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Hold On My Heart: Reevaluating the Platonic
Theory of Love in the *Symposium*

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ABSTRACT

Hold On My Heart: Reevaluating the Platonic Theory of Love in the Symposium

by

Mason Lee Johnson

In classical Athens, young elite men were educated in political life through pederasty, an educational institution in which older citizens trained young adolescents in political and social life. However, because of the sexual aspect of this relationship, many outside of the ruling class found this practice to lie outside the bounds of Athenian sexual and political mores. As a member of the Athenian elite, Plato was aware of the problems of erotic attachment, and he dramatizes this tension through a discussion of eros in the Symposium. Scholarship on the dialogue's pederastic theme follows two main veins. On the one hand, some examine Plato’s conception of eros from a philosophical point of view, largely ignoring the educative role pederasty played in Athenian culture. On the other, there are those who acknowledge Plato’s engagement with pederastic themes but fail to understand the importance of erotic love for his political philosophy. This paper seeks to bridge the gap between the philosophical and the more socially focused approaches by offering a new reading of the Symposium, which situates the dialogue firmly within the sexual and political atmosphere of classical Athens. I argue that Plato problematizes pederasty in the speeches of the work's interlocutors but proposes a unique solution in the voice of Socrates, who transforms the institution into a vehicle for creating virtuous rulers by freeing elite citizens from the unpredictable and destabilizing emotional ties of erotic love.
One ought to hold on to one's heart; for if one lets it go, one soon loses control of the head too.
– Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

**I: Introduction**

Plato’s *Symposium* poses somewhat of a dilemma for scholars who want to figure out what the dialogue is about. Much of the dialogue seems to be leading up to Socrates’ discussion of the nature of *eros*, but the dialogue is riddled with specific references to the educational institution of Athenian pederasty. Accordingly, Scholarship regarding the *Symposium* diverges into two main veins, one focusing more generally on the dialogue’s discussion of love and the other focusing more namely on the references to pederasty in the dialogue. Many of those who focus on Plato’s treatment of love criticize Plato’s characterization of it as a phenomenon. They seize on Plato’s assertion that the proper object of *eros* is not a particular individual whom one finds beautiful, but rather the Idea of Beauty itself. In “The Individual as Object of Love in Plato,” Gregory Vlastos remarks, “Plato discovers a new form of pederastic love, fully sensual in its resonance, but denying itself consummation, transmuting physical excitement into imaginative and intellectual energy” (Vlastos 22). However, he also feels that this does not truly capture *eros*, for it relegates the people we actually love to mere instantiations of the Idea of Beauty. According to Vlastos, “Erotic attachment […] is not directed to an individual in the proper sense of the word – to the integral and irreplaceable existent that bears that person’s name – but to a complex of qualities” (Vlastos 28). Thus, Vlastos argues that what Plato sees as constitutive of erotic experience fails to account for the nature of the experience.

Martha Nussbaum also draws attention to the differences in the accounts of love between the universal object of Plato’s *eros* compared to a particular instance of that
universal. She notes, “we seem to have in [Aristophanes’] story much of what Vlastos wanted from an account of love. The objects of these creatures’ passions are whole people: not ‘complexes of desirable qualities,’ but entire beings, thoroughly embodied, with all their idiosyncrasies, flaws, and even faults” (Nussbaum 173). However, Plato’s account seeks to rebuke Aristophanes’ more phenomenological account in favor of his own which focuses on the nature of Love itself. In the speech of Socrates, he “connects the love of particulars with tension, excess, and servitude; the love of qualitatively uniform ‘sea’ with health, freedom, and creativity” (Nussbaum 180). In regard to Alcibiades’ contribution to the discussion, Gabriela Carone writes, “Socrates gives us recipes to get away from vulnerability and volatility that we all fear; but Alcibiades makes us realize ‘the deep imperative unique passion has for ordinary human being’” (Carone 222). Carone sees Plato’s characterization of eros as a noble effort but ultimately a failure because it does not account for the individual in a meaningful way, just as Vlastos argues.

However, the dialogue is not simply about eros, but more specifically about its application in the form of Athenian pederasty, and this is the second vein of scholarly focus. As an institution it is very peculiar. For some it represented a useful aspect of a youth’s military and political education, and while for others its vaguely defined sexual dimension evoked caution and worry. Michel Foucault describes the crux of the pederastic problem as “the antimony of the boy” (Foucault 1985: 221). The boy must assume a passive role in order to enter the ruling class, yet he has to become a sexually dominant man to be politically dominant ruler. In attempting to solve this problem, Foucault suggests that Plato reexamines the institution as “an ontological enquiry and no
longer a question of deontology” (Foucault 1985: 236). By focusing on the abstract nature of *eros* as such, Plato sidesteps issues concerning the actual practice of pederasty in Athens. David Halperin sees the change as involving ‘erotic reciprocity.’ He views the dialogue as describing how, in the proper practice of *eros*, the educator and the youth are equals in the relationship: “The genius of Plato’s analysis is that it eliminates passivity altogether: according to Socrates, both members of the relationship become active” (Halperin 1986: 68). However, even though Halperin’s reading replaces the hierarchy of the relationship with a philosophical dialogue, it assumes that this eros still requires the cooperation of specific individuals working together, which Vlastos’ and Carone’s criticisms help to emphasize.

Two recent treatments of this theme underscore this cooperative aspect further. Luc Brisson evaluates this revision of erotic reciprocity in different terms. He draws on the work of Angela Hobbs, who points out, Plato describes a great deal of his account of *eros* in terms of pregnancy and giving birth (Hobbs 254). Plato’s account thus seeks to recast the pederastic relationship as not merely one of sexual gratification, but rather of begetting and bearing beautiful children into the world, in the form of virtue or excellence (Brisson 247). Frisbee Sheffield seizes on this notion in response to Vlastos’ criticisms. If the goal of *eros* is the birth of virtue, then this takes precedence over the individuals who help to bring it about. She argues that “the dialogue explores the nature of *eudaimonia*, ‘happiness’ […] And this is ultimately why a dialogue concerned with *eros* is at its core an ethical work” (Sheffield 126). Here, the more abstract philosophical concerns of the one trend of scholarship meet the social focus of the other, though still not fully situated in the context of classical Athenian society.
So why this concern with virtue and happiness in a dialogue about *eros*? In as much as the dialogue does highlight this ethical element, as Sheffield argues, it seems that the philosophically concerned critiques of Plato’s account may not be fully justified. Further, as Henri Marrou contends, while Plato appeals to the pursuit of philosophy, “his main object was political, not philosophical” (Marrou 63). In constructing his dialogue, Plato is very much conscious of how his account of *eros* will provide the best political ends for the polis, and this is in the inculcation of virtue in its rulers. Plato then seeks to revise the pederastic system in such a way as to remove any of the problematic, compromising sexual or emotional aspects which could either compromise a ruler’s qualifications or disrupt his state of mind. Thus, while on the surface the deontology of pederasty has been replaced by the ontology of *eros*, Plato’s project makes use of this metaphysical account in order to reimagine the educational institution of pederasty and restructure its practice for the greatest good for the polis. Given the significance of the institution in the *Symposium* and its consequences for Athenian society, a fuller treatment is needed to situate the construction of the dialogue. While prior scholarship does throw light upon both the philosophical and the pederastic strains of the dialogue, it has not adequately tied them together. The knot which binds them together is a reading of the dialogue as revision of pederasty which seeks to address the problems it poses for ancient Athenian social mores while at the same time promoting its claim to the production of a virtuous and effective ruling elite for the polis.

**II: The Place and Practice of Pederasty in Athenian Society**

By the time of Plato in the late 5th and early 4th century BCE, the institution of pederasty was well established in Athenian society. A code of social conventions and
laws governed the ways in which the relationships were carried out. However, although it was a social fact for some Athenians, they nonetheless expressed hesitance to talk about it directly. Additionally, because of this reticence concerning pederastic relationships, the dividing line between lawful and acceptable homosexual relationships and unlawful and shameful ones was vague, and thus the laws and mores governing sexuality could be deployed as weapons to demonize citizens in the name of political gain. In the Symposium, however, Plato brings the use of pederasty before the direct scrutiny of the literate ruling elites and suggests using it as a vehicle for philosophical discourse.

At the heart of the pederastic relationship, and indeed all sexual relationships, is eros, or ‘love.’ This concept is intuitive enough; however, as noted by Vlastos and others,1 many different words exist in Ancient Greek which are all translated into English as ‘love,’ namely eros, philia, and agape. The semantic domains of each of these words often overlap, but there are some salient differences. ‘Eros,’ as a form of love, particularly expresses desire, in the same way that the cognate ‘erotic’ is used in modern English. Kenneth Dover explains that eros pertains not only to sex but also to anything “for which one may feel a desire capable of satisfaction,” such as food and drink (Dover 43). Complementing this notion is that of philia, which is love in the sense we more readily think of when we speak of loving relationships. Etymologically, philia comes from the adjective meaning “near/dear,” and it expresses a relationship that is of mutual intimacy, much in the same sense as when we talk about our “nearest and dearest” friends and loved ones (Dover 49). Finally, agape expresses something more along the lines of a sort of disinterested ‘good will’ (Nicholson 210). The demarcation of these terms,

1 For more a more in depth treatment of the differences, see Nygren, Agape and Eros.
however, is more a product of later writers, in particular the early Church fathers. As Dover notes, “In the classical language there is no word for ‘love’ which precludes sexuality in cases where a sexual element in a relationship is socially acceptable” (Dover 50). Thus, in any given relationship, these forces can present themselves in myriad ways.

At the broadest level, we can categorize this relationships according to gender. The nature of the relationship was derived from the distinction between dominant and submissive roles. The modern everyday distinction between heterosexual and homosexual was recognized in the Greek language; both species of relationships were referred to with the same broad terms of love (Dover 1). However, differences do present themselves based on the gender of the passive partner in the relationship. In typical heterosexual relationships, males assume the active role of penetration, and the woman the passive role. As such, the male comes to develop *eros* for the woman, as he was the one attracted to her and interested in consummating his desire. However, women were not expected to have the same desire for men. Rather, in response to his *eros*, she develops an *anteros*, or a desire in response to his, which in turn forms the basis for their mutual *philia* (Dover 52).

What presents itself here is a division in the nature of *eros* and *philia* which occurs in all sexual relationships. On the one hand, both parties in the relationship share in a bond of *philia*. On the other hand, only one partner can legitimately have *eros* in the relationship, and this is only on the part of the active male in the relationship. Both of the individuals in the relationship love each other, but only the active male has ‘fallen in love’ with the other, or at least he is the only one who may legitimately do so according to the social norms. In heterosexual relationships, this difference was defined by the
cultural understanding both that penetration was a sign of power and that women simply lacked the self-control (σωφροσύνη) that men did (Dover 105). Aristotle roots this cultural perspective in natural causes in the Politics, remarking, “It is for humans just as for the other animals: for though the tame are better according to their nature than the wild, it is better for all of these to be ruled by humans: for they thus do they come to health. Yet the male is to the female by nature as the greater to the lesser, and as the ruler to the ruled. It is also necessary that this be the way for all humanity” (1254b). Women were viewed as constantly inclined toward adultery and generally disposed to taking excessive pleasure in drinking and sex (Winkler 167). The creation of children and the preservation of the wealth and lineage of the father were the most important functions of the relationship with a woman (Brisson 232). Because of this widely held stereotype, women were secluded from the general Athenian society and kept in the oikos. Even female prostitutes, who crossed the boundary of what constituted acceptable family life (namely that of conjugal chastity), secluded themselves in an effort not to incur the shame which was brought upon prostitutes (of both sexes) (Dover 66). Thus, men almost exclusively occupied the everyday public sphere.

Accordingly, the dominant and submissive roles which the Greeks viewed as the essential elements of sexual life were divided up between men of different social status, since for the most part women were denigrated as merely concerned with reproduction (Halperin 1990: 265). Homosexual relations were governed by the dominant/submissive dichotomy as well, but the submissive role was viewed as shameful. In the Athenian cultural mindset, the only people for whom submission to penetration was acceptable

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2 This is not to say that women did not have their own species of virtues; cf. Foucault, The History of Sexuality, Vol. 2: The Use of Pleasure. 83-85
were the lower statuses: slaves, foreigners, and women. Physical penetration was equated with political dominion, and so it was a manifestation of the power of the male citizenry (Dover 105). Therefore, a citizen who willingly played the passive partner in a homosexual relationship brought upon himself all of the negative qualities associated with women and foreigners and in essence gave up his right to Athenian citizenship (Dover 104). In fact, Athenian law at the time of Plato expressly forbade citizens to willingly give up their bodies for prostitution or compel other citizens to do so by force (such as through pimping, trafficking, or rape) (Dover 34). Conversely, foreigners living in Athens were free to do as they pleased with their own bodies, since they already lacked any claim to social or political power, and the state even collected a prostitution tax from them and female *hetairai* (Dover 27-30). Athenians did not have a problem with homosexuality qua homosexuality. Rather, the problems in homosexual relationships arose from the possibility of an abuse, usurpation, or an incorrect expression of power. Should an Athenian citizen, a man who has political power in the city, willingly place himself in the sexual role befitting his social inferiors, he would reveal himself as both a weak and compromised member of the political system. Because of the strict social mores concerning sexual hierarchy, those in a homosexual relation had to walk a fine line to avoid damaging themselves as citizens.

Among the elites of Athenian society, the institution of pederasty blurred this line between political permissible and harmful homosexuality. In a lawful or proper pederastic relationship, *eros* manifested itself in an older male, the *erastes*, toward a pubescent youth, the *eromenos*. The *erastes*, aroused by the beauty of the youth, sought his affections through gifts and favors in an attempt to win over the boy. However, the
youth was not supposed to eagerly respond to the advances of the *erastes*, for to do so would be to exhibit the qualities unbecoming of a citizen (or citizen to be) and essentially to have prostituted himself. Rather, the *eromenos* was expected to put up resistance to the *erastes’* advances; in fact, *anteros* in reference to pederasty is not a reciprocated desire, as it is with women, but rather a competing desire of another *erastes* for the same *eromenos* (Dover 52). The *eromenos* was expected to develop *philia* towards his *erastes* in appreciation of the services and attentions which the *erastes* lavishes upon him, and eventually he comes to grant the *erastes* sexual gratification (Dover 53). However, in order to preserve the integrity of the *eromenos* as a citizen, this sexual consummation is done intercrurally (between the thighs), and the *eromenos* performs the act standing upright and devoid of all enjoyment (or at least ideally, as depicted in vase paintings) (Dover 102).

Under a modern analysis of the institution, these roles all appear clearly defined, but the actual practice of pederastic relationships was only talked about in periphrastic language and only occurred in utmost privacy. Even in the *Symposium*, in which the whole dialogue is focused on this topic, Plato’s language is very indirect (*Symposium* 3). For example, in his encomium of Eros in the *Symposium*, Pausanias refers to the actions of *eromenos* toward his *erastes* as χαρίζεσθαι, “to gratify” and ὑποθησάμεν, “to render service” (182a). Unspecified as these actions are, what constitutes gratification and services could take any number of forms, even those which were socially taboo for the *eromenos*. In reading the speech of Aeschines “Against Timarchos,” which concerns the law against male prostitution, Dover notes how the orator expresses extreme hesitance to use the actual language in the law, which only speaks of “prostituting oneself”
(πεπορνευμένος) or being “like a hetaira” (ἑταιρικός) (Dover 23). This ambiguity in speaking about pederasty leaves much to the imagination, for the details of such a relationship were kept between the two partners, and such reticence to speak about what actually occurred in a particular relationship could leave both erastes and eromenos open to accusation of improper or even impolitic behavior.

Ostensibly, the purpose of pederasty among the elites was a means of grooming the adolescent population for political service. Henri Marrou traces the emergence of pederasty back to the military organization of the polis in archaic times, which was still present in the ἀγωγή of classical Sparta and Crete (Marrou 27-28). Initially, these pederastic relationships came about from the erastes seeking a suitable eromenos, who was attracted to the older warrior’s kleos (Marrou 30). However, in Athens this kind of one-on-one education became dissociated from its military roots more quickly due to the democratization of the military, and pederasty in turn became the primary means of political and economic education in the Athenian state (Brisson 235). However, the democratization of the military did not cause a similar democratization in the institution of pederasty which had grown up in it. Pederasty remained a mark of the upper classes, as “it was still designed for the leisure life of the aristocracy” and “was in no sense technical” (Marrou 43). Rather than being an official institution of education, it centered around the arenas in which men and boys encountered each other at leisure, namely at the gymnasia and at symposia. Because the lower classes lacked the leisure to participate in these institutions, the pederastic education was the prerogative of the elites who wanted to train young boys according to the ideal of the political gentleman, “καλοκἀγαθία –
“being a man both beautiful and good”’ (Marrou 43). Or, at any rate, this was the justification which the upper echelon of Athenian society gave for the institution.

In the lower classes of Athenian society, the institution was viewed more or less as just a veil for wealthy men at leisure to have sex with boys, which was neither beautiful nor good for the elite citizens according to the dynamics of Greek sexuality. Such attitudes are reflected in the comedic representation in Aristophanes’ plays (Winkler 195). These comedic representations present positive consequences for men engaging in the traditional, active masculine role and averse consequences for those who renounce it, such as the caricature of the tragedian Agathon in the Thesmophoriazousae (29-265). These public displays helped to promote heterosexual marital relations in line with the Periclean law of citizenship of 451, which focused on the sex act between two married natives. According to Susan Lape, “it enjoins the good democratic citizen to live up to his identity by procreating in the politically sanctioned format” (Lape 20-21). In poor and rural households, daily life had a much stronger female presence, as women were given more tasks due to the lack of slave help. Additionally, the complete isolation of women from the public sphere was only practicable by those wealthy enough to have a constant watch on them (Dover 149). The institution of pederasty was accepted because it was a fixture of the elites of the Athenian democracy, but this did not grant it universal sanction. Foucault notes of the policing of sexuality in general that “the most rigorous techniques were formed and, more particularly, applied first, with the greatest intensity, in the economically privileged and politically dominant classes” (Foucault 1984: 120). The concern over how people conduct themselves is of foremost concern to those in power, and in Classical Athens, the personal conduct of the members of the liturgical
class was seen as directly related to their governing ability. It was of less concern how slaves or women behaved, because they had no stake in the government (Foucault 1985: 82). However, because eromenoi assumed a passive role thought to be unfit for citizens, the institution received intense scrutiny as to what it suggested about the civic soundness of the ruling class. Pederasty thus poses a dilemma for the political structure of Athens. It was an institution of the ruling elite, and yet it allowed for the possibility of compromising the civic virtue of these very prominent citizens. Given the reticence to speak about the pederastic system which even those engaged in it had, and given the views of the poor towards it as an expression of effeminacy in the wealthy rulers, there was a great degree of tension in its practice (Brisson 238-239).

**III: The Encomia on The Traditional Practice of Pederasty**

In constructing the Symposium, Plato recognizes the social and political problems which arise from the traditional practice of pederasty and seeks to reform it so that it can effectively produce upright citizens without complications. Given the practical necessity of pederasty in civic education, however, it would be impossible to totally remove it from the city outright. Thus, Plato’s task in the Symposium is to determine what the nature of eros is and how to properly practice, in the words of the priestess Diotima, τὸ ὀφθόως παιδεραστεῖν, or “loving boys in the right way” (211b). The dialogue features six encomia of Eros from the different party goers, but Pausanias’ speech is the most indicative of the traditional Athenian conception of pederastic eros. He first clarifies that there is not one, but rather two kinds of eros: the common (πάνδημος) and the heavenly (οὐράνιος) (180e). On the one hand, the common eros “is the one which the lowly men

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3 Eryximachus makes a similar distinction in his encomium, but because his focus is less
love. Such men first love women no less than boys, therefore they also love the bodies of these rather than their souls… For it is also from the goddess who is much younger than the other and shares in both the female and the male in her origin” (181b-c). Pausanias’ description of the common eros toes the line of the Athenian sexual system. In juxtaposing it with the feminine, Pausanias also associates it with license and indecency, both of which are unbecoming of the most powerful of the citizenry. In opposition to this vulgar eros is the heavenly, which “does not take part in the feminine but only in the masculine – and this is the love of boys – and therefore it is from the older goddess and free from violation (ὕβρεως): wherefore the ones inspired by this love turn themselves toward the masculine, showing affection to the one who is by nature healthier and having more mind” (181c-d). The heavenly eros is the higher form because it avoids the simply sexual element of the common variety and seeks out beings capable of moral and civic worth, namely courageous and intelligent adolescent males.

However, Pausanias’ account is not so clear cut, as the sexual element of the relationship plays a very large role in his characterization of the pederastic system. He goes on to say, “I think that those beginning to love are henceforth prepared to be together (συνεσόμενοι) their whole life and to live together in common, otherwise not having sought to deceive, having taken a boy in folly as a youth, and having laughed at him they will leave running off to someone else” (181d). The participle συνεσόμενοι, while overtly denoting the erastes and eromenos continually cohabiting, also evokes the idea of them having sex in a committed relationship for the rest of their lives. This sexual dimension also presents itself in Pausanias’ definition of the proper relationship:

social than Pausanias, I have not included a treatment of it here.
νενόμισται γὰρ δὴ ἡμῖν, ἐὰν τις ἐθέλῃ, τινὰ θεραπεύειν ἵγοιμένος δ' ἐκεῖνον ἁμένον ἔσθεοι ἢ κατὰ σοφίαν τινὰ ἢ κατὰ ἄλλο ὁτιοῦν μέρος ἀρετῆς, αὕτη αὖ ἢ ἐθελοδούλεια οὐχ ἁίσχοι εἶναι οὐδὲ κολαχεία...ὅταν γὰρ εἰς τὸ αὐτὸ ἔλθουσιν ἔραστίς τε καὶ παιδιά, νόμον ἔχουν ἐκάτερος, ὁ μὲν χαρισμένος παιδικός ὑπηρετῶν ὁτιοῦν δικαίως ἢ ὑπηρετεῖν, ὁ δὲ τῷ ποιοῦντι αὐτὸν σοφὸν τε καὶ ἄγαθὸν δικαίως αὖ ὁτιοῦν ἃν ὑπουργεῖν

For indeed it has been considered by us, if someone should want to serve someone else, thinking that on that score he will be better either on account of some wisdom or any other part of virtue whatsoever, again this voluntary slavery is not shameful or fawning... For whenever both the erastes and the boy have come to the same thing, each having a rule: the erastes providing services to the boy who grants favors however he serves, and the boy in turn providing services rightly to the one who makes him both wise and noble, however he serves. (184c-d)

Once again, what exactly goes into the ‘services’ that the erastes and eromenos provide each other is extremely ambiguous, but coupled with the lifelong partnership he described earlier, it is hard to discount the sexual elements of these favors.

This sexual ambiguity poses an additional problem. If any and all services are permissible in the pursuit of civic virtue and nobility, and the higher, heavenly eros is bound to lead to an enduring extramarital partnership, it seems that this flies directly in the face of the nature of democratic civic virtue. By Pausanias’ reasoning, the boy trying to learn the roles of a good statesman from the erastes could feasibly submit himself to very un-statesman-like conduct so long as both parties are ultimately interested in civic service. Pausanias’ views on pederasty are exactly those which the less powerful citizens can easily attack, for the boy runs the risk of essentially prostituting himself and remains vulnerable of being publicly accused as womanly, deviant χίναδος (the archetypal lascivious catamite), someone unfit for civic leadership (Winkler 177). Furthermore, Pausanias’ distinction of “rightly” or “lawfully” (δικαίως) granting favors is used in the speech of Aeschines mentioned above (Dover 45). Pausanias is only concerned about the
ends of the relationship, whereas the law brings into account the problematic means to this end. The letter of the Athenian law does not follow the same logic as Pausanias’ approach. In seeking to save the sexual dimension of the relationship, Pausanias’ justification for pederasty blends the common and heavenly eros in a way which leaves the soundness of the boy as a male citizen in question.

In the speech of Agathon, the characterization of eros becomes even more complicated as regards its effects upon democratic political life. Agathon describes eros not in terms of the higher and lower forms as we see in Pausanias’ account, but rather as the most beautiful and graceful of all the gods. He describes Eros as “soft,” saying, “For it makes its dwelling in the characters and souls of gods and men, and not again in all souls one after another, but if whenever he happens upon someone having a hard character (σκληρὸν ἢθος), he departs, but whenever he happens upon one with a soft one (μαλακόν), he settles. Therefore it is necessary that he is most sensitive” (195e). The hardness/softness dichotomy which Agathon presents does not reside merely in physical differences, but it also exhibits moral differences. The “hard” character is also one of austerity, whereas the “soft” one calls to mind mildness or even moral weakness and effeminacy (Foucault 1985: 85). Agathon himself, as the eromenos of Pausanias, was not immune to the conflation of the soft with the effeminate. The Thesmophoriazousae casts the tragedian as the effeminate man par excellence, “so much so that his interlocutor wonders if he is in the presence of a man or a woman” (Foucault 1985: 19). Given the strong heteronormative force underlying Athenian comedy, such a parody is not as much an innocent joke as a harsh critique of this elite male’s perceived lapses in his civic duties (Dover 141).
But the effeminacy of *eros* as viewed by Agathon is not the only problem. As Agathon closes his speech, he commends love as “father of luxury, splendor, delicacy, graces, yearning (ἵμερος), and longing; [...] the most beautiful and best leader, to whom it is necessary that all men sing beautifully, providing the song which he sings while bewitching the perception of all the gods and men as well” (197de). Just as in the encomium of Pausanias, this description of *eros* brings to the fore the strong sexual element, and once again, this sexual force has the power to cloud the judgment of those who fall under its spell. Pausanias provides the account from the perspective of the lovelorn *erastes*, and Agathon provides its complement from the perspective of the *eromenos*. On both sides of the pederastic relationship, the partners have lost control of themselves, have renounced their rational agency for the pursuit of the pleasures of sex, and have bound themselves to the whims of the other partner. For Athenians, this lack of self-control was equally transferable from the private to the civic sphere; the ability to govern oneself directly translated to the ability to govern the city (Foucault 1985: 75). Thus, if both *erastes* and *eromenos* cannot exhibit the masculine virtue of active *σωφροσύνη*, then they are not fit rulers of the state, for being ‘bewitched’ they would put the state under the unstable spell of desire as well.

Phaedrus’ speech differs slightly from Agathon’s. Similar to Agathon, Pheadrus says, “There is no greater good (ἀγαθόν) for one who is young than an effective *erastes* or for an *erastes* than an *eromenos*” (178c). However, the reason why this pederastic relationship is so good is not from luxury and softness, but for civic aims. Phaedrus claims, “[*Eros*] causes shame for the shameful and love of honor for the beautiful: it is not possible for either the polis or an individual to accomplish great and beautiful things
without these two” (178d). Clearly, Phaedrus has political education in mind when he is praising pederasty. As an example of the great things that come from pederastic relationships, he cites Achilles and Patroklos, for it was on account of Patroklos’ death that Achilles achieved such great kleos on the battlefield (179e-180a). Phaedrus explains this scenario in terms of shame and honor: “It is worse for an erastes to be seen by his eromenos either quitting the ranks for throwing his shield away than perhaps he should be regarded by anyone else… There is no one so bad that Eros himself would not make him inspired toward virtue” (179a). Traditional pederasty, according to Phaedrus’ account, should be the perfect means for making good citizens, since it inspires great and glorious things. Barring the sexual problems of pederasty, Plato should not have a problem with the institution if it is in fact as virtuous as Phaedrus claims.

However, while Phaedrus’ praise of love hinges around the military prowess which it engenders, it also highlights some problems with eros as only directed toward individuals. Even though Achilles shows great prowess on the battlefield as a result of his love for Patroklos, his devotion is ultimately tied to Patroklos. Thus, whatever Achilles, or any eromenos does is not for the good of the army as a whole, but it is to avenge a heartfelt wrong. The erastes or eromenos in battle will only fight at their best for their lover; any higher goals are precluded from this relationship. While Phaedrus claims that this glorious warrior is greater for the state, in actuality he is working for the good of his lover, and civic concerns are only contingent upon this. The greater good plays no role in the decisions of the lover (as can be seen from Achilles’ behavior in the Iliad). Thus, when Phaedrus claims that eros is a civic virtue, in actual practice it only serves the erastes or eromenos, not the greater good. Also, Phaedrus’ account makes both erastes...
and eromenos slaves to the desire they feel for each other. It is not the desire to be virtuous that makes lovers do well in war, but rather the feeling that they will have when they are subjected to their lover’s gaze. Under this conception of eros, the lovers are still very much at each other’s mercy. For this reason, they are unable to truly exhibit the σωφροσύνη necessary for a citizen, and so they must suffer.

These problems specific to pederasty and the citizenry which these other encomia bring out are further elaborated in that of Aristophanes. He begins by claiming that eros “is both the ally of men and the physicians of these ills which, having been cured, are the greatest happiness (εὐδαιμονία) for the human race” (189cd). He backs up this view through a tale in which all forms of hetero- and homosexual behavior are derived from an ancient division of three separate genders, the male, the female, and the androgynous (189de). According to the story, humanity existed as spherical wholes but was divided in two by the gods for disobedience. Thus, heterosexual partners come from the androgynous, and the two kinds of homosexual partners from the whole male and whole female respectively. Given the symposiastic context, Aristophanes focuses on male, particularly in relation to pederasty and the conduct of the two partners together. Perhaps in keeping with the actual playwright’s work, Aristophanes’ speech here foregrounds the sexuality of a pederastic relationship:

τέως μὲν ἂν παίδες ὦσιν, ἀτε τεμάχια ὀντα τοῦ ἄρρενος, φιλούσι τοὺς ἄνδρας καὶ χαίρουσι συγκατακείμενοι καὶ συμπεπλεγμένοι τοῖς ἄνδρασι, καὶ εἰσίν οὕτως βέλτιστοι τῶν παίδων καὶ μειρακίων, ἀτε ἀνδρείαται ὀντες φύσι. φαοί δὲ δὴ τινὲς αὐτοὺς ἄναισχύντους εἶναι, ψευδόμενοι: οὐ γὰρ ὑπ᾽ ἀναισχύντια τοῦτο δρῶσιν ἀλλ᾽ ὑπὸ θάρρους καὶ ἀνδρείας καὶ ἄρρενωπίας, τὸ οὕτω τοῦτο ἀσπαζόμενοι, μέγα δὲ τεχμήριον καὶ γὰρ τελεωθέντες μόνοι ἀποβαίνουσιν εἰς τὰ πολιτικὰ ἄνδρες οἱ τοιούτοι.

On the one hand, while they are boys, as they are little slices of the male, they regard men with affection and they rejoice while lying with them and intertwining
themselves, and these are the best of the boys and lads, as they are the most manly by nature. Some say that these are shameful, but they lie: for they do not do this with shame but with courage and bravery and manliness, cleaving to the one like them. Here is great proof: for these men alone, once completed, end up in politics. (191e-192a)

Rather than idealizing dispassionate intercrural intercourse on the part of the eromenos, Aristophanes presents a very intimate and passionate scenario, as the eromenos is firmly and willingly entangled with his erastes as they sleep together. In this description, Aristophanes also illuminates the political nature of this relationship, which brings out the problems associated with pederasty as a sexual initiation into the political elite.

Indeed, he goes so far as to say that they engage in “ἡ τῶν ἀφροδιτῶν συνουσία” (192c), which is exactly what Foucault notes as the overarching term for all sexual relationships in Greek (Foucault 1985: 38). It is made very clear that there is in fact a sexual relationship going on, which calls to mind all the problem pederasty faces in trying to form dominant ruling citizens. Aristophanes’ seemingly blasé comments are further complicated as he traces the eromenos transformation into an erastes: “Whenever they become men, they love boys (παιδεραστοῦσι) and they do not turn their mind towards marriage and procreation, but are compelled to do so by law […]” (192b). Not only are these men engaged in sexual activity with one another, but they do not engage in the procreation of children or in marriage, which are necessary for the physical and economic continuation of the state (Lape 20-21). Aristophanes’ characterization of pederasty thus problematizes the position of pederasty to an even greater degree than Pausanias’ and Agathon’s do.

However, the speech of Aristophanes raises more general concerns about the nature of eros as well. As a result of the separation of the spherical wholes, “since their
nature was cut in two, each of itself would come together (συνήμει) in longing, and
throwing their hands around them and intertwining themselves (συμπλεκόμενοι)
desiring to unite (ἐπιθυμοῦντες συμφῦναι), they would die from hunger and from
idleness since no one wanted to be apart from the others” (191ab). Having been separated
from their perfect union, the halves of each gender try as much as they can to return back
to this fused state. After completing his story about the origins of these human relations,
Aristophanes sums up his position, saying, “eros is the name for the desire and pursuit of
the whole” (193c). Given the prior encomia, this characterization of eros seems markedly
different. Aristophanes begins by claiming that eros by nature leads to happiness.
However, given the details of the lovers wanting so much to unite that they would rather
die than separate, this hardly seems conducive to happiness. Nussbaum further elaborates
Aristophanes’ argument, claiming that “Erōs is the desire to be a being without any
contingent occurrence desires; it is a second order desire that all desires should be
cancelled” (Nussbaum 176). If Aristophanes’ argument is correct, and eros is the pursuit
of the whole, then it is a fundamentally impossible. To the extent that the union of the
two halves are achieved, the result is death from a lack of any sort of activity. This is
problematic for any human, but especially so for the political elite who are tasked with
the survival of the elite. Should erastai and eromenoi spend all their lives attempting to
return to their full masculine whole, not only will they die, but so will the political
structure of the state. Even barring the extreme case, engrossment in a pederastic
relationship keeps the ruling citizens from properly concerning themselves with the
workings of the polis. The degree of unity between erastes and eromenos is inversely
proportional to the well-being of the state. Thus, the account of *eros* and pederasty which Aristophanes gives provides far ranging consequences for the Athenian state.

*IV: Diotima and Plato’s Revisionary Account*

If the speeches of Pausanias, Agathon, and Aristophanes exhibit pederasty and *eros* as traditionally practiced and defined, then Socrates’ speech provides the revisionary account of the practice which seeks to solve the problems brought to light by the others. In doing this, however, Socrates does not engage his fellow symposiasts in his typical dialectic, but rather tells a story in which the proper method was revealed to him by the Mantinean priestess Diotima. Her account foregrounds the educative function, which is nominally present in Pausanias’ account, and seeks to provide a framework in which both *erastes* and *eromenos* can consummate *eros* while at the same time not allowing for the compromising influence of sex. Diotima manages this by suggesting *eros* is not a desire for particular individuals, but rather for the transcendent idea of Beauty (τὸ καλόν).

Thus, the desire for the *eromenos* is sparked by the beauty of his body, but it is not limited to his body. For, under Diotima’s framework, bodies are not the only things which can be beautiful or participate in Beauty, since customs, ideas, and laws have a share of Beauty as well (211c).

From a modern perspective, it makes little sense to talk about the beauty of things which are not actually perceptible, since most often we understand beauty from the Kantian perspective that it is grounded in the senses. However, the distinction between what is beautiful and what is good is only a recent one.⁴ For the ancient Greeks, the ethical and the aesthetic are blended together in τὸ καλόν, such that a beautiful

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⁴ For an explanation of changes in aesthetic theory, see Kristeller, “The Modern System of the Arts: A Study in the History of Aesthetics Part I.”
appearance reflected good character (Winkler 200). In order to apply equally to both bodies and ideas, Nussbaum translates this term as “valuable,” and Dover notes that it expresses “a favorable reaction,” which can be taken as fulfilling some sort of essence of what the thing ought to be (Symposium 2). In as much as a boy is καλός, he conforms to the ideal of the human form; in as much as a law or custom is καλός, they likewise conform to their respective essences. Built into Plato’s understanding of ‘beauty’ is a sense of ‘excellence’ in respect to what ever the thing in question is, be it bodies, ideas, or the Idea itself. This identification of the moral and the aesthetic then provides a basis from which Plato can use the erotic in pederasty to promote and instill virtue in the citizenry.

But it is not just being with τὸ καλὸν that eros desires, but to be with it forever, and the way that human beings are capable of this is through reproduction (207a-b). In as much as they all take part in the Idea, both physical and non-physical things are all equally καλός, but they are not all equally lasting or consistent, and therefore they do not all fulfill this drive for immortality to the same extent. Human bodies and human beauty are prone to change, whether through emotional changes or through their growth and decay, whereas laws and wisdom have increasing stability in their goodness. The Idea itself then, perfectly beautiful and timeless, becomes the ultimate object of eros, for so long as a person can contemplate it, it will always be there. Using this criterion of immortality, Diotima lays out the hierarchy of “loving boys in the right way”: “beginning always to rise from these pretty things on account of that Beauty, just as if using stairs, from one to two and from two to all beautiful bodies, and from beautiful bodies to beautiful habits, and from beautiful habits to beautiful learning, and from learning to end
at that form of learning, which is none other than the learning of that Beauty itself” (211b-c). In the end, the desire for one particular individual which Pausanias takes as the end of the pederastic relationship is really the first step towards the best means of being with beauty.

In addition to her revision of the objects of love through the use of the so-called “ladder of love,” Diotima also seeks to change the roles of the *erastes* and the *eromenos* within the relationship. Rather than fitting into the roles of the hunter and the “chased-but-chaste,” Diotima reverses the relationship such that the *eromenos* begets the knowledge of the beautiful/good in the *erastes*, and, moreover, this reversal is characterized in terms of conceiving and bearing children (*νωκ, τίκτει, γεννά, 206d*) (Winkler 195). The pederastic relationship, as conceived by Diotima, is not a hierarchical, unidirectional one, but rather one characterized by what David Halperin terms “erotic reciprocity.” Furthermore, these terms refer to experiences which are only attributed to women, so the *erastes* takes on the role of the woman in giving birth to the beautiful (Hobbs 264). In the traditional physical relationship described by Pausanias, the *erastes* provides the sexual seed to the *eromenos* (intercrurally or otherwise), but in the ideal revealed by Diotima, the *eromenos* provides the spiritual seed for the *erastes* (Brisson 250). In this way, then, the pederastic relationship acquires sanction, because it is in fact fruitful and not simply orgasmic (Carson 150). This mental procreation also takes precedence over the physical procreation of children. Diotima herself says that the offspring of the proper *erastes* and *eromenos* “have a share in more beautiful and more undying children,” and she claims, “Everyone would prefer to have given birth to children of such a sort rather than human ones” (209c-d). Given that the object of *eros* is
the eternal possession or companionship with the beautiful, virtue and ideas, as much more stable than mortal bodies, have more permanent beauty and thus are better objects of love than people.

Diotima also provides evidence for how beneficial this revision is for the erastes and for the eromenos in terms of their efficacy as citizens. In Pausanias’ characterization of pederasty, he notes how Athenian custom permits the erastes to act in such a manner that, if done for any other reason than the pursuit of an eromenos, it would be utterly reprehensible (182d-183c). In pursuing the one particular and changeable body, the traditional erastes gives up his manly self-control and becomes determined by the passions he feels towards the eromenos. Diotima, on the other hand, offers that in seeking the Idea itself, which is approached not through the senses but through reason, the proper erastes has “true virtue, in as much as he has grasped true beauty” (211e). Because the Idea is stable, it does not compromise the integrity of the mind in the way that the pursuit of the particular does. This levelheadedness allows for perfection of the character of both erastes and eromenos in their work as statesmen. They become free from the distractions of the flesh and can then turn themselves towards the lasting prosperity of the state. Diotima’s revision of pederasty circumvents the problems that plague the traditional system outlined by Pausanias.

It is important that Socrates presents these revelations about love not as his own observations or theory, but as the revelations of Diotima, for such a theory of love would be uncommon for Greek thought (Osborne 60). However, the authenticity of Diotima’s person, or at least of her conversation with a young Socrates, is not entirely certain. In fact, it is very likely (even within the narrative) that Diotima is entirely fictional and
merely a mouthpiece of Socrates, for he acknowledges his account of her as an offshoot from the speech of Agathon immediately preceding his own (201de). The organic flow from the normal elenchus in which Socrates engages Agathon to that in which Diotima engages Socrates, who apparently held the exact same views, makes for a seamless transition; however, Diotima’s reference to Aristophanes’ myth about lovers later on (while not specifically attributed to him) makes this seem so convenient that it forces the reader to believe that Socrates is just inventing Diotima (Halperin 1990: 293). Why couldn’t Socrates just speak his mind on pederasty and save himself all of this narrative trouble?

Speaking in his own person, Socrates is simply another man in society, and his account would be on the same level as that of each of the other symposiasts. As Halperin notes, Socrates use of Diotima is a case of “mimetic transvestitism,” such that Socrates attributes his own ideas to the person of Diotima, only to have her act as his foil in the conversation (Halperin 1990: 291). Plato employs Diotima as the mouthpiece for Socrates because her differences from the rest of the speakers, and indeed from the rest of the Athenian public involved in pederasty, lend this revisionary account of love credence and distinction. First of all, Diotima is a woman. Her explanation of the ideal form of pederastic relationship in terms of pregnancy and giving birth thus makes much more sense, because as a woman these actions are part and parcel of her nature as woman; for Socrates to use these terms in his own voice would be mere metaphor. Her insistence that the intellectual “children” born from the relationship between the erastes and the eromenos are much more desirable and better than physical children likewise gains credence because of her femininity. If even a woman, whose nature was defined by the
Greeks in terms of her capacity and desire to have offspring, would prefer to have children in the form of virtues and ideas, it suggests that men should be even more keen to find and produce them, since this is their socially determined sphere.

But Diotima is not just a woman, she is also a foreign priestess, one who helped to stave off a plague from the Athenians (201d). She does not suffer from any reproach insomuch as she is a woman because she has divine sanction (for her name literally means “honor of Zeus”) and sanction from the polis for her service to it (Nussbaum 177). As a priestess, her comments which suggest that the erastes and eromenos in the proper relationship are dear to the gods are not mere speculation, but they take on the character of actual divine revelation. In the voice of Socrates alone, his argument might be persuasive, but it does not have the force of the divine to also give it sanction. As a foreigner who comes to save the city, Diotima also serves as an objective bystander. Unlike the symposiasts, she is not enmeshed within the pederastic culture, so she can see the problems which arise from its practice which are not apparent to the likes of Pausanias. Thus, she can come in to save the city once again, though not this time from a plague of the body, but rather from a plague of the soul. Using the traditional framework of Pausanias, pederasty leads to unmanly and thus impolitic behavior both for erastes and eromenos when the erastes is so eaten up by bodily desire. In shifting the proper object of eros to the ideal of Beauty, Diotima offers a relationship that is much more, if not perfectly stable, and this allows the cultivation of “true virtue” (212a).

The fact that Plato’s account of eros focuses on the Idea of Beauty rather than individuals seems problematic to some individuals as a philosophical account of the nature of eros. Gregory Vlastos, in particular, argues that Plato’s account ignores how we
come to love in the first place. Diotima’s “ladder of love” grants that we begin to love particular individuals, but as Vlastos points out, “Erotic attachment [...] is not directed to an individual in the proper sense of the word – to the integral and irreplaceable existent that bears that person’s name – but to a complex of qualities answering to the lover’s sense of beauty, which he locates for a time truly or falsely in that person” (Vlastos 28).

What constitutes the first rung in the ladder is not truly a human being, but rather a particular instantiation of a beautiful thing. The fact that the beautiful thing happens to be another human being is only incidental, since Plato views not only humans, but also laws and ideas as instantiations of the beautiful. Thus, Vlastos argues that the Platonic account, in so far as it attempts to explain the nature of what it is to have *eros*, ignores key aspects of the human experience.

Vlastos’ argument against Plato’s vision of *eros* fits in well with Aristophanes’ parable, where human beings seek out the one from whom they were separated to reconstitute their original whole. But, as Diotima points out, the striving for human beings is marred by the fact that human beings change and die, unlike the Idea itself.

While Vlastos’ account rightly points out the phenomenological distance that which Plato introduces by changing the object of *eros* from a particular beautiful individual to the Idea of Beauty, it also misses out on the point of the restructuring in the first place. Plato’s reinvention of pederasty is not a simple denial of sexual desire, for as Vlastos himself notes, “Plato discovers a new form of pederastic love, fully sensual in its resonance, but denying itself consummation, transmuting physical excitement into imaginative and intellectual energy” (Vlastos 22). Rather, Plato’s restructuring of pederasty attempts to create an institution which is entirely unproblematic for the ruling
elite. On the one hand, by eliminating the specter of sexual intercourse, Plato insulates the ruling class from any attacks on their character from those in beneath them. On the other, by shifting the object of Platonic love from a perishable individual to the timeless form, Plato seeks to ensure the *sophrosune* necessary for political stability. If the ruling class, i.e. those engaging in pederasty, were to become as distraught as Pausanias’ description of the *erastes* would have them be, then their efficacy as legislators and statesmen would be drastically compromised; the ship of state would be directed on the whims of those troubled by the whims of particular *eromenoi*. However, by focusing their erotic impulse on the unchanging Idea of Beauty, Plato seeks to insure consistent political stability. Vlastos’ criticisms fail to see the larger political objectives of the restructuring of pederasty. Plato discounts the particular individual because the individual is subordinate to the larger social and political order, which is the ultimate benefactor of these pederastic reforms.

It seems that Vlastos has conflated *eros* with the other forms of love in Greek, or perhaps even the more general English notion of love. The nature of *eros* is that of desire generally, and on the Platonic account this general desire is to procreate in Beauty and to be with it forever. *Eros* qua desire is not necessarily restricted to the individual like Vlastos believes it is. As Sheffield points out, “If the discussion were concerned with *philia* [...] we might more reasonably expect the account to cover those features of our interpersonal lives” (Sheffield 123). Indeed, Vlastos begins his article with a discussion of the meaning of *φιλεῖν* and the dialogue *Lysis*, which centers on the question of what *philia* is (Vlastos 3-14). What Plato is concerned about in the *Symposium* is not friendship, but rather the nature of *eros* and its proper expression. Sheffield suggests that
the ultimate aim of Plato’s revision of *eros* is the pursuit of *eudaimonia*, alternatively both ‘happiness’ and ‘flourishing’ (Sheffield 122). Because the proper object of *eros* is the Idea of Beauty, it is a perfectly stable aim which allows for the clarity of mind necessary for true human flourishing, as Diotima says. Were the ultimate object of *eros* the individual human manifestations of Beauty, not only does this run into the problem of emotional instability, but it also faces the logical problem that they do not constitute *eudaimonia* (Sheffield 129). The flourishing on the part of the individual is not the ultimate goal, however. The importance of Plato’s revision of pederasty is that it creates a framework for inculcating virtue in the rulers of the city. The proper end is not an individual’s flourishing, but the flourishing of the entire state. Plato’s account moves away from love of individuals, because his project has grander political implications for the Athenian democracy.

*V: Enter Alcibiades – Traditional Pederasty versus Platonic Pederasty*

These political concerns come out in the next scene of the dialogue, which pits Plato’s revised institution, exemplified by Socrates, against the traditional one, exemplified by Alcibiades. Just as Socrates finishes relating the lessons of Diotima concerning the true nature of *eros*, a drunken Alcibiades bursts in upon the symposium accompanied by a train of revelers “with a shaggy crown of both ivy and violets and altogether many fillets upon his head” (212d). Already, Alcibiades presents himself in stark contrast to the other symposiasts. The reader is drawn from the lofty philosophical speech of Socrates back down to the level of drunken revelry, for as Alcibiades says of himself, “Greetings, gentlemen; will you accept an altogether very drunk man as a fellow party member?” (212e). However, given his present raiment, Alcibiades’ drunkenness
may reflect more than just his personal disposition. Concerning Alcibiades’ appearance, Nussbaum notes that the crown of violets is representative of Aphrodite and of the city of Athens (Nussbaum 193). Alcibiades, the famed Athenian statesman, comes to stand in as well for the city of Athens in general. Further, Alcibiades begins to chastise Socrates for being treated so poorly as an _eromenos_ , since the older man has rebuffed all of his advances both at the gymnasium and at other symposia. Through his concerns, it becomes clear that Alcibiades is deeply entrenched in the traditional conceptions of pederasty elaborated by Pausanias and Aristophanes. Thus, he becomes both the foil for Socrates’ personal virtues as well as the exemplary product of the problematic traditional pederastic system, in comparison with which Plato’s reforms can exhibit their great benefits for the state.

It is important to note that Socrates is in fact an _erastes_ of Alcibiades; he even self-identifies as one. However, Socrates embodies the new kind of _erastes_ , the one interested in ascending the ladder of love and not remaining in the purely physical, whereas Alcibiades views himself as a very traditional _eromenos_. When Alcibiades starts to reprimand him, Socrates says, “It is no longer possible for me either to look at or to have a dialogue with any beautiful one, or this one does extraordinary things since he is jealous of and resents me, and he reviles me and keeps his hands away with difficulty […] I altogether dread this one’s madness and his devotion to a lover” (213cd). This devotion, _φιλεραστία_ , is also mentioned by Aristophanes when he speaks of the relationship between those engaged in pederasty, which forms the overwhelming desire to never be apart and ultimately leads to inactivity and death. Plato identifies Alcibiades with the traditional way and its problems, and Alcibiades does not shirk these. Alcibiades
promises Socrates, “There is no reconciliation for me and you. But I will get my vengeance on you for these hereafter…” (213d). Alcibiades, bound up in his desires, is rife with all kinds of dangerous emotions which undermine the σωφροσύνη which is becoming of a good citizen, and to the extent in which he wants Socrates to conform to traditional pederasty, he perpetuates these problems of instability. In fact, Alcibiades is diametrically opposed to Socrates’ account, for he asks the symposiasts, “Does Socrates persuade you of anything of the things he said just now? Don’t you know that it is all the opposite of what he was saying?” (214c). In his reaction, both to his prior treatment as eromenos by Socrates and in his remarks about Socrates’ theory, Alcibiades situates himself as the poster child of the traditional view of pederasty and opposed to Plato’s revisionary account. In his encomium, however, Alcibiades avoids taking on the nature of eros head on like the other symposiasts. Instead, his speech is in praise of Socrates, since he cannot bring himself to sing the praises of anyone else. Here, Alcibiades provides a more phenomenologically focused account, since he recounts his eros for this one particular individual; thus, it fills Vlastos’ criteria for an adequate account of love (Vlastos 31). However, as Alcibiades’ speech further elaborates, this kind of eros is not unproblematic, and if Alcibiades is viewed as a symbol of the Athenian polis, then such a focus on the particular leads to drastic consequences.

He begins by comparing Socrates to statues of Silenos, which are ugly on the outside but “when opened in the middle appear having statues of gods within” (215a). But what are the gods with which Socrates is filled? Alcibiades claims that on the inside he is full of σωφροσύνη, and upon witnessing this inner divinity “it seemed to me so divine and golden, very beautiful (καλός) and wondrous, that in brief I had to do what
Socrates would order” (216e-217a). Alcibiades goes on to elaborate all of the ways in which Socrates self-mastery presents itself: he is unmoved around beautiful boys; unfazed by cold, hunger, and drink; and level-headed on the battlefield (219e-221e). It seems here that Alcibiades recognizes that Socrates’ self-control is not just beautiful but much more beautiful than a physical body (particularly Socrates’ body), a realization very much in line with Diotima’s lessons on love. Additionally, ἁγίασμα is the virtue par excellence of ruling, for if one could rule over oneself then one was well qualified to rule over others (Foucault 1985: 82). Thus, it is no surprise that Alcibiades should naturally be drawn to follow Socrates, since having ἁγίασμα would naturally make him fit to lead. Further, Alcibiades remarks that Socrates’ speeches “are the most divine and have the most images of virtue in them, stretching to most, or rather all that relates to witnessing what is of concern for becoming beautiful and noble (καλῷ κἀγαθῷ)” (222a). As noted earlier, καλοκᾶγαθία was the ideal of the wealthy ruling class (Marrou 43). Thus, Alcibiades himself explains that Socrates’ methods are those most conducive to creating upstanding gentlemen, and this is a direct outcome of Socrates sublimation of traditional pederastic eros towards the pursuit of the Idea of Beauty.

As much as it seems that Alcibiades understands Socrates’ virtues and subsequently the benefits of Plato’s revision of pederasty, he exhibits a great degree of cognitive dissonance. At the beginning of his encomium of Socrates, he says that none of Socrates’ words are to be trusted, yet, by the end of the speech, he suggests that they are the best and the only ones that make any sense. Further, while Alcibiades believes that Socrates is the best teacher for the youth, he fails to recognize how Socrates’ revised pederasty actually works. Rather than accepting the reciprocal relation which Halperin
highlights, Alcibiades tries as hard as he can to make Socrates do the things normally expected of an erastes, inviting him to wrestle in the gym and to even dine and sleep with him at his house (217bc). Indeed, Alcibiades tells Socrates, “there is nothing more honorable to me than to become as good as possible, and I think that there is no assistant more authoritative than you. I would be much more shamed by the wise if I do not gratify you (χαριζόμενος) than by the many and the senseless if I do” (218d). Alcibiades, left alone with Socrates, is ready to submit himself to sex in order to gain Socrates’ wisdom. Not only is Alcibiades ready to compromise his sexual and political dominance, but he is also overstepping the bounds of the traditional eromenos. Rather than gradually accepting the advances of Socrates, Alcibiades eagerly seeks out this encounter, attempting to flip the relationship and become the sexual aggressor (Nussbaum 188). Furthermore, Alcibiades says almost verbatim what Pausanias praises in pederasty: so long as the goal is noble, the ends will justify the means. Alcibiades, unable to remove himself from the traditional pederastic paradigm, cannot fully grasp Socrates’ virtue. Thus, he is unable to break out of the problems of the traditional pederasty and his misguided eros.

Alcibiades’ confusion is further exhibited by the nature of the speech itself. As Nussbaum says, “Asked to speak about Love, Alcibiades has chosen to speak of a particular love” (Nussbaum 185). While he recognizes that the object of eros is not just beautiful bodies but Beauty itself, since he praises Socrates’ virtue as such, he still nevertheless remains stuck in the traditional mindset that eros is for particular bodies. As such, Alcibiades is tossed about on waves of emotions. He claims that his passion for Socrates makes him flee “just as from Sirens” (216a), causes him to feel like “one having been bitten by a viper” (217e), and has left him “enslaved by this man as no one has been
by anyone else” (219e). Whereas Socrates, who exemplifies Plato’s revision of pederasty, remains in control of himself, Alcibiades has lost this control, and if he cannot rule himself, he is certainly unfit to command men. And yet, the historical Alcibiades is just the one leading the Athenian polis during the last third of the Peloponnesian War, and also one who was accused of defacing religious statues around the city of Athens, according to Thucydides. Alcibiades’ ruling capabilities are seriously called into question, and as a product of the traditional pederastic system, his shortcomings reflect badly on this system. Also, Nussbaum conjectures that Alcibiades’ description of Socrates as a statue may be connected to Alcibiades’ vandalism of the statues (Nussbaum 171). Lost to his passions, Alcibiades seeks to destroy the one whom he loves.

In the character of Alcibiades, we are presented with a paradigmatic product of the traditional pederastic system. Because of his fondness for his lover, which is praised by Aristophanes, Alcibiades utterly loses his self-control, for he has been enslaved to Socrates. He is ready to engage in compromising sexual acts in order to win over Socrates, and when Socrates does not want to subject Alcibiades to this, Alcibiades says that Socrates has “outraged” him (ὑβρίσεν, 219c). This lack of self-control appears also in his excessive drunkenness at the party, his jealous rage at Socrates, and his inconsistent thoughts concerning his love for Socrates and Socrates’ ideas. As Alcibiades is made to be a stand in for the Athenian state, his unstable personality reflects poorly on the workings of the polis at large under the traditional pederastic system, which gives too much power to the weakening, destabilizing effects of personal attraction to the particular. As Nussbaum puts it, “this reliance on erōs puts democracy, like Alcibiades, very much at the mercy of fortune and the irrational passions. The violet crown is worn
by a gifted drunk, who will soon commit imaginative crimes” (Nussbaum 194). However, in opposition to Alcibiades is the virtuous, upright Socrates, who is free from such instability because of his pursuit of the Idea of Beauty rather than of any particular instantiation of it. In juxtaposing these two characters, Plato brings into sharp contrast the problems which plague traditional pederasty and the benefits of the revision which he frames as divine revelation for the salvation of the polis.

VI: Conclusion

Through the construction of his dialogue, Plato juxtaposes two different methods for the Athenian elite to conduct themselves around the youth who will go on to become statesmen. In the voices of Pausanias, Agathon, and Aristophanes, Plato brings out the traditional conception of pederasty. On this account, the ends justify the means, so much so that the moral and civic integrity of the boys is subservient to the desires of their elders so long as it is all done in the name of teaching them. Additionally, because the relationship is so predicated upon particular individuals, it leaves both erastes and eromenos at the mercy of their passions. As represented in the character of Alcibiades, this traditional system leads to sexually compromised rulers whose tumultuous personal lives lead directly to problems for the state at large. In the voice of Diotima, Plato brings in an objective voice to counteract the contradictions in this system and to provide a ‘proper’ alternative to the merely ‘lawful’ standard practice. By reconfiguring the structure of both the relationship itself and its object, Plato creates a system that exemplifies the proper virtues of the male ruling class, namely wisdom and self-control. In the end, Socrates becomes the exemplar of a proper erastes and of a proper ruler, one who is free from confounding passions and can teach his eromenos without submitting
him to sex. In teaching how to properly love, Plato provides a defense of the institution of pederasty and offers a framework for how to best prepare the city and its rulers to remain with the good forever.
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