

Plato on Love

Vasilis Politis

Introduction

Plato has two dialogues dedicated to the topic of love, or *erōs*: *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*. The entire *Symposium* is dedicated to this topic. The dialogue is made up of a series of speeches on love, delivered in succession during a drinking party and culminating in Socrates' speech, in which he recounts how, once long ago when he was young and very much in love, he was instructed about love by an old and wise woman, Diotima, who was responsible for pointing his love in the right direction and guiding it to a better place. This is followed, at the end of the dialogue, by Alcibiades, Socrates' would-be lover, gate-crashing the party in a drunken and excited state, to tell the exceedingly personal tale of his unhappy love for Socrates. The symposiasts' official assignment to themselves and each other, at the outset of the speechmaking, is to speak in praise of *erōs*. However, as they embark on this undertaking it emerges that while some of them think *erōs* is simply good, others think it is a mixed blessing and are distinctly ambivalently disposed towards it. This, it seems to me, is important for understanding Plato's thinking on love: it points to a central question in the dialogue, which is: 'How good is *erōs* for a human being?' and 'Is *erōs* good for us?' We shall have to see how, in what complex manner, especially Socrates (Aristophanes, too, and going back to the second speaker, Pausanias) takes up and answers this question, and how Alcibiades' tragic wretchedness, caused in no small part by an erotic drive that has gone astray in him, contributes.

The two dialogues approach the topic of love in very different ways. The *Symposium* is expressly addressed to the question of the character and benefits of *erōs*—and to the question of its nature—and it reads as a philosophical enquiry into this phenomenon, conducted by a set of mature men, and the memory of one exceptional woman, who have personal experience in this matter and have thought about it. In the *Phaedrus*, on the other hand, the topic is addressed from the point of view of a would-be lover trying, through a speech addressed to a young and inexperienced man, to persuade him to submit to his overtures and desires. We might for a moment wonder whether this dialogue is about *erōs* at all, for much of it is concerned not with the content of these speeches, but with their rhetorical qualities and persuasive power. A first speech is read aloud by Phaedrus, as he and Socrates have paused at a spot of rare beauty during their excursion outside the walls of Athens, and is followed by two speeches in quick succession by Socrates. All three speeches are addressed to the question: 'Should one (when young) engage in an intimate and sexual relationship and friendship with one who is in love with one, and so quite mad, or, on the contrary, with one who is not in love but sober and reasonable?' Plato is pointing

to an important question about love: ‘How is *erōs* related to irrationality and to madness (*mania*)?’; and to a no less important question about irrationality and madness: ‘Is all irrationality and madness bad, or bad unless it is guided by reason, and to be avoided in the name of sobriety and reason?’

As we shall see, Plato’s is a more subtle question, and a very important one: ‘Is all irrationality dependent, for its goodness or badness, simply on how it is guided by reason, or is there, on the contrary, a kind of irrationality—and madness, and love—that has its own source of goodness?’ Socrates’ answer in the *Phaedrus* will be stark and remarkable: “the greatest of goods come to us due to madness, provided that it is given as a divine gift.” (*nun de ta megista tōn agathōn hēmin gignetai dia manias, theia[i] mentoi dosei didomenēs*, 244a6-8) If virtue is divorced from the love that is a divinely given madness, it is fake and the opposite of what it makes itself out to be; it is: ‘the meanness that is praised by the majority as virtue’ (*aneleutherian hupo plēthous epainoumenēn hōs aretēn*; 256e3-257a2, trans. Rowe). It is a good question whether the *Symposium* goes this far. I am inclined to think that it does, when Socrates says that the perception of absolute beauty, which is the highest achievement of the ascent of love, *and this perception alone* (see *hoti entautha monachou*, 212a3), is capable of generating true virtue as opposed to mere phantoms of virtue. All this ought to make us seriously pause before we give credence to the view, common among critics, that Plato’s ethics is a rationalist one; like Kant’s, except that whereas Kant’s rationalist ethics is constructivist, Plato’s rationalist ethics is realist.¹

That Plato should dedicate two entire dialogues to *erōs* (or, in the case of the *Phaedrus*, in large part; its other topic being speeches and arguments, rhetoric, dialectic and writing) shows that this is a very important topic in his philosophy. It is worth noting immediately (I shall, space permitting, come back to it later) that there are two substantially different ways, and to the modern reader surprisingly and unfamiliarly different ways, in which *erōs* is important for Plato. The obvious and familiar way is that *erōs* is a major subject of his philosophy; in the way in which a philosopher today would include the subject of *emotion* under the division of philosophy she calls moral psychology, or ethics, and include, as a subject under that subject, the emotion that is *love*. However, this is not the only way in which Plato treats of and is interested in *erōs*. For it is a remarkable part of his argument, in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* as well as the *Republic*, that *erōs* is crucial to the practice of philosophy: philosophy, and so the desire for wisdom, is fake and worth nothing if not inspired by *erōs*. This is a strange claim, but Plato’s philosophy of love is not recognisable without it. It shows that his thoughts about *erōs* are inseparable from his thoughts about philosophy and the practice of philosophy. It also shows, I think, that the medium through

¹ See e.g. Korsgaard 1998. See also Santas (2010, 181), when he says, generalising on the basis of his reading of the *Republic*: ‘On Plato’s view, desire—desire which is not itself the result of reasoning—has nothing to say about what is good, either ultimately or instrumentally; these are reason’s functions’. See also Annas (1981, 264), when, in regard to the *Republic*, she says ‘The objects of every faculty but reason have already been judged to be, in comparison with its objects, worthless trash’.

which he practices philosophy, and in general the way in which he expresses philosophical thoughts, arguments, enquiries, which is the distinctive dialogical dramas that we know as most of his dialogues, is shaped by his view of philosophy as filled with *pathos* and, in particular, *erōs*.

The concept of erōs

I think we may begin by acknowledging that, on a first reading of the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, it may not be so clear what it is that the symposiasts and interlocutors are talking about, when talking about what they call *erōs* and we translate as love. We might even wonder whether they are all talking about the same phenomenon. This, it may be said, is only as it should be, for Plato intends to start with a concept that is deliberately left vague and even ambiguous in order to render it distinct and unitary in and through his investigations. Still, we need some understanding of the concept, *erōs*, and the meaning of the word, at the start and before we embark on these investigations.

What is clear is that the characters in the two dialogues take themselves to be familiar with this phenomenon, *erōs*, and capable of recognising it, and using the term, “*erōs*”, for it, without effort; indeed, they take it that we are all familiar with this phenomenon and this term, even if some of the characters think they understand it better than most of us do.² Plato offers a succinct clue about the meaning of this term, in the dialogue *Cratylus*, and the part of that dialogue occupied with the meaning of a long list of important individual words, when he says: ‘It is called “*erōs*” because it *pours in (eisrei)* from the outside; and this influx is not the property of the person whose *erōs* it is, but is brought in from outside through the eyes’ (420a8-b1). What this says is that *erōs*, according to the basic meaning of this word, is something in one, presumably, a kind of desire; and that it is the desire it is, because it is caused by something outside one, and something that one directly perceives, especially through sight: as the *Symposium* makes clear, something that one perceives as beautiful. *Erōs* is a certain desire in us, if this desire is caused by the perception of beauty and something beautiful. On this basic characterisation of *erōs*, *erōs* is indeed something that we are all familiar with and capable of recognising without effort.

² I set aside, as incredible, the view, recently defended by Vogt (2017) but not new in the literature, which says that, in the *Symposium*, Plato uses the term *erōs* as a technical term to designate motivation for action, much like Donald Davidson’s notion of a pro-attitude: ‘Plato introduces a technical notion of love, different from ordinary ways of thinking about it, in order to characterize the desiderative attitudes that motivate pursuits’ (150). I am all in favour of making Plato relevant in today’s analytic philosophy—though personally I would think putting Plato on love next to Dante would be a great deal more instructive than next to Davidson or, as Vogt does, Harry Frankfurt—but not to the point of such distortion. For one thing, it would have Plato change topic between that which *Phaedrus*, Pausanias, Eryximachus, Aristophanes and Agathon take themselves to be talking about, which is not at all a technical notion of love, and that which Socrates, and apparently Plato, is talking about. (For an approach similar to mine, see Richardson-Lear 2006.)

This prompts several questions about the concept of *erōs*, thus understood. One immediate question, which is particularly important for understanding this concept, is what this desire, *erōs*, is the desire *of*, or *for*: *What* does one desire, when one desires due to *erōs* and erotically? The obvious answer is that one desires beauty and something beautiful. So far, so good. But this prompts Plato to ask: What does one desire to do with the beauty and beautiful thing that one desires due to *erōs*? The immediate answer is that, if the *erōs* is caused by the sight of beauty and something beautiful, then one desires to look at the beautiful thing and its beauty; if it is caused by hearing, then one desires to listen to it and its beauty; if it is caused by touch, then one desires to feel it and its beauty; and so on. In Socrates' speech in the *Symposium*, it is apparent that Plato is not satisfied with this answer, true though he thinks it is as far as it goes. For he argues that when one desires something due to *erōs*, one does not merely desire to look at (or listen to, etc.) it and its beauty; one also, and crucially, desires to engage with it creatively and productively. As he says (206e), one desires to conceive in and give birth to beauty. He spells out that this response to the beauty of the beautiful thing, when one desires it due to *erōs*, can take a variety of forms. A basic form is the desire to conceive, give birth to, and raise children with the beautiful person. Other forms include, most characteristically, the desire to conceive, give birth to, and raise not offspring of the body, but of the soul and mind. This includes all kinds of artistic and intellectual creation and production, including philosophical creation and production.

If I may anticipate at this point, this passage from the *Symposium* is extremely important. First, it shows that the perception of beauty (be it the sensory perception of a beautiful body or the ultimate vision of absolute beauty) is not the ultimate end of *erōs*; rather, this perception is the source of creative activity. Secondly, it shows that the way in which *erōs* works is not individualistic, much less solitary. For, even if the perception and vision is the act and experience of a single person, and even if what is looked at and gazed on, when the gaze is due to *erōs*, is not invariably another person, the creative activity that is generated by this erotic act and experience is, even in its most basic form (which is the conception and raising of children), essentially other-involving.

A further question is how *erōs* is related to sexual desire. That the two are supposed to be somehow closely related is clear from the way in which all the characters in the two dialogues speak of *erōs* and have an interest in it. But it is not so clear what the relation is supposed to be, or how close it is supposed to be. It is assumed by all that *erōs*, understood as the desire that is caused by the perception of something beautiful, can, and often does, stimulate sexual desire. But they do not appear to assume that this psychic, or psychosomatic, link is necessary or unbreakable. And they do not appear to assume that all sexual desire, or that sexual desire always and invariably, is stimulated by *erōs*.

Another question is how *erōs* is related to *philia*, friendship. In a notable passage in the *Symposium* (179c), the symposiast Phaedrus, drawing on a myth familiar to them, says of the particular *philia* of a wife to her husband that it is based on *erōs*; and this fits well the

relationship as described in the dialogue between two of the other symposiasts, Pausanias and Agathon. In the *Phaedrus* Plato's question is whether one should (when young) enter into friendship, and friendship that involves sex, with one who is in love with one or, on contrary, with one who is sober and not in the grip of *erōs*. But it would not be true to say either that *philia* is always based on *erōs* or that *erōs* always leads to *philia*.

The Symposium

Plato's is a masterful depiction of a traditional Greek drinking party among the upper classes, albeit one of a distinctively intellectual flavour and with some unusual newcomers, both invited and uninvited. The party follows on directly from an apparently more bawdy and unrestrained occasion of the previous day at the same house and with largely the same group: Socrates is a newcomer, and brings along his barefoot young friend, Aristodemus; Alcibiades gatecrashes at the end. It begins with the symposiasts deciding to send away the flute-girl (a prostitute?) and to reduce their consumption of alcohol in what follows. What follows is a series of six speeches on *erōs* (Phaedrus→Pausanias→Eryximachus→Aristophanes→Agathon→Socrates) followed by the unexpected entry of Alcibiades and his speech about his particular *erōs* for Socrates. Plato's depiction of this whole event is so convincing that we may forget to ask why he should have wanted to address the topic of *erōs* in this characteristically polyphonic way and setting. It seems to me that, by addressing it through a series of different perspectives on it, and perspectives that react and respond to each other, Plato draws attention to certain tensions in the views that the symposiasts hold about *erōs*, tensions that he thinks are to a large extent typical rather than merely idiosyncratic, and productive for an enquiry into this phenomenon, *erōs*. There are, it seems to me, three principal tensions (they seem to be closely related) in the symposiasts' views about *erōs*, which become apparent as the speeches progress and a speaker reacts to those before him.

The first problem is what Socrates, eventually and late in the dialogue, formulates when he criticises those of the previous speakers that have depicted *erōs* as, purely and simply, divine: he argues that, on the contrary, *erōs*' status, like that of a daemon, is between human and divine (see 203a-204a). The idea here is that, when we desire something due to *erōs*, we do so because of some significant lack in us, a lack that we may be more or less conscious of and that we respond to by that desire and yearning that is *erōs*. It follows that *erōs* cannot be, purely and simply, divine, for what is divine (Socrates argues) does not lack anything significant and it does not desire to be what it is not, or to be in a condition in which it is not. In this way, Plato raises the question about *erōs*: 'What must be the condition of a being, if it is subject to *erōs*?'; and 'Can a being be subject to *erōs*, if it is simply in a good condition?'

The note for this question has already been struck, in Aristophanes' speech. For he argued that *erōs* in us is predicated on our being in a fallen condition in which we have suffered an

original damage to our very identity and wholeness. Aristophanes describes this original damage in wonderfully figurative and mythical language and imagery, as the moment of a primal wound we once suffered when we were torn in two and since when we have been missing, and yearning for, and yearning to unite with, our other original half—this yearning being, precisely, *erōs*. He even offers this account of the origin of *erōs* in us, to provide an (as it were, genetic-naturalistic) explanation of why some of us are heterosexual and others homosexual, and why, among the homosexual, some are gay and others lesbian. Socrates, therefore, cannot be implying that all of the previous speakers have failed to consider the question of what must be the condition of a being that is subject to *erōs*, or that they have all assumed that even a perfect being can be subject to *erōs*. In fact, Socrates' criticism of Aristophanes (a criticism he puts in the mouth of Diotima; see 205d) is, rather, that Aristophanes' account of *erōs* fails to explain how this desire in us—the desire to find and unite with our unique other half, and in general the desire to restore our severed identity and wholeness—can heal the damaged human condition on which it is predicated. This criticism is worth noting, especially for us in our current times when identity politics is rife. Plato's point appears to be a simple one: establishing one's identity and wholeness does not necessarily or automatically mean establishing a good state in and for one.

The second problem is whether *erōs* is, purely and simply, good for us. The note for this question is struck early in the dialogue, though not in the first speech. Phaedrus starts off the speechmaking with a magnificent and hyperbolic encomium in praise of *erōs*, when he both begins and ends his speech with the resounding statement that *erōs* is the root cause of the greatest of goods for humans in regard to both their virtue and their happiness. While this may sound exaggerated and rhetorical, Phaedrus argues the point through the distinct articulation of a number of exemplary cases—he makes a point of saying that these cases represent the deeds of love by both sexes, men and women, alike—through which he intends to demonstrate the basis of his conclusion: that *erōs* is *the* source of a sense of shame in base people, and *the* source of the love of honour in noble people; these (i.e. the sense of shame and the love of honour) being the foundation of anything worthwhile both in public and in private (178d).

Pausanias begins his speech, which follows, by objecting: he objects that, whereas Phaedrus would have been right, if *erōs* had been a single, unitary thing, he is wrong, because there are in fact two antithetical kinds of *erōs*, one good and the other bad; and that while the good *erōs* may be the source of the sense of shame and of the love of honour, the bad *erōs* is a source of their opposites since its readily recognisable manifestations include such things as unrestrained lust and the indulgence in shameless pursuits.

If I am not mistaken, Plato intends the depiction of Pausanias to lend him a disagreeable flavour, for he is depicted as exceedingly assured that he, and the educated class to which he belongs, have dealings only with the good and civilised *erōs* and that it is in others, such as sailors and the lower orders generally, that the ugly *erōs* is met with. (They, he says, frequent prostitutes! Has he forgotten about the flute girl his party have just sent away?)

There is also Pausanias' marked interest in legislating for the promotion of the good *erōs* and for the prevention of the bad *erōs*; a legislation whose principal objective he sees as being that of specifying under what conditions and in what circumstances sexual union is to be permitted and encouraged, and in what it is to be stopped! It seems to me that Plato depicts Pausanias as, above all, self-righteous; and that we are supposed to see in his self-righteousness a short step to self-deception.

At the same time, Pausanias undoubtedly puts his finger on a true and important point: *erōs* is not invariably good in its manifestations; on the contrary, it can take one in the wrong direction and to bad places. Socrates will take up this theme in a major way some four speeches later—as we shall see. Where does Pausanias go wrong, according to Plato? First, Pausanias is precipitate in the conclusion he draws. For he concludes, from the fact that *erōs* is not invariably good, and can be bad, that there are two distinct and separate kinds of *erōs*, one good and the other bad. This overlooks the possibility that *erōs* is a single force in us, which, though it can take us goodwards, can also take one badwards. This is, I think, the view of *erōs* that Socrates will defend. Secondly, and relatedly, Pausanias thinks it is an easy thing to ascertain which of the two forms of *erōs* one is oneself subject to and prone to, and to ensure that one chooses the one over the other. This overlooks that self-knowledge, and the living up to it, do not come easy here. We may compare Socrates' powerful statement in the *Phaedrus*, when he says that what he is most intent on is to know about himself 'whether I am a monster more complicated and more furious than Typhon or a gentler and simpler creature, to whom a divine and quiet lot is given by nature' (230a).

The third problem concerns the relation between beauty and goodness, and between desiring beauty and desiring goodness: Is everything that is good (*agathon*) also beautiful (*kalon*)? And does desiring something beautiful (as one does when desiring due to *erōs*) imply desiring something good? This problem has been lying in wait in the background, because it is related to the question (the one we have been considering) whether *erōs* is necessarily good: If *erōs* is a desire for beauty and beautiful things, then the question whether *erōs* is necessarily good will depend, for its answer, on whether desiring beauty and beautiful things is necessarily desiring goodness and good things. But the problem comes to the fore distinctly and forcefully through Agathon's speech and Socrates' response to it. Agathon, manifestly disregarding Pausanias' criticisms of Phaedrus' view of *erōs*, returns to this original view, that *erōs* is purely and simply good and supremely good. What is new is the bold and seemingly rigorous way in which he defends this conclusion. Agathon's argument consists of one master premise, which he defends and from which he directly infers that *erōs* is supremely good and in possession of all the major ethical virtues: justice, moderation, courage and wisdom. His premise is that: *erōs* is supremely beautiful and in possession of the manifest aesthetic qualities: gracefulness, delicacy and softness (and the like).

Unless Agathon's argument is an elaborate joke (which cannot be entirely ruled out, so absurd is the idea that what is graceful, delicate and soft is necessarily just, moderate,

courageous and wise), Agathon must be assuming that what is beautiful is necessarily good, and that to desire something beautiful is necessarily to desire something good. Perhaps these assumptions are facilitated by the fact that everyday Greek usage was not overly careful in separating the application of the adjective *kalon* ('beautiful', 'fine', 'noble') from the application of the adjective *agathon* ('good'). And perhaps this fact is in turn associated with the apparent fact that noble folk, and those who saw themselves as belonging to the ruling classes, were naturally inclined to see in themselves bearers of both qualities alike, beauty and goodness—they referred to themselves as *kaloi k'agathoi*, 'both-beautiful-and-good'. Be that as it may, when Socrates takes over from Agathon, he resists any quick move from 'N desires something beautiful' to 'N desires something good'. It can be seen that Socrates provides an original and careful argument against the identification of the desire for beauty with the desire for goodness. As I understand it, his argument is that there is an essential difference between these two desires. The desire for goodness is a rational desire, in the sense of a desire based on thinking that something is desirable and worth desiring due to such and such considerations. But the desire for beauty is not (at least not typically) rational, rather it is immediate and intuitive: you see something as beautiful, and directly you desire it erotically and due to *erōs* (see also the *Cratylus* passage quoted earlier). From these premises it follows, not only that these are two distinct and substantially different desires, but also that the inference from 'N desires something beautiful' to 'N desires something good', which Agathon held up, is a fallacy or at any rate questionable.

Plato's *Symposium* culminates in Socrates' speech and his recollection of Diotima and her words to him once a long time ago when he was young and very much in love; words that not only instructed him about love, but also saved him from a love that was close to taking him astray. Here is how he recalls Diotima's near-concluding words to him:

"It is here, my dear Socrates, if anywhere, that life is worth living for a human being, in contemplation of beauty itself. *That*, if ever you see it, will not seem to you to be of the same order as gold, and clothes, and the beautiful boys and young men that now drive you out of your mind when you see them, so that both you and many others are ready, so long as you can see your beloveds and be with them always (if somehow it were possible), to stop eating and drinking, and just gaze at them and be with them." (211d1-8; translation Rowe)

It is remarkable that the *erōs* that Diotima saved the young Socrates from a long time ago, by pointing his *erōs* in the right direction and guiding it to a better place, is not, in its self-destructive tendency, unlike the *erōs* that young Alcibiades is in the grip of now, as he candidly narrates after his sudden and disruptive entry (which is described very soon after the passage just quoted).

Diotima's account of *erōs* is expressly addressed to the question of its essence and nature (see e.g. 201e and 204b). It seems to me that what is most distinctive and central in her account is the claim that *erōs* is neither beautiful nor good, but mid-way between the two (202d-203a). It is controversial among critics how this is to be understood. It seems to me that Diotima's account goes well beyond the claim, which Socrates has made in his own

voice in immediate response to Agathon, that *erōs*, like any other desire, does not already possess what it desires. For, unlike Socrates' claim, Diotima's claim implies that *erōs* is positively unstable and can go either way: either goodwards or badwards.³ *Erōs* is, as we may say, volatile.⁴ It follows that, if *erōs* is to take us goodwards and not badwards, it must be assisted and guided by something in us, or indeed outside us, other than it. Plato does not expressly tell us what this needful guiding force is, but we can see it in operation when we observe how Diotima, who is characterised as old and wise, guided the young Socrates' *erōs* in the right direction and to a better place. Guiding *erōs*, it seems, requires experience and wisdom. What is less clear, and it seems to me a most important question, is whether this guiding force is supposed to be independent of *erōs*. For reasons that will become apparent, it seems to me that Plato cannot possibly think that it is supposed to be independent of *erōs*; and that it is not, therefore, reason, or reason alone and independent of *erōs*, that is the guide.

Socrates agrees with Pausanias, therefore, that it is wrong to think of *erōs* as, purely and simply, a good thing. But, whereas Pausanias inferred that there are two distinct and separate kinds of *erōs*, one good and the other bad, Socrates (through Diotima) argues that *erōs* is a single force in us, which, by its very nature, is such that it can take us in opposite directions, both goodwards and badwards. Here we come to what is, it seems to me, a most important question prompted by Plato's account of *erōs*: If *erōs* is thus unstable and volatile, should we not want to forgo it (to the extent that it is humanly possible to do so) in preference to some more reliable and stable power in us—a more sober and reasonable part of us? This, we shall see, is a question that Plato takes up directly and face-on in the *Phaedrus*. And in the *Symposium*, when the young Socrates (i.e. his former self that he now recalls from a distance) for a moment is drawn to this conclusion, Diotima warns sternly against going there: “Do not blaspheme!” (*ouk euphēmēseis*, 201e10). Plato is implying that *erōs*, for all its volatility, is a sacred thing, which we should not contemplate forgoing.

Why, we must ask, is *erōs* sacred, inviolable and not to be dispensed with, in spite of its potential faults and the great risk they imply? Plato answers this important question, it seems to me, through Diotima and her initiation of Socrates into the mysteries of love, the ascent of love, and the vision of absolute beauty in which the ascent culminates if all goes well. That the vision of absolute beauty is understood as a supremely good manifestation of *erōs* is evident. What Plato says, remarkably, is that this vision, *and it 'alone'* (cf. *monachou*, 212a3), issues not in a semblance of virtue but in genuine virtue. Here is the end of Diotima's speech:

“What then do we suppose it would be like if someone succeeded in seeing beauty itself, pure, clean, unmixed, and not contaminated by things like human flesh, and colour, and much other mortal nonsense, but were able to catch sight of the

³ See Politis 2016.

⁴ The volatility of *erōs* in Plato's *Symposium* is finely captured by Leon Robin (1968; originally 1935, 55-57).

uniformity of divine beauty itself? Do you think it's a worthless life if a person turns his gaze in that direction and contemplates that beauty with the faculty he should use, and is able to be with it? Or do you not recognize that it is under these conditions alone (*hoti entautha monachou*), as he sees beauty with what has the power to see it, that he will succeed in bringing to birth, not phantoms of virtue, because he is not grasping a phantom, but true virtue, because he is grasping the truth; and that when he has given birth to and nurtured true virtue, it belongs to him to be loved by the gods, and to him, if to any human being, to be immortal?" (211d8-212a7; trans. Rowe).

Up to this point, when goodness and virtue are mentioned for the first time in the ascent, the subject of the ascent has consistently been identified as the person due to his or her *erōs*. It is the person due to the *erōs* in him or her that desires, first, to perceive the beauty of a particular body; then, and unless he or she remains stuck on the first rung of the ladder, the beauty of a soul; then, if all goes well, extends this desire to the beauty of many and various beautiful things; finally, and all going well, perceives beauty itself. Goodness and virtue are mentioned, but only as the product of the vision, by the person due to his or her *erōs*, of absolute beauty in which this process and ascent culminates, all going well. The statement that *only* the vision by *erōs* of absolute beauty issues in genuine virtue, which is the last thing Socrates reports Diotima as having said, is, it seems to me, extraordinary; as is a statement in the *Phaedrus* (256e3-257a2) to which it is very similar, when Plato sets the divine gifts of erotic madness (this is how he describes *erōs* there) against 'the meanness that is praised by the majority as virtue' (trans. Rowe; *tēn aneleutherian hupo plēthous epainoumenēn hōs aretēn*). The conclusion, therefore, has to be that, for all its faults and the risks they imply, *erōs* is the one and only thing that, provided that it is properly assisted and guided, can lead us to genuine as opposed to merely conventional virtue, and to a place in which alone life is worth living.

The Phaedrus

The part of the *Phaedrus* that is dedicated to *erōs* consists of three speeches: a first speech is read aloud by Phaedrus (it is written by Lysias, and Phaedrus is carrying with him a copy of it), as he and Socrates have paused at spot of rare beauty during their excursion outside the walls of Athens, and is followed by two speeches in quick succession by Socrates. All three speeches are addressed to the question: 'Should one (when young) engage in an intimate and sexual relationship and friendship with one who is in love with one, and so quite mad, or, on the contrary, with one who is not in love but sober and reasonable?' This is not a philosophical question or intended as such by Plato. Rather, it is a question that may present itself to us in a certain everyday context; and, once it has presented itself, it may assume the importance of a vital and even existential question. We may compare the question *whether or not virtue can be taught*, which Plato takes up in two other dialogues (*Protagoras* and *Meno*). But Plato thinks this everyday but potentially vital question points to an important philosophical question about *erōs*: 'How is *erōs* related to irrationality and

madness?'; and to a no less important philosophical question about irrationality and madness: 'Is all irrationality and madness bad and to be avoided in the name of sobriety and reason?'; and, most especially, 'Is all irrationality dependent, for its goodness or badness, simply on how it is guided by reason, or is there, on the contrary, a kind of irrationality—and madness, and love—that has its own source of goodness?'

The first two speeches, by Phaedrus and by Socrates in his first speech, argue the latter, rationalist option (that one should engage in an intimate and sexual relationship and friendship with one who is not in love with one but is sober and reasonable), whereas the last speech, which is Socrates' second speech in an apparently sudden turnaround and recantation by him, argues the former, irrationalist option (that one should engage in a sexual relationship and friendship with one who is in love with one, and so quite mad). A close reading reveals that Socrates was never committed to the rationalist option, which, in his second speech, he opposes with tremendous fervour, seriousness and pathos. He prefaces this speech with the statement that his previous defence of the rationalist option was a shameful aberration and an insult to the sacredness of *erōs*, for which he must now make amends (242d-243e).

In the *Phaedrus*, the question, 'What in the soul is the ultimate cause of the good of the soul?', is apparent in Socrates' account of the soul at the opening of his first speech (237d-238c). The account says that the soul consists of two basic elements (*ideai*), an element that rules in a rational way ('leading and ruling by reasoning (*logō[i] agousēs kai kratousēs*) toward what is best', 237e3), referred to as reason (*logos*, 238b8), and an element that rules in an irrational way (*alogōs*, 'irrationally',⁵ 238a1; *aneu logou*, 'without reasoning', 238b7-8), referred to as appetite (*epithumia*). The two parts of the soul are described as contending with each other to being that which rules in us:

"We must realize that each of us is ruled and led by two principles (*ideai*), which we follow wherever they lead. ... Sometimes these two are in agreement in us, but there are times when they are in conflict, and then sometimes one of them rules, sometimes the other." (237d6-7)

The supposition distinctive of Socrates' first speech, and what he will repudiate in his second speech, is that the rule of the irrational element in the soul is simply bad. In the first speech, love is distinguished as one of several forms of the irrational element in us. Since it is supposed that the rule of the irrational element is simply bad, it follows that the rule of love is simply bad.

At the opening of the second speech, Socrates points to the particular point at which he went wrong in the first:

⁵ If one prefers 'non-rational', 'a-rational', or 'unreasoning', for *alogon*, I don't mind. I have a general preference for 'irrational', because it is not philosopher's English and because 'irrational' indicates not just a difference from, but an opposition to reason.

“There is no truth to that story’—that when a lover [i.e. one in love with you] is available you should give your favours to one who is not in love with you instead, because he is in control of himself while the lover is in a state of madness. That would have been fine to say if madness were bad, pure and simple; but in fact the greatest of goods come to us due to madness, provided that it is given as a divine gift.” (244a5-8)

What Socrates says here is that, *if* the supposition that madness is, simply and without proviso (*haploun*), bad had been true, *then* the supposition would have been true which says that the rule of the irrational in us is simply bad. But now the antecedent is considered as contrary to fact and denied. The proviso is important, since it is undeniable that the rule of the irrational in us is commonly bad; the question is whether it is simply bad, that is, bad necessarily and always. It is assumed that madness is a form of irrationality. In denying in the second speech that madness is simply bad, the supposition of the first speech is repudiated, which was that the rule of the irrational in us is simply bad.

The choice between the sober and the mad lover is represented, by Socrates in his second speech, in the starkest terms: it is not a question of deciding which option is the better all things considered, but of recognising that the attraction of the rationalist option is deceptive and a symptom of a slavish, mean and calculating disposition, and the irrationalist option alone is genuine and worth the risk it implies. Socrates ends his second speech, in praise of the madness of *erōs*, by setting the divine gifts of erotic madness against ‘the meanness that is praised by the majority as virtue’ (256e-257a); a conclusion we may properly understand as articulating, not simply an intellectual *aporia*, but an existential dilemma between a false and a true life.

Socrates concludes thus:

Well then, the result of my whole account of the fourth kind of madness is clear ... my conclusion is that this [namely, *erōs*] then reveals itself as the best of all the kinds of divine possession and from the best of sources for the person who is subject to it and shares in it, and that it is when he partakes in this madness that the person who loves the beautiful is called a lover. (249d4-e4; trans. Rowe, slightly adapted)

One major point that Plato argues in the *Phaedrus* about the nature of *erōs*, therefore, is that *erōs* is a form of irrationality and belongs to the irrational part of the soul; for he argues that *erōs* is a form of madness, and madness, evidently, is a form of irrationality. This is, I believe, consistent and coherent with the account of *erōs* that Plato presents through Socrates and Diotima in the *Symposium*. The *Phaedrus* makes the point, that *erōs* is a form of irrationality, more directly and clearly than does the *Symposium*. Where the two dialogues agree most substantially is on the view that *erōs* is sacred, inviolable and not to be dispensed with, in spite of its potential faults and the great risk they imply; and this because *erōs* alone can generate authentic as opposed to fake virtue—and indeed, authentic as opposed to fake philosophy. The *Phaedrus* works out a logical consequence of this view, which is that: it is wrong to suppose that all irrationality and madness is bad, or bad unless it is guided by reason; rather, we must suppose that there are all sorts of irrationality and

madness, many bad but some good and supremely good, and good not simply because guided by reason, but due to their peculiar source of goodness.

We saw that, as understood by Socrates and Diotima in the *Symposium*, *erōs* is a single force in us, which, by its very nature, is such that it can take us in opposite directions, both goodwards and badwards. That *erōs* can take one both goodwards and badwards is a prominent theme in the *Phaedrus*, too. It figures prominently in the extended myth that Socrates tells to the (imagined) young man, about the trials and tribulations of the *erōs* in us not only during our present life but during our countless previous and future lives and their countless different and diverse incarnations. The simple idea behind this elaborate myth is, precisely, that the manifestations of *erōs* range from the best and most blessed forms of life, which is that of the philosopher at the moment when she contemplates the Forms, to moments of brutish lust and the wretchedness they imply (see 249-250). It is a good question why Plato thinks appealing to the idea of a seemingly endless sequence of incarnations is a good way of making this point. Perhaps what he wants to underscore in this way is that, ultimately, there is no single and complete explanation of why *erōs* takes some of us, or each of us some of the time, goodwards, and others of us, or each of us some of the time, badwards; it all depends on the circumstances and their pre-history in which we happen to be caught up.

One might wonder whether, in the *Phaedrus*, this dual *erōs* is represented as a single force in us, and not rather as two distinct and separate parts of the soul. I believe that, on this point, too, the *Phaedrus* is in agreement with the *Symposium*: *erōs* is a single force in us, though it can take us in opposite directions, goodwards and badwards. It is true that the famous image, in the *Phaedrus*, of the soul as a charioteer driving two horses, one good, the other bad (246a-d, 253cff), may suggest a division of the soul into distinct and separate parts; which would imply that the distinction between good and bad *erōs* must be understood as referring to two separate parts of the soul. But I do not think this image has to be read in this way. For this remarkable image need not at all be read as an image of the division and structure of the soul. Rather, it may be read as a potent intuitive image of what it is like for a person (represented by the charioteer) to be in the grip of *erōs* and its peculiar duality and volatility.

REFERENCES

- Annas, J. 1981. *An Introduction to Plato's Republic*. Oxford.
- Korsgaard, C. 1999. 'Self-constitution in the ethics of Plato and Kant'. *The Journal of Ethics* 3, 1-29.
- Politis, V. 2016. 'How good is that thing called love? The volatility of *erōs* in Plato's *Symposium*', *Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* XXXI: 1-34.

Richardson Lear, G. 2006. 'Plato on learning to love beauty', in G. Santas (ed.), *The Blackwell Guide to Plato's Republic*. Blackwell. 104-124.

Robin, L. 1968 (originally 1935). *Platon*. Paris. Félix Alcan.

Santas, G. 2010. *Understanding Plato's Republic*. Blackwell.

Vogt, K. M. 2017. *Desiring the Good. Ancient Proposals and Contemporary Theory*. Oxford.