

Philosophical *eros*: a twofold desire in Plato's dialogues*

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Abstract: The appropriation of the term *eros* by Plato in the *Symposium* culminates in: Socrates'/Diotima's speech. However there is a more specific sense of *eros*, which could be called philosophical *eros*. On the one hand, philosophical *eros* is the immediate consequence of the development of the *dynamis* by which one is capable of recognizing both the existence and the value of the Forms. On the other hand, the development of this same *dynamis* promotes the desire to transmit this *dynamis* to those regarded as a fertile ground to it. Understanding this twofold dimension of philosophical *eros* will shed light both on Plato's conception of philosophy and on Socrates, character of Plato's dialogues, as lover of beautiful boys.

Keywords: Plato. *Eros*. *Dynamis*.

***Eros* filosófico: um desejo ambivalente nos diálogos de Platão**

Resumo: A apropriação do termo *eros* por Platão no *Banquete* culmina no discurso de Sócrates/Diotima. Há em Platão, entretanto, um sentido específico de *eros*, o qual pode ser chamado de *eros* filosófico. Este é, por um lado, a consequência do desenvolvimento da *dynamis* pela qual alguém é capaz de reconhecer a existência e o valor das Ideias. Por outro lado, o desenvolvimento dessa *dynamis* conduz ao desejo de transmiti-la àqueles que são vistos como “terreno fértil”. Entender a ambivalência do *eros* filosófico contribui tanto para esclarecer a concepção filosófica de Platão quanto para compreender Sócrates, personagem dos diálogos, como amante de belos rapazes.

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Eros filosófico: un deseo ambivalente en los diálogos de Platón

Resumen: La apropiación de la palabra eros por Platón en el Banquete culmina en el discurso de Sócrates / Diotima. Hay en el texto de Platón, sin embargo, un sentido específico del eros, que puede ser llamado eros filosófico. Esto es, por una parte, la consecuencia del desarrollo de la *dýnamis* través de la cual se puede reconocer la existencia y el valor de las ideas. Por otra parte, el desarrollo de esta *dýnamis* conduce al deseo de transmitirla a aquellos que son vistos como “terreno fértil”. La comprensión de la ambivalencia del eros filosófico ayuda a clarificar no sólo la concepción filosófica de Platón, así como en qué sentido Sócrates es amante de los chicos hermosos.

Palabras clave: Platón. Eros. *Dýnamis*.

The right understanding of Plato’s conception of *eros* can be of great importance for clarifying how he sees some aspects of the psychology of a philosopher and also to have a clearer picture of Socrates’ character in his dialogues. Concerning the first point, I will try to show how the emergence of a specific form of *eros* is the consequence of a complete conversion of the philosopher’s soul, which also follows the acquisition of a certain *dynamis*. Concerning the second point, such understanding of *eros* will shed light on the philosopher’s behavior before people he sees as capable of being guided to the recognition of the existence and value of the highest objects of knowledge. I will begin by briefly alluding to Plato’s comprehensive conception of the human soul as tripartite and focusing on the element that is directly related to philosophical *eros*: the rational element.

In an important passage on the soul (*Republic*, 485d et seq.), Socrates states that if the desires (*epithymíai*) lean heavily towards an object, they become weaker for other objects, like in a diverted stream. As shown

by Charles Kahn (1996, p. 276),¹ a good understanding of that passage requires it to be read along with the statement that there are three types of desires (*epithymíai*) associated with each of the three elements of the soul (*Republic*, 580d). Kahn regards this last passage as a key for understanding the meaning of the claim that desires can be diverted towards different objects. According to the author, when considering both passages together, one could not conclude that for Plato the different kinds of desire direct themselves to any object whatsoever, nor could one conclude that desire comes from a single source and from there it is directed to different objects (KAHN, 1996, p. 278-279).

The text of the *Symposium*, still according to Kahn, supports this interpretation to the extent that *eros* is its main theme and the dialogue culminates in the presentation of a form of *eros* that is equivalent to the desire of the *logistikón* element of the soul. This desire, which he calls “rational desire”, has a specific object, namely, the good, as perceived by reason. Being so, the passage on the channeling of desires (*Republic*, 485d) would be better interpreted as referring only to the rational desire. Thus, desire could not be mistaken for a psychic energy originating from a common source that would be distributed to the various elements of the soul (KAHN, 1996, p. 279-280).

In another study Kahn (1987, p. 94) states that when Plato presented the Forms, in the *Symposium*, as being related to the Form of Beauty, he intended to indicate that the Forms are not only the object of knowledge, but also of desire. Following this view, the desire for the knowledge of the Forms, the highest kind of desire, would be a specific kind of the general rational desire for the good, which he calls “philosophical *eros*” (KAHN, 1996, p. 278).² He also argues that Plato sees the commitment to philosophy as something comparable to a religious conversion (KAHN, 1996, p.

¹ KAHN, 1987, p. 77-103.

² This is also in line with Bury’s conception of *eros* as philosophical impulse (BURY, 2010, p. xlvii).

273), and to illustrate the point he quotes passages from the *Symposium*, the *Phaedo* and the *Republic* where the philosopher is referred to as a lover whose passion (*eros*) for the ultimate object of knowledge makes his contact with it only describable in the language of sexual relations (KAHN, 1996, p. 275).

From here, one could proceed to argue that the practice of philosophy as depicted in the work of Plato is a very specific endeavor that cannot be taken to be the effect of a more or less unconscious desire for an unidentifiable good. Rather on the contrary, it implies a drive towards a specific kind of object which has to be recognized as existing and as being good.

If philosophical *eros* is understood as being as specific as Kahn depicts it, the question to be further pursued is that of the conditions of emergence of such philosophical *eros*, the clarification of which can be done with the aid of passages from the *Symposium*, the *Phaedrus* and the *Republic*.

First, I would like to propose that philosophical *eros*, as understood by Kahn, is specific not because its particular condition of emergence is a contact with an instance of the Beautiful, as a hasty reading of the *Symposium* as an isolated dialogue might suggest, but rather because it presupposes the capacity to see something that is an instance of a Form as an instance of that Form. Moreover, since philosophical *eros* is desire, it also implies the capacity to recognize the value of acquiring the knowledge of Forms, for one would not desire what one is not capable of recognizing as neither good nor valuable.

Now, if philosophical *eros* is directed at the knowledge of Forms, it must be accepted that it would be awakened by the consideration of any instance of a Form and not only by instances of the Form of Beauty³, even though the instances of the Form of Beauty must be somewhat eminent.

The *Phaedrus* seems to establish both these points when Socrates,

³ SANTAS, 1988, p. 34-39.

referring to the contemplation of the Forms in the soul's voyage through the region above the sky, states:

But beauty as I said before, shone in brilliance among those visions; and since we came to earth we have found it shining most clearly through the clearest of our senses; though wisdom is not seen by it, for wisdom would arouse terrible love, if such a clear image of it were granted as would come through sight, and the same is true of the other lovely realities; but beauty alone has this privilege and therefore it is most clearly seen and loveliest (PLATO, 2005, p. 485).

This passage alone would provide enough ground to sustain that philosophical *eros* is not awakened exclusively by beauty; but this point could be corroborated by an earlier passage of the same dialogue:

Few then are left which retain an adequate recollection of them; but these when they see here any likeness of the things of that other world, are stricken with amazement and can no longer control themselves, but they do not clearly perceive. Now in the earthly copies of justice and temperance and the others ideas which are precious to souls there is no light, but only a few, approaching the images through a darkling organs of sense, behold in them the nature of that which they imitate, and these few do this with difficulty. But that former time they saw beauty shining in brightness, when, with a blessed company – we following the train of Zeus, and others in that of some other god – they saw the blessed sight and vision and were initiated into that which is rightly called the most blessed of mysteries, which we celebrate in a state of perfection (...). (PLATO, 2005, p. 483-485).

Thus, an instance of beauty is not a necessary condition for triggering philosophical *eros*: it can also be aroused by instances of other Forms, provided that one is capable of grasping that they are instances of Forms.

It must be noted that in the *Symposium* (206c-209e), when Diotima introduces the distinction between one who is pregnant in body and one who is pregnant in soul, it is the beautiful, or the desire to procreate in the

beautiful, which in both cases awakens *eros*. In this passage, which precedes what is often called “the higher mysteries”, it is clear that even in the case of the lover who is pregnant in the soul, it is not the specific philosophical *eros* that is at play. This is so because in that case what he is pregnant with and can potentially produce is civic virtue, not epistemic knowledge.⁴

There are two distinct kinds of *eros* addressed in the two parts of Diotima’s speech. The first kind, dealt with in the lesser mysteries, is *eros* as a desire for immortality, which, as the priestess shows, can be fulfilled by generating in the beautiful by means of body or soul. This could be seen as a specific form of the general desire for the good, but does not include philosophy. The second, addressed only in the higher mysteries, is an even more specific kind which is the most original of them and the one that Plato wants most to elucidate, the philosophical *eros*.

Philosophical *eros* cannot be triggered in the first instance, i.e., in the case of the “lesser mysteries”, because the *dynamis* that leads to its appearance is absent both from the lover and from the beloved. If we compare the “learning process” implicit in the first part of Diotima’s speech, which is concerned with the relation between lover and beloved in view of civic virtue,⁵ with the one described in the “higher mysteries”, we can see that, in both cases, it is the beauty of a beautiful boy what triggers each process. However, in the first case the process is quite different from the second one. In the first, the one described in the lesser mysteries, it is implicit that a man, able to instruct a youngster in civic virtue, seeks a beautiful boy whom he takes to be fertile ground to his teachings.⁶ On the second case, that of the higher mysteries, we also have a kind of guidance, but one which enables the pupil to transform very soon his relation with the beautiful into a dialectical relation. The difference between the two processes may seem quite obvious, yet it makes

⁴ KAHN 1996, p. 272.

⁵ Cf. *Symposium*, 209a-209e.

⁶ Which is much in line with what Pausanias takes to be a relationship inspired by the celestial *eros*. Cf. *Symposium*, 180c-185c.

one wonder why there are two very different processes triggered by two contexts that appears to be identical, to extent that both implicitly involve the guidance of young men by a “pregnant” guide. But, in fact, there are major differences between the two contexts, and that leads further into the question of the conditions of emergence of philosophical *eros*.

The quoted passages from the *Phaedrus* aimed at supporting the thesis that philosophical *eros* could be triggered by the instances of any Form, and not only by an instance of the Form of Beauty. However, the mere encounter with instances of any Form is not sufficient for the awakening of philosophical *eros*; some other conditions must have been previously met. Such conditions are the existence of a specific nature and of a specific training, which together produce a special *dynamis*. Of course, what is decisive for allowing the “ladder of love” in the context of the higher mysteries is the presence of the philosophical *eros*, for it is the driving force of the dialectical search for a Form, which, in the case of the *Symposium*, is the Form of Beauty.

However, one must consider that even in the presence of the object capable of arousing it, i.e., an instance of a Form, unless it is perceived as an instance of a Form, philosophical *eros* is not awakened. Only a true philosopher or, at least, a promising apprentice, who has the appropriate nature and also enough philosophical training, can be erotically attracted to the higher objects of knowledge, the Forms. This is so because only in those cases is present the *dynamis*⁷ which enables to both grasp in the presence of some instances of Forms that they are instances of Forms and at the same time recognize the value of knowing them. And this *dynamis* is a condition to desire this kind of knowledge. Thus, it is the presence or the absence of such *dynamis* what explains the utter difference between the lovers’ disposition before beauty in the lesser and higher mysteries.⁸

⁷ The word *dynamis* is used here in the sense established by Socrates in the *Republic* (477c1-2): “Shall we say that faculties, powers, abilities [*dynameis*] are a class of entities by virtue of which we and all other things are able to do what we or they are able to do?”.

⁸ The best textual illustration of what I mean by that *dynamis* would be: *Republic*, 518c-d.

Since the lover in the latter case has already been guided and has already acquired the *dynamis* that makes him a philosopher, there is no other way of relating to the objects that can be subject to a philosophical treatment other than the philosophically erotic way.

All this is, of course, very elliptical in the *Symposium* itself, leaving to the *Republic* a major role in the clarification of the meaning of philosophical *eros*. If one accepts that in the *Republic* the path to true philosophy implies the existence of a very specific nature allied to a very specific education,⁹ one could begin to understand that the philosophical *eros*, as presented in the *Symposium* and further clarified in the *Phaedrus*, seems to be another way of presenting the *dynamis* necessary to philosophy in the *Republic*.

This *dynamis* which enables one to recognize the existence of a higher form of knowledge and its value has its seat in the rational element of the soul and being dependent both on nature and education allows for the formula: *physis + paideia = dynamis*.¹⁰ The acquisition of this *dynamis* is so closely related to philosophical *eros* because it implies the emergence of a desire for the kind of knowledge one is now capable of recognizing as existing and good.

It was the need to stress the strength and intensity which this desire must possess in order to be the driving force of such a difficult endeavor as philosophy that led Plato to use the word “*eros*” to refer to it, and that is also what justifies the employment of sexual language in relation to it, as stressed by Kahn (1996, p. 274-275).

But Plato uses still another vocabulary on the matter, that of initiation or, as also stressed by Kahn (1996, p. 273), that of a religious conversion. The acknowledgment of philosophy as a kind of conversion leads to a better understanding of the psychology of the philosopher and

⁹ See *Republic*, 487a and 492a.

¹⁰ This formula seems to be applicable not only to philosophy but to all kinds of *erga* performed in the city presented in the *Republic*.

of the Socrates depicted in Plato's dialogues. If the conversion to philosophy of one who truly has the appropriate nature and the right guidance involves the acquisition of a *dynamis* that implies, simultaneously and as an inescapable consequence, the emergence of a desire one must call "philosophical *eros*", then the radical character of this conversion must be considered when the interpreter approaches the figure of Socrates as a character of Plato's dialogues.

That leads to a second dimension of philosophical *eros* I would like to approach: the desire to generate in the beautiful, which is characteristic of *eros* as depicted by Diotima. This will entail the conclusion that philosophical *eros* is not only very specific, but also twofold.

In the "lesser mysteries", the one who is pregnant in soul is pregnant with discourses and teachings that can lead to civic virtue, and he senses an urgency to transmit it. In that context, the urgency to generate in the beautiful should be understood as the urgency to transmit ethical or political contents to a soul which is recognized as a fertile ground. The same understanding should be extended to philosophical *eros*: a man pregnant not only with ethical or political knowledge, but with "epistemic" knowledge is, likewise, erotically attracted¹¹ to young men he perceives as fertile ground to his teachings.

Socrates, the character of Plato's dialogues, could well be construed as a man who was once properly guided to the point of a radical conversion, when he acquired a *dynamis* that enabled him to recognize the existence and the value of the highest objects of knowledge. Such *dynamis* also produced simultaneously and inescapably an intense desire for these objects, as well as pregnancy and desire to transmit this same

¹¹ In the new subversive sense introduced by Diotima, which does not involve sex but only the genuine desire to promote virtue of soul. Note that not even in the "lesser mysteries" sex or sexual favours are mentioned as is insistently done by Pausanias in his speech. About Pausania's insistence on getting sexual favours from the *eromenos* in exchange for virtue, cf. *Symposium*, 182a 2-3; 182b1-3; 182c5-d1; 183d6-8; 184b5-6; 184c7-d3; 184c6-a5; 185a5-b5. Passages compiled by Alieva (2013, p. 154). On the fact that sexualized pederasty is not directly envisaged by Diotima's discourse (CORRIGAN, 2006, p. 145).

dynamis to the ones he recognized as potentially capable of acquiring it.

That is the reason why the *Symposium* indicates that he who has the appropriate nature and right guidance becomes a guide himself¹² when he acquires his own *dynamis* as a philosopher. This is the case both of Socrates, who was guided by Diotima and of the “guided” one in the “ladder of love”, who also becomes a guide.¹³

The specific and twofold form of *eros* that can be construed by the reader as “philosophical *eros*”, the most original among all the many ingenious appropriations Plato made of the term *eros* – in the *Symposium* or elsewhere –, could well allow a last remark about Socrates as a lover.

If philosophical *eros* is permanently operating in Socrates, much of his apparent absences of mind could be explained, as well as his erotic behavior towards beautiful young men. As far as he is concerned, one could say that philosophical *eros* is aroused in one of the two situations. The first situation would be whenever he comes to consider something that is an instance of a Form as an instance of that Form. That is the case whenever he engages in philosophical or dialectical quest, what seems to be an almost permanent state, due to the genuine nature of his “conversion”. The second kind situation is whenever he finds himself in presence of beauty of the soul, i.e., on the assumption that he is facing a philosophical nature ready to be guided.

An example of the twofold philosophical *eros* at play in Socrates could well be the passage of the *Charmides* where he, at least for a moment, is supposedly sexually attracted to Charmides.¹⁴ Many would consider such acts as a testament to the humanity of the man Socrates. But that would not do justice to the literary genius of Plato.

The alternative interpretation I propose is that Socrates’ “arousal” before Charmides’ physical beauty in the *Charmides* should be construed

¹² On the guide/guided character of (BLONDELL, 2006).

¹³ Cf. *Symposium*, 210 b-c.

¹⁴ *Charmides*, 155c-d.

either as an example of what happens when the philosopher grasps physical beauty as an instance of the Form of Beauty or as an example of Socrates' erotic disposition before someone he sees as having a beautiful soul.¹⁵

If this interpretation is correct, then it's not incoherent that Plato's Socrates may love beautiful boys and pursue them¹⁶ and at the same time decline Alcibiades sexual favors at the end of the *Symposium*. What he sees in Alcibiades or Charmides that makes him erotically attracted to them is not their physical beauty, but rather the prospect of having before him the beauty proper to a beautiful soul, which constitutes the fertile ground which he could use to "procreate in the beautiful", i.e., transmit his own *dynamis* for philosophy.

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¹⁵ This thesis would need further support, but I think it becomes more plausible when one compares *Charmides* 155c-d and *Phaedrus* 250e-256e. Note that in the *Phaedrus*' passage Socrates describes the attitude of a non-initiated or corrupted man before physical beauty, contrasting it to that of an initiated one. The description of what happens with Socrates before Charmides' beauty could be, as the similarity of language indicates in the two passages, a brief illustration of what is more extensively depicted in the *Phaedrus* as the reaction of the initiated when he sees beauty; either in the body or in the soul.

¹⁶ Cf. *Symposium*, 213c-d; *Lysis*, 206a; *Meno*, 76b-c; *Gorgias*, 481d and 482^a-b; *Protagoras*, 309a.

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