Plato's Instruments: Harmony, Hubris, and Heartstrings

Kendra Tully

Follow this and additional works at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/undergrad_rev

Part of the Philosophy Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/undergrad_rev/vol8/iss1/17

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.
Copyright © 2012 Kendra Tully
Plato's Instruments: Harmony, Hubris, and Heartstrings

Kendra Tully

Plato's Symposium strives to resolve the tension between physical and moral love. After characterizing this tension through an analysis of the speeches of Eryximachus (who advocates purely physical love) and Socrates (who advocates purely moral love), this essay argues that Plato offers an interpretation of love that bridges the physical/moral divide. Evidence for this claim is found in the content of the speech of Aristophanes, the timing of the arrival of Alcibiades, and the exchange between Alcibiades and Socrates. In taking seriously both the physical and moral aspects of love, Plato concludes that humans can live beautifully together only when they practice love of the mind, body, and soul. In making this argument, Plato purposefully departs from the teaching of his mentor, Socrates.

In The Symposium, Plato presents a series of speeches meant to eulogize the god Eros. Some of the speakers present conflicting accounts of Eros, expressing the main tension of the dialogue: moral love versus physical love. This paper argues that Plato’s understanding of Eros is expressed in Aristophanes’ interpretation, which is a hybrid of moral and physical love. In bridging the moral and physical divide, Plato’s conception of love differs from that of his mentor, Socrates. This is evident in the juxtaposition of Socrates’ private, moral love with Plato’s intentional reintroduction of sexuality, which is seen in the arrival of Alcibiades, and the return of the flute girl and revelry. By reintroducing and subduing the physical element of love, Plato concludes that the only way humans can ever live beautifully together is to practice love in the mind, body, and soul, becoming one from two and desiring each other for eternity. Plato’s introduction of Aristophanes’ account of love not only bridges the dichotomy between physical and moral love, but also offers the most promising love for continuing human existence.

Eryximachus – Purely Physical Representation of Eros

Eryximachus, the doctor in the group, presents his interpretation of Eros through a physical and biological analysis. Eryximachus convinces his audience that his knowledge in “the art of medicine” leads him to have “the expert knowledge of the erotics of the body in regard to repletion and evacuation” (186C).1 By advocating for the expertise of his specialization, Eryximachus sets himself up as a significant resource on knowledge of love. Doctors routinely distinguish between good and bad courses for improving health. Additionally, they have the power to motivate their patients toward...
good health, for “he who diagnostically discriminates in these things between the noble and base love is the one most skilled in medicine; while he who induces changes, so as to bring about the acquisition of one kind of love in place of the other… has the expert knowledge to instill it, or to remove it from those things in which it is” (186D). Consequently, a doctor’s power is measured by his ability to maintain harmony between the noble and base and, in doing so, promote health in the body. The questions become: What represents the good and the bad things of the body? What should one replenish and what should one evacuate?

According to Eryximachus, “The nature of the bodies has this double Eros, for the health and sickness of the body are by agreement different and dissimilar… there is one love that presides over the healthy state, and another over the sickly” (186B). He then presents the two sides of Eros:

The decent human beings must be gratified, as well as those who are not as yet decent, so that they might become more decent; and the love of the decent must be preserved. And this love is the beautiful one, the Uranian, the Eros of the Uranian Muse. But the pandemian one is Polyhymnia’s, which must, whenever it is applied, be applied cautiously, in order that it might harvest its own pleasure but not instill any intemperance (187D).

He provides a clinical prescription for achieving harmony between the two goddesses; participate in one, and moderate the other. Eryximachus exchanges the original tension [moral love versus physical love (181B, 185B-C)] for moral and purposeful gratification versus base and instinctual sex. He orders that one must pursue the Uranian (purposeful gratification) and attempt to resist the Pandemian (unfeeling and purely instinctual sex). Eryximachus hopes to preserve the decent practice of physical rejuvenation in his patients (188D). The doctor concludes his speech by describing the power of Uranian Eros: “the Eros concerned with good things, consummately perfected with moderation and justice; among us and among gods, this has the greatest power and provides us with every kind of happiness, making us able to associate with one another and to be friends even with the gods who are stronger than we are” (188D). A problem arises here because his discussion of love provides a connection with the divine without taking the necessary step to answer what is the good and who are the decent. He merely promises that those who engage in this love will find happiness through moderation.

The faulty reasoning of this argument derives from Eryximachus’ limited view of love. Since doctors treat parts of the body and not the whole, Eryximachus treats Eros in the same way. He only understands one “limb,” the physical, and ignores the way humans interact intellectually, spiritually, and emotionally. Eryximachus addresses problems of love in “men’s bodies taken by themselves” and he offers only supplements for the physical conditions of the body (186C). There is no change or growth involved in Eryximachus’ plans, but only a bare minimum fulfillment (186C-D, 187D). He completely ignores concerns about the future development of the soul and instead focuses on a cure for the temporary illness of the body. Eryximachus speaks of gratifying with a purpose, but fails to define the purpose. His arguments also omit any discussion about the consequences of participating in base and unfeeling sex (the Pandemian). Eryximachus’ speech presents Plato’s criticism of the medical profession. Eryximachus are defined by a set of skills, not overarching wisdom. They are unable to see all the parts of the human condition. Eryximachus therefore does not have the authority to make legitimate conclusions about the nature of love. Furthermore, Eryximachus may have presented an interesting argument, but his inability to articulate why the physical is the best demonstration of love is the foundation of why his speech is not persuasive.

Socrates – Purely Moral Representation of Eros

Socrates promises to deliver the truth in his speech, whether it pleases his audience or not. This declaration comes just after Socrates criticizes Agathon for presenting a lyrical and crowd pleasing account of Eros (198B-199C). In addition to denying Agathon’s viewpoint, Socrates argues for the moral side of love, which appears first in Pausanias’ speech. Socrates begins by characterizing moral Eros as a daemon, who brings understanding from the Gods, who already have it, to the masses, who lack understanding (202E-203A). Accordingly, Socrates establishes Eros as a quest and desire for understanding. This description resembles the purpose of a philosopher, “for wisdom is one of the most beautiful things, and Eros is love in regard to the beautiful; and so Eros is – necessarily – a philosopher; and as a philosopher he is between being wise and being without understanding” (204 B). As a philosopher, Socrates can then bring this knowledge of love from the gods to his listeners.

On the opposite end of the spectrum from Eryximachus, Socrates presents a very abstract view of the nature of Eros, which differs from any standard view of love. He strives to reveal the superiority of moral love to any other formulation. He does this by sharing a conversation he once had with Diotima, to whom he attributes his erotic knowledge (201D). Eros pursues knowledge and spreads understanding, so what does Eros wish to attain? According to Socrates, “Eros is the whole desire of good things and of being happy” (205D).
Socrates denies that the “good things” encompass a physical longing which leads to producing offspring. Instead, the good things become the offspring of the soul: “there are others who are pregnant in terms of the soul – for these, in fact… are those who in their souls even more than in their bodies conceive those things that it is appropriate for soul to conceive and bear” (208E-209A). Accordingly, Socrates asserts that love should be directed toward the pursuit of gaining good things for the soul. How does one come to conceive these good things?

For Socrates, the greatest profession is philosophy, and in practicing philosophy one can spread knowledge to others. In this respect, he denies Eryximachus’ belief that we should love one another in terms of the body, for “it is great folly not to believe that the beauty of all bodies is one and the same. And with this realization he must be the lover of all beautiful bodies and in contempt slacken this [erotic] intensity for only one body” (210B). The great perceiver of beauty sees not the physical exterior, but the good within the soul. The philosopher (Socrates) takes in these beautiful souls and teaches them the true path of Eros. Accordingly, love for Socrates becomes this momentous journey to the truth:

from one to two, and from two to all beautiful bodies; and from beautiful bodies to beautiful pursuits; and from pursuits to beautiful lessons; and from lessons to end at that lesson, which is the lesson of nothing else than the beautiful itself; and at last to know what is beauty itself (211 C).

According to Socrates, the end of moral love makes it far better than physical love. That end is true virtue, and upon obtaining this glorious truth, one should never want to part from it (211D). There are various representations of Eros, but the appropriate association of “love” can only apply to the moral cycle of love (211B). Thus, Socrates believes not in relationships between two people, but instead in a relationship to all and to the truth. This is the all powerful relationship because “it is at this place in life, in beholding the beautiful itself… that it is worth living” (211D). Therefore, through the practice of this philosophical Eros, one comes to conceive the good, best, and most beautiful things in the soul.

Although there is much to like in Socrates’ account of love, his interpretation still lacks something critical. This purely rational relationship between oneself and the truth feels dry and empty. This love eliminates human interaction, emotion, and passion. Lack of human intimacy renders love between human beings impossible, as shown by the relationship between Alcibiades and Socrates. Alcibiades disrupts the conversation directly after Socrates ends his speech. This intrusion marks the turning point when the subject of discussion shifts from praising Eros to praising Socrates.

As a politician, Alcibiades deals with concerns of the public, but here he recounts his very intimate acquaintance with Socrates. Alcibiades leaves room for Socrates to correct his recollections, but Socrates never feels the need to do so (214E). Alcibiades characterizes Socrates as being “hybristic” and using his words as “instruments” (215B-C). Consequently, Alcibiades, being entranced, attempts to gratify Socrates in their relationship and attain this beauty in return, but his seduction ends in disillusionment. Alcibiades explains that he was “bitten by a more painful viper in the place that is most liable to pain – the heart or soul or whatever name it must have – bitten and struck by philosophical speeches, which grip in a more savage way than the viper” (218A). There is a sense of shame and un-fulfillment because Socrates could not reciprocate these feelings. Alcibiades had an emotional craving that created a longing for closeness, but moral love stood in the way.

Alcibiades explains that Socrates put him under a spell and how he affects others as well: “whenever any one of us hears you or another speaking your speeches… we are thunderstruck and possessed… for whenever I listen, my heart jumps for more than the Corybants’, and tears pour out under the power of his speeches” (215D-E). Alcibiades says that Socrates advocates a purely contemplative approach to Eros, but upon hearing his speeches the listeners experience emotion (215D-E). Socrates’ explanation of the journey to rational Eros, rather than inspiring a rational attitude, inspires sentiment and affection. The inconsistency here leaves room for another account of Eros. Finally, Plato contradicts Socrates through not only the introduction of Alcibiades, but with the interruption of the discourse by the revelers. At the end of Socrates’ speech, the “hammering on the courtyard door made a lot of noise – revelers they thought – and they heard the sound of a flute girl” (212C-D). Alcibiades then enters with a small crowd following behind him. The reintroduction of revelers and the flute girl signify the reintroduction of the physical aspect of Eros.

Having laid out the two extreme interpretation of Eros, Plato prepares the question: Is there a medium position that could satisfy both the physical and the moral? The answer is yes, one can engage in physical and moral love, if physical love is approached in a moral way. Aristophanes presents a beautiful solution to harmonize the tension.

**Aristophanes – Reconciling Physical and Moral Eros**

Thorough analysis suggests that Aristophanes offers the most realistic presentation of Eros. Aristophanes articulates an aspect of the human condition that the other speakers ignore, which
According to Aristophanes, the foremost purpose of Eros is the search for the other half, and how humans long for their original nature as one being. The history of how Eros came to be, the role of the Gods in love, and how humans may experience sexual pleasure and regeneration of the body can be productive. Men who lie together (or practice pederasty) grow up and go on to political careers (192A). Witnessing an unjust practice of Eros, these lovers wish to set things right and abolish discrimination. The same would follow for lesbians, except that women cannot be politicians. So what do these pairs generate besides political wisdom? They produce happiness in the best sense and offer a perfect model for society. Those in love direct their happiness to moral pursuits, and men who lie together (or practice pederasty) grow up and go on to political careers (192A). Witnessing an unjust practice of Eros, these lovers wish to set things right and abolish discrimination. The same would follow for lesbians, except that women cannot be politicians. So what do these pairs generate besides political wisdom? They produce happiness in the best sense and offer a perfect model for society. Those in love direct their happiness to moral pursuits, and men who lie together (or practice pederasty) grow up and go on to political careers (192A). Witnessing an unjust practice of Eros, these lovers wish to set things right and abolish discrimination. The same would follow for lesbians, except that women cannot be politicians. So what do these pairs generate besides political wisdom? They produce happiness in the best sense and offer a perfect model for society. Those in love direct their happiness to moral pursuits, and men who lie together (or practice pederasty) grow up and go on to political careers (192A). Witnessing an unjust practice of Eros, these lovers wish to set things right and abolish discrimination. The same would follow for lesbians, except that women cannot be politicians. So what do these pairs generate besides political wisdom? They produce happiness in the best sense and offer a perfect model for society. Those in love direct their happiness to moral pursuits, and men who lie together (or practice pederasty) grow up and go on to political careers (192A). Witnessing an unjust practice of Eros, these lovers wish to set things right and abolish discrimination. The same would follow for lesbians, except that women cannot be politicians. So what do these pairs generate besides political wisdom? They produce happiness in the best sense and offer a perfect model for society. Those in love direct their happiness to moral pursuits, and men who lie together (or practice pederasty) grow up and go on to political careers (192A). Witnessing an unjust practice of Eros, these lovers wish to set things right and abolish discrimination. The same would follow for lesbians, except that women cannot be politicians. So what do these pairs generate besides political wisdom? They produce happiness in the best sense and offer a perfect model for society. Those in love direct their happiness to moral pursuits, and men who lie together (or practice pederasty) grow up and go on to political careers (192A). Witnessing an unjust practice of Eros, these lovers wish to set things right and abolish discrimination. The same would follow for lesbians, except that women cannot be politicians. So what do these pairs generate besides political wisdom? They produce happiness in the best sense and offer a perfect model for society. Those in love direct their happiness to moral pursuits, and men who lie together (or practice pederasty) grow up and go on to political careers (192A). Witnessing an unjust practice of Eros, these lovers wish to set things right and abolish discrimination. The same would follow for lesbians, except that women cannot be politicians. So what do these pairs generate besides political wisdom? They produce happiness in the best sense and offer a perfect model for society. Those in love direct their happiness to moral pursuits, and men who lie together (or practice pederasty) grow up and go on to political careers (192A). Witnessing an unjust practice of Eros, these lovers wish to set things right and abolish discrimination. The same would follow for lesbians, except that women cannot be politicians. So what do these pairs generate besides political wisdom? They produce happiness in the best sense and offer a perfect model for society. Those in love direct their happiness to moral pursuits, and men who lie together (or practice pederasty) grow up and go on to political careers (192A). Witnessing an unjust practice of Eros, these lovers wish to set things right and abolish discrimination. The same would follow for lesbians, except that women cannot be politicians. So what do these pairs generate besides political wisdom? They produce happiness in the best sense and offer a perfect model for society. Those in love direct their happiness to moral pursuits, and men who lie together (or practice pederasty) grow up and go on to political careers (192A). Witnessing an unjust practice of Eros, these lovers wish to set things right and abolish discrimination. The same would follow for lesbians, except that women cannot be politicians. So what do these pairs generate besides political wisdom? They produce happiness in the best sense and offer a perfect model for society. Those in love direct their happiness to moral pursuits, and men who lie together (or practice pederasty) grow up and go on to political careers (192A). Witnessing an unjust practice of Eros, these lovers wish to set things right and abolish discrimination. The same would follow for lesbians, except that women cannot be politicians. So what do these pairs generate besides political wisdom? They produce happiness in the best sense and offer a perfect model for society. Those in love direct their happiness to moral pursuits, and men who lie together (or practice pederasty) grow up and go on to political careers (192A). Witnessing an unjust practice of Eros, these lovers wish to set things right and abolish discrimination. The same would follow for lesbians, except that women cannot be politicians. So what do these pairs generate besides political wisdom? They produce happiness in the best sense and offer a perfect model for society. Those in love direct their happiness to moral pursuits, and men who lie together (or practice pederasty) grow up and go on to political careers (192A). Witnessing an unjust practice of Eros, these lovers wish to set things right and abolish discrimination. The same would follow for lesbians, except that women cannot be politicians. So what do these pairs generate besides political wisdom? They produce happiness in the best sense and offer a perfect model for society. Those in love direct their happiness to moral pursuits, and men who lie together (or practice pederasty) grow up and go on to political careers (192A). Witnessing an unjust practice of Eros, these lovers wish to set things right and abolish discrimination. The same would follow for lesbians, except that women cannot be politicians. So what do these pairs generate besides political wisdom? They produce happiness in the best sense and offer a perfect model for society. Those in love direct their happiness to moral pursuits, and men who lie together (or practice pederasty) grow up and go on to political careers (192A). Witnessing an unjust practice of Eros, these lovers wish to set things right and abolish discrimination. The same would follow for lesbians, except that women cannot be politicians. So what do these pairs generate besides political wisdom? They produce happiness in the best sense and offer a perfect model for society. Those in love direct their happiness to moral pursuits, and men who lie together (or practice pederasty) grow up and go on to political careers (192A). Witnessing an unjust practice of Eros, these lovers wish to set things right and abolish discrimination. The same would follow for lesbians, except that women cannot be politicians. So what do these pairs generate besides political wisdom? They produce happiness in the best sense and offer a perfect model for society. Those in love direct their happiness to moral pursuits, and men who lie together (or practice pederasty) grow up and go on to political careers (192A). Witnessing an unjust practice of Eros, these lovers wish to set things right and abol
Socrates and desires to create this whole with him, but for Socrates this is unthinkable. Being a politician, Alcibiades looks to maximize his possibilities for the good of the city and wishes to cultivate the benefits from the combination of moral love (gold) and physical love (bronze). Alcibiades yearns to make Socrates his own, so that perhaps they can generate the beautiful together. If Socrates were willing to compromise on his rejection of the body, their union would have produced wonderful things for the city. Physical love can be pure and moral if done correctly and for the sake of faithfulness (not just to each other but to the Gods as well). Socrates also overlooks a simple fact in his argument; to continue philosophy there must be a continuation of existence and that existence continues by regeneration in the body. Aristophanes solves this problem, without suggesting the path taken by Eryximachus. According to Aristophanes, Zeus rearranged the genitals “so that in embracing, if a man meets with a woman, they might generate and the race continue” (191C). Aristophanes does not make regeneration a focal point, but simply a product of certain kinds of moral love.

According to Aristophanes, in the myth, “the soul of each [lover] plainly wants something else” (192C). The split halves were unable to articulate what they wanted, but then Hephaestus came and presented them with a solution; “I am willing to fuse you and make you grow together into the same thing, so that – though two – you would be one; and as long as you lived, you would both live together just as though you were one” (192D-E). The split halves agree to this, since two people in love desire to be together for eternity. This suggests that even when the time for regeneration and good looks passes, the two still desire to be together. Therefore, Aristophanes suggests there must be love for the beautiful in the soul. The two must wish to “grow” together; not in the literal sense, but in the sense that by living together they will foster the good things in each other.

Conclusion
Plato, through Aristophanes, succeeds in defining Eros because he is able to reconcile the tension between physical and moral love. Aristophanes concludes by saying, “we should justly hymn Eros, who at the present time benefits us the most by leading us to what is our own; and in the future he offers the greatest hopes, while we offer piety to the gods, to restore us to our ancient nature and by his healing makes us blessed and happy” (193D). Aristophanes provides an ultimate solution that both supplies happiness and pleases the Gods. His Eros is not purely sexual, like Eryximachus’, and not other worldly, like Socrates’. His love is feasible, moral, sustainable, fulfilling, and directed between human beings. Since Aristophanes’ solution promises more than any other version of Eros in The Symposium, this understanding of Eros could provide society today with a proper model of love. An understanding that love does not discriminate, but can be practiced by any two people who wish to be together.

Endnotes
1 All references to The Symposium follow the standard use of Stephanus numbers.
2 Later arguments introduce Eros’ relation to the condition of the soul and its needs. See the arguments of Aristophanes (189C-193D) and Socrates (201C-212C).
3 Plato offers a similar analysis when Socrates critiques Agathon’s speech (198B-199C). Socrates denies that Agathon told the truth in his speech. Instead, in the way of a poet, he only spoke of the most beautiful and crowd-pleasing parts.
4 A daemon is a creature in between a human and a god (a sort of demigod).
5 Diotima is a wise woman prophet who Socrates references as his source of knowledge of Eros.
6 Pausanias’ made reference to the unjust treatment of homosexuals in tyrannical societies and how this treatment should be remedied by abolishing laws and accepting the Uranian way of love (182A-D). According to Pausanias, Uranian love incorporates sense, morality, and loyalty (181C-D, 183E).

Works Cited