

**ἜΡΩΣ ACCORDING TO SOCRATES IN
PLATO'S *SYMPOSIUM***

A dissertation submitted in fulfilment of the requirement for an Honours degree in
Philosophy, Murdoch University, 2015.

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Abstract

In this dissertation, I offer an interpretation of Socrates' conception of erotic love (ἔρως [erôs]) presented in Plato's *Symposium*. In this dialogue, Socrates describes ἔρως as a desire for eternal possession of the good. I will suggest that for the philosopher, ἔρως is a desire for wisdom. I contend that Socrates conceives of wisdom as an understanding of the form of the good. I will argue that for Socrates, ἔρως is fundamental to philosophy, as it is the desire that impels philosophers to question and engage in rigorous discussion as they strive to procure understanding of the good. I relate Socrates' dialectical approach to philosophy to his conception of ἔρως presented in the *Symposium*. I suggest that by questioning and uncovering the inconsistencies in his interlocutors' false beliefs, Socrates' intention is not to simply reduce his interlocutors to perplexity or to merely point out that they are mistaken. Rather, by showing his interlocutors that they lack understanding, Socrates' intention is to incite in them a desire for understanding. Moreover, I will argue that in their pursuit of wisdom, philosophers remain in-between ignorance and understanding, remaining seekers of wisdom throughout their lives.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank all of my friends and fellow philosophy students, for always welcoming the discussion of ideas. You have made studying philosophy an absolute joy for me.

I would also like to express my gratitude to my supervisor Lubica Učník, for her unswerving dedication and tireless contribution to this project, and for always encouraging me to ask questions.

Finally, I would like to thank my parents, for their continual encouragement and immeasurable support of my studies in philosophy.

List of Abbreviations of Plato's Works:

Apology	Ap.
Gorgias	Grg.
Letter VII	Ltr. VII
Lysis	Ly.
Meno	M.
Phaedo	Phd.
Phaedrus	Phdr.
Republic	R.
Symposium	Smp.
Theaetetus	Tht.

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Introduction

In this dissertation, I will explicate my thesis that in Plato's *Symposium*, Socrates understands ἔρως as a desire for an understanding of the good, thereby, fundamental to philosophy. His extended claim is that ἔρως is a desire for wisdom, prompting philosophers to engage in rigorous philosophical discussion in order to strive for an understanding of the good. My approach to Socrates' notion of ἔρως presented in the *Symposium* is largely expository, and my argument is shaped by several scholarly commentaries on Plato and his *Symposium*, particularly Richard Hunter's commentary entitled *Plato's Symposium*,¹ and Richard Kraut's essay entitled "Plato on Love".² In several steps taken in each chapter, drawing upon various insights offered by the aforementioned scholars (among several others), I will elucidate Socrates' idea that a philosopher's love of wisdom is ἔρως, and that ἔρως is a desire which arises when one comes to realise that one lacks an understanding of the good. Put differently, Socrates believes that love of wisdom is a *desire* for wisdom that arises from an awareness of one's lack of wisdom. Furthermore, I will suggest that Socrates' notion of ἔρως as a love of wisdom transforms the traditional concept of ἔρως, which ordinarily meant an overwhelming desire and force that took away people's better judgment. Plato instead has Socrates describe the philosopher's experience of ἔρως as involving a series of stages, beginning with bodily desire and moving onto a desire for an understanding of the form of beauty, and ultimately the form of the good. This ascent of the stages of ἔρως occurs as one's understanding is deepened through philosophical discussion. Moreover, I will suggest that as a lover of wisdom, the philosopher always remains in-

¹ Richard Hunter, *Plato's Symposium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

² Richard Kraut, "Plato on Love," in *The Oxford Handbook of Plato*, ed Gail Fine (New York: Oxford University Press), 2008, 286–310.

between ignorance and understanding in his or her pursuit of an understanding of the good.

I do not attempt to offer a commentary on the *Symposium* as a whole. In this dissertation, I could not possibly account for this illustrious dialogue in all of its richness, wit and complexity. Such a colossal task is beyond the scope of this project. I therefore narrow my focus to Socrates' understanding of ἔρωϑ and the role it plays in philosophical inquiry. Our interpretation of Socrates' conception of ἔρωϑ as a desire that is fundamental to philosophy can be deepened and enriched through a discussion of his dialectical approach to philosophy as seen in some of Plato's other dialogues. I will therefore discuss Socrates' approach to philosophy as seen in some sections of the *Republic*, the *Meno*, the *Lysis* and the *Apology*. These dialogues provide us with clear examples of Socrates' dialectical approach to philosophical discussion, which will shed light on Socrates' conception of ἔρωϑ as a desire for understanding that stems from an awareness of one's lack of wisdom.

In chapter one I will offer a brief overview of the traditional meaning of ἔρωϑ in contrast to φιλία (*philia*), as both of these Greek terms for love surface in Socrates' conception of ἔρωϑ as a desire for an understanding of the good. Assessing the traditional meaning of ἔρωϑ in Plato's day will also allow us to see how Plato has Socrates adapt and transform the commonly accepted conception of ἔρωϑ. I will then briefly summarise the speeches preceding Socrates' speech, so that any further comparisons or references that I make to the previous speakers' speeches will be comprehensible.

After having discussed the meaning of ἔρωϑ in Plato's day and the speakers who present before Socrates, in Chapter Two we will be adequately prepared to focus our attention on Socrates' reformulation of the meaning of ἔρωϑ as a desire for the good that

is thereby fundamental to philosophy. Drawing on insights especially from Richard Hunter, Gary Alan Scott and William A. Welton, I aim to provide an explanation of Socrates' conception of ἔρωϑ as a desire for the good. The good, says Socrates, has the effect of making people flourish, and we therefore strive to possess it for as long as possible. Socrates describes numerous ways in which we try to strive for the good. All of the ways in which we strive for the good are "erotic" in that they involve people *begetting* or *procreating* in different ways. For the philosopher, ἔρωϑ involves the birth of beautiful arguments and ideas about beauty, justice and moderation. Our discussion of Socrates' conception of ἔρωϑ as fundamental to philosophical inquiry will be further explored in Chapter Four, where we will discuss Socrates' dialectical approach in reference to the *Meno* and the *Lysis*.

To extend my discussion of Socrates' conception of ἔρωϑ as the philosopher's desire for an understanding of the good, I will discuss Alcibiades, the uninvited guest who speaks after Socrates. Plato's characterisation of Alcibiades as unruly and heedless seems to emphasise the importance of a commitment to an understanding of the good. Alcibiades tells us that Socrates attempted to encourage him to prioritise philosophical reflection before his involvement in politics, and that Alcibiades found this task too shaming and demanding. He therefore turned away from Socrates and from philosophy, and, being a masterful rhetorician and a high profile politician, Alcibiades instead sought the approval of the crowd. Plato's characterisation of Alcibiades as a disruptive, disorderly man, warns readers of the potentially destructive outcomes of a life committed to gaining the approval of the masses instead of striving towards an understanding of the good.

Suspicion of rhetoric is another running theme throughout the *Symposium* (as well as in all Platonic dialogues), and Alcibiades' chaotic character functions as an

example of why we ought to not necessarily place our trust in clever, persuasive speakers, as they may not have an understanding of what is truly good. Alcibiades recalls several incidents involving Socrates that reveal how committed Socrates is to his pursuit of understanding and his imperviousness to bodily desires. I argue that resisting bodily desires is a theme that resurfaces in several other works of Plato, especially the *Phaedrus* and the *Phaedo*, and that it is a defining characteristic of what it means to be a philosopher.

In the fourth and final chapter, we will bring together several themes that we have come across so far in our discussion of Socrates' understanding of ἔρως to illuminate why he believes ἔρως is a desire that is fundamental to philosophy. We will begin by examining the role of ἔρως in Socrates' dialectical approach to philosophical discussion in the *Meno*. In this dialogue, desire for understanding proves to be vital in philosophical inquiry. This is because in one's desire for an understanding of the forms, one already has a dim intimation or awareness of the forms that one desires an understanding of. Our desire for an understanding of the forms therefore guides us in our inquiry. It is in this way that ἔρως is, as Socrates describes in the *Symposium*, a desire that links mortals to the divine. I will then draw an important connection between Socrates' ability to cross examine his interlocutors to his claim of having knowledge of the "art of love" in the *Symposium* (Smp. 177e). With reference to the *Lysis*, I will argue that the "art of love" is the ability to lead a dialectical discussion. I also explicate the importance of a sense of φιλία and good will between those who participate in philosophical discussion, and I discuss why Socrates' notion of ideal erotic relations in the *Symposium* involves both ἔρως and φιλία.

I will bring our study of Socrates' notion of ἔρως to a close with a discussion of the philosopher's pursuit of understanding the good with reference to the *Apology*. I will

argue that the “human” kind of wisdom that Socrates says he may have reached in the *Apology* is akin to the intermediacy of the philosopher, who is described as remaining between ignorance and understanding in the *Symposium*.

To conclude my dissertation, I will draw from my findings in each chapter to show that, as I have already suggested, in the *Symposium*, Plato has Socrates define ἔρως as a desire for an understanding of the good, and that such a desire is fundamental to philosophy. My discussion of Socrates’ conception of ἔρως will lead me to conclude that Socrates believes loving wisdom means desiring an understanding of the good. For the philosopher, this desire arises when one becomes aware of one’s *lack* of wisdom. The philosopher spends his or her life pursuing wisdom and in this pursuit of wisdom, he or she reaches a “human” kind of wisdom. The “human” wisdom that the philosopher reaches is not an *exhaustive* understanding of the good. However, it is also not the ignorance of those who do not pursue wisdom because they are unaware of their lack of understanding. Rather, the lover of wisdom acquires a learned ignorance, as Socrates tells us, whereby the philosopher is aware of the limitations of human wisdom. The philosopher, as a lover of wisdom, remains betwixt ignorance and understanding.

Chapter One: Setting the Scene of Socrates' Speech

In the first chapter, I offer an overview of the meanings of ἔρως and φιλία in Plato's day in order to understand how Socrates is employing these Greek words for love³ in his conception of ἔρως as a desire for an understanding of the good. I explain the meaning of these two particular words so that we can see how Plato uniquely adapts the meaning of ἔρως in Socrates' speech and so that we will be able to appreciate Socrates' claim that the best erotic relations also involve a sense of φιλία. Furthermore, I will briefly summarise the speeches of the speakers preceding Socrates. There exist countless commentaries that offer thorough accounts of each of the speeches delivered in the *Symposium*.⁴ It is not my intention to add to these commentaries. In this dissertation, my primary aim is to examine Socrates' notion of ἔρως as a desire that is fundamental to philosophy. Therefore, I offer only brief accounts of each of the speeches made by the other guests, for the sole purpose of providing a context to Socrates' speech for the reader, and to lay ground for any further references I make to the previous speakers' conceptions of ἔρως.

The Setting of the *Symposium*

Plato's *Symposium* is an account of a fictional gathering that took place at the house of the poet Agathon in honour of his first literary triumph in a dramatic festival in 416 BCE. The work itself is thought to have been written between the years of 385–370 BCE.⁵ The narrative of the *Symposium* is conveyed through a complicated series of narrators. The narrator who readers hear from directly is Apollodorus, a devotee of Socrates, who recounts the events that took place at Agathon's banquet to some

³ I acknowledge that there are other Greek terms for love, however, in this dissertation I will only be referring to ἔρως and φιλία, as these are the only two Greek terms for love that surface in the *Symposium*.

⁴ For thorough studies of each of the speeches, see: Leo Strauss, *On Plato's Symposium* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2001).

⁵ Hunter, *Plato's Symposium*, 3.

acquaintances. The dramatic date of the conversation between Apollodorus and his acquaintances remains somewhat unclear. Socrates is still alive at the time of this conversation (he was executed in 399 BCE) and the symposium is said to have occurred some time ago (Smp. 173a5). Agathon is also said to have not resided in Athens “for many years” (Smp. 172c3), and the poet is often thought to have left Athens around 408 BCE, which leaves the date of the conversation between Apollodorus and his anonymous acquaintances somewhere at the very end of the fifth century BCE.⁶ Before we move on to discuss the narrative of the *Symposium* that Apollodorus recounts to his acquaintances, let us firstly consider the ordinary meaning of ἔρως in Plato’s day so that we will be able to recognise how Plato has Socrates adapt and transform the meaning of ἔρως.

The Meaning of ἔρως

ἔρως and φιλία come from two families of Greek words, which can be adequately translated as “love”. ἔρως referred to both the Greek god of love and to the erotic love that he was thought to be responsible for inciting in people. As Richard Kraut explains, erotic love was typically understood as a desire⁷ that inspires people, “under certain conditions, to physical contact – to touch, to kiss, to embrace, to “make love” – and also to think obsessively of the person who is loved and to be filled with longing when he or she is absent”.⁸ What is *characteristically* attributed to ἔρως and not to φιλία is sexual desire. In the broadest terms, ἔρως can be understood as an invasive, forceful⁹ desire that took away people’s better judgment and drove them away from

⁶ Ibid, 4. This date is generally agreed upon by scholars. For a discussion of alternative dramatic dates proposed by some commentators, see: James M. Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence. Plato’s Erotic Dialogues* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 190–91.

⁷ My account here must necessarily be rather broad-brush. For an extensive study of the history and the semantics of ἔρως, see: Paul W. Ludwig, *Eros and Polis: Desire and Community in Greek Political Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). For a full and rich account of φιλία in antiquity, see: Aristotle, “Books VIII and IX,” in *The Nicomachean Ethics*.

⁸ Kraut, “Plato on Love”, 287.

⁹ Hunter, *Plato’s Symposium*, 16.

reasonable consideration of their actions.¹⁰ Its presence was therefore shaming and bewildering.¹¹ Unlike ἔρως, φιλία was not considered an overwhelming desire. Even though φιλία can pertain to a variety of relations, it was generally used to designate the sentiment and close bond that exists among good friends and family members, whether they are sexually attracted to each other or not. Using the term “φίλοι” to describe the relationship of two people can be ambiguous, as it does not reveal if the nature of their relationship is erotic or not.¹²

Φιλία is brought up only once in Socrates’ discussion of ἔρως, as we will see in Chapter Two, when we examine his speech about ἔρως. For Socrates, the best kind of erotic relations also involves φιλία. Since ἔρως is the primary focus of both the *Symposium* and our discussion, throughout this dissertation I will use ἔρως and “love” interchangeably. It is important to note that in the *Symposium*, Socrates does not *reduce* ἔρως to an overwhelming and unruly sexual desire, as the traditional sense of the word often denotes. Rather, Socrates believes that ἔρως is a desire that can involve a series of stages, which, for the philosopher, transcends sexual desire and evolves into a powerful yearning for an understanding of the good. In order to understand where and to whom Socrates presents his speech about ἔρως, let us briefly discuss the guests who present their speeches before Socrates in the *Symposium*.

The Speakers Preceding Socrates

The Greek symposium (συμπόσιον – literally meaning drinking together or drinking party) typically meant a gathering of the elite, upper class. Heavy drinking along with conversation, speeches and music were also characteristic of a customary symposium. In his *Symposium*, Plato stages a discussion between a group of Athenian

¹⁰ Hunter, *Plato’s Symposium*, 17.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Kraut, “Plato on Love”, 287.

intellectuals. Having already spent the previous night drinking and reveling in celebration of Agathon's first literary victory, the men decide not to continue the heavy drinking and, instead, to pass the time by making speeches in praise of ἔρωϛ.

The first speaker of the evening is Phaedrus, the lover of speeches and rhetoric, who describes love as a great god. Phaedrus contends that love guides us by giving us a sense of shame when acting dishonorably in front of our lovers, and a sense of pride when we act well. For this reason, love is, according to Phaedrus, the most powerful god in helping people gain virtue.

After Phaedrus has delivered his speech, we hear from Pausanias, the lover of Agathon, who argues that there are two kinds of love who are associated with two different versions of the goddess Aphrodite. Firstly, there is Heavenly Aphrodite, the daughter of Uranus, who is partnered with "Heavenly Love". The second kind of Love is Common Love, who Pausanias associates with Common Aphrodite, daughter of Zeus and Dione. Heavenly Love is of great value to the city because it impels people to be virtuous, whereas Common Love is of lesser value because it is vulgar. Pausanias explains that Common Love is vulgar because it is only directed towards bodies and sexual gratification.

The next speaker is Eryximachus, the doctor, who states that he will follow Pausanias in his distinction between good and bad love, but that Pausanias is mistaken in limiting love to an emotion experienced by only human beings. Eryximachus suggests that love also occurs as a bodily response in animals and plants, and even says that ἔρωϛ is a moderating force of the cosmos, especially affecting the domains of health, music and astronomy. Ἐρωϛ, according to Eryximachus, is therefore a god of the greatest importance.

Aristophanes follows Eryximachus, announcing a break from understanding love in terms of “good” and “bad” forms. Instead, he recalls a myth that reveals the origins of love as a searching for one’s other half. He says that humans were once two headed, eight limbed creatures, but were then spliced into two individual beings by Zeus. Love is the longing we feel to find our original other half, a “search for primordial wholeness”.¹³ Aristophanes conceives of love as one desire, shared by all, and aimed towards one common goal — wholeness.

After Aristophanes’ speech, we hear from Agathon, the host of the dinner party. Agathon argues that ἔρως is, by nature, entirely good, that he is the youngest, most beautiful god, and that he loves all that is beautiful and good like himself. The next speaker at the symposium is Socrates, who we will turn to in the next chapter.

Conclusion

In this chapter, in order to lay ground for our discussion of Socrates’ conception of ἔρως as the philosopher’s desire for understanding, we have assessed the meaning of the Greek terms ἔρως and φιλία. We discussed the meaning of these two Greek terms for love because Socrates employs both of these terms in his speech about ἔρως. Traditionally, ἔρως referred to both the god of love, and a powerful, irrational, and often sexual desire that took away a person’s ability to make sensible decisions. We contrasted ἔρως to φιλία, a term which refers to the sense of mutual regard, care, and affection that occurs especially between family members and friends. We briefly encountered the speakers who delivered their speeches before Socrates. Most of these speakers understand ἔρως as a god, some of the speakers also argued that ἔρως manifests in good and bad forms, others argued that it is always aimed towards one

¹³ G. R. F. Ferrari, “Platonic Love,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*, ed. Richard Kraut (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 250.

common goal. In the next chapter, we will see how Plato has Socrates' conception of ἔρως call into question several aspects of the previous guests' speeches as well as challenge the traditional meaning of ἔρως. We will see that he does this by arguing that ἔρως is a powerful desire, always aimed towards the good, and fundamental to philosophy.

Chapter Two: Socrates and Diotima

To extend our discussion of ἔρως as a desire that is fundamental to philosophy, we will now turn to Socrates' speech, in which he explicates his understanding of ἔρως as a desire aimed towards the good. In the previous chapter we outlined the speeches of the speakers preceding Socrates to set the stage for the Socratic explanation of ἔρως. In his speech, Socrates argues that ἔρως is a desire that all mortals have for possessing the good. According to Socrates, possession of the good causes people to live well and flourish, which is ultimately what we all want. Socrates also argues that in striving towards possession of the good, we are also, in a sense, striving for immortality, because we want to possess the good *forever*. As already noted, Socrates takes on the traditional meaning of ἔρως as a powerful, sexual desire (which, of course, can lead to procreation), and reformulates it as desire for the good. He outlines several ways in which we try to secure the good forever, all of them are “erotic” insofar as they involve people *procreating* or *begetting* in various ways. For the philosopher, ἔρως involves the begetting of beautiful arguments and ideas about beauty, justice and moderation. Socrates' speech about ἔρως will shed light on his approach to philosophy that we see in several other works of Plato (as we will discuss later on). Our starting point in our present discussion of Socrates' understanding of ἔρως will begin with the preamble he makes before his speech, in which he expresses his disdain for rhetorical approaches to speech making and his want to only ever speak plainly and truthfully, whether it pleases his listeners or not.

Socrates' Reluctance to Make a Speech

Socrates begins by calling himself ridiculous for having been so enthused about making speeches in praise of love (Smp. 198d). Agathon's speech was awarded with

loud applause, which has made Socrates concerned about how his own presentation will be received. He tells the other guests that he had mistakenly believed that one should tell the truth about whatever one is praising. Therefore, he had thought he would surely speak well, as he had felt confident about speaking truthfully (Smp. 198d). After hearing the others make their speeches, however, Socrates now realises that their approach to praising love was not to speak truthfully about love, but to apply the grandest and most beautiful qualities to it even if it does not actually possess these traits. Instead of speaking sincerely about ἔρωϑ, the other speakers simply wanted to persuade their listeners to believe that they were praising ἔρωϑ earnestly (Smp. 198e). An unknowing audience, says Socrates, would be deceived by these rhetorical tricks, but Socrates knows the true nature of ἔρωϑ, and therefore was not persuaded by any of the speakers' descriptions of ἔρωϑ (Smp. 199a). Socrates tells the guests of his mistake of agreeing to participate in the speeches and informs them of the way he intends to speak: "I didn't even know the method for giving praise; and it was in ignorance that I agreed to take part in this...I'm not giving another eulogy using that method, not at all – I wouldn't be able to do it – but, if you wish, I'd like to tell the truth my way" (Smp. 198d–199b).

Socrates' critique of the other guests' disregard for delivering truthful speeches reminds us of his critique of rhetoric in other dialogues such as the *Gorgias*. In the *Gorgias*, he criticises rhetoric as a mere 'knack' (Grg. 462c) for embellishing and adorning certain subject matters in speech. The aim of a rhetorician's speech, according to Socrates, is not directed towards genuine understanding. Rather, the rhetorician's goal is to persuade and seek the gratification of an audience.¹⁴ Marcel Detienne argues that the sophists and the rhetoricians shared principally the same goals, and says that Plato was "correct to regard them as masters of illusion who presented men not with the

¹⁴ Hunter, *Plato's Symposium*, 36.

truth but with fictions...[and] images...which they persuaded others to accept as reality.”¹⁵ At the core of Socrates’ disconcerted, though resolute preamble lies not only his distrust of the deceptive aims of rhetoricians, but also unease brought on by witnessing his fellow Athenians’ indifference to the importance of speaking truthfully. In contrast to the somewhat witty conversation of the *Symposium* (though it is not without its poignant moments), we can compare the rather more serious tone of the opening of the *Apology*, in which Socrates contrasts the persuasive but utterly untruthful speeches of his prosecutors with the simple truth, delivered in ordinary words and ordinary Socratic mode, which they will hear from him.¹⁶

Similarly, in the *Symposium*, Socrates announces that if he is to speak, his listeners will hear only the plain truth about love (Smp. 199b). The guests respond by encouraging Socrates to speak in whichever way he would prefer. He begins his presentation by cross-examining Agathon (Smp. 199e-210c). In this exchange, Socrates discloses the connection between ἔρωϝ, need and futurity. Socrates and Agathon reach the conclusion that love necessarily desires that which it needs. Socrates speaks of ἔρωϝ as personified in the sense that ἔρωϝ *desires*, perhaps, to engage with Agathon’s conception of ἔρωϝ as a god as well as to introduce Diotima’s metaphor of ἔρωϝ as an embodied spirit or daimon. Though the sense of agency we hear in phrasing such as “love *desires* that which it *needs*” might sound peculiar, we can simply take this as a metaphor for the experience of the feeling of love, which is a desire derived from one’s need for something. Socrates and Agathon then concur that when one says one desires something one already has, for example, when a healthy man states that he is healthy and says that he *wants* to be healthy, what he really means is that he wants to be healthy in the future as well (Smp. 200c-d). Socrates and Agathon agree that whenever you say

¹⁵ Marcel Detienne, *The Masters of Truth in Archaic Greece*, trans. Janet Lloyd (New York: Zone Books, 1996), 118.

¹⁶ Hunter, *Plato’s Symposium*, 37.

that you desire what you already have, you actually mean that you want what you have to be yours now and in the time to come as well.

Socrates and Agathon also come to agree that love desires beauty because it needs beauty. Socrates then explains to Agathon that he knows these facts about love because he was once taught the “art of love” by a wise woman¹⁷ from Mantinea called Diotima. Socrates tells us that he once made the same mistake that Agathon made in assuming that love is a great god and that he is beautiful. Diotima, however, suggests that this assumption is mistaken. According to Diotima, the gods are both “beautiful and blessed,” and blessedness consists in the possession of good and beautiful things. ἔρωϑ, however, *needs* good and beautiful things, and therefore desires them.

To clarify the nature of desire for Socrates, Diotima encourages Socrates to stop thinking in terms of mutually exclusive opposites, the way Parmenides and his followers did.¹⁸ Diotima points out to Socrates that what is not beautiful is not necessarily ugly, and that those who do not have knowledge are not necessarily ignorant. Diotima helped Socrates change his understanding of ἔρωϑ by encouraging him to examine his own opinions, in the same way Socrates asks his interlocutors to examine theirs. By prodding him with her questions, Diotima helps Socrates realise for himself that ἔρωϑ can neither be a god and nor can ἔρωϑ be beautiful. After having claimed that ἔρωϑ is a desire to possess beautiful things, Diotima then changes the word *beautiful* to *good*, and says that love is a desire for permanent possession of the good, because possession of the good brings people *eudaimonia* (εὐδαιμονία), a term that

¹⁷ A discussion of the potential reasons behind Plato’s choice of characterising Diotima as a woman is beyond the scope of this essay. For an account of this fascinating issue, see: David Halperin. “Why is Diotima a Woman?” in *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality and Other Essays on Greek Love* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 113–151. See also: Wendy Brown, “Supposing Truth Were a Woman... Plato’s Subversion of Masculine Discourse,” in *Feminist Interpretations of Plato*, ed. Nancy Tuana (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania University Press, 1994), 157–180.

¹⁸ Catherine H. Zuckert, *Plato’s Philosophers: the Coherence of the Dialogues* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 192.

means well-being or flourishing life.¹⁹ The connection between the good and the beautiful remains somewhat mysterious in the *Symposium*. Diotima does not give an explanation for her substitution of the beautiful for the good. However, Socrates' discussion of the form of the good in Book Six of the *Republic* can illuminate the connection between the good and the beautiful. The form of the good is said to be of the highest beauty because it is the cause or source of all knowledge and truth. All other forms depend on the good for their being (R. VI 508e-509a). For the philosopher, to "possess the good forever" (Smp. 206a) is to have wisdom. Wisdom is an understanding of the form of the good, which itself involves an understanding of all of the other forms because they depend on the good for their being.

Following this discussion of the form of the good in the *Republic*, we might be in a better position to understand Diotima's substitution of the beautiful for the good to mean that in desiring beauty we are ultimately desiring the good. Though ἔρωϛ is felt by all humans, not all humans are philosophers, not everyone is striving for wisdom or an understanding of the good. This is because all humans strive for what at least *seems* to them to be good, in the sense of what seems to bring them eudaimonia. It is possible, however, to be mistaken about what will in fact bring one *true* eudaimonia. Socrates and Diotima agree that if eudaimonia is to be real, it has to be eternal. Diotima later says that ascending the various stages of ἔρωϛ will bring the philosopher to a vision of the form of beauty. This is why, as we will see in our discussion of the ascent passage, Diotima says that the philosopher's begetting of ideas is the highest means for a human to participate in the immortal. This begetting of ideas leads the philosopher to a vision of the eternal, unchanging form of the beautiful, bringing him closer to his goal of understanding the good.

¹⁹ For an in-depth semantic study of *eudaimonia*, see: Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, trans. John Raffan (Cambridge, USA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 181.

After claiming that ἔρως is not a god because he desires permanent possession of the good (which the gods already have), Socrates asks if ἔρως is mortal. Diotima says that ἔρως is in fact, a daimon (δαίμων). Diotima defines a daimon as a spirit that is in-between being mortal and divine. She also says that ἔρως acts as a messenger, mediating between the mortal and divine realms (Smp. 202e). The ἔρως that humans feel is thus not merely a mortal phenomenon. It is not a merely human occurrence, yet this love that humans feel is by its very nature not something divine either, because it involves a lack and the divine lacks nothing.²⁰ Ἔρως brings together two kinds of distinct beings into contact with each other,²¹ being in-between the divine and mortal realms, ἔρως as a daimon “round[s] out the whole” (Smp. 202e) and binds “the all to all” (Smp. 202e). The role of ἔρως as a messenger, shuttling back and forth between the divine and mortal realms (Smp. 202e), means that ἔρως must somehow be in contact with both of these realms. The idea of ἔρως sharing in both the mortal and the divine is reinforced by the metaphorical myth Diotima (as reported by Socrates) tells of the birth of ἔρως.

The Parents of Ἔρως

The parents of ἔρως, Penia (Πενία, poverty, deficiency) and Poros (Πόρος, resource, plenty) met and conceived at the celebration of Aphrodite’s birth. Poros, having feasted, and having drunk too much nectar, falls asleep in the garden of Zeus. Penia, with the plan of having her lack of resources relieved by conceiving a child with Poros and thereby obliging him to support her and her child, lies beside Poros and gets pregnant with ἔρως. This is an important detail, because it makes clear the natural predisposition of that which is lacking to be guided by its desire towards whatever can

²⁰ Gary Alan Scott and William A. Welton, *Erotic Wisdom: Philosophy and Intermediacy in Plato’s Symposium* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2008), 95.

²¹ Zuckert, *Plato’s Philosophers: the Coherence of the Dialogues*, 193. As Catherine Zuckert observes, ἔρως therefore achieves a mediating role between the sensible and the intelligible realms, which the younger Socrates could not discover or explain in the *Parmenides*.

provide what is lacked.²² This principle is fundamental to Diotima's conception of ἔρωϑ, as we will soon discuss in more detail. Diotima moves on to explain that ἔρωϑ is not beautiful, as is generally assumed. Rather, ἔρωϑ is tough, shriveled and shoeless, always sleeping in the dirt, at people's doorsteps or in roadsides under the sky (Smp. 203d). Like his mother, ἔρωϑ is impoverished and always living in need (Smp. 203d). However, ἔρωϑ has also inherited his father's aptitude for striving towards the beautiful and the good. Like his father Poros, ἔρωϑ is a brave and tenacious hunter: "always weaving snares, resourceful in his pursuit of intelligence, a lover of wisdom through all his life" (Smp. 203d).

Ἐρωϑ remains a lover and therefore never a *complete* "possessor" of wisdom. Since every human experiences ἔρωϑ, Diotima must mean that no human transcends beyond this state of being a seeker. Due to his parentage, ἔρωϑ is between several opposites. He is poor and yet resourceful (his resources are endlessly returning and ebbing away), neither mortal nor immortal, neither wise nor ignorant, but both desirous and *partially* in possession of wisdom (Smp. 203d6). This being in-between and being neither a member of a pair of opposites here means having a share in both of them, as the dual parentage of ἔρωϑ shows.²³

To say that ἔρωϑ has the traits of both parents is not to collapse the distinction between the parents of ἔρωϑ or between the objects of our desire and our yearning for them.²⁴ It is not that in desiring an object we also possess that object which fulfills our desire, for that would simply satiate the desire and negate it as a desire. Instead, longing for the object involves a dim awareness or intimation of the object. This awareness or

²² Gary Alan Scott and William A. Welton, *Erotic Wisdom: Philosophy and Intermediacy in Plato's Symposium*, 101.

²³ *Ibid*, 96.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 104.

intimation affects people in their longing for an object²⁵ in the sense that their actions are guided by the objects that they strive for. The description of ἔρωϑ as a “messenger” seems to mean that humans are somehow in contact with that which they desire through their desire for it. Since some people are guided by the most harmful desires, desires that lead them to unhappiness and/or vice, it follows that to live a virtuous life it is not sufficient to desire just anything; what one’s desires are aimed at seems to matter greatly.²⁶

Gary Alan Scott and William A. Welton argue that someone who desires something may even take on some features of the object they desire. This idea surfaces in what Plato has Socrates say in Book Six of the *Republic* (R. VI 500c-d), where he speaks of the philosophers admiring the forms and thereby becoming more orderly like them.²⁷ This also seems to be akin with the “human” kind of wisdom (Ap. 20d) that Socrates says he may have reached in the *Apology*. By confronting his lack of wisdom, Socrates is, in a sense, wiser than those who do not desire wisdom because they believe they already possess it. By spending his life dedicated to his love of wisdom, Socrates has become wiser, though his wisdom is a limited, “human” kind of wisdom as he always remains a lover of wisdom. The recurring theme here is that while the soul does not have what it desires (which is – as we discussed, an understanding of the forms or, ultimately the good), it is somehow *aware* of the forms, however dimly, *in this very desire*. Ἐρωϑ thus functions as a link between the mortal and the divine realms; ἔρωϑ is the desire that brings us into contact with the divine. From the myth of the birth of ἔρωϑ, Diotima, as reported by Socrates, moves on to explicate the various stages of ἔρωϑ.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid, 103–4.

²⁷ Ibid, 105–6.

Erotic Ascent

Diotima elucidates a series of stages involved in the ascent of ἔρωϛ. She explains that initially it seemed that to love is to desire beauty. Instead, however, to love is to really desire to beget the beautiful in order to achieve the ultimate aim of permanent possession of the good. Diotima states that reproduction is a mortal way of seeking immortality since it leaves something in place of one's self. All of us, in our attempts at possessing the good *forever*, are also pursuing immortality, and in our pursuit of immortality, we beget the beautiful. She says that reproduction can only ever be of beautiful things, one can never give birth to the ugly, because pregnancy and reproduction are an "immortal thing" and thus cannot occur in anything that is out of harmony. Diotima explains that this is why in the presence of the beautiful we are prone to want to reproduce. Ugliness, says Diotima, is out of harmony with all that is godly, whereas beauty is in harmony with the divine.

All of us, Diotima says, are pregnant, in both the body and the soul. Some are more pregnant in their bodies than in their souls, others are more pregnant in their souls than their bodies. She does not specify what those people pregnant in their bodies are pregnant with. Her language of the birth,²⁸ however, is strongly suggestive of male ejaculation. Richard Hunter notes that the idea of ejaculation being a kind of birth is perhaps less strange in Greek than in English, due to an ancient notion²⁹ of "the male seed containing within itself "embryonic humans" which are placed inside the female".³⁰ Intercourse and ejaculation may therefore be seen as a kind of giving birth. By comparison, those who are pregnant in their souls are pregnant with "wisdom and

²⁸ "When what is pregnant draws near to beauty, it becomes obliging and melts with joy, and gives birth and procreates... So the reason why, when pregnant and swollen, ready to burst, it gets so excited in the presence of beauty is that the bearer of beauty releases it from great pain." (Smp. 206d–e), translation taken from Richard Hunter, *Plato's Symposium*, 88.

²⁹ Hunter acknowledges that this understanding of the male seed was by no means universally held, but that it might have been what Plato had in mind when writing about those who are pregnant in the body.

³⁰ Hunter. *Plato's Symposium*, 88.

the rest of virtue” (Smp. 208d). Diotima does not explain exactly what it means to be pregnant with wisdom and virtue. It later seems that this pregnancy consists in a kind of potential for wisdom and virtue that is realised by participating in philosophical discussion.

Mortals beget the beautiful in their attempts to preserve forever what they deem to be good. One way mortals try to strive for immortality is by pursuing glory through performing good deeds. Heroes perform good deeds in the hope that the heroic fame they achieve will leave a lasting, immortal memory of themselves. This attempt at achieving immortality founders because the heroes’ fame depends on *mortals* to remember them. Another way in which people strive for immortality is the physical reproduction of offspring between a man and a woman, in the parents’ attempt to leave an enduring memory of themselves. However, this kind of earthly begetting also cannot achieve immortality because it can only endure for the duration of one’s family genesis.

From her discussion of the birth of mortal children, Diotima moves on to discuss the highest means of participating in the immortal, which is not reproduction of flesh and blood children. Rather, it involves the begetting of ideas through philosophical discussion. According to Diotima, as reported by Socrates, the highest form of love among two humans is one where there is reasoned discussion about ideas that deal with the ordering of cities and households. Diotima refers to these ideas as moderation and justice (Smp. 209a6-7). Diotima mentions that there have been many great poets and politicians who have contemplated these ideas and produced more lasting offspring than mortal children in the form of celebrated works of poetry and legal legislation. She then says that the *correct* way to go about the contemplation of these ideas is through philosophical discussion. By “correct” contemplation, Diotima might mean the kind of contemplation that will bring someone closer to an understanding of the good. This

begetting of philosophical discussion takes place not in the body but in the soul. For the lover of wisdom, love of beautiful bodies is only the first stage of his erotic ascent.³¹

In this first stage, the lover of wisdom will pair with a man who is more practised in philosophical discussion than he is, and who, in this sense, is beautiful in his soul. Diotima explains that the young lover begins his ascent by loving the beauty in one body, which will inspire him to beget beautiful words or *logoi*. The pair who come together and bring forth beautiful *logoi* share a firmer love (here Diotima employs the word *φιλία*) than the parents who only procreate mortal offspring. Since the term *φιλία* is used in this context, we can gather that a strong feeling of goodwill and mutual regard exists between those who are drawn to each other to beget philosophical discussion and ideas.

The highest form of *ἔρω* thus includes the urge to procreate, in the sense of the begetting of ideas, and a sense of friendship based on the shared orientation towards the good. With the help of the man he has paired with, who acts as his guide or mentor, the younger lover will realise that the beauty of any one body is akin to the beauty of any other, and that if he is to pursue beauty he must become a lover of all beautiful bodies. The boy's guide or mentor³² helps him reach the realisation that the beauty of one beautiful body is akin to the beauty of all beautiful bodies. The mentor does this by engaging the younger lover in a question-and-answer based discussion about what

³¹ Diotima's description of *ἔρω* as occurring between males might not necessarily mean that she and Socrates believe that females cannot experience *ἔρω*. For a discussion of this issue, see: Luc Brisson, "Agathon, Pausanias, and Diotima in Plato's Symposium: *Paidierastia* and *Philosophia*," in *Plato's Symposium: Issues in Interpretation and Reception*, ed. J. H. Leshner, Debra Nails and Frisbee C. C. Sheffield (Cambridge: USA and London, UK: Harvard University Press, 2006), 229–251.

³² There are some crucial differences between the depiction of the role of the mentor or guide in the *Symposium* and the metaphor of Socratic midwifery in the *Theaetetus* (Tht. 149a), a discussion of which is beyond the scope of this particular paper. However, despite any differences between the two notions, the metaphor remains *principally* the same in both dialogues. The more experienced participant of philosophical discussion will act as a "midwife" to the interlocutor's thoughts and realisations. By leading and engaging the interlocutor in dialectical discussion through rigorous questioning, the "midwife" helps the interlocutor give birth to or bring forth opinions on a particular subject. These opinions are then put to the test of critique through further discussion, which in turn leads to further realisations about one's understanding of the topic at hand.

makes an individual body beautiful. This leads the lover to realise that all beautiful bodies share in the beauty he saw in the individual body. After realising the commonality of the beauty shared by all beautiful bodies, the lover begins to realise that the more valuable beauty is not of people's bodies but of their souls. The boy then begins to see that the beauty of bodies pales in comparison to the beauty of souls. From there, the lover is led to gaze at the "beauty of laws" (Smp. 211d).

Diotima does not explain how this process of the philosopher coming to see the various instances of beauty is, as she stated at the beginning, the correct way to go about the contemplation of justice and moderation. It seems implicit, however, that in contemplating the beauty of souls and laws, one is also considering the beauty of justice and moderation, thereby contemplating these ideas as well. From gazing at the beauty of laws, the philosopher will then move on to see the beauty in all various kinds of knowledge, so that his gaze is fixed on the extraordinary variety of beauty (Smp. 210d). At this point, the lover has broadened his perception of beauty, so much so that he can see the great multiplicity of the many particular things that participate or share in beauty. Once he has reached this rung of the ladder, instead of seeing the various instances of beauty, the lover of wisdom will catch sight of the one form of the beautiful.

Plato has Diotima describe the form of the beautiful as always remaining the same. All the other beautiful things share in the beautiful, in such a way that when those others come to be or pass way, the beautiful does not become the least bit smaller or greater nor suffer any change. The form of the beautiful is not beautiful in relation to one thing and ugly in relation to another (Smp. 211a–c). It is pure, unmixed and unpolluted by human flesh or colours or any other sense of mortality (Smp. 211e). Once the philosopher has this vision of the form of beauty, "he has almost grasped his goal"

(Smp. 211b), which seems to mean, given that Diotima stated earlier that ἔρως is a desire for the good, that although the philosopher may reach a vision of the form of beauty, the form of the good still remains beyond him. As mentioned previously, the philosopher as a philosopher remains a seeker of wisdom, he or she remains in an intermediary state, between ignorance and understanding, striving ardently towards an understanding of the good.

Conclusion

In this second chapter, we have examined Socrates' speech on ἔρως that he presented at the symposium to explicate his conception of ἔρως as a desire for an understanding of the good. Socrates is reluctant to make a speech in the fashion of the speakers who presented before him because of their tendency to invent and embellish their conceptions of ἔρως. Socrates' hesitation to speak in this manner about ἔρως shows us that he is only interested in speaking straightforwardly and truthfully, and that he believes that he has reached an accurate understanding of ἔρως. Socrates tells us that his teacher, Diotima, is responsible for teaching him the "art of love".

Later on, we will discuss what Socrates means by the "art of love", and we will discover that Socrates is referring to the ability to lead and engage in a dialectical discussion. As we have just seen in our examination of the notion of ἔρως presented by Socrates, the ability to engage in dialectical discussion is fundamental to the ἔρως that occurs in the soul of the philosopher, as his or her understanding is deepened through discussion. Ἐρως, says Socrates, is experienced by everyone and is a desire for the good, because the good brings us eudaimonia. According to Diotima, as reported by Socrates, eudaimonia in its true sense would last forever. Therefore, in our desire for the good we are also striving for immortality, because eternal possession of the good would bring us true eudaimonia. Some people strive towards immortality by producing mortal

children in an attempt to leave behind a part of themselves through their family genesis. Heroes perform valiant deeds in their hope of securing the eternal good through lasting fame and glory. Poets write eminent works of poetry and legislators leave behind lasting laws. The most suitable way to strive for the eternal form of the good, however, is to engender philosophical ideas and arguments regarding beauty, justice, and moderation, because it is through discussing and contemplating these ideas that we are brought closer to an understanding of the good.

Now that we have heard Socrates' conception of ἔρως as a desire that is essential to philosophy because it is a desire for an understanding of the good, let us now turn to the speech made after Socrates by the renowned politician Alcibiades, as there are several aspects of his speech which shed light on some important aspects of Socrates' notion of ἔρως.

Chapter Three: The Uninvited Guest

In the first two chapters, we looked at the various speeches presented in the *Symposium* to bring to light Socrates' speech in which he argues that ἔρως is a desire for an understanding of the good and that such a desire is fundamental to philosophy. In this third chapter we will discuss some significant aspects of the closing section of the *Symposium*, which is illuminated by the brilliant, disorderly character of Alcibiades. To extend my analysis of Socrates' conception of ἔρως as a desire for wisdom, in this chapter, I will argue that through his negative characterisation of Alcibiades, Plato prompts his readers to consider the damaging and potentially harmful consequences of a life that is dedicated to winning the approval of the masses rather than a life spent striving towards an understanding of the good. I will also suggest that in this section of the *Symposium*, the various stories told by Alcibiades about Socrates remaining unwaveringly impervious to bodily desires, reinforces the idea that a philosopher must resist any overwhelming bodily desires in an effort to concentrate on pursuing an understanding of the forms. This theme, I will argue, runs throughout several of Plato's dialogues, including the *Symposium*, the *Phaedrus* and the *Phaedo*.

Before I turn to the speech made by Alcibiades, I will briefly consider the potential implications of Aristophanes' reaction to Socrates' speech, which goes unnoticed by most of the guests, as this occurs in a moment before the arrival of Alcibiades. I will suggest that Plato might be subtly directing animosity towards Aristophanes because he may have believed that Aristophanes, in his play *Clouds*, contributed to Socrates' reputation of a man who uses clever rhetorical tricks to make weak arguments appear convincing. For this reason, in both the *Symposium* and the *Apology*, Plato has Socrates emphasise his disdain for disingenuous rhetoric and his commitment to pursuing only truth.

Aristophanes' Unnoticed Retort

Socrates finishes his speech and is given a loud applause by all of the guests *except* Aristophanes, who is trying to make himself heard over the cheering. Aristophanes attempts to respond to Socrates' refutation of his own conception of love as a desire aimed towards one's other half as opposed to the good. Though it is a very subtle detail, it may not be a coincidence that Plato has Aristophanes' retort to Socrates go unnoticed by the majority of the guests at the banquet. In his comedy *Clouds*, Aristophanes portrays Socrates' occupation with philosophy as really a specious, sophistical practice of natural investigation. In both the *Symposium* and the *Apology*, however, we learn that Socrates' approach to philosophy was different from the sophists' approach, since he never claimed to have wisdom or the ability to make people wise the way the sophists do. We also learn that Socrates' main concerns are not to do with natural investigation, but instead his focus was to understand the good.³³ Commenting on the play *Clouds*, Anthony Kenny notes that much of the play is burlesque in the sense that it is not meant to be taken seriously. However, some of the jokes it contained had dangerous implications.³⁴ In the *Apology*, Plato has Socrates say that Aristophanes' caricature of Socrates contributed to the rumours that led to his trial for his life in 399 BCE. Addressing the accusers at his trial, Socrates describes the rumours spread about him:

They say: 'That man Socrates is a pestilential fellow who corrupts the young.' If one asks them what he does and what he teaches to corrupt them, they are silent, as they do not know, but, so as not to appear at a loss, they mention those accusations that are available against all philosophers, about 'things in the sky and things below earth,' about 'not believing in gods' and 'making the worse the stronger argument,' they would not want to tell the truth, I'm sure, that they have been proved to lay claim to knowledge when they know nothing (Ap. 23d).

³³ Even if one were to argue that at the time of release of *Clouds*, Socrates may have been more interested in natural investigation, in the *Symposium* and in the *Apology*, Plato makes it clear that Socrates' primary concern has become an understanding the good life.

³⁴ Anthony Kenny, *A New History of Ancient Philosophy. Volume 1: Ancient Philosophy* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2004), 34.

As we discussed when we looked at Socrates' preamble to his own speech, Socrates held that rhetoric and philosophy are extremely different practices, and that he wants nothing to do with the former. Plato has his readers see that the rumours about Socrates being a philosopher who corrupts the youth of Athens with lessons in rhetoric were therefore unfounded speculations. Socrates' attempts to point out the falsities of the rumours spread about him fall on deaf ears in his trial, just as Aristophanes' attempts to offer a defense of his own views falls on deaf ears in the *Symposium*. This is, perhaps, a small consolation for Plato, and the supporters of Socrates, as we know that in the end, Socrates was unable to convince his accusers of the falsity of the rumours spread about him and was thereby sentenced to death.

Underlying the lively wit of the *Symposium*, Plato provokes his audience to consider the potential harm that can be caused by acceptance of public opinion over critical reflection, and by mistaking philosophy as a rhetorical practice as opposed to a commitment to self-reflection and critical thinking. This theme is explored in further detail with the speech made by the uninvited guest, Alcibiades, who unexpectedly arrives in the courtyard with a noisy group of drunken partygoers after Socrates has finished his own speech.

Alcibiades' Speech

Alcibiades is heard shouting in the courtyard, asking where Agathon is and bidding those around him to lead him to Agathon.³⁵ Alcibiades' words here function like a pun on the speeches of Socrates and Diotima. Diotima has just explicated the way in which each of us may be led towards the good (agathon), but a band of inebriated revelers were not who she had in mind as one's guide.³⁶ Alcibiades deeply misapprehends Socrates' notion of ἔρωϛ. The extent of his misunderstanding of ἔρωϛ is

³⁵ Plato, "Symposium," in *Lysis, Symposium, Gorgias*, trans. W.R.M Lamb (London: Heinemann, 1967), 212d.

³⁶ Hunter, *Plato's Symposium*, 98.

revealed when he laments that in the past he had believed that he would be able to exchange sexual favours for Socrates' wisdom. Socrates, however, easily resisted the beautiful Alcibiades' sexual advances, criticising this kind of trade as an exchange of "gold for bronze" (Smp. 219a). Education according to Socrates cannot simply be a facile exchange of sexual gratification for wisdom, rather, it involves rigorous self-transformation through one's commitment to philosophy. Alcibiades is not willing to take on the demanding task of self-transformation required in the pursuit of an understanding of the good. Alcibiades wants to be able to simply take the familiar and less arduous road of using good looks as a means for getting what he desires. His physical allure and masterful proficiency in rhetoric never fail at gaining the support of the masses, but Socrates will not commend these traits. Alcibiades tells us that Socrates urged him to critically engage with his opinions and to question the worth of his actions and lifestyle, but that he found these tasks too challenging and that he continually fell back into the comfort of the approving crowd.

Stanley Rosen observes that Alcibiades' speech makes the differences between Socrates and Alcibiades patent. Alcibiades is "a poor dialectician, but he is an expert at bewitching the crowd. Socrates, on the contrary, is a master at dialectic... but he lacks the ability to sway the multitude, whether at a banquet or in a courtroom."³⁷ Alcibiades was a high profile politician in Athens during the final years of the Peloponnesian War. He came from an extremely wealthy, upper class Athenian family, and was trained as a rhetorician. Using his social and rhetorical power,³⁸ Alcibiades convinced the Athenians to embark on a major military expedition to Sicily, having himself elected as one of the leading commanders. The expedition, however, was a calamitous failure, and can be

³⁷ Stanley Rosen, *Plato's Symposium* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1968), 284.

³⁸ Hunter, *Plato's Symposium*, 4.

seen, at least in retrospect, to have led to the period that ended in the devastating defeat of Athens in the Peloponnesian War.³⁹

It seems to be no accident that Plato decided to bring the *Symposium* to a close with the intrusion of Alcibiades. This statesman was renowned for his good looks, his ability to persuade the crowd, and eventually, for his ruinous mistakes within the political realm. Plato contrasts the characters of Alcibiades and Socrates. He makes this juxtaposition by having Alcibiades present his speech about his desire to win the approval of the masses, directly after Socrates has explicated ἔρως as the philosopher's desire for the good. The disorderly Alcibiades, who strives for the crowd's approval, is the counterexample of the orderly Socrates, who strives for an understanding of the good. Plato's depiction of Alcibiades as destructive seems to intimate that devastating consequences can result from turning a blind eye to philosophy. Plato also might be suggesting that Alcibiades' refusal to critically assess his priorities resulted in his larger failure in the political arena.⁴⁰

In his essay entitled *A Study in Violets: Alcibiades in the Symposium*,⁴¹ C. D. C. Reeve discusses a section of Book Six of the *Republic* that echoes remarkably similar themes of the speech of Alcibiades. In this section, Socrates is describing how those who are not inclined towards philosophy obsess over human affairs and preoccupy themselves with matters that do not concern the philosopher. Allow me to quote at length:

The harshness of the masses towards philosophy is caused by those outsiders who do not belong and who have burst in like a *band of revellers (epeiskekōmakotas)*, abusing one another, indulging their love of quarrelling, and always arguing about human beings—something that is least appropriate in philosophy... For surely, someone whose mind is truly directed towards the things that are has not the leisure to look down at human affairs, and be

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Kraut, "Plato on Love", 294.

⁴¹ C. D. C. Reeve, "A Study in Violets: Alcibiades in the *Symposium*," in *Plato's Symposium: Issues in Interpretation and Reception*, ed. J. H. Lesher, Debra Nails and Frisbee C. C. Sheffield (Cambridge: USA and London, UK: Harvard University Press, 2006), 124–146.

filled with malice and hatred as a result of entering into their disputes. Instead, as he looks at them and contemplates things that are orderly and always the same, that neither do injustice to one another nor suffer it, being all in a rational order, he imitates them and tries to become as like them as he can. Or do you think there is any way to prevent someone from associating with something he admires without imitating it?...Then the philosopher, by associating with what is orderly (*kosmiōi*) and divine becomes as divine and orderly as a human being can.⁴²

Alcibiades' behaviour in the *Symposium* mirrors the disruptive behaviour of the anti-philosophical characters described in this extract from the *Republic*. Alcibiades is completely caught up in human affairs, lamenting that he is in agony from the pain of Socrates' rejection. He also expressed anger at not being able to get close to attractive men when Socrates is around because they are always captivated by Socrates.

Accompanied by a crowd of revellers, Alcibiades bursts into Agathon's house uninvited, and, observing the guests' sober faces, he encourages them to drink until they are too drunk to care (Smp. 213e), destroying the "order (*kosmōi*)" (Smp. 223) that the guests had agreed upon at the beginning of the night. To add to this disruption of the established order, he presents a speech, though not on the agreed topic of ἔρωϛ, but rather a speech about his failed seduction of Socrates. Alcibiades' presence is disruptive, his misunderstanding of Socrates' philosophical inclinations drive him, like the revellers in the *Republic*, to bitterness and malice.

Alcibiades' speech also reinforces a theme that is explored in several of Plato's works, that is, the ability of the philosopher to resist the demands of the body. Alcibiades recalls several instances of Socrates remaining completely unconcerned and unaffected by what would usually be physically arduous states. During terribly cold winters, Socrates wore only a threadbare cloak. When Socrates and Alcibiades served in the army together, Socrates persevered with only his meagre cloak and bare feet, making better progress on the ice than the other soldiers did in their boots and several layers of clothing (Smp. 220b-c). Socrates withstood hunger better than anyone else

⁴² Extract from Book Six of the *Republic* 500b-d, taken from C. D. C. Reeve's translation given in: Reeve, "A Study in Violets: Alcibiades in the *Symposium*", 141.

when there was a food shortage, and no one has ever witnessed Socrates affected by alcohol (Smp. 220a). Alcibiades even recalls a day when Socrates stood on the same spot, lost in thought. Without stopping to eat or drink, Socrates remained transfixed, standing there from dawn through to sunrise the next day. Recalling these instances characterises Socrates as someone who strives to remain detached from bodily concerns.

Turning away from bodily concerns is a theme that also surfaces in the *Phaedrus* and the *Phaedo*. In the *Phaedo*, Socrates discusses the hindrance of the body in the soul's desire to understand the forms. The philosopher has to attempt to resist the demands of the body in order to concentrate on pursuing an understanding of the "divine, the pure and uniform" forms (Phd. 83e). Similar themes resurface in the *Phaedrus*. There, the soul is described metaphorically as a charioteer driving a pair of horses (Phdr. 246aff). The driver represents reason, exercising control over a light haired noble horse and a dark haired base horse. The noble horse represents the desires humans have that are inclined towards moderation and the good, the base horse embodies our appetitive desires such as want for food, drink and sex. For a human being, appetitive desires cannot be eliminated altogether. The driver must exercise control over the very strong forces of the two horses. In order to contemplate the forms, the distracting demands of the base horse must be restrained and not overindulged. This idea is magnified in Alcibiades' description of Socrates as someone completely unaffected by his body, perhaps to reinforce the idea that the philosopher's concentration on pursuing truth is linked to the philosopher's ability to exercise great control over his or her bodily passions. Like the admirers of the forms described in both the *Phaedo* and the aforementioned passage of the *Republic*, Socrates has become orderly like the forms in his admiration of them.

Conclusion

In this third chapter, I have argued that Plato characterises Alcibiades as the counterexample of Socrates in order to underline the disastrous consequences of a life spent dedicated to the approval of the crowd instead of an understanding of the good. I suggested that by having Alcibiades storm in and disrupt the order and harmony of the symposium, Plato was perhaps foreshadowing the devastating upshots of Alcibiades' political decisions. Alcibiades was renowned for his ability to win the hearts of the masses with his skill for rhetoric and physical allure. Socrates tried to help him understand that examining his own beliefs, questioning the virtue of his lifestyle and confronting his own shortcomings ought to take precedence over his involvement in politics. Alcibiades, however, tells us that he found critically reflecting on his own beliefs and way of life too shame inducing and arduous, and he thus chose to ignore Socrates and, essentially, turn his back to philosophical reflection. The ruinous outcomes of Alcibiades' political decisions seem to be the result of Alcibiades' unwillingness to pursue an understanding of the good. Moreover, I also proposed that Alcibiades' descriptions of Socrates' ability to resist bodily demands emphasises the philosopher's ability to master his or her bodily passions in order to focus on pursuing understanding the good.

Now that we have heard from all of the reported speakers in the *Symposium*, in the next chapter we will turn our attention to how Socrates' dialectical approach to philosophy, as seen in some other Platonic dialogues, is coherent with the conception of ἔργος that he presents in the *Symposium*. Assessing these aspects of Plato's other works, particularly the *Meno*, the *Lysis* and the *Apology*, will help us elucidate Socrates' conception of ἔργος as a desire for understanding that stems from an *awareness* of one's lack of wisdom.

Chapter Four: The Art of Love

In the last chapter, we discussed Plato's characterisation of the politician Alcibiades. I argued that by portraying Alcibiades as reckless and destructive, Plato might be warning readers about the consequences of spending one's life devoted to the approval of the masses rather than an understanding of the good. I also suggested that Alcibiades' disappointment at not being able to have Socrates' wisdom simply given to him in exchange for sexual favours shows the depth of his misunderstanding of Socrates' idea of erotic love. We will now discuss some aspects of the *Meno*, the *Lysis* and the *Apology* in order to shed light on how Socrates understands ἔρωϑ as a desire for an understanding of the good and its relation to his approach to philosophical inquiry. Our aim is to show that the notion of ἔρωϑ described by Socrates in the *Symposium* is coherent with his approach to philosophical investigation in other works of Plato. We will firstly assess ἔρωϑ and Socrates' dialectical approach to philosophical discussion in the context of the *Meno*. From this examination of Socrates' approach to philosophical investigation in the *Meno*, we will move onto his dialectical approach demonstrated in the *Lysis*. Here I intend to elucidate the importance of a sense of φιλία between those who participate in philosophical discussion. Finally, with reference to the *Apology*, we will discuss the ways in which Socrates, as a philosopher, embodies the notion of ἔρωϑ taught to him by Diotima in the *Symposium*.

Intermediacy, Aporia and Recollection in the *Meno*

According to Diotima, the lovers of wisdom are intermediary in the sense that they remain in-between ignorance and understanding in their pursuit towards an understanding of the good. There is another context in which this intermediacy surfaces as a central theme in the dialogues. This intermediacy appears in relation to ἀνάμνηϑιϑ

(recollection [anamnêsis]). In the *Meno*, Socrates cross-examines Meno as he attempts to provide a definition of virtue. Meno says that there are various virtues, such as justice, moderation and generosity, but Socrates wants to know the nature of virtue as a whole, and asks him to “stop making many out of one, as jokers say whenever someone breaks something” (M. 77a5-6). In other words, Socrates is asking Meno: what is the Idea of virtue that all of these particular instances of virtue participate in? Meno is unable to answer. Socrates’ questions expose the inconsistencies in Meno’s understanding of virtue, leading Meno to realise that he cannot offer a sufficient account of virtue after all. Consequently, Meno becomes frustrated. He and the character of Alcibiades in the *Symposium* are alike in that they both share the same desire to acquire wisdom as “cheaply”⁴³ as possible. Like Alcibiades, Meno “bolts when he is about to be forced to place himself in question.”⁴⁴ Socrates’ questions reduce Meno to perplexity (ἀπορία [aporia]). His inability to define virtue leads Meno to believe that it is impossible to inquire into virtue. According to Meno, one cannot search for what one already knows, neither can one search for what one does not know, for one does not know what to look for (M. 80 d-e). To answer Meno’s paradox, Socrates brings up the idea of ἀνάμνησις.

Socrates suggests that there is a middle ground between ignorance and knowledge. He uses Meno’s slave boy to reveal this middle ground. Prodded by Socrates’ questions, the slave boy discovers the solution to a rather difficult geometrical problem. Socrates suggests that the slave boy found the correct answer and recognised it as correct because he already had a dim awareness of the solution at the start of this inquiry. The idea here is that in order for one to commence an inquiry, one must already have a sense of what it is one is searching for. Recollection means striving towards an

⁴³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy*, trans. P. Christopher Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 52–53.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

understanding of the truth that the soul is already in a sense aware of. According to this view, one must already have an awareness of, for example, what is right in order to distinguish what is wrong. Similarly, in the *Phaedo* it is proposed that one must have a sense of what is perfect in order to grasp the imperfect (Phd. 74d-e).

The idea of recollection is another sense in which one is between ignorance and wisdom, for the notion of ἀνάμνησις involves being both in touch with and separated from truth. As Socrates explains in the *Meno*, the soul is in the state of *having seen* truth (M. 81c-d), but is not *presently seeing* truth. The enduring relation of the soul to truth, to what it *has seen* but is not *presently seeing*, consists in its very desire for truth.

Another important idea presented in the *Meno* that relates to the notion of ἔρωσ in the *Symposium* is the idea that clearing away false beliefs is a crucial part of searching for truth, as this process can incite a desire for truth. In typical fashion, in the *Meno*, Socrates engages his interlocutor in a dialectical question and answer cross-examination. The term ‘dialectical’ here refers to the question and answer style approach that we see Socrates employ in the *Meno* and several other dialogues. Dialectic is the art of discussion by which the leader of the dialogue refutes or accepts a proposition about a particular topic, by questioning the interlocutor’s responses, with the intention of eliminating the inconsistencies found in the interlocutor’s account of a particular topic. By clearing away the false beliefs of Meno, Socrates reduces him to ἀπορία. The aim is not simply to refute Meno’s claims but to help him realise that he needs to think further about his claims. Socrates is guiding Meno onto the path of searching for truth by helping him realise his lack of understanding and therefore inciting in him a desire for truth. One can only search for truth if one has a *desire* to search for it. In this very desire for truth, one already has a sense or awareness of what it

is one is striving for.⁴⁵ Diotima's idea of ἔρωϑ as a desire that is both in contact with and separated from wisdom correlates to the idea that in commencing an inquiry one already has an awareness of what it is one is looking for, and shows that ἔρωϑ is therefore a desire that lies at the heart of philosophical inquiry.

The Art of Love

There is a significant connection between ἔρωϑ being a desire for understanding and Socrates' cross-examination of his interlocutors. This method of inquiry, as we have seen in our discussion of the *Meno*, proceeds by question and answer and reveals the inconsistencies in one's opinions and therefore one's *lack* of understanding about the topic of the discussion. The connection between this method and ἔρωϑ is made clear in the *Symposium* when Socrates claims that the only thing he knows is "*ta erōtika*" (Smp. 177e). *Ta erōtika* refers to "the art or craft of love (*hē erōtikē technē*)."⁴⁶ According to Reeve, in this passage, Socrates is making a non-trivial play on words: *erōs* means "love" and "*erōtan*" means "to ask questions". The art of love is "being identified with the Socratic art of asking questions... As an art of asking rather than answering, it is also one that Socrates, though ignorant, can possess."⁴⁷ Socrates knows the art of love insofar as he knows how to ask questions,⁴⁸ how to lead a dialectical discussion. Dialectical discussion is erotic in the sense that its participants *beget* ideas in their discussion. Dialectical discussion is, for Socrates, "the true art of making love".⁴⁹

In the *Lysis*, this connection is made even more explicit in Socrates' advice he gives to Hippothales, a young man who is trying to attract another young man, Lysis,

⁴⁵ Francisco J. Gonzalez, "How is the Truth of Beings in the Soul? Interpreting Anamnesis in Plato," *Elenchos: Rivista di studi sul pensiero antico* 28 (2007), 293.

⁴⁶ C. D. C. Reeve, *Plato On Love* (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company Inc. 2006), XX.

⁴⁷ C. D. C. Reeve, *Love's Confusions* (Cambridge, US, and London, UK: Harvard University Press, 2005), 107.

⁴⁸ Reeve, *Plato On Love*, XX.

⁴⁹ Herman L. Sinaiko, *Love, Knowledge and Discourse in Plato* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1965), 117.

with poems that he has written for him. Socrates advises that the correct way to attract someone one desires is not by flattery with love poems and rhetorical praises dedicated to them, as this will only spoil them and make them arrogant (Ly. 206a). Rather, the right way to engage with someone one is attracted to is by engaging them in philosophical discussion. If the person one is trying to attract is worthy of one's attention, inspiring them to concentrate on the improvement of their souls is the only way to attract them. He then demonstrates to Hippothales how to treat a lover by approaching Lysis and engaging Lysis in a dialectical discussion. Socrates is putting into practice the "art of love" – that is, the art of philosophical discussion.

A Sense of Φιλία in Philosophical Discussion

Philosophical discussion requires a willingness to embark on a process of inner transformation, by having one's opinions put to the test of critique, and admitting a lack of knowledge when one's mistaken beliefs are uncovered. One has to allow one's opinions to be problematized,⁵⁰ as "truth is always the conquest of progressive criticism of that which we originally thought, criticism of our opinions."⁵¹

Thomas A. Szlezák emphasises the importance of good will towards one's partner in philosophical inquiry. Intellectual capability does not suffice in this kind of investigation; rather, what is required is a shared desire towards uncovering the truth.⁵² Drawing his understanding from Plato's *Letter Seven*, Szlezák argues that philosophical conversation, if it is to be productive, can only be possibly conducted in "well intentioned refutations" (Ltr. VII 344b). Real philosophical inquiry can only be possible between friends, by which Szlezák means among those who share a natural inclination towards the good. For Diotima and Socrates, the ideal relationship that can occur

⁵⁰ Jan Patočka, *Plato and Europe*, trans. Petr Lom (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2002), 92.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 2.

⁵² Thomas A. Szlezák, *Reading Plato*, trans. Graham Zanker (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 7–8.

between two people involves φιλία for this very reason. This relationship is erotic, however, in the sense that the philosophers engage each other in critical discussion and *bring to birth* beautiful ideas and logoi.

The term “Platonic love”, which is commonly used to refer to a relation that is devoid of sexual activity, seems to have its derivation in Plato’s emphasis on φιλία and his lack of emphasis on sex in his understanding of ideal erotic relations. The use of the term, “Platonic Love”, however, does not seem to adequately capture the rich and intricate notion of ἔρως presented by Socrates in Plato’s *Symposium*. The ideal, erotic partnership that Plato has Socrates describe is far more elaborate than a relationship that is simply not sexual in nature. Rather, ἔρως involves people who have turned away from bodily lusts because of a higher, awe-inspiring desire to uncover and exchange ideas in their effort to live good lives. *Erotic love*, according to Plato’s Socrates, does not solely involve sexual desire and physical attraction. For the philosopher, ἔρως transcends these yearnings and evolves into a powerful longing for wisdom. Ἐρως is the desire that instigates the philosopher to spend his or her life dedicated to pursuing an understanding of the good.

Intermediacy in the Apology

In the *Apology*, addressing the accusers in his trial of 399 BCE, Socrates tells of an important realisation that occurred to him in his many years spent dedicated to his pursuit of understanding. Socrates says that during the time he spent questioning his fellow Athenians about the wisdom they claimed to have, he came to the realisation that none of them, himself included, really knew anything worthwhile (Ap. 21d4). However, while these people are not aware that they do not truly have knowledge of anything worthwhile, Socrates understands that he does not know. He does not think he knows anything worthwhile because he is aware that he lacks divine wisdom. As he says, it is

precisely his awareness of his own ignorance that makes him likely to be *wiser* than those who think they are wise when they are not (Ap. 21d-e). Awareness of one's ignorance is a crucial part of what it means to be a philosopher, for one can only uncover one's desire for wisdom by realising that one *lacks* wisdom. In realising his lack of knowledge of anything worthwhile, Socrates, as a lover of wisdom, spends his life dedicated to pursuing that which he deems to be worthwhile, that is, an understanding of the good.

In his pursuit of understanding, Socrates can only ever reach – what he calls – a “human wisdom”, which he says is worth little in contrast to divine wisdom. Compared to other human pursuits, however, the pursuit that has led Socrates to this awareness of his ignorance is understood by him to be vital for human virtue and wellbeing (Ap. 22e). Socrates does not possess wisdom, but he is also not so ignorant as to assume he knows what he does not.⁵³

Like the ἔρωϑ that Diotima describes, Socrates remains in-between ignorance and wisdom. Behind the portrait of ἔρωϑ that Diotima illustrates in the *Symposium*, one cannot fail to recognise the features of Socrates. Like ἔρωϑ, Socrates is neither rich, nor delicate, nor beautiful.⁵⁴ He is neither completely ignorant, nor is he wise. Socrates is the very embodiment of the ἔρωϑ that Diotima describes. He is the poor, barefoot lover of wisdom, striving resolutely towards wisdom.

Conclusion

In this fourth and final chapter, we have discussed the relation between ἀνάμνηϑιϑ, ἔρωϑ, and philosophical inquiry. The “art of love”, according to Socrates, is to engage in dialectical discussion in the hope of clearing away false beliefs in order to incite a desire for understanding. In order for one to commence an inquiry, one must

⁵³ Scott and Welton, *Erotic Wisdom: Philosophy and Intermediacy in Plato's Symposium*, 202–203.

⁵⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination* (London and New York: Continuum Books, 2004), 119.

already have a dim awareness of what it is one is investigating. Philosophical inquiry cannot occur among those who would prefer to adhere to false beliefs, rather than have them exposed as inconsistent. Philosophical discussion can therefore only occur among friends, meaning those people who have a shared desire for understanding and who are therefore willing to examine their own beliefs in the hope of improving their understanding. In his or her pursuit of understanding the good, the philosopher remains in-between ignorance and wisdom.

Conclusion

In this dissertation I have argued that in Plato's *Symposium*, Socrates understands ἔρως as a desire for an understanding of the good, which is fundamental to philosophy. In Chapter One, I provided an overview of two Greek terms for love – “ἔρως” and “φιλία”. I argued that ἔρως was traditionally understood as an overwhelming desire that is often sexual, dangerous and disruptive. I contrasted this with the Greek term “φιλία”, and argued that φιλία usually referred to a mutual feeling of friendship and regard that occurs between friends and family members. I finished Chapter One with a brief summary of the speakers preceding Socrates at the symposium. Most of the speakers argued that ἔρως is a god, some of the speakers also maintained that ἔρως manifests in good and bad forms, others claimed that it is always directed towards one goal.

Having provided some background to Socrates' speech in Chapter One, in Chapter Two I examined Socrates' presentation at Agathon's banquet in close detail. There I argued that Socrates, reporting the lesson in the “art of love” that he received from his mentor Diotima, conceives of ἔρως neither as a god, nor as a necessarily disruptive or unwanted desire. On the contrary, Diotima and Socrates understand ἔρως as a desire that is fundamental to philosophy and always directed towards the good. Diotima, as reported by Socrates, states that we all want to possess the good, because possession of the good brings us eudaimonia. She says that if eudaimonia is to be real, however, then it must be eternal. We therefore strive to secure the good for ourselves for now and forever, and in this way, while striving for the good, we are simultaneously striving for immortality.

As a desire that is directed towards the eternal possession of the good, ἔρωσ compels people to procreate in various ways in their attempts to secure the good forever. Some people beget flesh and blood children in an attempt to leave behind a part of themselves through their family genesis. Heroes perform noble acts in their hope of acquiring the eternal good through fame and glory. Poets write celebrated works of poetry and legislators leave behind enduring laws. However, the most fitting way to strive for the eternal form of the good is to beget philosophical ideas and arguments regarding beauty, justice, and moderation, because it is through discussing and contemplating these ideas that we are brought closer to an understanding of the good.

For the philosopher, ἔρωσ evolves into a powerful yearning for an understanding of the good. A way of getting closer to an understanding of the good, is by participating in philosophical discussion with another person who shares a yearning for an understanding of the good. Together, the philosophers bring forth beautiful ideas concerning beauty, justice, and moderation. Through this dialectical exchange, the lover of wisdom deepens his or her understanding of beauty. After having encountered various instances of beauty, the philosopher reaches a momentary insight into the form of beauty. Given that in the *Republic*, the form of the good is described as the most beautiful form, I suggested that the philosopher having a momentary insight into the form of beauty might mean that he or she is brought to a closer understanding of the form of the good. Like the embodied description of ἔρωσ given by Diotima (as reported by Socrates), the philosopher, aware of his or her lack of wisdom, desires wisdom, and remains in-between ignorance and understanding in his or her striving towards understanding.

My aim in this dissertation was to explicate Socrates' conception of ἔρωσ as a desire for an understanding of the good, thereby fundamental to philosophy. In Chapter

Three, I argued that Plato characterises Alcibiades as someone who desires power, fame and the approval of the masses. I suggested that this portrayal of Alcibiades functions as a kind of warning or foreshadowing of the dangerous consequences that can result from spending one's life pursuing only power and the approval of others as opposed to an understanding of the good. I also argued that the stories Alcibiades tells of Socrates remaining impervious to bodily desires emphasises the philosopher's ability to keep his or her appetitive desires restrained in order to concentrate on pursuing the good.

In Chapter Four I expanded our discussion of ἔρως as a desire for understanding with reference to Socrates' dialectical approach to philosophical discussion. I argued that by dialectically engaging his interlocutors, Socrates tries to show them that they lack understanding by clearing away their false beliefs. He does this in the hope of setting his interlocutors onto the path of understanding by helping them realise they lack understanding, thereby awakening in them a desire for wisdom. In one's desire for wisdom, one is already somewhat aware of the wisdom that one lacks, and in this way, the philosopher's love of wisdom has both divine and mortal aspects, making it intermediary in the sense that it is in-between the two. Put differently, in one's desire for an understanding of the good, one is already somewhat aware of the idea of the good that one desires an understanding of. It is in this way that ἔρως is as a desire that links mortals to the forms.

I then discussed desire for understanding of the forms in reference to recollection. Recollection of the truth that the soul has seen but is not presently seeing is made possible in one's desire to seek truth. The very fact that one desires to inquire into something shows that one already has some intimation of what it is that one seeks.

Finally, I argued that the "human" kind of wisdom reached by the philosopher embodies the nature of ἔρως as a desire that lies between ignorance and understanding.

The “human” wisdom reached by the philosopher consists in an awareness of the limitations of human wisdom. “Human” wisdom is therefore a *learned* ignorance. Plato’s Socrates, as an exemplary philosopher, embodies the ἔρως that Diotima describes. The philosopher spends his or her life seeking wisdom, and in this pursuit, he or she is brought closer to wisdom, though only ever reaching a “human” kind of wisdom. Such wisdom of the philosopher is not divine, nor is it the ignorance of those who do not pursue wisdom because they are not aware of their own ignorance.

In this dissertation, I have argued that for Socrates in Plato’s *Symposium*, erotic love is the powerful desire that impels philosophers to engage in rigorous philosophical discussion in their striving towards an understanding of the good. For Socrates, ἔρως is a desire of the upmost value because it is *fundamental* to philosophical inquiry, as one can only ever pursue understanding if one *desires* understanding.

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