when a beautiful person inspires the mind and the soul and directs one's attention to spiritual things. The term itself, though

developed by, the " Symposium," was coined by Florentine philosopher Ficino. His coinage of the term signified the introduction of intellectual love between friends that in turn united members of the Platonic Academy where he studied into a community. The modern definition of platonic love has shifted in a different direction, referring to platonic love as disinterested and spiritual love without physical implications. Though the intentions behind each definition has changed, platonic love is a concept that resonates from ancient Greece to modern society.

Plato's " Symposium" had an incredibly positive reception and has influenced many prominent artistic forms since its creation. Many musicians have been inspired by the vast differences between each speech, and used these differences as inspiration for different composed works. Leonard Bernstein's 1954 " Serenade: After Plato's Symposium," draws inspiration from Plato's " Symposium". The seven speakers who inspired Bernstein's five movements are: Phaedrus: Pausanias—marked *lento* and *allegro*, Aristophanes—marked *allegretto*, Eryximachus, the doctor—marked *presto*, Agathon—marked *adagio* and Socrates: Alcibiades—marked *molto tenuto* and *allegro molto vivace*. Luigi Nono wrote a quartet titled " Fragmente-Stille an Diotima" in 1980 based on the views of Diotima from the " Symposium." " Hedwig and the Angry Inch," a rock opera debuted in the 1980's, utilizes Aristophanes' myth of Zeus' cutting humans in half in the song " The Origin of Love." Several film and stage adaptations have been made based off of the " Symposium's" text, such as the 1965 BBC TV play, " The Drinking Party," a 1989 French adaptation titled " La Banquet" and German playwright Boudgoust's 2007 stage adaption, " Das Grandiose Leben." Overall, Plato's "

Symposium" can be seen in film, music, stage and both modern psychology and philosophy through the concept of platonic love.