Plato, the Other, and the Freedom to Love

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Abstract

Plato's *Symposium* is divided into several speeches; two, by Aristophanes and Socrates, are considered here. These classic views on love extend into the modern era by way of philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Bertrand Russell. This essay examines their views and argues that modern ideas about love are similar to classic ideas on the topic. The main topics discussed relate to the identity struggle lovers engage in and the way in which love can inspire the intellect.

Love is a gateway to knowledge. This, I believe, is one of the central ideas of Plato's *Symposium.* Influential philosophers of the twentieth century have reached similar conclusions. For instance, Bertrand Russell holds that love is something that can lead to surges in creativity and works to enhance one's knowledge. Similarly, Jean-Paul Sartre describes how, in love, the self must cope with the identity of other beings and how these beings can give us insights and knowledge about ourselves. The aim of this essay is to analyze each philosopher's conception of love and to see how they cohere with one another, showing that ideas about love are reoccurring throughout history.

In Plato's dialogue, seven prominent citizens of ancient Athens gather together for an evening of festivities. As the night progresses the group decides to eulogize the Greek god of passionate love, Eros. Aristophanes presents a poetically driven speech that employs mythology to articulate his particular view of love. He focuses on an idea of wholeness—that those who are in love sense a longing for their partner (which is also described as a desire to join or merge with their partner). Although Socrates expresses his ideas about love less poetically than Aristophanes, they both agree that love is more than bodily lust. Rather, love expands the possibilities of being human; a lover is capable of doing things that those who are not in love cannot hope to do. I argue below that Russell's view of love is remarkably similar to Socrates', and that Sartre's is also similar to Aristophanes'. In fact, all four treatments of love work together to form a cohesive view.

Aristophanes begins by saying that in order to understand his view, the others in attendance "must first understand human nature and its afflictions."[1] Love, he explains,

began when three types of human beings existed: a female type, a male type, and a type that contained the essence of both the male and female forms. No matter the gender of these prehistoric humans, their forms were different from the form of the modern human being. These creatures had two of every appendage a contemporary human has—four legs, four arms, two heads, two sets of genitalia, etc. To move they would curl up into a spherical form and roll. This version of the human was considerably powerful and, at one point, attempted to defeat the gods. This, of course, was something the gods would not allow, and Zeus ordered that every human was to be cleaved in half, giving humans their current form.[2]

In this split form people had feelings of incompleteness. What was once a wholly complete union was merely half that; humans felt a desire to be whole. Aristophanes suggests that eros (the drive) is "inborn" within humans, and that Eros (the god) is the "bringer-together of their [human's] ancient nature, who tries to make one out of two."[3] Aristophanes also explains that because humans originally had three forms (male, female, and the combination of the two), complete wholeness presented itself in the same forms: male-male, female-female, and male-female.

The notion of incompleteness and a desire to be whole are relatable to Sartre's view of *the Other* (Sartre's term for other people) and of love. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre theorizes about what it means to be a human being, what it means to exist in the presence of other human beings, and what it means to interact with the Other via love. According to Sartre, the self is both a conscious entity and a physical body. Theoretically, the self can exist without ever coming in contact with any other object (be it a person or some other thing). But, in order to adequately conceptualize one's existence, a being must come in contact with other things. The Other, therefore, is needed to form a conceptualization of what it means to be an individual human, which Sartre expresses by saying, "I need the Other in order to realize fully all the structures of my being."[4] Without the Other we are incomplete, just as Aristophanes suggests we are if we cannot find our other half.

Admittedly, there is a slight difference in the ways in which Aristophanes and Sartre address the idea of human incompleteness. Aristophanes (and by extension, Plato) had no conception of the way Sartre would come to define the self, as a product of the beings interacting with it. And, Sartre's notion of incompleteness is broader than what the quest for love might suggest by itself. But the similarities become more apparent as Sartre begins to focus on what love means for a being.

The being-in-love's ultimate goal is to completely merge with their lover. The reason for this has to do with the quest for self-identity. As Sartre puts it, "the Other holds a secret—the secret of what I am." [5] Lovers hold each other's essences; the secrets of both of their existences are within each other. Recall here that the Other provides a self with the means to conceptualize a human identity. The project of the lover is to possess the lover, to consume the Other into their own being, becoming complete.[6] Thus, when a being loves, it wishes to break the mental and physical barriers between the self and the Other, becoming a singular entity.

This notion is very similar to Aristophanes'. Two humans long for completeness; unfortunately both views conclude that such a unity is impossible. Aristophanes suggests that, given the choice to merge with our true beloved, there is not a person who would refuse; it is our true nature.[7] What keeps us from doing this is our standing

with the gods, who fear our wholeness. Aristophanes suggests that if we were ever to reconcile with the gods it may be possible for us to obtain a sense of completeness.[8] He leaves us with the sense that we have the potential to alter the minds of the gods. By contrast, Sartre argues that we could never actually unite with the Other. If such a process were possible and we were able to merge with the one we loved, we would destroy the individual that resides in each of our bodies. A unity with the Other would result in "the disappearance of otherness in the Other."[9] If the Other as such cannot exist, then the self has no way in which it can define its own existence. Thus, a negative progression would occur, wherein united lovers (becoming one entity) would hope to define themselves by incorporating more Others into their being until every person had become absorbed. Such a complete merger would leave no Other to provide any sort of meaning for this being's identity.

Another problem with love, according to Sartre, is that the individual willingly gives up his own freedom for the Other. When people enter into love relationships, they objectify themselves. Those seeking love work to make themselves desirable in the eyes of their beloveds—that is, to turn themselves into whatever their beloveds want them to be. Thus, Sartre's view of love asserts that there is a delicate, perhaps impossible balance to love. On some level, lovers relinquish portions of their freedom as they objectify themselves for their beloveds. However, mere objects cannot provide lovers with what they need from each other; freedom is the essence of being human. So the matter of love boils down to choice, freedom, and responsibility, as it often does for Sartre and his existentialist cohort. To engage in a meaningful relationship, lovers and beloveds must work together to ensure that they maintain their freedom.

Aristophanes suggests that there are three kinds of love one might partake in, all of which are based on gender. As mentioned above, the prehistoric humans that challenged the gods had existed in three distinct genders: male, female, and androgynous. A perfect union for the now-separated humans would imply that one would pair up with a person who came from a similar gendered pre-human (and specifically, the one from which they were cut). In his own treatment of these genders, Aristophanes, interestingly, seems to use the mythological tale as a means to critique his culture. Of the three kinds of love, the type in which males have been split from an entirely male entity are clearly Aristophanes' preference. Aristophanes criticizes the androgynous (male + female) or common type of relationship because it produces many adulterers and adulteresses. However, he describes the behavior of two males loving one another as manly; the males engaged in this kind of love are the manliest. The relationship he is envisioning at this point is between a man and a boy.[10] In a defensive tone, he claims that the manliness of such a relationship is evident given the sort of things the man and the boy become involved in (politics, for example). Aristophanes goes on to say, "When they are fully grown men, they are pederasts and naturally pay no attention to marriage and procreation, but are compelled to do so by the law; whereas they would be content to live unmarried with one another."[11] On this account, the best possible love is pederasty (a love shared between a young boy and an older man) seemingly because this type of love goes beyond the lust of the body. Aristophanes claims that the soul has a different agenda than the physical body; souls want something different from sexual intercourse, but Aristophanes is unsure of what, exactly, that entails.

It is important to note that part of Aristophanes' agenda is to promote pederasty as an acceptable practice. Aristophanes envisions the best loving relationship as a mentorship, where a mentor (an older man) engages a student (a young boy) both intellectually and physically. This practice may seem strange or even offensive to the modern reader, most likely due to issues of consent. How can a young boy freely and responsibly consent to being in a loving relationship with an older man? To understand Aristophanes' view as charitably as possible, we need to stress that at the core of the relationship is intellectual companionship. Two people who are each other's previously missing halves cultivate their friendship and pursue intellectual growth. If Aristophanes is not entirely clear about this, the possible relationships between love, sex, and intellectual growth are further developed by Socrates and his twentieth century partner, Russell.

Socrates presents his view of love by recollecting various conversations he had with Diotima, a woman of Mantinea, focusing on the nature of Eros, the personification of love. In all of the speeches prior to Socrates', Eros is considered to be a god and the speakers treat him as such. Socrates rejects his godly status, and this becomes a key part of his view.

According to Socrates, Eros is a being caught between the immortal nature of the gods and the mortal nature of humans. Eros, and by extension, love, is defined as a desire for the good and beautiful. Because Eros desires things that are good and beautiful he cannot be them or have them; gods possess these things, so it is impossible for Eros to be a god if he desires the things that the gods inherently possess.[12] And, because of his parents, Poros (the personification of resourcefulness) and Penia (the personification of poverty), Eros is always in flux between poverty and resourcefulness, between godliness and mortality. According to Diotima and Socrates, the philosopher is also between being completely wise and completely unknowing.[13] In fact, Eros is precisely a philosopher. He desires the beautiful and good; one of the most beautiful things is knowledge, thus Eros desires it. Eros does not have complete knowledge, only a love of knowledge, which is exactly what philosophy is.

The second portion of the speech develops the foundation of this doctrine of the in-between. Humans are lovers insomuch as they desire what is good.[14] The gods possess what is good; additionally they are immortal. Diotima makes the connection between the good, the immortal, and the mortal by saying that "the mortal nature seeks as far as possible to be forever immortal."[15] What Diotima implies as she continues is that because humans desire what is good, they have an inevitable connection with the immortal; it is what they desire because the immortal possess what is all good. Humans are naturally driven to sexually reproduce because it is beautiful and everlasting in the sense that birth keeps human beings immortal; by creating generations and generations of humans, humans are seemingly immortal.[16] Birth is the means by which humans get a small taste of the good the gods possess.

However, sexual reproduction is not the only way in which mortal humans may reproduce; it is possible for the soul to become pregnant. According to Diotima, "prudence and the rest of virtue" are the appropriate things to conceive and bear. The overall doctrine Diotima preaches at this point is that young men, who harbor undeveloped ideas, should engage in relationships with older men, who are more acquainted with wisdom. This is the "correct practice of pederasty."[17] This type of

relationship fosters a respect for wisdom, which is beautiful. The soul is searching for what is truly good and beautiful; wisdom fits these criteria. Thus, it is appropriate and correct for men to engage in a mentor-style relationship with young boys. With this relationship, better understanding will be achieved through a sort of cognitive intercourse.

Both Socrates (with Diotima) and Aristophanes assert that the sexual relationship—and the act of reproduction that only men and women can partake in—is less valuable than the kind of love a man and a boy can experience. Both conclude that the desires of the soul outweigh the biological urges of the body. Both also make an appeal to the intellect; Aristophanes suggests that pederasts are successful in politics, and Socrates asserts that only these men are capable of attaining wisdom. It is also within this realm of thought that Russell's ideas about the social practice of love should come to the forefront of the discussion.

Russell begins by asserting that society places too many limits on sexual behavior. He argues that conventional morality has made sexual freedom a taboo and that several social institutions have perpetuated this taboo so that those who dare to advocate sexual freedom are publicly chastised. He suggests that "fierce morality is generally a reaction against lustful emotions, and the man who gives expression to it is generally filled with indecent thoughts—thoughts which are rendered indecent, not by the mere fact that they have sexual content, but by the fact that morality has incapacitated the thinker from thinking cleanly and wholesomely on this topic."[18]

Those who wish to speak on the topic are generally thought of as perverted. Russell finds that it is humanity's strict morality that is to blame for this view. Morality is also at fault for those who become corrupted by excessive sexual thought. He holds that the Church's way of handling sex, attempting to ban the topic by making it a point of shame, has been a mistake because it makes people wish to avoid sex in all forms. That wish is ill-founded because sex is a natural impulse, which he compares to eating.[19] The person who hoards food experiences symptoms similar to a person who harbors or hoards sexual thoughts; in either case, that person is being denied their natural impulses. To this Russell suggests that "healthy, outward looking men and women are not to be produced by the thwarting of natural impulse, but by the equal and balanced development of all the impulses essential to a happy life."[20] In other words, Russell prescribes sexual freedom with some limitations. A balance must be achieved so that people are neither denying themselves sexual freedom because of social constraints nor abusing that freedom so that sexual activities and thoughts consume them.

Another point Russell makes is that the underlying idea of sexual freedom is the ability to freely choose a lover. He suggests that free love has benefits for society as a whole; his most concrete example is the artist. Art, for Russell, is a field that is inexorably connected with the freedom to love. He suggests that "societies that have been conventionally virtuous have not produced great art" and suggests that contemporary America is such a place; Americans are among the most religious or conventionally virtuous of the industrialized nations and, at least during Russell's lifetime, were importing much of their art.[21] What Russell suggests is that creativity goes hand in hand with being able to love who one chooses. Other fields seem to benefit from it as well, though most not as directly as art. In any case, the main idea is

that being able to love frees the mind from perversion and allows it to function better, which coheres well with Socrates' notion that the intellect functions best in the context of a close mentoring relationship between a man and a boy.

As with Sartre, balance is an issue that concerns Russell. But whereas Sartre is concerned with lovers finding a balance between freedom and objectification, Russell is concerned with lovers finding a balance between freedom and sexual obsession. Too much interference from society will disrupt lovers, but a total disregard for social convention will have a similarly damaging effect. The problem is that an unchecked focus on love, especially of sexual nature, has the potential to similarly crush the intellect. Repression and unchecked obsession are two sides of the same coin. Thus, a lover must neither give in to the kinds of repression society has offered nor let love (or sex) become be all consuming.

Russell, along with Socrates and Aristophanes, stress the intellectual benefits of loving relationships. Russell's view of sexual freedom suggests that those who love freely would be, undoubtedly, more creative. This, he argues, would be the case if society rethought its moral positions in relation to sex and love. Restriction breeds obsession, and this is detrimental to other modes of thinking. In the absence of a repressive morality, lovers can set out to use their intellect in more meaningful ways. And, just as we see in Aristophanes' and Socrates' speeches, liberation of the intellect, rather than physical pleasures, are at the core of Russell's message. Aristophanes argues that societal conventions like marriage and procreation are ignored by the best of lovers. For Aristophanes, companionship and intellectual growth are the essential traits of a loving relationship, not sexual pleasures. It is much the same in Socrates' view. Lovers are focused on that which the soul is seeking—wisdom and beauty. These things are not found in sexual desire, but rather through intellectual channels. The combined efforts of lovers to seek that which is good and beautiful defines what love is for Socrates. In all three accounts, lust takes the backseat to the intellect and is a core concept of love that has stretched through the ages.

All of these philosophers make clear that love is not simply lust and reproduction—it is something greater. Certainly, the drive to procreate must be considered and Plato accounts for it, but he quickly places it below the intellectual aspect of love, as does Russell. And just as Aristophanes views love as a drive to reunite with one's severed half, Sartre views love as a desire for completion and stable self-identity. If this desire is not futile, the key is for lovers to properly balance freedom and objectification. So the central theme common to all of the philosophers discussed above, is that love can be a beautiful thing if practiced in the best way. It can lead to a life of balance where one's identity is intact and reinforced through great friendships; with a lover, one can enhance the functionality of the intellect and improve the human condition.

Notes

1. Plato, *Symposium, 189 D.*
2. Ibid., 190 A–E.
3. Ibid., 191 D.
4. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 303.
5. Ibid., 475.
6. Ibid., 475–76.
7. Plato, *Symposium,* 192 E.
8. Ibid., 193 B.
9. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 477
10. Plato, *Symposium*, 192 A.
11. Ibid., 192 A–B.
12. Ibid., 202 D.
13. Socrates is famous for asserting that one can only know that they know nothing. That is, the certainty of our knowledge is highly questionable, despite our readiness to claim certainty. Philosophers, according to Socrates, realize that certainty is hard to attain, thus they are caught between the certain (completely wise) and the uncertain (completely unknowing).
14. Plato, *Symposium*, 205 E.
15. Ibid., 207 D.
16. Ibid., 206 C–E.
17. Ibid., 211 B.
18. Russell, "The Place of Sex Among Human Values," 327.
19. Ibid., 327–28.
20. Ibid., 329.
21. Ibid., 330.

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