

PLATO ON ERŌS

MANUEL CRUZ ORTIZ DE LANDÁZURI*

SUMMARY: 1. Introduction. 2. Erōs in *Symposium*. 3. Love towards Beauty as a Dialogical and Practical Process. 4. Love for Individuals. 5. Friendship in the *Symposium*. 6. Erōs in the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*. 7. Erōs and Sublimation. 8. Conclusions.

1. INTRODUCTION

ONE of the main problems concerning Plato's doctrine on love in the *Symposium* is making a theory that defines love as desire towards the form of Beauty (reaching its highest point in the intellectual field) compatible with personal and sensitive love. If love is desire towards beauty itself then it might seem that true love comes only in the contemplation of beauty. Therefore, the previous steps in the ascent are just instrumental and intermediate levels making personal love a necessary step that needs to be overcome. In the best of the cases, what is loved in the other would not be the other itself, but the way in which that particular person participates in the form of Beauty. The aim of this paper is to show that Plato's concept of love in the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus* is not intellectualistic in a strong sense. Instead, these Platonic dialogues offer a new concept of love that goes beyond sensitive desires. I wish to argue that the contemplative life that Plato proposes for true lovers does not entail a rejection of love for individuals but rather it entails a new way of looking at beauty within the individuals. On one hand, I argue that Plato's contemplation of Beauty continues in the action. On the other hand, I deal with some problems of interpretation that arise when Plato's concept of *erōs* is compared with Aristotle's *philia*, and for this reason I will discuss some of the main recent interpretations of these dialogues.

Before going on with the analysis of the platonic texts it is necessary to clarify what is meant by "intellectualism" when applied to a theory of love. Intellectualism in a strict sense is any ethical doctrine that focuses only on the role of the intellect for doing what is right or wrong. Intellectualism in a loose sense is any ethical doctrine that places the good life in the pursuit of intellectual growth (*vita contemplativa*). A theory of love might be intellectualistic when it places love as a means for the intellectual activity. Plato's theory

* mcruz@unav.es, Universidad de Navarra, Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, Campus Universitario, 31009 Pamplona, Navarra, España.

of love has usually been interpreted as intellectualistic in the sense that love would be for him some kind of desire that reaches its highest peak in the intellectual contemplation of the forms. Love would be for him a means and not an end in itself.¹ There have been three kinds of intellectualistic interpretation in the last several decades:

i) The individual, for Plato, would not be a direct object of love, but only a necessary step on the way upwards to what is most pure and divine; the Form of Beauty. Love for individuals would be just instrumental and thus there wouldn't be a place for real personal love.²

ii) There are different theories of love in *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*. In *Symposium* love is a desire towards what is mostly intellectual (the forms). In *Phaedrus* there seems to be a place for interpersonal love relations. Plato's vision of love in *Symposium* would be intellectualist, while in *Phaedrus* Plato seems to have changed his view.³

iii) Plato's theory of love can be interpreted with a Freudian scheme in which the desire for sensible beauty does not reach satisfaction and there is sublimation towards artistic and intellectual fields. This sublimation in Plato's theory would be a process in which sensitive and sexual love is rejected while desire focuses on intellectual activities.

I would like to argue against these views showing that there is some kind of misinterpretation of the Platonic texts. An intellectualistic view of love is possible only when we admit that Plato had a strong theory of Ideas in which the best life is found in pure intellectual contemplation. This in turn ignores the sensitive and personal aspects of human life.⁴ As I will attempt to show,

¹ See L. ROBIN, *La théorie platonicienne de l'amour*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 1964, pp. 169-170; V. BROCHARD, *Sur le Banquet de Platon*, in *Études de philosophie ancienne et de philosophie moderne*, Librairie Félix Alcan, Paris 1912, p. 83.

² G. VLASTOS, *The Individual as Object of Love in Plato*, in *Platonic Studies*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1983, pp. 3-42; J. M. E. MORAVCSIK, *Reason and Eros in the Ascent Passage of the Symposium*, in J. P. ANTON and G. L. KUSTAS (eds.), *Essays in Ancient Greek Philosophy*, State University of New York Press, Albany 1971, pp. 285-302.

³ M. NUSSBAUM, *The Fragility of Goodness*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1986, p. 201; G. SANTAS, *Plato and Freud. Two Theories of Love*, Basil Blackwell, New York 1988, pp. 69-71; N. KREFT, *Das Problem der Gegenseitigen Liebe im Lysis, Symposium und Phaidros*, in C. HORN (ed.), *Platon. Symposium*, Akademie, Berlin 2012, pp. 207-221.

⁴ On the other hand there have also been attempts to understand the doctrine of *erōs* in the *Symposium* from a practical point of view, without paying attention to any link between *erōs* and contemplation. See R. WEDGWOOD, *Diotima's Eudaemonism: Intrinsic Value and Rational Motivation in Plato's Symposium*, «Phronesis», 54 (2009), pp. 297-325. Wedgwood understands the possession of beauty (which is love's goal) as a suitable relation in respect to an intrinsic value. It seems that he wants to highlight the practical perspective of love as desire towards beauty, but he does not consider contemplation as the authentic form of possessing beauty (which is, in fact, a fundamental point in Plato's doctrine). In this sense, although his interpretation is far from being intellectualistic, it is far from being platonic.

this ideal of life is not Plato's, and the intellectualistic approach presupposes too much about the role of Ideas and the contemplative life Plato has in mind. If we understand Plato's philosophy as an ideal of contemplation and action it is possible to understand the role of Ideas in human life in a broader and richer sense.

2. ERŌS IN SYMPOSIUM

The discussion about Plato's doctrine of love is generally focused in some passages of *Symposium*. It is not so easy, however, to know Plato's doctrine in these passages unless we consider the setting and structure of this dialogue.⁵ Thus, there are several points that must be considered before going on with the main interpretations:

i) First of all, in order to understand Plato's thought in this dialogue it seems important to consider the setting of this dialogue; a dinner party. The characters are members of Athens' high society and each one represents distinct people of the aristocracy: a tragic writer, a doctor, a comedic writer, and a sophist.

What is the role of these speeches in the plot of the dialogue? Does Plato use each of these speeches to present a big picture of love with different perspectives? It does not seem to be the case. What Plato is doing is to contrast Socrates' philosophical view with other ordinary views.⁶ Plato tries to give a new notion of *erōs*, different from the popular views of his time,⁷ in particular, trying to clarify the role of *erōs* in a philosophical education.⁸ It is then possible to find a structure in the dialogue that would explain the role of the different speeches.⁹

⁵ In the *Symposium* we do not find the arguments in a clear way, just because it is more a philosophical drama than a philosophical treatise. The argument of the dialogue must be found through the narrative setting with all its implicit elements. See R. WARDY, *The Unity of Opposites in Plato's Symposium*, «Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy», 23 (2002), p. 57.

⁶ See C. ROWE, *The Symposium as a Socratic Dialogue*, in J. LESHNER, D. NAILS, and F. SHEFFIELD (eds.), *Plato's Symposium. Issues in Interpretation and Reception*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 2006, p. 21.

⁷ See B. EFFE, *Platon und die Päderastie. Phaidros 256 b-d und die platonische Eros-Theorie*, in M. VAN ACKEREN (ed.), *Platon Verstehen*, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt 2004, pp. 141-142. In Euripides' *Hyppolytus* we find the tragic representation of *erōs* as a pleasurable desire that brings also the greatest pains, being described as a random force that can lead to ruin (348-355, 525-544).

⁸ See L. BRISSON, *Agathon, Pausanias, and Diotima in Plato's Symposium: Päderastia and Philosophia*, in J. LESHNER, D. NAILS, and F. SHEFFIELD (eds.), *Plato's Symposium*, cit., pp. 247-248.

⁹ Diez tried to show the formal and symbolic structure of the dialogue. The first few speeches exemplify the common views (*doxa*), whereas Socrates' speech tries to reach the truth (*alētheia*). See G. DIEZ, *Platons Symposion. Symbolbezüge und Symbolverständnis*, «Symbolon», 4 (1978), p. 69.

ii) We find several speeches about the nature of *erōs* with very different approaches. Only the speech of Socrates, that puts forward the doctrine learned from Diotima, tries to develop a philosophical concept of love.¹⁰ The question is: does Plato develop here a complete theory of love or is he just trying to clarify the concept of love in relation to the mere opinion of the others? Plato tries to develop a philosophical notion on the nature of love, but he is not enunciating a complete theory of love. In fact, with Diotima's teaching, he is trying to do two things: to correct the popular views on love (*erōs* is not a beautiful god or the most powerful of Gods, but rather he lacks beauty and tries to pursue it), and to present a new philosophical concept of love showing the role that it plays for the philosophical (contemplative) life.

iii) After Socrates' speech, there is a sudden entrance of Alcibiades at the dinner party. What role does Alcibiades' speech play in the discussion? Alcibiades speech is not philosophical, rather he just tells us of his experience of love with Socrates. In this sense, it seems that Plato is trying to show the way that Socrates has tried to live the doctrine learned from Diotima with his disciple.

These three points seem really important in understanding Plato's motivation when writing about love in this dialogue as well as what he wants to show us with his doctrine of love. It is necessary to consider at least briefly if Plato is proposing a complete theory of love or rather he wants to refute some common visions of love and show that the phenomenon of *erōs* is richer and deeper than those opinions. In order to understand Plato's doctrine on love it is necessary to consider the structure of Socrates' (Diotima's) speech, that goes as follows:

i) Refutation of the popular view (Agathon's) of Eros as a great god. Eros is desire and, as such, it lacks beauty and goodness (199 c-201 c)

ii) Mythical narration of the birth of Eros and the qualities it has, namely, that love is somewhere between ugliness and beauty as well as desire towards beautiful things (201 d-204 b).

iii) Philosophical clarification of the myth: love is desire towards the possession of goodness and love is desire towards immortality (204 b-207 a).

iv) New popular account of love: the way to satisfy this desire towards immortality (which is the essence of love) is with the realization of spiritual works in the artistic and moral fields. For instance, what the famous artists and lawyers did and are now remembered due to their works (207 a-209 e).

v) Final philosophical doctrine on love: it is only the contemplation of Beauty itself that can bring true happiness (209 e-212 b).

Socrates' speech is a process of philosophical comprehension on the nature of love. It begins with the refutation of popular views and goes to a deeper

¹⁰ See F. SHEFFIELD, *Plato's Symposium: The Ethics of Desire*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2006, p. 78.

concept that can only be understood by those who seek true knowledge. In the first few remarks he wants to correct the popular views and tries to give a new concept of love on the same level (*doxa*) in which the previous speeches were moving (mythical view). He then further clarifies philosophically this new concept of *erōs* from the mythical narration and this section ends with a new account of love that has taken out the mistakes of the common views. Love desires beauty, immortality, and goodness. The way to achieve them is in the spiritual (intellectual) realm by the realization of works of art and law. Up to this point, Socrates is trying to present a philosophical notion that goes beyond the previous speeches and can be easily assimilated by his friends. However, it is only in the final step that Plato develops his doctrine on love with deeper consequences. This final step can only be achieved by those who are true lovers and want to reach Beauty through an intellectual and moral process. Even Socrates was not prepared to assimilate this doctrine when he heard Diotima (209 e).

Taking into account the structure of Socrates' speech it seems that Plato wants to present a philosophical concept of love as desire towards goodness (happiness) and beauty, and show the proper way to satisfy it. In the final section he explains through Diotima's mysteries the way a true lover can discover Beauty itself; by showing a process of how to look at the things of the world if we want to contemplate beauty.

The pertinent question remains; what is Plato telling us about love in the *Symposium*? He does not say anywhere that in order to contemplate beauty we must get rid of our interpersonal relations. Nor does he say that for the contemplation of beauty we must rid ourselves of the things of the world. What Plato does say is that we discover beauty in material bodies (210 a), souls (210 b), noble actions, law, and in different sciences (210 c). These particular beauties are not enough, because our soul needs a perfect beauty (210 e) that can bring us happiness. The true philosopher and lover of wisdom is the one that knows how to contemplate that Beauty beginning from particular beauties. Here we find the core of Diotima's doctrine on love, which could be resumed in the following points:

- i) Love is desire towards beauty.
- ii) The contemplation of beauty is a process of self-transformation and appreciation of beauty itself.
- iii) True love is not found in sensitive or sexual satisfaction, but rather it is found in the spiritual realm (souls, Ideas).

From my point of view, there is no rejection of love for individuals in Plato's doctrine on love in *Symposium*. Plato is saying through Diotima that love is not only a sensitive desire, but a deeper desire that aims at something perfect and eternal.¹¹ Plato is not rejecting personal love (I would dare to say that he is not

¹¹ See G. R. LEAR, *Permanent Beauty and Becoming Happy in Plato's Symposium*, in J. LESHNER, D. NAILS, and F. SHEFFIELD (eds.), *Plato's Symposium*, cit., p. 121.

treating personal love here, but only love as human desire), and he does not say anywhere that personal love is *only* a means towards Beauty itself. Here, the precision with which the words are used is important. Although personal love might be a means towards Beauty itself (and Plato says it is similar to stairs: *ōsper epanathasmois*, 211 c), that is not the same as to say that personal love is *only* a means, as if the previous steps were to be rejected once we are on a higher step of the ascent.

In this sense most of the intellectualistic interpretations of love are grounded in a reading of the platonic dialogues that focuses only on a pure speculative and intellectual theory of ideas. If the most important thing in life is the contemplation of ideas, any other aspect of human life that is not intellectual (including love) will be found secondary. Interpersonal love would then be a step in the ladder of love but wouldn't have intrinsic value. However, it is not so clear if the forms for Plato are just an object of pure intellectual contemplation with no intervention of action and desire. At least we do not find explicit references in favour of a pure intellectualist interpretation.

3. LOVE TOWARDS BEAUTY AS A DIALOGICAL AND PRACTICAL PROCESS

Plato's ascent in the *Symposium* has often been considered an intellectual process of contemplation of Beauty. This ascent begins with the contemplation of beautiful bodies, it shifts up to intellectual beauty (beautiful souls and sciences) and ends in the contemplation of Beauty itself (211 b-c). It is certainly a process of intellectual growth and contemplation. The question is, however, that if this is only an intellectual ascent or rather some kind of appetitive, emotional, or interpersonal elevation. In order to give a possible interpretation, I would like to focus on three points: i) what kind of intellectual activity is the contemplation of beauty; ii) what role do interpersonal relations play in the contemplation of beauty; iii) how are action and practice involved in contemplation.

i) Contemplation of Beauty itself is a very special sort of intellectual activity. Plato's use of the ladder metaphor can lead us to understand the ascent in a negative way. It would seem that in order to reach a higher level of love, one must leave behind the previous one. But it is important to consider that Plato is speaking here of an intellectual activity, and the ladder metaphor is just a pedagogical way to speak about love. In fact, to reach a higher level does not mean to leave behind or reject the previous step, but rather to contemplate beauty in a new way; to contemplate a special beauty that already was present in those previous levels:

He who has been educated in the things of love up to this point, beholding beautiful things rightly and in due order, will then, suddenly (*exaiφhnēs*), in an instant, proceed-

ing at that point to the end of the things of love, see something marvelous, beautiful in nature (210 e).¹²

That sudden contemplation of beauty is arrived at through the contemplation of particular beauties. It is clear that there is an ascent, but the last step is mainly an action of deep contemplation of Beauty. It is not a process,¹³ but rather a single action of comprehension in which one is able to understand the way in which that beauty is present in the steps of the ascent (particular bodies, souls, practices, branches of knowledge: *panta kala ekeinou metechonta*, 211 b). This contemplation (*blepein*, 211 e) of Beauty gives new light in the comprehension of the previous particular beauties.

ii) For the question of what role do interpersonal relations play in Plato's doctrine of *erōs*, it is quite enlightening that he always presents the way towards Beauty in a dialogical relation. Socrates was instructed by Diotima, and Socrates tried to instruct Alcibiades. Moreover, the role of interpersonal relations in love and contemplation seems to be more explicit in the *Phaedrus*. Here, Plato offers a praise of *erōs* and presents it as a force and desire that, under rational control, is the main source of motivation in order to achieve true contemplation (247 e). Through the rightly ordained love of the other, (256 b) one is able to live happily and arrive with his wings to the contemplation of what is most real (*ousia ontōs ousa*, 247 c).

It could be said that in the process of education, as is described in the *Symposium*, the other person only plays an instrumental or secondary role in order to contemplate beauty. It must be noticed, however, that Plato is not talking about the nature of friendship (*philia*), but the nature of love (*erōs*) as a deep desire towards beauty. It seems that in order to fulfill this desire and contemplate beauty it is necessary to cultivate a friendship of trust and help.

This is clear with the irruption of Alcibiades in the dialogue, where we find a practical example of how Socrates lived the doctrine of Diotima. Socrates tried to instruct Alcibiades and make him a better person. Socrates' love of the beautiful drives him to seek Alcibiades' real beauty, which is not in his body, but in his soul. Moreover, that beauty is not actually present in Alcibiades' soul, but needs education and rational control. Socrates, in fact, is able to appreciate the "potential" beauty of his soul and tries to make him a better man. He loves Alcibiades, but in a way that Alcibiades cannot understand precisely

¹² For the *Symposium* I use R. E. Allen translation (Yale University Press, New Haven 1991).

¹³ Irwin understands the ascent as a confutative process in which the particular beauties don't satisfy the desire of perfect beauty and the lover seeks something better. See T. IRWIN, *Plato's Moral Theory*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1977, p. 171. Although it seems that there is some kind of process in the ascent, the last step is not just one more step in the process, but a direct discovery of something admirable (*ti thaumaston*, 210 e).

because he has in mind the popular concept of *erōs* of the Athenian high-class society. That's the reason why Alcibiades says of Socrates: «He seduces as a lover and ends up himself as beloved instead of lover» (222 b). For Alcibiades, *erōs* is a sexual and bodily desire and he believes that in the erotic relation the beloved (*eromenon*) receives some power and virtue from the lover (*erastēs*, 218 c-d). He cannot understand his master because he sees *erōs* as a self-interested desire. He wants to be loved by Socrates because in that way he will receive some benefits.¹⁴ Socrates loves Alcibiades in a very different way, precisely because *erōs* is desire of beauty and reaches its highest point in the soul, but it is only possible to contemplate the beauty of the soul if there is an altruistic desire to make him better.

In fact, the path of philosophical *erōs* implies some kind of friendship that seeks beauty in the spiritual field. This is the reason why Plato can state that for those who are fecund in the soul, there can be a noble friendship if they try to be concerned with «the sort of thing the good man must be concerned with and his pursuits» (209 b). This kind of friendship generates something beautiful

so that people of this sort gain a far greater communion with each other than that of the sharing of children, and a more steadfast friendship, because they have in common children more beautiful and more immortal (209 c).

Contemplation of Beauty is only possible through a relationship of friendship in which the fruit of that contemplation is shared with other people and a perfect friendship is achieved.

iii) It is important to notice the role of action and practice that Plato gives to *erōs* in the *Symposium*. Love is the desire of possessing the good (206 a), but also the desire of generating beauty (206 b). In fact, Plato finds examples of true lovers in people that have introduced a beautiful order through their action; poets and artists with their works of art and politicians with their laws (209 d). There is no reason to believe that the intellectual contemplation of beauty is for Plato the final goal in human life. The contemplation of beauty is not saturated in the intellectual contemplation of the form, rather it continues in action and practice,¹⁵ seeks the beauty of the souls of others, and brings true virtue (*aretē*, 212 a).

¹⁴ See L. BRISSON, *Agathon, Pausanias, and Diotima in Plato's Symposium*, cit., pp. 247-248.

¹⁵ As P. Destrée has shown, Alcibiades' speech has a clear ethical resonance, and the ascent towards the Form of the Beautiful is nothing else than the definitive virtuous life. See P. Destrée, *How Does Contemplation Make You Happy? An Ethical Reading of Diotima's Speech*, in P. Destrée and Z. GIANOPOULOU (eds.), *Plato's Symposium: A Critical Guide*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2017, pp. 216-234.

4. LOVE FOR INDIVIDUALS

In a well known article, Vlastos¹⁶ argued that love for individuals in Plato is just an instrumental step necessary to contemplate beauty and there's no room in his thought for non self-interested love. Personal love, as Aristotle described in the *Nichomachean Ethics* VIII, would not be compatible with Plato's view on love. Love for Plato is only desire of total beauty and individuals can only be loved because of some beautiful qualities they have; not for their own sake. Vlastos' interpretation is grounded on a high intellectualistic interpretation of Plato's thought in which the pure contemplation of the forms (which are separated from the individuals) is the goal in life. The individuals are valuable only in the way they have qualities that participate in beauty. The question would then be if Plato really thought of contemplation as a pure intellectual activity that rejects any kind of individuality in favour of pure abstraction. This question is not the object of study of this article, but I would dare to say that there is a strong link in Plato between contemplation and action. For example, the necessity of contemplating the Good in the *Republic* is due to the necessity of introducing order and proportion in the city while the work of the Demiurg in *Timaeus* is the desire of communicating the perfection of the forms he is contemplating. In this sense, it might be argued that happiness for Plato is not a matter of pure abstract contemplation, but rather a life of action through contemplation.¹⁷ Just as he says in the *Symposium*, love (which is desire to be happy and possess the good) reaches its satisfaction in the generation and procreation in the beautiful (206 d). Love is not only desire of contemplating Beauty, but of generating in that beauty and communicating it to the world, like the great poets and legislators (209 c-d).

Vlastos' interpretation seems to be problematic since he makes a very strong distinction between pure love for individuals for their own sake and instrumental love for our own sake. As D. Levy argued,¹⁸ Vlastos' definition

¹⁶ See G. VLASTOS, *The Individual as Object of Love in Plato*, cit., pp. 3-42.

¹⁷ «In Platons Deutung dieses Begriffes [*kalon*] sind die ethische und die ästhetische Komponente nicht scharf geschieden. Denn einerseits erklärt er sich das Phänomen des ästhetisch Ansprechenden durch Proportionsbegriffe, andererseits führt er auch die ethischen Handlungen auf eine seelische Ordnungsstruktur zurück, die den ästhetischen Proportionsbegriffen verwandt ist. Für Proportionen generell gilt, dass sie sich, wie zum Beispiel die musikalischen *harmoniai*, idealerweise mathematisch-geometrisch exakt fassen lassen, so dass auch jener ethisch-ästhetische Komplex, der durch das *kalon* bezeichnet wird, mit dem Ideal mathematisch-geometrischer Analyse eine Verbindung eingeht», J. SZAFI, *Die Aletheia in Platons Tugendlehre*, in M. VAN ACKEREN (ed.), *Platon Verstehen*, cit., p. 201.

¹⁸ D. Levy gave very good arguments against Vlastos' definition of love. See D. LEVY, *The Definition of Love in Plato's Definition*, «Journal of the History of Ideas», 40 (1979), pp. 285-291.

of love is grounded on this distinction. One thing is the desire of oneself to possess what is beautiful and another thing is to wish good things for people for their own sake. Vlastos argued that there is no possibility of desiring our own good and at the same time desiring good things for someone else (because that is what is good and beautiful for me). Part of the critique to Plato's doctrine on love is based on Vlastos' assumption that love is a self-interested desire towards one's own goodness that would make true love impossible for the others. In fact, Plato says that love is desire towards the possession of goodness (206 b) and it would seem that love for others is in fact love for the possession of beauty and goodness. As far as I can see, this critique is based on the view that desire for one's own happiness is some kind of egoism. If I look for my own happiness I look for my self-interest and, as a consequence, I do not look for the good of others.

Nevertheless it can be said that love for Plato is desire towards happiness. It is a deep and abstract desire for possessing the good, which, in fact, we will always need to find a proper way to satisfy it. But that is not the same as to say that love is egoistic. In a general sense, love is not an egoistic desire because it is not a desire that we can avoid. What can be egoistic is the way we try to satisfy this desire. The question then concerning Plato's doctrine is if his doctrine and method to satisfy this desire can be called egoistic. This is not an easy question and perhaps it is not possible to answer only with the *Symposium* but it is necessary to say something about it. On one hand Plato includes love for individuals in the ascent, yet on the other hand, this love for individuals is not the final step and we need a pure contemplation of beauty itself. But Plato does not say that we must reject love for individuals in order to attain beauty. In this sense, there is no evidence in Plato's doctrine of an egoistic view on love. He does not say anywhere that in order to attain beauty we must look after our own good without looking for the good of the others. We find some reference against an egoistic view on love in some passages of the *Republic* in which Plato explains that it is better for one to look for the good of the city as a whole than to look after our own appetites and desires (420 b-c).

Much of the critique concerning Plato's theory of love arises when it is compared with Aristotle's theory of friendship in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Plato would have treated love as desire towards the possession of beauty and in this sense his doctrine would be an intellectualistic (and egoistic) vision of love. Aristotle would have included friendship as a necessary and specific good in the path towards happiness in which friendship would be an altruistic love

Even though, Levy interprets that love has just an instrumental value in order to contemplate beauty. As I may argue here, this instrumental vision of love has been grounded on a strong distinction between contemplation and action in Plato's thought, and it is not so clear in Plato.

for the good of others. It must be noted however, that Plato and Aristotle are treating love from very different perspectives. In fact, it seems that they are talking about different things. Plato's account of love in *Symposium* focuses on love as *erōs*, that is, love as desire. Aristotle's treatment of friendship in the *Nicomachean Ethics* focuses on love as *philein*, that is, love as action. Plato speaks of *erōs* as the deepest desire in the human soul, which is desire towards beauty and permanent happiness. The main questions in *Symposium* are, what is love as desire, and, what are we striving at when we feel love as desire? Aristotle on the other hand is interested in the proper actions of love (*philein*) in order to live a happy life, and in this perspective, he wants to answer the following question: who and how do I have to love? We find in Plato and Aristotle very different perspectives in their accounts of love, but they are not in contradiction. Plato described *erōs* as desire towards permanent and perfect beauty and Aristotle speaks of *philein* as a virtuous action in which I look for the good of my friend for his own sake. However, it must not be forgotten that even for Aristotle friendship reaches its highest point in the contemplation of the beauty and goodness in the life of a true friend (1170 b 1-14). The contemplation of beauty is also for Aristotle, the goal of friendship.

Vlastos' interpretation seems problematic since he places Plato's treatment of love in the *Symposium* within a general theory of love. Instead, Plato would have differentiated several concepts: *philia*, treated in the *Lysis* and explained in reference to the utility, and *erōs*, which is related with beauty and is more intense than *philia*. Nevertheless, as Sheffield pointed out,¹⁹ it is quite questionable that Plato had in mind such a general theory of love. Love in the *Symposium* is desire towards happiness and that happiness is found in the contemplation of beauty and the presence of virtue according to that beauty. There is no reason however to deny that love is an inclusive process in which we ascend to the contemplation of beauty itself while we are contemplating the individual beauties.

5. FRIENDSHIP IN THE SYMPOSIUM

It must be noticed that although Plato does not speak of friendship in his treatment of *erōs*, he is clearly concerned with interpersonal relations. In this sense, Alcibiades' final speech seems clarifying in order to understand Plato's doctrine on love. It is certainly true that the main point of his doctrine is expressed in Socrates' speech, but it is necessary to consider what role do the previous speeches play (as ordinary views on love that need to be clarified with a philosophical concept) and in which sense Alcibiades' speech completes his

¹⁹ See F. SHEFFIELD, *Plato's Symposium*, cit., p. 156.

vision on love.²⁰ Alcibiades says that he tried to seduce Socrates but Socrates did not want to follow him. The master then would have told him that there is a beauty in the soul of others that is more valuable than the beauty of the body:

My dear Alcibiades, you are really not to be taken lightly, if indeed what you say about me happens to be true, and there is in me some power through which you might become better; you would then see inconceivable beauty in me, even surpassing your own immense comeliness of form. But if, seeing it, you are trying to strike a bargain with me to exchange beauty for beauty, then you intend to take no slight advantage of me: on the contrary, you are trying to get possession of what is truly beautiful instead of what merely seems so, and really, you intend to trade bronze for gold (218 d-e).

In this passage we find a clear explanation of the interpersonal relation between Socrates and Alcibiades. Plato states that in the souls of others we find a true beauty that it is worthy of contemplation. Moreover, Socrates' relationship with Alcibiades is grounded in the interest of making him a better person. Socrates does not like Alcibiades' imperfections, but he contemplates his soul and tries to make him a good person (*kalos kai agathos*).²¹ His relation with Alcibiades is the practical example that Plato brings to the dialogue in order to show the role of interpersonal love in his doctrine. Plato does not exclude love for others,²² but rather, he gives a new philosophical and ethical view.

Socrates' and Alcibiades' relation in the *Symposium* has been a controversial point of interpretation of the dialogue especially from intellectualistic interpretations of Plato's doctrine on love. Nussbaum thinks that Plato understands love in the *Symposium* in a hard intellectualistic way saying that personal love would then be a plague.²³ With the fact that Socrates did not give in

²⁰ See C. D. C. REEVE, *A Study in Violets: Alcibiades in the Symposium*, in J. LESHER, D. NAILS, and F. SHEFFIELD (eds.), *Plato's Symposium*, cit., pp. 124-146.

²¹ See C. GILL, *Platonic Love and Individuality*, in A. LOIZOU and H. LESSER (eds.), *Polis and Politics. Essays in Greek Moral and Political Philosophy*, Avebury, Hants 1990, p. 81.

²² Vlastos' interpretation of the relation between Socrates and Alcibiades is not convincing. According to him, Socrates would have failed to educate Alcibiades because he would have been trapped in the contemplation of pure beauty, not interested in helping the others. But, as Plato tells us (216 e), Alcibiades had already seen his beautiful speeches, and Socrates had tried to begin the ascent with him. See P. DESTRÉE, *The Speech of Alcibiades*, in C. HORN (ed.), *Plato. Symposium*, Akademie, Berlin 2012, p. 199.

²³ «We have seen Plato invent a priestess whose job is to save men from plagues, and we have suggested that personal *erōs*, and the lover's knowledge, are these plagues. We want now to discover the origins of this condemnation. What makes *erōs* intolerable? What gives rise to this overwhelming need to get above it and away from it?», M. NUSSBAUM, *The Speech of Alcibiades: A Reading of Plato's Symposium*, «Philosophy and Literature», 3 (1979), p. 164.

to Alcibiades's desires, Plato would have shown us how the philosophical attitude must be in respect to personal desires. Alcibiades would be for Socrates something beautiful, that participates in beauty, but that cannot be loved for his own sake. Much of this interpretation is grounded on Vlastos' arguments against the individual as an object of love in Plato. It could be argued, nevertheless, that there are other possible interpretations of the relation between Socrates and Alcibiades. It seems that Plato, after explaining a philosophical notion of *erōs*, wants to show us how Socrates lived according to this notion of love. In fact, the life of Socrates and his relation with Alcibiades and other friends shows that the way of the contemplation of beauty goes hand in hand with a true friendship. The interesting point is that a true friendship looks for the good of the soul.²⁴ Socrates loves Alcibiades not in his body but in his soul. Although the object of love for Plato is perfect beauty, there is no reason to say that the philosopher that begins his ascent must lose interest in love for others.

A great part of the intellectualistic interpretation of friendship in Plato is based on the view that Plato's ladder of love implies a negative process in which the lover has to reach higher steps discarding the previous objects of love. This is Moravcsik's exclusivist interpretation²⁵ that has been rejected by Lear²⁶ and Sheffield²⁷ among others. Moravcsik's interpretation, like Vlastos', is based on the assumption of a pure intellectualistic perspective of love. If the only proper object of love is perfect beauty and it is to this contemplation of beauty that one has to direct his life, then interpersonal relations are just instrumental and the lover of wisdom would have to discard them in the moment he reaches a higher level of beauty. However, there does not seem to be any reference in Plato to such a negative process. It is possible to consider that when the lover discovers that his beloved is an image of something better (beauty), he will try to contemplate beauty in itself. Nevertheless, why should he have just an instrumental relation with his friends? Precisely because the one that is loved participates in beauty and has some intrinsic value and can be loved while one is contemplating a higher beauty in a different field of knowledge.²⁸ On the other hand, like Price pointed out,²⁹ the ascent in the *Sym-*

²⁴ See D. SCOTT, *Socrates and Alcibiades in the Symposium*, «Hermathena», 168 (2000), pp. 25-37.

²⁵ J. M. E. MORAVCSIK, *Reason and Eros in the Ascent Passage of the Symposium*, cit., p. 293.

²⁶ See G. R. LEAR, *Happy Lives and the Highest Good*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2004, p. 219.

²⁷ See F. SHEFFIELD, *Plato's Symposium*, cit., p. 156.

²⁸ See G. R. LEAR, *Happy Lives and the Highest Good*, cit., p. 219.

²⁹ «If the ascent passage has standardly been read as describing a discarding process of persons for the sake of Forms, that is, if I am right, the result of two connected mistakes (whose effect is only slightly mitigated by an inclusive reading): confusing the loved one's role as an object of contemplation (in which he is soon largely superseded) with his role as

posium is always described in an educative context in which communication with others is always an end and not only a mean. In this sense, interpersonal love seems something necessary and present in his theory (or, at least, it is not something that Plato denies in favour of a pure Beauty).

As a final remark to the problem of friendship in the platonic account, I think that most of the problems of the exclusivist vision of love come from considering the contemplation of forms as an activity that is developed in a life separated from the things of the world. It must not be forgotten that the ascent towards beauty does not end with contemplation, but it continues in action. Desire of possessing the good makes us want to generate beauty, not only in the soul, but also in other spiritual aspects of human life. From the moment that the true lover contemplates Beauty he enters into a new life in which he is in union with Beauty³⁰ and his knowledge of beauty transforms his whole life. The main question, however, is how does the individual participate in Beauty? There must be something in his soul that makes him beautiful, but, we may ask, is that beauty in the soul a passive effect of the form of Beauty in the individual, or rather it is an active life according to beauty that makes him beautiful?³¹ There is no doubt that for Plato there is beauty in the soul as long as there is a practice and knowledge that introduces that beauty through an active life. In order to attain total beauty, a continuous practice (*meletan*) is necessary that makes possible that knowledge (*epistēmē*, 208 a). In this sense, it could be said that the true lover does not love just the passive participation of the beloved in the form of beauty, but rather his active beautiful life in his soul.

6. ERŌS IN THE SYMPOSIUM AND THE PHAEDRUS

Some of the intellectualistic views of Plato's theory of love in the *Symposium* are grounded in its relation with the *Phaedrus*. Some interpreters hold that we find two different accounts: in the *Symposium*, Plato would have prized only Beauty in itself, while in the *Phaedrus* he would like to capture the passion of erotic love and interpersonal relations.³² I would like to point out that this problem is due to a previous intellectualistic interpretation of love in *Sympo-*

a recipient of thought, and taking the passage out of context», A. PRICE, *Love and Friendship in Plato and Aristotle*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1991, p. 49.

³⁰ See F. C. WHITE, *Virtue in Plato's Symposium*, «Classical Quarterly», 54 (2004), p. 373. A curious point in White's interpretation is that the true virtue that generates beauty is the final product of contemplation (a work of art, a philosophical discourse, etc.), and so the inner virtue will not be so important.

³¹ See L. WARE, *Erotic Virtue*, «Res Philosophica», 92 (2015), pp. 915-935.

³² See G. SANTAS, *Plato and Freud*, cit., pp. 69-71. See N. KREFT, *Das Problem der Gegenseitigen Liebe im Lysis, Symposium und Phaidros*, cit., pp. 207-221.

sium that would make interpersonal relations impossible for a true lover of Beauty.

Nussbaum has tried to defend Plato's philosophy of love against the accusation that Plato wouldn't have included interpersonal love and knowledge of the individuality of the other person in the philosopher's knowledge. Against this accusation, Nussbaum states that Plato tries to include interpersonal relations in the *Phaedrus*, whereas the *Symposium* represents an intellectualistic vision of love. As Gill³³ and Rowe³⁴ pointed out, Nussbaum's interpretation is problematic. Although it seems that Socrates in the *Phaedrus* is more concerned with lasting love-relationships than in the *Symposium*, there is little evidence that Plato had considered knowledge of the other uniqueness and individuality as an important aspect of the philosophical knowledge.

But the main problem, however, concerning Nussbaum's interpretation is that it is grounded on the same intellectualistic approach of the *Symposium* made by Vlastos. Once assumed that Plato's view of love in the *Symposium* is only concerned with the contemplation of the Idea of Beauty, Nussbaum tries to defend Plato's account of love in the *Phaedrus*. But what if Plato's theory of love in the *Symposium* is not so intellectualistic as Vlastos interprets? As I have tried to argue, there are other possible interpretations to the question of love in Plato's *Symposium* and there is no explicit evidence that Plato rejects interpersonal love relations in that dialogue. Up to this point, it seems possible to answer the question raised at the beginning of this article; is Plato's theory of love intellectualistic? The answer is no. Plato's theory of love would be intellectualistic if he had said that love is found only in the intellectual contemplation of Beauty itself. But, as I have tried to argue, Plato speaks of love as desire, and not as an act of the will. In Diotima's teaching we find an account of *erōs* as a deep desire towards beauty and happiness, a very special kind of desire that can only be satisfied with the contemplation of beauty and the presence of beauty in ourselves (virtues) and in the political community (laws, works of art, etc.). Plato does not treat love as an act of the will and he does not tell us what (or whom) I have to love, or how do I have to direct my will. In this sense his doctrine is not egoistic. That would be the case if he had said that we have to direct our acts of will only towards our own good and not towards the good of others. But he only says that we find happiness in the contemplation of Beauty and a life that is led according to this contemplation. His treatment of *erōs* could be perfectly compatible with an altruist vision of man; seeking one's happiness and contemplation of beauty does not imply that we shouldn't care for the good of the others. In

³³ See C. GILL, *Platonic Love and Individuality*, cit., pp. 69-88.

³⁴ See C. ROWE, *Philosophy, Love and Madness*, in C. GILL (ed.), *The Person and the Human Mind*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1990, pp. 227-246.

fact, that is what Socrates did and Plato also tried to show in the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*.

7. ERŌS AND SUBLIMATION

Love is a deep desire that seeks permanent beauty. From a psychological point of view, however, the problem is how to fit this kind of desire in the tripartite soul that Plato describes in the *Republic* and the *Phaedrus*. The question seems especially interesting from the moment Plato speaks of *erōs* as a kind of desire that begins with the contemplation of sensible beauties until it tries to achieve some kind of intellectual beauty. The question is, how then is *erōs* related to the different desires through the ladder of beauties of the *Symposium*.³⁵ Is *erōs* something different from the sensitive desires? Regarding this problem, a possible answer would be to say that in Plato's theory of love there is a process of sublimation. In this sense, *erōs* would be a sensible desire that does not reach satisfaction and turns to the intellectual field. There would be some textual evidence for this interpretation because Plato distinguishes in the *Symposium* (208 e) between people that are fecund in the body and those who are fecund in the soul. Those who are fecund in their bodies will try to procreate with sexual relations, while those who are fecund in their soul will turn to knowledge and the works of art (209 a). It might seem that *erōs* would be primarily sexual desire, and it is only in a philosophical life that it turns out to be a desire of contemplating beauty. In fact, it seems that the contemplative love of beauty itself would be a kind of love appropriate for a few men that prefer to live a philosophical life (210 a).

The main problem regarding the sublimation-scheme, however, is how to understand the ascent of the soul through the ladder of beauties. If the ascent is understood as a negative process, it would be true that there is some kind

³⁵ The role that Plato gives to erotic and sexual relations in his account of *erōs* has been a controversial point of debate. Nussbaum thinks that in the *Phaedrus* Plato would have seen long-time erotic relations as a necessary and essential aspect for an adequate psychological development. See M. NUSSBAUM, *The Fragility of Goodness*, cit., p. 201. Nussbaum's position seems a bit exaggerated since Plato explicitly says that the best love relation is the one in which the sensitive appetite is under control in order to attain the purity of the forms (*Phaedrus* 256 a-b). Rowe has held against Nussbaum that Plato is precisely defending in the *Phaedrus* the excellence of a rational way of living between lovers in order to attain truth, and for that reason lovers have to moderate their appetites. See C. ROWE, *Philosophy, Love and Madness*, cit., p. 240. Sheffield remarks in this line of interpretation that both in the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus* the perception of corporeal beauty is only the beginning of a deep philosophical love of truth, and Plato does not say anywhere that there must be an appetitive or sexual response in order to go into a higher contemplation. F. SHEFFIELD, *Erōs Before and After Tripartition*, in R. BARNEY, T. BRENNAN, and C. BRITAIN (eds.), *Plato and the Divided Self*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2012, pp. 230-231.

of sublimation and, what is more, Plato's doctrine on love would then seem highly intellectualistic. But it is not so clear that the ascent must be a negative process. The ascent from particular beauties to Beauty itself would be, according to T. Irwin's argument hinted at previously, a refutative process in the soul. Once a young lover of wisdom feels the force of *erōs* he looks for some kind of beauty that can satisfy his desire. He then discovers that the sensible objects cannot fulfill it, and he will turn to the intelligible field.³⁶ It should be added, nevertheless, that this is not only a negative process,³⁷ but that there is a positive attraction in the purity of the forms that has its higher point in the perfection of Beauty itself. Although it is true that the particular beauties don't satisfy that desire, it is certain that in that particular beauties there are some traces that indicate a higher beauty that must be searched. The main object of *erōs* is beauty, which appears at the beginning in a corporeal and sensitive way (*epithumia*), which allows it to be grasped by the intellect. In this sense, it seems that in the platonic doctrine of *erōs* there is a leap from *epithumia* to *philia* in which the rationality enters in the main erotic desire and strives for something perfect and eternal.³⁸ The proper way to drive *erōs* towards its proper end is through the love of wisdom (*philosophia*).

There is no sublimation, but elevation. It is important to notice that there is no rejection of the previous steps, but a new ordering in regard to what is most noble and pure. *Erōs* is a desire towards a permanent and perfect beauty that is not found in the sensible objects of the world, which are but appearances.³⁹ Rather, once we attain what is more pure and noble, we can introduce a beautiful order in those appetites and desires that also makes them beautiful and pure. This, in fact, is in accordance with Plato's doctrine on pleasure and desire from the *Republic* (586 e-587 a) and the *Philebus* (52 c). It is only when we introduce a rational order in our appetites in accordance with a principle of measure that those appetites also remain true and pure. Plato does not reject the sensitive appetites, but rather wants to introduce a rational order in them that makes them beautiful. It does not seem correct to speak of sublimation. In this sense Charles Kahn's interpretation of *erōs* in relation to the tripartite soul⁴⁰ seems quite convincing. Love as desire of permanent beauty involves

³⁶ «The progress is elenctic. At each stage the pupil tests his aspirations against his present objects of admiration, and though he was not previously aware of it, finds the objects inadequate to the aspiration, in discovering that the reason he offers for choosing this object really justifies the choice of something else. As he reaches each new object, he finds it does not fully satisfy his criteria, as they become more explicit, for something admirable, and continues until he finds the right criteria», T. IRWIN, *Plato's Moral Theory*, cit., p. 171. See note 13 *supra*.

³⁷ See A. PRICE, *Love and Friendship in Plato and Aristotle*, cit., p. 42.

³⁸ D. A. HYLAND, *Ἔρως, Ἐπιθυμία and Φιλία in Plato*, «Phronesis», 13 (1968), p. 38.

³⁹ See C. ROWE, *Plato*. Symposium, Aris & Phillips, Warminster 1998, p. 7.

⁴⁰ See C. KAHN, *Plato's Theory of Desire*, «Review of Metaphysics», 41 (1987), pp. 95-96.

a deep desiderative structure in the human being⁴¹ because *erōs* is not on the same level of desire as *ephithumia*, *thumos*, or *boulesthai*. *Erōs* is a permanent and deep desire that looks for something perfect that can bring us happiness.

8. CONCLUSIONS

I have tried to show an interpretation of Plato's theory of love arguing against some intellectualistic views. Most of these views in Plato's *Symposium* are grounded on a high speculative vision of contemplation and the role of Ideas in the life of philosophers which can be summarized in the following two points. First, appetitive and sensitive desire would have been rejected by Plato since he considered pure contemplation as the only thing worth in life, and because contemplation of Ideas has nothing to do with sensitive appetites and worldly matters. Plato would have tried to give an intellectualistic account of love that rejects interpersonal relations and sensitive love. Second, Plato would have changed his concept of *erōs* in *Phaedrus* in order to fit interpersonal relations in his philosophy of love.

As I have argued, there seems to be too much presupposition behind this interpretation of love. Plato neither says that it is necessary to reject love for individuals in order to attain perfect Beauty nor do we find in his dialogues that the contemplation of Ideas is only an abstract activity. Rather, we find his highest expositions of contemplation always in connection with practice (208 a), virtue (212 a), and the good order of the political community (*Republic* VII, 514 a). Plato's concept of *erōs* should be understood as desire for beauty and as such it needs not only the contemplation of Beauty itself, but also the realization of beauty in daily life and personal relations.

Up to this point it must be added that the main question concerning Platonic ethics remains unsolved; what is the role of contemplation and Ideas in everyday life? As far as I can see, Plato tries to develop a new concept of *paideia* in which the philosophical and contemplative life could bring a good practical order to the political community as well as for the life of individuals. What Plato does not say anywhere is that in order to live this contemplative life one should get rid of the human aspects of everyday life. In this sense, his account of *erōs* in the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus* must be seen as a clarification of the concept of love from a philosophical perspective.

ABSTRACT · In this article I argue against some recent interpretations that Plato's doctrine of love in the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus* is not intellectualistic. For this reason I analyze Socrates' speech in the *Symposium* trying to grasp the relationship between

⁴¹ In fact, *erōs* characterization in the *Symposium* is not incompatible with the tripartite psychology of the *Republic*. See A. VALLEJO, *Desire and Will in the Symposium*, in M. TULLI and M. ERLER (eds.), *Plato's Symposium*, Academia, Sankt Agustin 2016, pp. 409-417.

desire and contemplation. I defend that Plato's treatment of *erōs* does not explain love as an act of the will but rather in terms of love as desire. In this sense, many of the critics to Plato's notion of love come from the comparison with Aristotle's notion of *philia*. I argue that while Plato is treating love as desire (how do I experience love), Aristotle focuses his analysis on the act of loving (to whom should I love).

KEYWORDS · Beauty, Contemplation, Desire, Friendship, Love.