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Grotesque Forms: ἔρωϑ and σῶμα in the Symposium

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***Abstract:** The purpose of this paper is to examine the conception of the body and its relationship to desire articulated by Aristophanes in Plato's Symposium. The paper begins by analyzing the progress of Aristophanes creation myth and determining the role of the body as origin, hindrance, and aid of love. Then the paper compares the account of Aristophanes to the experience of Alcibiades. Lastly the paper compares the account to the one put forward by Plato's Socrates via Diotima. Through this multi-step analysis, we reconstruct a unique conception of the body not found in other works by Plato and come to better understand the role of the body in Plato's account of desire as a whole.*

Introduction

Throughout Plato's corpus, it is a common trend for the body to take a backseat in favor of the mind. For many of Plato's speakers, the body is at best a hindrance to the mind's ascendance towards divinity and a constant source of vile distractions. In addition, accounts from advocates of bodily pleasure, such as Thrasymachus, are usually superficially constructed and only serve to be dismantled by Socrates. This trend, however, is seemingly interrupted in the *Symposium*, Plato's dialogue centered around the investigation of love. Here we see the comic playwright Aristophanes invoke a different attitude towards the body. For him, the examination of love must begin with the nature of humanity, and his speech embarks on an absurd creation myth, involving circular primordial humans, divine violence, and then somehow ending with an account of love. But at every moment, he is always making use of bodily imagery and metaphor.

An investigation of this bodily account of love will be the subject of this paper. First, it is necessary to consider how Aristophanes identifies the body and events centered around it as the origin of love. Second, we will examine how Aristophanes portrays the body as a hindrance to the activity of love and human life. Third, the body will be re-examined as an aid to the activity of love and an avenue for uniquely human experiences. Fourth, Alcibiades' speech will be investigated as a phenomenological account of love. Finally, it will be asked why Plato included this account and to what degree (if at all) he agrees with it. Through this process, we will be able to unveil a unique attitude towards the body, one that is rarely expressed in Plato's work.

Body as Origin of Love

Whereas Phaedrus, Pausanias, and Eryximachus begin their speeches with an immediate examination of the god ἔρωϑ, Aristophanes takes a different approach and begins looking into the nature of mankind. For Aristophanes, a proper understanding of love begins by examining the nature of the human condition. The explanation then takes a unique and absurd turn when Aristophanes describes a creation myth involving a race of circular beings of three sexes.

The three sexes, I may say, arose as follows. The males were descended from the Sun, the females from the Earth, and the hermaphrodites from the Moon, which partakes of either sex, and they were round and they went round, because they took after their parents. And such, gentlemen, were their strength and energy, and

such their arrogance, that they actually tried - like Ephialtes and Otus in Homer - to scale the heights of heaven and set upon the gods.¹

There are several observations that can be made from Aristophanes account, but the primary sentiment is the absurdity of his description. Eryximachus' laughter throughout the speech is understandable in light of these multi-limbed, clown-like figures rolling about the earth. Here we can see the absurd nature within the human body that Aristophanes begins to reveal. In addition, in this older, more unified state, humanity possessed such strength, energy, and arrogance, that we sought out to usurp the gods themselves. In response Zeus:

cut them all in half just as you or I might chop up sorb apples for pickling, or slice an egg with a hair. And as each half was ready he told Apollo to turn its face, with the half-neck that was left, toward the side that was cut away - thinking that the sight of such a gash might frighten it into keeping quiet - and then to heal the whole thing up. So Apollo turned their faces back to front, and, pulling in the skin all the way round, he stretched it over what we now call the belly - like those bags you pull together with a string - and tied up the one remaining opening so as to form what we call the navel. As for the creases that were left, he smoothed most of them away, finishing off the chest with the sort of tool a cobbler uses to smooth down the leather on the last, but he left a few puckers round about the belly and the navel, to remind us of what we suffered long ago.²

Multiple observations can be drawn from this passage. First is the physicality of the description; the bodies of these primordial humans cease to be bodies inhabited by consciousnesses, and become mere objects, comparable to apples or eggs. The intervention of divinity in response to feelings of greatness reduces their bodies to mere matter, subject to a horrific description involving destruction and painful reconstruction. Furthermore, the comparison between Zeus and a cobbler worsens the image. The human body is in this moment passive material, warped into an unnatural state. The human body, to some beautiful, become simple leather under Aristophanes account, dead flesh, subject to warping by violent forces.

Next there is a furthering of the absurd imagery of the body. The new form these humans are worked into is described in grotesque terms; skin is torn, stretched, and smoothed over, the modern human body now becomes, not a subject of artistic beauty, but an object of warped disgust. Our current state is far from natural, our current bodies are detached from our true nature, our origins. We are always already in a state of warped existence, that is, our current bodies are by nature unnatural.

Finally, our bodies, in their current revolting state, are molded in such a way to be a reminder of past transgressions. Our bodies are not just mutilated and torn apart, but are done so in such a way as to remind us of our failed attempt at divinity and our loss of strength and power. For Aristophanes, our bodies, in their current state, are a sign of our weakness and frailty. Indeed, the body now becomes a source of humility and shame.

Unlike other speakers, who connect love with a divine experience, one in which we connect with a higher realm of ideas, for Aristophanes, the very fact that we are not divine is where love begins; the fact that we inhabit physical bodies that can be, and are, horrifically

¹ Plato *Symposium* 190b

² Plato *Symposium* 190c

destroyed, is where the examination of love starts. This places love specifically within the realm of humanity, instead of being a drive towards the divine. Love becomes an activity wholly centered around the human. Our inadequacy and the aftermath of a break with divinity become the center of love in Aristophanes account.

Body as Hindrance

In the aftermath of violent divine action, Aristophanes goes on to describe the forlorn status of the surviving humans.

... when the work of bisection was complete it left each half with a desperate yearning for the other, and they ran together and flung their arms around each other's necks, and asked for nothing better than to be rolled into one. So much so, that they began to die of hunger and general inertia, for neither would do anything without the other. And whenever one half was left alone by the death of its mate, it wandered about questioning and clasping in the hope of finding a spare half-woman - or a whole woman, as we should call her nowadays - or a half man.³

Here Aristophanes identifies this splitting as the origin of widespread pain. In addition to the physical trauma, there is immediate emotional pain as the divided parts throw themselves upon one another in the desire to be made one again. Here we can identify a new aspect of humanity's psyche: a drive to reunite. Whereas we were previously connected with one another in a way that was at once both physical and psychological, the act of splitting created new beings lacking this unity, yet craving it. We are by nature meant to be unified with another, and yet our physical existence denies us of such a connection. Aristophanes outlines this most perfectly when he seems to interrupt his drawn out metaphor and explain the core of his claim about love.

So you see, gentlemen, how far back we can trace our innate love for one another, and how this love is always trying to reintegrate our former nature, to make two into one, and to bridge the gulf between one human being and another.⁴

There is a drive towards unity that all human beings feel, considering the violent splitting committed by the gods. Unfortunately, in our current state, such a unity is an impossibility. Despite any clinging and grasping, humans are doomed to a loneliness that will never be fully repaired. Humans are condemned to solitude and their embodied nature is a constant reminder to this and an eternal barrier to the unity they seek.

Even the sexual act, which is identified as a kind (yet baser) form of love by some of the previous speakers, is for Aristophanes but an expression of the desire for unity.

Zeus felt so sorry for them that he devised another scheme. He moved their privates around to the front, for of course they had originally been on the outside - which was now the back - and they had begotten and conceived not upon each other, but, like the grasshoppers, upon the earth. So now, as I say, he moved their members round to the front and made them propagate among themselves, ...⁵

³ Plato *Symposium* 191c

⁴ Plato *Symposium* 191d

⁵ Plato *Symposium* 191c

What is notable here is the redirection that Aristophanes places upon the sexual act. It is not directed towards procreation, something Plato explicitly departs from when Diotima describes procreation as the attempt at immortality that all humans desire. Rather than the sexual act being directed towards self-interested reproduction it is directed towards a connection with another that goes far beyond a simply physical interaction.

Body as Aid

Yet for all the harm and pain our embodied nature exposes us to, Aristophanes does not wholly condemn us to a miserable existence.

What I am trying to say is this - that the happiness of the whole human race, women no less than men, is to be found in the consummation of our love, and in the healing of our dismembered nature by finding each his proper mate.⁶

Despite our torn bodies, there is still a chance to heal our split psyche by uniting with one another. Further, the mending of this split nature will deliver us to a greater realm of happiness. In our previous nature, we did not engage in love and, despite its traumatic origin and the painful barriers that our newfound bodies condemn us to, we are brought into a new realm of interaction possessing untold happiness.

This experience of searching and reunification is uniquely human. The gods, possessing immortality and perfection in all things, have very little in terms of meaningful relationships. Their battles are meaningless since they may never die and their affection for each other is only articulated in the sexual act. For humanity, however, this is not the case. The mutilated bodies we inhabit due to the god's actions encourage us to seek one another out for a greater kind of relationship, one that we can sometimes only express in a sexual act but which transcends any attempt to describe, as articulated by Aristophanes:

It is such reunions as these that impel men to spend their lives together, although they may be hard put to it to say what they really want with one another, and indeed, the purely sexual pleasures of their friendship could hardly account for the huge delight they take in one another's company. The fact is that both their souls are longing for a something else - a something to which they can neither of them put a name, and which they can only give an inkling of in cryptic sayings and prophetic riddles.⁷

Love here becomes the unique capability of humanity; that feeling of attachment that goes beyond physical expression and verbal explanation, and something that the gods, with all their divinity, could never understand or partake in. Our bodies now take on a contradictory nature: on the one hand condemning us to an isolated existence, always reminding us of our weakness and inadequacy; on the other opening up to us a realm of relationship that transcends our embodied nature and brings the greatest kind of joy and flourishing. An important observation to be made is the ultimate irrelevance of our bodies (as sexually differentiated) in our ability to access this higher realm of happiness.

⁶ Plato *Symposium* 191c

⁷ Plato *Symposium* 192d

The man who is a slice of the hermaphrodite sex, as it was called, will naturally be loved by women - the adulterer - for instance, and women who run after men are of a similar descent - as, for instance, the unfaithful wife. But the woman who is a slice of the original female is attracted by women rather than by men - in fact she is a Lesbian - while men who are slices of the male are followers of the male...⁸

For Aristophanes, the love shared between persons, regardless of the nature of their bodies, is always deserving of being called love and treated equally. Despite its body-centric language, this account does not discriminate based upon the specific features that our bodies have, and the notion of beauty never enters into Aristophanes language -- for him, we are all bodies. This is a unique shift that is not emulated in the other speeches. For Pausanias, there is a more respectable and a more base kind of love determined by the bodies of those involved; the baser kind belonging to those that seek the female body and the respectable for those that seek the male body. Even in Diotima's speech, those that enjoy the more spiritual kind of connection will prefer the male body, and are also drawn at first to love beautiful appearances in the movement of the body towards loving the beautiful itself. Despite his greater focus upon the body than the rest of the speakers, Aristophanes is able to escape this hierarchy of bodies and assert the egalitarian nature of his conception of love.

The Phenomenological Account of Alcibiades

An interesting break in the discussion occurs with the entrance of Alcibiades. He makes his entrance at the end of the round of speeches and, being quite drunk, embarks on a long eulogy of Socrates at the request of Eryximachus. This speech is unique in that it is not an abstract investigation into the origin, meaning, or qualities of love. Instead it is a direct account of a lover on their experience with love. Throughout his speech, Alcibiades unveils his great affection for Socrates and his attempts (and failures) to have it expressed. This account is different from the others in that we can consider it a phenomenological account -- that is, a description of love as it is experienced.

Examining Alcibiades account reveals some interesting features, particularly when he begins to recount his physical advances. Obsessed with Socrates, Alcibiades repeatedly attempts to create a sexual encounter, first in the gym, then in various dinner dates. When he is finally able to keep Socrates long enough that he must spend the night, and states openly his feelings, he senses that he may have "registered a hit" and then moves to embrace Socrates under the covers:

So I got up, and, without giving him a chance to say a word, I wrapped my own cloak round him - for this was in the winter - and, creeping under his shabby old mantle, I took him in my arms and lay there all night with this godlike and extraordinary man...⁹

This description of Socrates reveals an attitude very similar to that expressed by Aristophanes. Despite its emphasis upon a physical action, the relative beauty of the two persons is not relevant. For Alcibiades, Socrates' less than beautiful appearance is no barrier for his affection. He nonetheless moves to embrace Socrates as they sleep together. There is something about

⁸ Plato *Symposium* 193c

⁹ Plato *Symposium* 219c

Socrates that appeals to him and that initiates his affection beyond a simple physical attraction. This seems to depart directly from Diotima's account, which begins the ascent towards a contemplation of the beautiful with an enjoyment of physical beauty.

Nowhere does Alcibiades articulate a desire for a sexual encounter for the sake of pleasure, yet when Socrates does not return his advances and they simply sleep beside each other the entire night, Alcibiades is humiliated and angered. For what reason is he angered? For Alcibiades, there was something to be sought beyond pleasure, but what was it? Many of the speakers claim that in the act of love, what is desired is a movement towards greater virtue. This is very well displayed in Pausanias' account.

But suppose that he had yielded because he believed in his lover's virtue, and he hoped to be improved by such an association; then, even if he discovered in the end that he had been duped by an unholy blackguard, there would still have been something noble in his mistake, for he, too, would have shown himself for what he was - the kind of person who will do anything for anybody for the sake of progress in the ways of virtue.¹⁰

Here there is a progression towards virtue that is gained in the act of love, but this kind of desire to claim an abstract quality does not seem very important to Alcibiades. Instead, we see him articulate a much more personal desire, a kind of attachment.

I don't know whether anybody else has ever opened him up when he's been being serious, and seen the little images inside, but I saw them once, and they looked so godlike, so golden, so beautiful, and so utterly amazing that there was nothing for it but to do exactly what he told me.¹¹

It is not Socrates' body, and possible pleasures from it, that Alcibiades desires, nor is it some abstract principle he thinks he can gain from the interaction. What Alcibiades desires is the person Socrates himself. The being that inhabits the physical body before him is the subject of his desire. This unusual centering and de-centering of the body is critical to Aristophanes' claim. On the one hand, Alcibiades expresses his desire in a bodily fashion, and despite his great strength and beauty, his rejection--that is, his failure in a bodily practice--puts him in a place of humiliation and sadness. Yet the consummation of a bodily act is not the goal of his desire: it only functions as an expression of it. His core desire is to access Socrates' being, to overcome the barrier created by bodies and become one with his beloved.

Why Plato Includes the Account

Perhaps the most important question is, after having developed a proper understanding of this bodily account, for what reason Plato included Aristophanes' speech. Since it is not advocated, and even comes under criticism from Plato's Socrates, it is fair to claim that Plato does not consider this to be his preferred account of love. To better understand the place of this account within Plato's thought, we must examine the conception of love Plato puts forward, and what specific criticism he levels against Aristophanes' account.

¹⁰ Plato *Symposium* 185b

¹¹ Plato *Symposium* 217a

The account Plato puts forward is first developed by a short series of questions leveled against Agathon by Socrates. Over the course of the questioning, Agathon is forced to essentially overturn his conception of love, particularly the fact that it is lacking in what is beautiful. The line of questioning that leads to this conclusion is critical for the way in which Socrates construes desire. Socrates states that love, since it is always *of* something and never of nothing, must necessarily be directed towards some external object. In addition, this object must not be already owned by the one doing the act of loving, otherwise the object would already be possessed and not longed for. In this moment, love is constructed by Socrates to be a kind of lack. There is something deficient within the lover, an emptiness that then becomes a desire directed towards some external object.

At this point we can see a close parallel between Socrates and Aristophanes. For both, love is a desire to fill an emptiness felt by the lover. The human condition, for them, is fundamentally understood as being subject to a feeling of lack or absence. In the case of Aristophanes, our embodied nature is directly contrary to our psychological nature that drives towards a unity with another, while for Socrates love itself is lacking in the beautiful and the good and thus drives after them.

The divergence however can be found once Socrates, through Diotima, levels a criticism directly against Aristophanes' account.

I know it has been suggested, she continued, that lovers are people who are looking for their other halves, but as I see it, Socrates, Love never longs for either the half or the whole of anything except the good. For men will even have their hands and feet cut off if they are once convinced that those members are bad for them. Indeed I think we only prize our own belongings in so far as we say that the good belongs to us, and the bad to someone else, for what we love is the good and nothing but the good.¹²

At first glance, the section is confusing. It appears that Socrates claims that desiring after a half person is misleading, since we never desire half of anything but instead, the whole of it. Thus, Aristophanes' account is wrong, since it misses the real object of love. In addition, it is added that we only ever desire the good, with seemingly little cause to support such a claim.

This criticism seems to be rather lacking. At first, Socrates appears to be misunderstanding Aristophanes' account. Aristophanes does not claim that we desire the half of just anything, but that we desire another person with whom we feel can fill a void integral to our being as embodied subjects. Socrates is completely missing this and is misconstruing the account by claiming that it is a desiring after half of something. Finally, he seems to just slap on to the end of his critique that we desire the good, thus redirecting the object of love from another embodied person to an abstract principle.

However, upon closer examination we can see that there is a deeper dimension to the claim. Socrates is willing to grant that in our experience we see ourselves as desiring another embodied person, but we only truly desire them insofar as we consider them good for us. Adopting Aristophanes' bodily language, Socrates compares harmful lovers to harmful limbs; in both cases, we would willingly remove them since they only did us harm. Thus, Socrates' core argument is that, since we only desire others insofar as they are good for us, it can be claimed

¹² Plato *Symposium* 205e

that despite the good residing in a specific, embodied subject, we are really loving the good that is within them.

Given this, it becomes much clearer why Socrates goes on to describe, through Diotima, the movement away from loving the beauty within an embodied person towards loving abstract beauty and finally towards loving the good itself.

Looking at each of the speeches, then, it can be concluded that Plato outright dismisses the speeches of Phaedrus, Pausanias, Eryximachus, and Agathon for their shallow analysis of love. They misunderstand the nature of love, drawing it up as already being good and beautiful, being a contract of sorts for the betterment of the parties involved. However, when it comes to the bodily account of Aristophanes, Plato considers this to be a much more valid account, so much so that he even comes to agree with it in some respects-- namely the relationship between lack and desire. However, due to its disregard for abstract beauty in favor of an emphasis on embodied persons, Plato must also dismiss the account in favor of one that centers the experience of love around an encounter with the good and beauty as abstract forms.

Conclusion

Among the various accounts of love put forward by the speakers in Plato's *Symposium*, perhaps the most human account, the one that most speaks to us as human beings rather than as just contemplative observers, is that put forward by Aristophanes. To him, our nature as not just contemplative thinkers, but contemplative thinkers inhabiting an embodied existence, must serve as the basis for an account of the experience of love.

The purpose of this paper has been to flesh out and better understand Aristophanes' account. In order to accomplish this, we have examined the role of the body as an origin, hindrance, and aid to the activity of love. For Aristophanes, the fact that we inhabit physical bodies instead of existing as disembodied minds serves as the origin of love, because it creates a desire for unity with another that transcends any physical partnership. In addition to this, the body exposes humanity to a horrific realm of pain and destruction that ultimately keeps us forever separated from one another. However, the fact that we seek to overcome this bodily handicap and seek out relationships in a uniquely human form opens an avenue to flourishing and joy that even the gods cannot understand, serves to ease this pain.

In addition, we have compared it to the phenomenological account of love displayed by Alcibiades. The experiences described by Alcibiades most readily matches up with the account of Aristophanes, due to the emphasis it places on bodily performance and the desire directed, not towards an abstract principle of good or beauty, but towards the real embodied Socrates before him.

Finally, we have attempted to understand why, despite its accuracy, the account is ultimately dismissed by Plato. It has been claimed that although Plato places higher value on this account than the others, he identifies its overemphasis on the body as the locus of love as a defect that derails any human advancement towards a virtue oriented good life.

Throughout the course of Plato's works, we see a frequent dismissal of the body and a consideration that only deems it a threat to advancement towards the Good itself. However, within the *Symposium*, we see this trend broken, if only for one speech, where Plato has Aristophanes put forward a bodily account of love that is not dismissed outright. In fact, Plato goes as far as to adopt part of the account, namely the importance of lack and its relation to desire, for his own description of love. Here, we see a unique instance of Plato acknowledging, if only for a moment, the importance of our embodied nature as persons and the role it plays in our lives.

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