

Plato's theory of Love: Rationality as Passion

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'I ... profess to understand nothing but matters of love.'
Socrates in Plato's *Symposium*.

Introduction

One of the most influential traditions of love in the Western world is Platonism. Originating with Plato's writings on love (mainly *the Symposium* whose explicit subject is the nature of love and *Phaedrus*, but also *the Republic* and the *Laws*), the tradition flourished through Aristotle, Plotinus and the revival of neo-Platonism in the Renaissance. But Plato's influence expanded beyond the tradition he started: the Courtly Love of the Middle-Ages, the Romanticism of the 19th century, important characteristics of religious love and even many Freudian ideas are rooted in his theory of love (de Rougemont, 1983). Today, interest in Plato's view of love is being renewed (Nussbaum, 2001, chapt. 6; Levy, 1979; Vlastos, 1973; Moravicsik, 1972).

In the popular mind Platonism is associated with the concept of Platonic love, which is understood today as a non-sexual relationship between heterosexual friends. As the concept of Platonic love is far from doing justice to Plato's complex theory of love and sex, French scholars found it helpful to distinguish between *amour platonique* (the concept of non-sexual love) and *amour platonicien* (love according to Plato) (Gould, 1963, p. 1).

Two rectifications of the popular concept of Platonic love seem necessary in order to appreciate the relevance of Plato's theory of love to contemporary problems. The first is related to the non-sexual aspect of the loving relationship, for Plato's theory of love includes sex. The second is related to the heterosexual aspect of the loving relationship. Indeed, Plato considers love between people solely as a homosexual phenomenon, whereas his discussion of sex includes both heterosexual and homosexual relationships. The sociological setting of Platonism explains it: in 5th century Athens, apart from some outstanding exceptions, like Pericles' legendary love for Aspasia, men were married for reproductive ends, yet reserved the term 'love' and the passionate activity of sexual love for homosexual relationships (Gonzalez-Reigosa, 1989; O'Connor, 1991; Tannahil, 1989). Nevertheless, in my opinion, nothing in Plato's philosophy stands in the way of adapting it to modern

times, when due to their education and to political changes, women earned the right to love and to be loved as equals to men.

When one dispels these misunderstandings related to the popular notion of Platonic love, one finds a great richness and depth in Plato's theory of love. In explaining why love is so important to us and yet why it fails us so often, Plato's view of love seems applicable to our time. It is common knowledge that a very high rate of divorce threatens our marriages. We expect a lot from the sexual passion we call love, but usually end up disappointed when the romance goes away. Yet we keep getting married, thinking that we are going to be the ones that will beat the system. If we fail, we change our partner and try again. We end up our love life as we began it, confused, afraid and as disappointed as we were hopeful.

The malaise that characterises our love lives naturally finds its way to the philosophical consulting room. In this paper I shall attempt to show how Plato's view of love can be helpful both in dispelling our confusion about love and in proposing some solutions to our suffering.

A comprehensive account of Plato's complex theory of love, an exhaustive presentation of the controversies involved in interpreting it or a thorough discussion of the problems it creates, are all beyond the scope of this paper. What one may hope to do is to introduce the reader to some basic characteristics of Plato's view of love, and then to share some thoughts about its applicability to our contemporary view of the blessings and predicaments involved in what we call love.

I shall therefore begin with Plato's definitions of love (sections 1 and 2), followed by a description of the path to successful love (section 3). Some difficulties in Plato's theory of love will be then explained, as well as their import on the applicability of Plato's view to philosophical counselling (section 4). I shall conclude with some positive applications of Plato's conception of love to contemporary problems (section 5).

1. Love as desire for the perpetual possession of the good

The *Symposium* is a Platonic dialogue, which describes a symposium on the nature of love or eros. From the five speeches related there, the one delivered by the great playwright Aristophanes was perhaps the most popular and influential over the years, and the one most in accordance with people's romantic desires. Yet, it is to Socrates, or more precisely to a priestess named Diotima, whom Socrates allegedly met in the past and who told him the secrets of love, that Plato gives the honour of explaining his own theory of love.

Aristophanes had explained through a comical and colourful myth that love is our search for our alter ego, that part of us that will make us whole again. Love is a remedy for an ancient wound inflicted on us by the gods, who divided us in two as a punishment for our arrogance. Since those primordial times, each of us is only half of himself or herself, searching relentlessly for completion.

When Socrates' turn to speak comes, he refers to Aristophanes' theory, but adds something that changes everything: we don't yearn for the half or the whole unless it is good. By this he means that the motive force in love is a yearning for goodness, not just completion. From this he concludes that love is always directed towards what is good, indeed that goodness itself is the only object of love. When we love something, we are really seeking to possess the goodness which is in it. Not temporarily of course, but permanently. And from there Plato gives his first definition of love: 'Love is desire for the perpetual possession of the good.' (Plato, 1951, p. 86)

Everything in this definition is innovative and interesting. First, 'love is desire' already articulates a fundamental presupposition, to wit, that human beings are basically acquisitive. Our life is a continuous search for things that will satisfy and fulfil our needs, that will provide happiness. Second, desiring always implies a desire to have what is good. We desire something because we at least think that it will do us some good. Plato always explains whatever we do, desire or strive for, as a direct or circuitous means of acquiring goodness. Since Plato believes that everything, not just human beings, strives for the attainment of some good, the entire universe seems to be continuously in love. Indeed, it is love that makes the world go round, without it nothing could exist. But although all things love, and all men are in some sense

lovers, few recognise the object of their love, that which motivates their striving, that which underlies their every desire, that which will ensure 'perpetual possession'. This object Plato calls the Good or absolute beauty.

Let us say a word about this identification of goodness and beauty. Was not Socrates good but ugly? Can't a woman be beautiful and mean? Not really, at least not according to Plato. To the Greeks, beauty was a function of harmony; it arose from a harmonious relationship between parts that could not cohere unless they were good for one another. From this Plato concludes that what is truly beautiful must be good and what is truly good must be beautiful.

In order to understand what Plato means by the Good or absolute beauty, some understanding of his theory of Forms is required. Ultimate reality according to Plato is not the world that we perceive with our senses, but some eternal entities, which he calls Forms (ideas). As all things that exist are instances of these essences, knowledge about the world is always knowledge about Forms. The universe being not random but purposive, the highest knowledge shows us how everything strives to attain that which is good for itself and for the fulfilment of its being. Since all things participate in a single world-order, there must be a single good for which they yearn. This is the Good or the Beautiful, absolute goodness or absolute beauty, the highest of the Forms, the ultimate category in terms of which all other realities are to be explained. It is present to all existence in the sense that everything aims for it. But its being is not limited to anything in nature or to nature itself, and the height of love consists in knowing it in its metaphysical purity. Lovers are often carried away by a sense of beauty in the beloved. The greatest love, according to Plato, would disclose the secret beauty in everything, that hidden harmony which directs all beings toward the best of all possible ends. We all wish to elope with absolute beauty, or so Plato thinks. For nothing else would assure the 'perpetual possession of the good', because all instances of goodness or beauty are only partial to the highest form, only flickering hints of true and therefore eternal beauty or goodness.

As the supreme object of desire, the Good or the beautiful must be present in all phases of human life. It is what everyone seeks, that for the sake of which everything is sought. But few people recognise it, for in the confusion of their lives human beings know that they have desires, but they do not know what will satisfy them. When hungry, they eat, thinking that food is the object of their desire. But once they have eaten, they desire other things, and so on, till death (hopefully) puts an end to it. They may never

realise that all their striving is motivated by a search for beauty and goodness. To that extent, they live in ignorance and are incapable of loving properly.

2. Love as desire for immortality

So important is the notion of 'perpetual possession' of the Good, that in the *Symposium* Socrates modifies his earlier definition: to love beauty is to wish to bring forth in beauty. To possess it perpetually would be to re-create it endlessly. Consequently, love must by its very nature be the love of immortality as well as of the Beautiful. That explains why love is associated with the reproduction of the species. Love issues into a desire to procreate because procreation is our nearest approach to perpetuity. We cherish our children because through them we may partake of the future. Also the sacrifices of heroes stem from a love of fame, which is none other than the love of immortality. Yet the philosopher's love brings him as close to immortality as possible. When we contemplate absolute beauty with an unfettered soul, we are in contact with the eternal in a way that secures perpetuity. We may never bring forth children nor create works of art or even enact a deed of great importance. Nevertheless, the philosopher's achievement will be supreme: 'he will have the privilege of being beloved of God, and becoming, if ever a man can, immortal himself.' (Plato, 1951, p. 95) He is described in the *Republic* as follows:

He contemplates a world of unchanging and harmonious order, where reason governs and nothing can do or suffer wrong; and like one who imitates an admired companion, he cannot fail to fashion himself in its likeness. So the philosopher, in constant companionship with the divine order of the world, will reproduce that order in his soul and, so far as man can, become godlike; though here, as elsewhere, there will be scope for detraction.

(Plato, 1941, p. 208)

Also in *Phaedrus*, the search for absolute good or beauty is considered in terms of problems that the soul faces in becoming immortal. According to Plato's dualistic view of human nature, the soul is immaterial and indestructible, therefore in itself immortal. But once it descends to the world of nature, it is enclosed with the material casing of a material body. In its original state the soul lived among the gods, enjoying the true being of the eternal Forms. As they become human beings, most souls forget their divine origin. Immersion in matter blunts the awareness of their spiritual source. Nevertheless, that past remains as a state of wholeness to which all men secretly aspire. Though it may act with confusion, the soul wishes to reunite itself

with the realm of essences, particularly that absolute good or beauty which shimmers through the world of sense but can be properly enjoyed only in its own domain.

In Plato's view the nature of the human being is double, an unstable composition of body and soul, each governed by contrary impulses. Each part struggles to move the human being in its own direction, both impelled by the dictates of love, but love for different kinds of objects. The body allows carnal temptations to drag it down to the mire of sensuality. The soul wants to move upward towards its home among the eternal Forms. The latter cares only about the achievement of excellence, through a pure, noble, spiritual relationship that enables both lover and beloved to improve in the search for virtue. Yet human nature finds it easier to follow the lure of the flesh.

In the *Symposium* love generally appears calm and serene, like Socrates' character and like the orderly advance towards absolute beauty. In the *Phaedrus* it is turbulent and overwhelming enough to deserve to be called 'the divine madness'. Madness can be pathological, resulting from human infirmity. Or it can be, as all creative inspiration is, 'a divine release of the soul from the yoke of custom and convention'. True love is madness of the latter sort and it is highly desirable. When the enlightened spirit finally wrenches itself from the debasing but pervasive influence of the body, it seems to lose all sense of equilibrium. Actually, it is only regaining freedom and the true sanity of man.

The sight of beauty, which the soul encountered in its previous state but quickly forgot, stirs the spirit anew whenever it appears before the lover. Plato very vividly describes the excitement of the lover who sees in another person an expression of divine beauty:

At first a shudder runs through him, and again the old awe steals over him; then looking upon the face of his beloved as of a god he reverences him, and if he were not afraid of being thought a downright madman, he would sacrifice to his beloved as to the image of a god; then while he gazes on him there is a sort of reaction, and the shudder passes into an unusual heat and perspiration.

(Plato, 1937, p. 225)

We may interpret the reaction as a sexual response, yet this is not what Plato has in mind. He explains through the language of emotion how the soul grows wings. For Platonism, such adoration is the beginning of love. When ascending the ladder of love, the true lover possesses the good by enabling the Good to take possession of him. When this happens, the lover attains knowledge of reality. The path leading to this state is a life-long adventure, yet

structured through determined stages. The steps in the ladder of love are described in the next section.

3. The path to successful love

At the beginning of his search, the lover will naturally contemplate physical beauty. He will eventually fall in love with one particular person, whom he finds particularly attractive. Love being ephemeral at this stage, the lover will move from one beautiful person to another. Realising that physical beauty is not limited to any one beloved, he will become a lover of all physical beauty. Therefore he 'will relax the intensity of his passion for one particular person, because he will realise that such a passion is beneath him and of small account.' (Plato, 1951, p. 92) This is a beneficial consequence, in Plato's opinion, because it finally liberates us from the tyranny of the senses.

The next stage is the realisation that beauty of the soul is more valuable than beauty of the body. In the company of good and beautiful souls, which might be trapped in ugly bodies, he will move to the next stage. There he will appreciate social and moral beauty and contemplate the beauty of institutions and noble activities. The fourth stage is the study of science and the acquisition of knowledge. There he will be free at last from any attachment to an individual instance of beauty – whether of body, soul, or society. He will give birth to 'many beautiful and magnificent sentiments and ideas, until at last, strengthened and increased in stature by his experience, he catches sight of one unique science whose object is the beauty of which I am about to speak.' (p. 93)

This beauty is absolute beauty. It culminates the mysteries of love as it also reveals the nature of the universe:

'This beauty is first of all eternal; it neither comes into being nor passes away, neither waxes nor wanes; next, it is not beautiful in part and ugly in part, nor beautiful at one time and ugly at another, not beautiful in this relation and ugly in that, nor beautiful here and ugly there, as varying according to its beholders; nor again will this beauty appear to him like the beauty of a thought or a science, or like beauty which has its seat in something other than itself, be it a living thing or the earth or the sky or anything else whatever; he will see it as absolute, existing alone with itself, unique, eternal, and other beautiful things as partaking of it, yet in such a manner that while they come into being and pass away, it neither undergoes any increase or diminution nor suffers any change.' (pp. 93-4)

'The supreme knowledge whose sole object is that absolute beauty' portrayed above, is the final step in this platonic ladder (pp. 93-4). Plato refused to write about that stage, though he is said to have delivered a lecture on the Good, which left his audience breathless. Success in love is not promised to everyone: it depends ultimately on mysterious forces that defy human comprehension.

The five stages outlined above indicate the direction for the ideal lover, as described in the *Symposium*. In the *Republic*, however, dozens of pages are dedicated to the education of the philosopher, which include moral training, scientific education and spiritual discipline. One difference, however, between the view of the ideal lover presented in the *Symposium* and the *Republic* and the one presented in *Phaedrus* is worth mentioning here: in the former, there is a new decision that it is not necessary, or perhaps even possible, for the philosopher to fall out of love and cease to need his special friend. If they are truly lovers of wisdom, the only intercourse that will appeal to them is rational exploration together. If, however, they are men of the second order, their constant proximity may be too much for them and they will find a sexual expression for their love. Being essentially good men, they will indulge in sexual pleasures only very rarely, understanding the regrettable effects that these have on the freedom of the mind in the search of the Forms.

Plato invested great efforts in trying to develop a method that would help us clarifying our desire, and direct it overtly and authentically towards its real objective. For till we realise that all our striving is motivated by a search for beauty and goodness, we live in ignorance and are incapable of loving properly.

4. Difficulties in Plato's theory of love

There are many difficulties in Plato's theory of love: there is an ambivalent attitude towards sex that seems to be inherent in Plato's thought; there are some contradictions in his attitude towards homosexuality, and of course, his attitude towards women is utterly problematic. Interesting as these issues might be, I shall not address them here. Rather, I shall concentrate on the relationship between rationality and emotion in Plato's theory of love.

Two possible interpretations of this issue seem to me worth mentioning: one is that Plato's highest love is predominantly intellectual, possibly fervent but always a form of rational activity. His ideal lover leaves emotionality behind, his love being not an attempt to express or purify sensuous feelings but rather to suppress

them by sheer rationality. Even when true love is described as a divine madness, emotions merely attend the condition, bespeaking the eagerness of the soul to enter into relationship with absolute beauty. The relationship itself is intellectual, the attainment of wisdom, of knowledge about the highest Form (Singer, 1984, vol. 1, pp. 72-3).

The other interpretation is that there is in Plato a new view of the nature of rationality. As men become more splendid examples of what men should be, they may indeed lose their need for irrational attachment, like consolation, stimulation and help, but not because they feel the absence of desire; it is because they have come to desire that alone which is truly rewarding. Men think that to be rational is to be able coolly to discount all passions, but rationality really consists in a passion so powerful and happy that what most men conceive passions for is finally seen to be really irrational, that is, not rewarding at all (Gould, 1963, pp. 164-5).

I think that the latter view represents more faithfully Plato's intention. Plato's theory of love seems, therefore, successful in creating a very special synthesis of rationality and emotion. Yet, before considering its applicability to counselees' problems, there is one obstacle to overcome: is this synthesis of rationality and emotion possible only for the (Platonic) philosopher? For, underlying all difficulties in Platonic love, there resides a fundamental paradox. As Irving Singer formulates it:

Everything in nature is motivated by eros; but nothing can 'really' gratify its love within the limits of nature itself. That is why the true Platonic lover must be a philosopher. In being the desire for the perpetual possession of the good, love strives for union with a metaphysical principle that does not *exist* (in nature or anywhere else) and shows itself only to philosophic intuition. In Platonism true love and true rationality coincide. As the basis of both knowledge and valuation, the Good is the only object worthy of being loved or capable of giving knowledge about reality. Consequently, no search for *natural* goods could possibly satisfy the definition of love. That requires a highly intellectual, purely rational, non-sensuous striving for transcendental insight, a love of wisdom which may have little or no relation to a love of life. Starting with a vision of everything being in love, Plato ends up with the incredible suggestion that only the (Platonic) philosopher really is.

(Singer, 1984, vol. 1, pp. 83-4)

This paradox raises more clearly than anything else does the question of the relevance of Plato's ideas on love for everyone, including counselees who might not be

platonic philosophers. In the next section, the issue of the practicability of Plato's theory will be addressed.

5. Applying Plato's theory of love to contemporary problems

I shall begin by stating the obvious: though I love challenges, I dislike impossibilities; in other words, I would not have chosen this subject unless I had thought that one can learn a great deal from Plato's theory of love. Yet, I admit that the philosophical consultant for common problems of love might more easily apply any other philosopher's view on love (with the possible exception of the Stoics) (Nussbaum, 1994, pp. 359-401; Nussbaum, 2001; Vlastos, 1973).

Before addressing the question of how Plato can be applied to counselling, I would like to address some preliminary questions. First, does the counsellor have to be a Platonist in order to use Plato's theory of love in consultation? Second, does the counsellee have to endorse Platonism in order to be helped by Plato's theory of love? If by 'being a Platonist' we understand knowing or believing that Plato's account of the Forms is true, and therefore that the good is a metaphysical entity, then I believe that the answer to both questions is negative.

Allow me to answer the first question according to my own experience as a philosophical counsellor. I cannot know that Platonism is true any more than I can know, for example, that Spinoza's or Schopenhauer's philosophies are true. I do suspend my judgement about the truth of their metaphysics. But then, I have also to suspend my judgement about the truth of their respective ethics, and of the various other interesting insights on life they might offer. For, as philosophies are usually coherent theories, their respective ethics follow from their metaphysics. It is true that, with the help of experience and age, we seem to have more say in matters of ethics and of what I referred to as 'other interesting insights on life' than on metaphysics. But we still don't *know* if these are true. Nevertheless, I use in consultation not only Socratic tools aimed at giving birth to the counsellee's own ideas; or analytic tools aimed at clarifying her thought. I also use philosophical theories from the general corpus of the history of philosophy, which I think are relevant to the issue at hand. I hope, by using these theories, to enrich the counsellee with interesting, deep and challenging views regarding the subject that we investigate. I might suggest some reading of these philosophies; we may challenge Plato's or Spinoza's metaphysical premises and discuss the relations they have to the ideas that the counsellee found interesting. But I cannot endorse any of these

philosophies in the sense of saying that their metaphysics is true or that their view of love is true. Moreover, were I to *believe* that any of these philosophies is true, my opinion is that I ought not try to convince the counsellee of its truth.

This is one way of doing philosophical counselling. Of course, other counsellors might handle the problem of using speculative theories in philosophical consultations quite differently. They may even abstain from using them, because of the very problem of establishing their veracity. Yet, I still think that Plato's views on love are important, even if false. Therefore, personally I have a negative answer to the question: does the counsellor have to endorse Platonism in order to make use of Platonic views in a consultation?

As to the second question, namely, does the counsellee have to endorse Platonism in order to be helped by Plato's theory of love? I believe the answer is still negative. Some of the argument is similar to that presented in the previous answer: the counsellee no more than the counsellor can know if Plato is right in his account of the world. But she can tell if some of the things Plato says make sense to her, if they describe accurately the way she feels, if they disclose important aspects of her suffering or of her confusion about love. In short, she can know if she would like to listen to what Plato has to say, better, if she would like to begin a conversation with him, if his thought is worth the effort of communicating with it. This communication would take place through discussing his views with the help of the counsellor, through reading some of his texts, through thinking alone along some of his insights. But what if Plato is wrong? Is there any value in discussing with someone whose views are wrong? Does the sole value of such a conversation lie in disclosing the other's errors? Or rather, are we enriched by having been challenged in our own views, by having been exposed to someone else's views, and even more so if these views are deep, interesting and bearing on important aspects of the human condition? Plato might be wrong, but his mistake is profound in that it reveals some needs that we all share and makes a very ambitious attempt to meet them. As we do not know the truth about love, we might as well consider various views about it. Plato being the deep and wise thinker that he is, his view of love is not the last of them: neither in importance, nor relevance, nor interest, as I hoped to show above.

If neither counsellor nor counsellee have to endorse Platonism in order to make use of Platonic ideas, let's ask the following practical question: which counsellees and which problems would best benefit from Plato's views on

love? And from which views? In my experience, there are many possibilities of introducing Plato's thought on love in a consulting setting and of applying it to various predicaments. I will present three general contexts in which I have used Plato's thoughts on love. Of course, as counsellors are required to be creative in their craft, other counsellors might use Plato differently.

I shall begin with a short account of how one aspect of Plato's theory of love may be used in the context of parental love. More specifically, how it may help in easing the tension between parental love, as frequently encountered, and grown-up children's expectations. Second, I shall briefly introduce some interesting Platonic thoughts concerning sex and its relation to beauty, and shall question the applicability of those insights to the case of the non-vulgar Don Juan. Finally, I shall dwell at length on what, in my opinion, is Plato's strongest point: his criticism of the prevailing fashion in matters of love. I am referring to the Romantic tradition of love, which contends that we can all be saved by loving passionately another human being. Let's begin with the relatively easy issue of parental love.

A) Parental love and grown-up children's expectations

'The relations between parents and children', writes Bertrand Russell in the *Conquest of Happiness*, 'are in nine out of ten cases a source of dissatisfaction for both sides, and in ninety-nine out of hundred a source of suffering and agony at least to one of the sides ... The adult, who wants happy relations with his children, or wants to provide them with a life of happiness, must think deeply about fatherhood ...' (Russell, 1930, p. 120). Plato's view of love as love of immortality, and love of immortality as the key to parental love can be helpful in discussing parental love, its ambitions, its shortcomings, especially the feasibility of its ideal unconditionality. Grown-up children often complain about the fact that their parents are too protective, do not see them as autonomous adults and generally fail to recognise that they have a right to live their life as they choose. What may appear at first sight as disappointing shortcomings of parental love, might be better understood as inherent characteristics of this love, provided that we see its essence or at least its main characteristic as love of immortality.

B) Sex and its relation to beauty: the extreme case of the non-vulgar Don Juan

According to Plato, sex is a completely natural but somewhat unimaginative device to get what we want. To act when we see beauty as if we wanted children is not the most intelligent response to it. Beauty awakes in us a much deeper longing, of which we should at least be aware and which we should at most fulfill. Plato proposes an interpretation of the meaning of beauty that cannot be exhausted by any amount of sexual relations. Even if we do not agree with him, his views challenge us to figure out for ourselves what is so disturbing in beauty.

More specifically, Plato can be helpful in the case of the non-vulgar Don Juan. He is the type of man that doesn't look vulgarly for sheer conquest of an endless number of women, but for a *je-ne-sais-quoi* that tortures him. In Plato's language, he is stuck in the second stage, moving endlessly from one beauty to another. As we have seen, Plato's philosophy gives a compelling account of our fascination with beauty, by identifying our yearning as a desire to bring forth in beauty. Unfortunately, even experts on physical beauty, who should be delighted by the variety, will still be unsatisfied, or so Plato predicts. His diagnosis is that their yearning for *absolute* beauty will be frustrated. To quote Santayana on this second platonic stage: 'all beauties attract by suggesting the ideal and then fail to satisfy by not fulfilling it' (Singer, 1956, p. 99). Plato's analysis sometimes rings a bell for the non-vulgar Don Juan and helps him clarify his real goal. When he realises that this goal won't be achieved by the means he is taking, change might occur. This is especially valuable because as far as I know, we do not have too many philosophical sources for clarifying the phenomenon of Don Juan, the only other philosophical source being Kierkegaard (Kierkegaard, 1978).

C) Salvation through love of another person: the Romantic

The richness and depth of Plato's theory of love allows us the choice of being impressed by its crudest aspects (the love of immortality as the key to parental love and as an explanation for a hero's behaviour); or by its subtlest ones (the ultimate dissatisfaction linked with sexual relationships, even in a loving relationship). Yet its edge lies somewhere else. Though Plato's theory might be irrelevant for anyone who happens to be in love, its importance appears as soon as there is trouble in paradise and even more so, when a love affair is over, or simply when the affair is not over, but love is. Allow me to

explain this point by relying on the analysis of love of a great psychologist, Theodore Reik.

Reik viewed love as arising out of dissatisfaction with oneself and one's lot in life. 'People seek out love and especially passion' explains R. J. Sternberg in summarising Reik's view on love 'when life is disappointing and when they need someone else to fill the void within'. Moreover,

Some people seek salvation in love, much as other people do in religion, hoping to find in another the perfection they cannot find in themselves. At first, they may well think that salvation is at hand. Early in a relationship, their partner may indeed seem to be just what they are looking for, and their being in love is tantamount to being saved – from the world and from themselves. But eventually disillusionment is almost certain to set in. They discover two facts. First, the other person has flaws: they cannot maintain the illusion of perfection is the face of ever more evidence that the partner is not, in fact, perfect. Second, no other human can save them, not even the love of their life.

What are the options then? According to the same source,

Perhaps one can save oneself, but one cannot expect or even ask this of another. People have either to adjust to a new kind of love or else forever live with the disappointment of knowing that they cannot find salvation through love of another. Of course, some people take a third course: they try to find someone else to save them and once again reenter the cycle of high hopes followed by disappointment. (Sternberg, 1998, p. 126; Reik, 1944).

What we can learn from Plato is that we do not need to give up our longing for salvation through love. The longing can be fulfilled if directed towards other objects, that is, not human beings. This hunger called eros should be acknowledged and could even be fulfilled when supplied with the right nutrition. We need not emphasise the contemplation of a metaphysical idea of the beautiful, the good and the true as the sole way to fulfilment. We may choose to stress the idea that the complete fulfilment of eros may pass, yet cannot be attained, through another human being. After all, Plato points to the transcendent nature of eros and love, a theme which, following him, Christianity will develop (Singer, 1984, vol. 1, chap. 9; Nygren, 1982). And of course, in order to see that Plato could make sense, we have to doubt the assumptions of the prevalent and fashionable tradition of love in which most of us partake, namely, the Romantic (Singer, 1984, vol. 2, chaps. 12-13; Gould, 1963, chaps. 1 and 9). That is, we have to re-evaluate a human being's capacity of saving

us, just by loving us and being loved by us. Allow me to elaborate.

According to my consulting experience, most people experience the end of a relationship or the death of love in a relationship as a failure. They blame themselves, or their partners, or both. However, when they recover from the mourning, they search for a new partner, hoping that this time the relationship won't fail them or that they won't fail the relationship. This hope is usually unfounded, because no real understanding has been reached, no real work done, nothing that would ensure that the 'failure' won't repeat itself.

When confronted with Plato's definition of love ('love is desire for the perpetual possession of the good'), most people say: yes, this is exactly what I wanted; what I still want. Moreover, the 'failure' is described in those terms: the possession was not 'perpetual', or there was no 'possession' contrarily to what was expected, or the partner or the relationship was no 'good' any more.

What most people do not realise is that they cannot both hold this definition of love and expect a human being to fulfil it. If we keep in mind the stages of the ladder of love described above (section 3), we understand why changing partners will not help us in the long run. To repeat Plato's argument, the love of one particular beautiful body is the first step towards fulfilling our desire that the good will be always in our possession. Our incapacity of being satisfied at this stage stems from the nature of the true object of our search, from that which we are really looking for, independently of the partner we chose. Therefore, sooner or later we will be out of love with this particular beautiful body, that is, beyond the first stage of the ladder.

Some of us repeat this stage, by falling in love again and again, but leave as soon as love is over. Some reach the second stage, by moving endlessly from one beauty to another, as we have seen above. Few people realise that there might be something beyond the second stage. Plato explains how transcending the limitations inherent in a relationship with a person might fulfil our desire for the good and the beautiful. When we truly understand the limitations of all human beings in fulfilling our needs, we stop resenting the particular specimen with which we are living. We adapt our expectations from human beings to that which can be obtained within the human sphere. For this very reason we can remain faithful to our original desire, which Plato's analysis helped us clarify as aiming beyond what a particular individual can give us.

The limited capacity of human sexual passion, which we call love, to bring us everlasting love, can be a blessing if we understand why it fails us. For then we might look for fulfilment by transcending the relationship, without ending it unnecessarily. Moreover, only if we keep insisting on fulfilling our desire for the perpetual possession of the good, we have a chance of realising our dream of happiness. Yet, it is important to stress that *we need not endorse Plato's interpretation of what that good really is. Suffice it to feel that his characterisation of what we desire or his definition of love echoes our true needs. The rest might be a personal quest.*

A last point is worth emphasising. In his theory of love, Plato gives us a diagnosis of human misery by explaining to us what we really want and how we err in searching for it. Yet, his diagnosis is optimistic in so far as he identifies ignorance and confusion as the sources of our suffering. For ignorance and confusion can be amended either through the compelling invitation of his philosophy or through our own determination to further our understanding of the human condition. In order to appreciate Plato's optimism, let's take another example of a diagnosis of why love fails us. Schopenhauer's diagnosis, for example, is a pessimistic one, in so far as he sees in us a passive instrument of the Will that underlies reality. Our passionate love is no more than a device of nature for reproducing the species. Once our work is done, the love we had for our mate leaves us and there is nothing we can do about it (Schopenhauer, 1969, p. 241).

But, Plato tells us, everything begins where we used to think that everything ended.

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