

# Eryximachus: the role of contradiction



Through all the speeches of the Symposium, Eryximachus' speech may be the most difficult to understand. Looking at Eryximachus' initial, more scientific approach to love, under which he views love as something that can be quantitatively measured, one many find it difficult to accept the more abstract arguments of a "universal" love that he poses later on in his speech. Thus, one can ask: Why does Plato present such a striking, almost contradictory, set of arguments within Eryximachus' speech?

The initial portrayal of Eryximachus shows him to be a man of science. From the very onset of Eryximachus' speech he begins with the statement, "I feel sure it's from medicine, my own area of expertise that I've realized how great and wonderful a god Love is, and how his power extends to all of human and divine life." These words indicate a man who clearly takes pride in his occupation in medicine. This "pride" in his occupation then continues to manifest itself in his following arguments. As shown in the statement, "Love is not only expressed in the emotional responses of human beings to beautiful people, but... in the bodily responses of every kind of animal, in plants growing in the earth," Eryximachus' pride in medicine is shown in his adherence to the belief that love can be viewed, and therefore explained, in terms of medicine and science. This "scientific" view is supported by the fact that Eryximachus' assertions imply that he believes that love is a quality that can be quantitatively measured. This is seen in his words "bodily responses" which supports the idea that Eryximachus believes that he can physically view and acknowledge the presence of love in all living things.

Another important aspect of Eryximachus' speech is seen in the very nature of the speech itself. Because Eryximachus' speech is so distinct from the

other speeches, it is clear that Plato uses this argument as a representation of a very specific way to view love. This tactic is seen in the fact that Eryximachus' speech uses a disproportionate number of personal pronouns—the words “ I” and “ my”—which supports the idea that Plato clearly desires to distinguish Eryximachus' speech from that of the other characters by showing to the readers that Eryximachus, himself, believes his speech to be unique to the other speeches. In addition, Eryximachus' first words, “ This is what I think,” also provides another layer of separation between his speech and the other speeches by stating the obvious and asserting that what he is about to say about love is totally original. From the start, this separation between Eryximachus' speech and the other speeches helps provide a clear visual of how Eryximachus thinks, allowing readers to compare and contrast this line of reasoning with a different one in Eryximachus' next argument. Eryximachus' following argument portrays a very different line of reasoning from the argument prior. After speaking of the quantitative aspects of love, Eryximachus asserts a more abstract and philosophical argument, one that contends that love is a universal force. Eryximachus' statement, “ When those elements I mentioned before (hot and cold, dry and wet) are influenced by the well-ordered Love, they are in harmony,” provides a glimpse of the idea that love is far more than just a “ bodily response,” but rather a universal force that rules the balance between opposite forces. This “ universal” view of love is also shown in Eryximachus' statement, “ So Love as a whole has great and mighty—or rather total—power, when you put this all together,” which portrays Love to be an omnipotent and all-encompassing power. In addition, the fact that the word “ Love” is capitalized hints at the

idea that Eryximachus views Love as a god, a view that adds to the more “abstract” and spiritual basis of his new argument.

After reading the entirety of Eryximachus’ speech, one cannot help but to be confused. After all, Plato presents a striking dichotomy between Eryximachus’ arguments. On one hand, Eryximachus seems to adhere to the scientific method, on the other, Eryximachus seems to base his definition of love on philosophy. In fact, these very contradictions undermine Eryximachus’ speech rather than strengthen it. So why does Plato present Eryximachus’ speech in this manner? Perhaps, Plato is concerned with an idea beyond the topic of love. By giving such contrasting views of love, Plato subtly hints at his view of the relationship between science and philosophy. The very undermining of Eryximachus’ speech due to the two perspectives reflects Plato’s view that science and philosophy are incompatible. Perhaps more intriguing is the fact that because Eryximachus’ is a scientific man by trade, Plato is also asserting the shallow nature of science in it’s understanding of abstract qualities such as love.

This negative view of Eryximachus by Plato is seen in the pompous portrayal of Eryximachus’ character. For example, Eryximachus’ statement, “ I feel sure it’s from medicine, my own area of expertise, that I’ve realized how great and wonderful a god of love is...,” shows Eryximachus to be someone who repeatedly tries to remind everyone that he is a doctor, despite the fact that it is clear that the other characters already know that he is a doctor. It is the very weakness of Eryximachus’ speech that explains to the audience that men who base their views solely off science are incapable of understanding love and other ideals through the correct way of philosophy.

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Plato, therefore, may have created this dual-faceted argument in order to establish the idea that it is philosophy, not science, that is able to answer the truly important questions in life.