

Two Problems from Plato

At the beginning of the Western world, and in spite of the shining example of Sappho, Greek philosophers expressed wariness of sex. Pythagoras said that the best time for a man to make love is when he wants to weaken himself. Hippocrates, the father of medicine, and later on Plato as well, thought that sexual activity, the squandering of seed, involved a dangerous loss of energy. The Hippocratic writings also suggest that adolescent wet dreams are the precursor of insanity, a view that persisted at least until the nineteenth century, when it reached hysterical proportions.¹⁴ And a variety of ills were laid at lust's door:

Those who are bald are so because their constitution is phlegmatic: for during intercourse the phlegm in their heads is agitated and heated, and impinging upon the epidermis burns the roots of their hair, so that the hair falls out.¹⁵

In the fifth century B.C., Hesiod said that Eros has a power that is the enemy of reason, and this is perhaps an example.

In case we think that these attitudes are inevitable, doing no more than reflect universal facts of the human condition, we might want to contrast Eastern traditions of the rejuvenating and life-giving powers of lust. In the Eastern Han dynasty (A.D. 25–220), Taoists proposed a theoretical basis for immortality through sex. Indeed, one of the Taoist manuals asserted that the Yellow Emperor became immortal after having had sexual relations with twelve hundred women, although it seems probable that the number twelve hundred is more accurate than the claim of immortality. The sage Peng Tsu, by means of making love to ten to twenty girls every single night, was able to live to a good old age. Unfortunately it is not recorded how long the girls lived.

This is not the way the West took. One of the most famous images in philosophy is Plato's model of the soul in terms of the charioteer with his two horses. In the dialogue *Phaedrus* they are vividly described:

The one in the better position has an upright appearance, and is clean-limbed, high-necked, hook-nosed, white in colour, and dark-eyed; his determination to succeed is tempered by self-control and respect for others, which is to say that he is an ally of true glory; and he needs no whip, but is guided only by spoken commands. The other is crooked, over-large, a haphazard jumble of limbs; he has a thick, short neck, and a flat face; he is black in colour, with grey, bloodshot eyes, an ally of excess and affectation, hairy around the ears, hard of hearing, and scarcely to be controlled with a combination of whip and goad.¹⁶

The Greeks took it as natural that beautiful boys excite lust in men, and the drama begins when this equipage comes in sight of one. The charioteer, who is usually thought to be the emblem of reason, nevertheless finds that “his whole soul is suffused with a sensation of heat, and he is filled with the tingling and pricking of desire.” The black horse, lust, compels them to head toward the boy, and to “bring up the subject of the pleasures of sex.” But the charioteer sees only true beauty, which he imagines on a pedestal next to self-control. So he “rears back in awe” and brings down both horses. The good horse “drenched in shame and horror,” doesn’t seem to mind this apparent setback, but the black horse breaks out into furious abuse and plunges forward, repeating the drama again and

again. After enough of this, however, it becomes tamed, and “when it sees the good-looking boy, it is frightened to death, and the upshot is that at last the lover’s soul follows his beloved in reverence and awe.”

This is hot stuff, but it is only the first act. Eventually the boy’s soul in turn starts to fill with love, to “see himself in his lover as in a mirror,” and eventually he is inclined “not to refuse any request the lover might make.” And then there is a choice. If the better parts of their minds win, they live a life of self-control, since they have “enslaved the part which allowed evil into the soul and freed the part which allowed goodness in.” They are then well on the way to immortality. But if they live a more ordinary life (“devoted to prestige rather than to philosophy”), then they will “choose the course which is considered the most wonderful of all by the common run of mankind, and consummate their relationship.” This is not too bad, although it will not be “approved of by their whole minds.” In particular, it does not damn them for good: love is always the start of a skyward journey, even when the bad horse gets its lustful way. There is no suggestion that either the lover or the boy is particularly polluted by the act. We are far from a world in which they need counseling or prison. Indeed, a peculiarity of the picture is that if the couple want to gain prestige rather than become philosophers, they will go at it rather than restrain themselves.

On the other hand, there is ambivalence and even anxiety in the air. In fact, as Michel Foucault has emphasized, there was a definite script for what was expected in this kind of relationship.¹⁷ The man would feel pleasure, but the boy would not; the boy could submit only after a decent interval of courtship, and not too often; the boy would need a nonsexual motive, and this would be what the man could offer him by way of a road to citizenship: education, or connections and influence. It would be dishonorable, for example, for the boy to acquiesce simply for money.

As far as the theory of mind and motivation goes, there are a number of puzzles in Plato's metaphor. What role does the white horse play, since it seems to do nothing but side with the charioteer? The conflict seems to be a simple two-sided one, between lust and something like honor or shame, so a better image might have been of two horses tugging the opposite ends of a rope. And what motivates the charioteer himself? He is the embodiment of reason, but also the locus of the original emotions, the tingling and prickings of desire, for it is explicit that he himself, and not only the black horse, feels those.

These problems may be the inevitable fate of "homuncular" models of the mind. These are models that think of separate faculties, such as reason, pleasure, or desire, in terms of little agents within us competing or cooperating for control of us. These little agents then turn out to be themselves amalgams of

the faculties—reason desires, and desire reasons—and we are no farther on in understanding reason, desire, and self-control.

Perhaps Plato's purpose is not affected by these problems. He is conceptualizing the mind on a parallel with his two favorite examples of social organization: the city and the family. Each of these can be run in justice and harmony, and each can fall catastrophically short. The abuse of power was a permanent anxiety for Greek politics: the unbridled lusts of a tyrant literally destroyed cities and caused revolutions.

For our purposes, what is clear is that poor lust is already firmly categorized: misshapen, deaf to entreaty, and above all shameful. The context is not Christian in the least, but the presumption is not only that lust is willful and therefore in need of restraint, for the same could be said of any appetite, such as the desire for food; the further presumption is that lust is shameful, and that to succumb to the pleasures of sexuality is intrinsically some kind of failure. What was the argument for this? It seems to have crept in simply as an axiom that we are all to rely upon. Yet at the same time the mass of mankind is represented as regarding the sexual consummation of the relationship as not only permissible, but “most wonderful of all.”

In his dialogue the *Symposium*, Plato brings up another crux in the notion of sexual desire. One of the speakers, the comic dramatist Aristophanes, explains the nature of love with a

charming myth. Originally each of us formed a unity with someone else, either male-male, or female-female, or one of each, androgynous, as the case might be. In this state each individual had four hands, four legs, and two sets of genitals, and was more or less spherical. Unfortunately this gave them sufficient strength and vigor to attack the gods. In response Zeus, the king of the gods, cut us in half like flatfish. But this leaves us with an intense desire to recapture our lost unity. So it is that we roam around, seeking our original partners. Those men who are cut from the combined gender, the androgynous, are attracted to women, “and many adulterers are from this group.” The corresponding women are drawn to men (and are in danger of being adulteresses); and then there are men drawn to men, and women drawn to women, depending on their original constitution. Erotic desire is the “desire and pursuit of the whole.”

Although it is incidental to our theme, it is notable that Aristophanes draws the moral that it is not shameful for boys to enjoy relations with older men. On the contrary boys from an original male-male unity “are brave bold and masculine, and welcome the same qualities in others.” In support of this, Aristophanes cites the evidence that they “are the only ones who, when grown up, end up as politicians.”

In response to this delightful myth, Socrates responds with what he has learned of erotic passion from a wise old priestess,

Diotima. She tells him of an ascent of the soul. At first, when someone is young, he (we might add, or she) is drawn toward beautiful bodies. At that time he should love just one body, and in that relationship “produce beautiful discourses.” But then

he should realize that the beauty of any one body is closely related to that of another, and that, if he is to pursue beauty of form, it’s very foolish not to regard the beauty of all bodies as one and the same. Once he’s seen this, he’ll become a lover of all beautiful bodies, and will relax his intense passion for just one body, despising this passion and regarding it as petty. After this, he should regard the beauty of minds as more valuable than that of the body. . . . he will be forced to observe the beauty in practices and laws and to see that every type of beauty is closely related to every other.¹⁸

And then instead of his original “low and small-minded slavery,” he will be turned toward the “great sea of beauty,” and gazing on it “he’ll give birth, through a boundless love of knowledge, to many beautiful and magnificent discourses and ideas.”

It is breathtaking, but it is still not over. In the final movement, there is a kind of religious transformation, in which the aspiring soul catches sight of beauty itself, or the form of beauty, eternal and unchanging, and such that “when other

things come to be or cease, it is not increased or decreased in any way nor does it undergo any change.” Plato calls this object of erotic attachment divine, and the staircase he describes has been the inspiration of religious minds ever since, having perhaps its finest expression in Dante.

We need to notice a number of things. First, in all three myths, this myth of ascent, that of Aristophanes, and that of the charioteer, Plato steeps us in the idea that we do not really know what we want, that lust needs interpreting and explaining. In each he contrasts the “true” object of passion with the apparent object. In Diotima’s story, the true or proper aim of human beings is only what you get at the end of the ascent. In Aristophanes’ myth, the amputated halves do not realize that their restlessness is a search for a unity that has been destroyed, while in the *Phaedrus*, the black horse represents not something the charioteer wants, but only part of him.

Secondly, while we might stumble at the association, in Diotima’s myth Plato apparently has no problem in seeing the divine rapture at the end of the process as perfectly continuous with the lust that started it out. The object has changed, but the energy and the excitement have not. We are likely to balk at that, thinking that Plato has simply described an idealized process in which lust is destroyed, and substituted or sublimated by something else. We settled on an account of lust as the active and

excited desire for the pleasures of sexual activity, and Diotima's staircase is more about putting that behind us than about merely changing the direction of our lust.

In fact, Plato himself is ambivalent. In the dialogue itself, this high-flown story is followed dramatically by the entry of the drunken Alcibiades, a beautiful and somewhat promiscuous young man, a bit of a tart, who tells the company how, when he thought he had carefully seduced Socrates and got him into bed, Socrates displayed the most stony indifference and simply went to sleep. This might be read as a partial recantation on Plato's part, a recognition that sexual pleasure is a pleasure of the senses, and that in sexual activity the senses respond to the person with us here and now, rather than merely to ideas in the mind (which is not to deny that ideas in the mind play their part, as we shall discover). The ideal partner is not someone with his or her head permanently in the clouds. Or, it may be a reminder that it is individuals who make love with other individuals, and that contemplating such abstractions as a bodily beauty that may be in common to a number of individuals is something very different, and from the point of view of someone wriggling beside you in bed, something distinctly inferior.¹⁹ But it is not clear that Plato means this, for after all Socrates simply went to sleep. If he had started adoring Alcibiades' beauty instead, things might have burst into flame. A religious devotion to abstractions interferes

with a man's aptitude for everyday sexual collisions, but sensual concentration on beauty does not.

There is no implication in Plato that either desire or pleasure is in itself to be destroyed or uprooted, or is by itself the cause of calamity and disaster. There are ideas related to this, but they are subtly different. First, there is the idea that desire is always in danger of becoming too much. So it needs control—the harmonious soul, like the harmonious city, is that in which we are in control of lust, not enslaved by it. Second, this implies that there is nothing fatally wrong with the desires themselves. The ruler of a city must control the lower orders, but not exterminate them. The charioteer needs his horses. But third, there is a ranking of higher and lower, and there is the danger of shame and dishonor. Lust is fine in its place, but is to be looked on with shame and even horror outside that place. The Greeks liked to paint satyrs, half-human and half-horse or mule, usually in states of erection, and frequently pouncing upon sleeping maenads, on their drinking vessels (fig. 4). But the imagery of their being only half-human suggests that they represent something marginal, boundaries that should not be crossed, transgressions that human beings themselves should not make, however alluring the activities that are depicted.²⁰