

The Symposium

Plato

July 8, 2005

The setting of the Symposium is hilarious with its love-sick men bent on drinking, and its proceedings are not related directly by an authoritative narrator, but through the intermediaries of several levels. As the speeches of the Symposium itself involve references to other speeches, the actual chain of inclusions become somewhat confusing, although they are not felt as such, each narrator fading away as he relates his tale. The structure is made up of a sequence of eulogies on the subject of Love, made concrete by its manifestation as a God. With the exception of the speeches by Aristophanes and Socrates, the eulogies are rather conventional, and hence do not stick as individual pieces, but serve more as to provide a background against which the truly original ones are made to stand out.

There is a distinction made by the initial speakers between common love, as exemplified by conjugal consummation involving the propagation of the species; and the more exalted love between an older man - the active lover, and a young man, the passive object of the desires of the former. Although the inspiration for the former may very well be formed by the beauty of the latter, its object is not primarily to satisfy the pleasures of the senses but to involve edifying instruction by the active part in order to develop the virtue of the younger. Although the physical beauty of the flesh is not denied, the real attraction should be on the level of the mind; because the former does not intrinsically belong to the object, but is ephemeral (and thus liable to quickly fade away) as well as shared by many, thus leading to inconstancies in desire. To an individual mainly attracted by beauty, beauty is interchangeable. Minds are not. Thus there is a sense of a good love based on good intentions, in which much is understood, forgiven and sanctioned; matters which would not otherwise have been viewed as indulgently, had the motives behind the love been less pure.

Nevertheless the sexual element, although when juxtaposed with old and physically ugly characters like Socrates appears rather ridiculous, is not entirely absent, even if never explicitly described. However a spiritual closeness of minds do not infrequently inspire an excitement that shares many of the features of heterosexual infatuation, especially that of mutual idealization. It could be that the conventions of love-making are simply drafted on the emotions of friendship with the addition of instinctive erotic desire. In former times same-gendered friendships were not infrequently sentimentalized. With our present carnal obsessions, such sentimentalizations are nowadays viewed suspiciously, and thus in spite of supposed greater sexual tolerance, no longer so innocently encouraged and celebrated.

Platonic love is a cliché used to designate love purified from carnal pollution, and thus thought of as somewhat insipid. As the Greeks maintained, the element of passion is exactly what enables a lover to sacrifice his own life for that of the object of his desire. An act of recklessness not even parents were thought to be capable of. Love is an expression of incompleteness and its purpose is to become whole, hence the notion of the Platonic half, well-known to most people. However, what may not be as familiar to most people, is that

the notion is jocular in origin. Plato lets Aristophanes, the celebrated writer of comedies, present a ridiculous story about men originally being spherical with two sets of legs and arms and faces, but then halved by the gods (with the subsequent threat of a further halving to leave men, like figures on friezes, jumping around on one leg) to prevent an uprising. Ever since men have been lonely, desperately searching for their other half. Most likely the notion of a complimentary soul, explaining the yearning for a unique individual to love, antedates Plato by far, and the eulogy he puts in the mouth of Aristophanes, is simply a stratagem to ridicule it.

As to be expectant, the eulogy of Socrates transcends those of his predecessors at the symposium. In fact it is not an eulogy at all, but an inquiry as to what Love really means, presented as a recollection of an encounter of Socrates with Diatroma. In true Socratic methods preconceptions are challenged by questions whose purpose there is to exhibit inconsistencies. Socrates as always disingeniously maintaining that he knows nothing except the fact of not knowing anything, and his object to elevate his interlocutors to the same level of humble wisdom. Through reasoning, rather sophistic in nature, he shows that Love itself can neither be beautiful nor good, in contradistinction to what all the eulogies have so naively maintained. Because we always desire what we do not have, otherwise there would be no point in seeking to appropriate it. If Love seeks the beautiful and the good, it hence cannot be either beautiful and good, and thus is reduced from being of a divine nature to that of an intermediate between man and god, namely a spirit. (In fact Love is the fruit of the seduction of Poverty of the deity of Resources.) In characteristic Platonic manner, the question of Love is elevated and abstracted into the realm of forms. The real passion of Love boils down to seek knowledge, knowledge of the form of the beauty and the good. However, for most men this is realised as a quest for immortality, which on the baser level manifests itself in the desire for progeny, and on a more exalted in the pursuit of fame. The latter being more secure, means that most men are actually prepared to sacrifice their children for their ambition.

The Symposium does not end on such an exalted philosophical mood, but rather on a farcial. A drunken politician crashes into the party, trying to secure the affection of Socrates, while delivering an inebriated eulogy on the virtues as well as short-comings of the great man, throwing into comic relief his evasion of erotic involvement. Socrates does not normally drink, but when he does so, he drinks everyone under the table, no worse for the wear. And indeed the party continues throughout the night, and when morning breaks, Socrates walks unaffected away.

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