Plato and Erotic Reciprocity

Friendship and love are always mutual in their fulfillment, though they may originate only in one person: this Plato shows, primarily in the *Lysis*, the *Alcibiades*, and then in the great dialogues on love. Convinced of this, could Plato transform Socrates into an erotic character and have him teach the mutuality of all friendship and love if, in the passion of his own youth, he had met him in a man devoid of love?1

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the eleventh annual meeting of the International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on 28 May 1982. I wish to thank the sponsors of the conference and the members of the program committee for inviting me to address the Society. I also wish to thank Gregory Vlastos for a helpful critique of the revised version. The revised paper was subsequently presented at the American Academy in Rome, Brown University, the University of California, Berkeley, the National Humanities Center, and the University of California, San Diego, where it benefited from the careful scrutiny it received; it benefited further from the criticisms of John J. Winkler, John Bussanich, W. R. Connor, and Kenneth J. Reckford, to whom I am also grateful.


1. Friedländer, I, 46.
Ever since John Addington Symonds called to the attention of his fellow Victorians what he delicately referred to as “A Problem in Greek Ethics,” social historians have been accustomed to treat the Symposium and Phaedrus of Plato as prime sources of information about the theory and practice of sex in ancient Greece. An unfortunate consequence of this (perhaps unavoidable) tendency—quite apart from whatever biases it may have imported into our outlook on ancient varieties of sexual experience in general—has been an inability on the part of scholars to distinguish Plato’s own views from the dominant ideology of his culture. Only within the last two decades has new research into many aspects of sexuality in the ancient world made it possible to abandon our all but exclusive reliance on Platonic texts and, instead, to bring to bear on the study of Plato an independent knowledge of Greek sexual attitudes and practices. Sufficient progress had already been made by 1973 to enable Gregory Vlastos to claim in a pioneering and controversial essay on “The Individual as an Object of Love in Plato” that the Greek philosopher actually discovered “a new form of pederastic love, fully sensual in its resonance, but denying itself consummation, transmuting physical excitement into imaginative and intellectual energy.” The exact nature and extent of Plato’s

2. J. A. Symonds, A Problem in Greek Ethics, Being an Inquiry into the Phenomenon of Sexual Inversion, Addressed Especially to Medical Psychologists and Jurists (London 1901) 8n., 8-10, 30-44 (esp. 31-35), 48-55, on the value of Plato as a witness to the sexual behavior of the Greeks. (The essay was originally composed in 1873, privately circulated in an edition of ten copies in 1883, later revised, posthumously appended to the first, subsequently withdrawn, printing of Havelock Ellis’s Sexual Inversion in April 1897, and finally published in a limited edition of 100 copies in 1901.) Plato’s authority continues to be invoked by writers on the subject who descend from the same antiquarian tradition, of whom the most recent and voluminous (700 pages) is Félix Buffière, Eros adolescent: la pédérastie dans la Grèce antique (Paris 1980).

3. Thus, G. M. A. Grube, Plato’s Thought (1935; Boston 1958) 87, has in effect substituted “the Greeks” for “Plato” in the following statement: “It is well known that homosexual love alone was generally regarded by the Greeks as fulfilling the highest desires of men, and that the love of men for women was little more than a means of procreation.” (For a corrective, see K. J. Dover, Greek Popular Morality in the Time of Plato and Aristotle [Oxford 1974] 211-12; Robert F. Sutton, Jr., “The Interaction between Men and Women Portrayed on Attic Red-Figure Pottery” [Ph.D. diss., UNC Chapel Hill [1981] 186-89, 224-25; James Redfield, “Notes on the Greek Wedding,” Arethusa 15 [1982] 181-201, esp. 192-98; Mary R. Lefkowitz, “Wives and Husbands,” Greece & Rome 30 [1983] 31-47, esp. 37-40; Claude Calame, “Eros inventore e organizzatore della società greca antica,” in L’Amore in Grecia, ed. Calame, 3d ed. [Rome 1984], ix-xl, esp. xvii-xviii; Foucault, 165-66, 222-23.) A more cautious estimate is offered by Dover, 13: “Modern readers of Phaedrus and Symposium . . . are apt to believe that what they find therein is the quintessential doctrine of the Greeks on the whole topic of homosexuality, expressed in definitive terms by their acknowledged spokesman. Yet Plato’s right to speak for Greek philosophy—to say nothing of a right to speak for Greek civilization—was not conceded by other pupils of Socrates.”

contribution to Greek thinking about the moral conventions governing sexuality have only begun to emerge more recently, however. In what follows I shall attempt to illuminate one facet of Plato’s originality.

I. HIERARCHY IN GREEK HOMOSEXUALITY AND RECIPROCITY IN PLATONIC HOMOEROTICS

In a justly famous passage of Plato’s *Phaedrus* (255c–e) Socrates is inspired to analyze the dynamic of attraction between the two members of a conventional, if rather high-minded, paederastic relationship.

[When lover and beloved are together, a flood of passion] pours in upon the lover; and part of it is absorbed within him, but when he can contain no more the rest flows away outside him; and as a breath of wind or an echo, rebounding from a smooth hard surface, goes back to its place of origin, even so the stream of beauty turns back and re-enters the eyes of the fair beloved; and so by the natural channel it reaches his soul and gives it fresh vigour, watering the roots of the wings and quickening them to growth: whereby the soul of the beloved, in its turn, is filled with love. So he loves, yet knows not what he loves: he does not understand, he cannot tell what has come upon him; like one that has caught a disease of the eye from another, he cannot account for it, not realising that his lover is as it were a mirror in which he beholds himself. And when the other is beside him, he shares his respite from anguish; when he is absent, he likewise shares his longing and being longed for; since he possesses that counter-love which is the image of love, though he supposes it to be friendship rather than love, and calls it by that name. He feels a desire, like the lover’s yet not so strong, to behold, to touch, to kiss him, to share his couch: and now ere long the desire, as one might guess, leads to the act.\(^5\)

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5. R. Hackforth, trans., *Plato’s Phaedrus* (Cambridge 1952) 105. All quotations from the *Phaedrus* are in Hackforth’s translation (other quotations from Plato are my own rendering); for an argument against Hackforth’s acceptance of anapetassan in place of the manuscripts’ anapetirōsan at 255c7, see G. J. de Vries, *A Commentary on the Phaedrus of Plato* (Amsterdam 1969) 174 ad loc. This passage has recently been the subject of two psychoanalytic commentaries, both influenced by Lacan: Marie-Hélène Bohner-Cante [Hanna Glyphae], *Platonisme et sexualité: Genèse de la métaphysique platonicienne* (Toulouse 1981) 305–11; W. Thomas MacCary, *Childlike Achilles: Ontogeny and Phylogeny in the Iliad* (New York 1982) 19, confounding the roles of lover and
In this charming description (with its far-fetched analogies from physics and medicine) of how the beloved, having infected his lover with erotic *mania*, catches the disease himself,^7^ Plato is actually making a startling point about love and counter-love. For in a conventional Athenian pederastic relationship, the younger partner was not held to experience sexual desire but was expected to submit (if indeed he chose to submit at all) to the advances of his older lover out of a feeling of mingled gratitude, esteem, and affection (or *philia*)—rather like a good Victorian wife.^8^ As Xenophon emphasizes in his own *Symposium* (8.21), “the boy” does not share in the man’s pleasure in

beloved: “the *erastès* finds in the *erōmenos* a mirror for his own beauty . . . so that the erotic pattern is superficially homosexual but essentially narcissistic.” Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, ed. Pierre Clarac and André Ferré, 3 vols. (Paris 1954) I, 609, in his reformulation of this passage, also reversed the roles of lover and beloved in order to make them conform to a projective model of desire: “Quand on aime, l’amour est trop grand pour pouvoir être contenu tout entier en nous; il irradié vers la personne aimée, recontre en elle une surface qui l’arrête, le force à revenir vers son point de départ, et c’est ce choc en retour de notre propre tendresse que nous appelons les sentiments de l’autre et qui nous charme plus qu’à l’aller, parce que nous ne reconnaissions pas qu’elle vient de nous.” In Plato it is the beloved, not the lover, who falls in love with his own reflection.

The mirror-passage in the *Phaedrus* was also elaborated, somewhat mischievously, by Achilles Tatius 1.9: “You do not realize how marvellous it is to behold one’s beloved. This pleasure is greater than that of consummation, for the eyes receive each others’ reflections and they form therefrom small icons as clearly as in mirrors. Such outpouring of beauty flowing down into the soul is a kind of copulation at a distance” (I quote, by kind permission, from the forthcoming translation of Achilles Tatius by John J. Winkler). Cf. also pseudo-Lucian *Erotēs* 47–48; Plutarch *Moralia* 765a–766b. For the earlier tradition that located the source of *erōs* in the eyes (of the beloved, usually) and that made eye-contact between lover and beloved the erotic stimulus *par excellence*, see the long list of passages assembled by A. C. Pearson, “Phrixus and Demodice: A Note on Pindar, *Pyth.* IV. 162 f.,” C.R 23 (1909) 255–57, to which add Hesiod *Theogony* 910–11; pseudo-Hesiod *Shield* 7–8; Aleman fr. 3.61–62 (PMG 3, p. 12); Ibycus fr. 6 (PMG 287, p. 150); Sophocles *Trachiniae* 107; Euripides *Hippolytus* 525–6; Agathon fr. 29 (Nauck); Gorgias *Helen* 19 = fr. B11 (vol. II, p. 294.7 Diels-Kranz); Aristotle fr. 96 (Rose); Athenaeus 13.564b–f; and a fragmentary poem ascribed to Aspasia by Herodicus of Babylon and quoted by Masurius in Athenaeus 5.219e.


8. Dover, 90, elaborates this analogy.

9. The term *boy* (παῖς in Greek) refers by convention to the junior partner, or to the one who plays that role, regardless of his actual age (Dover, 16, 85–87; Buhlere [supra n.2] 605–14). That male homosexual behavior among the ancient Greeks featured a hierarchical division of roles
intercourse, as a woman does; cold sober, he looks upon the other drunk with sexual desire.”

The accuracy of Xenophon’s characterization of the conventional Athenian attitude—if not of the social actuality concealed by it—is overwhelmingly confirmed by the pictorial representations of male homosexual behavior on Attic vases as well as by a variety of ancient literary sources, all of which testify to the clear moral boundaries differentiating the roles of lover and beloved in antiquity. As K. J. Dover concludes, the Greeks assumed that

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according to age has recently been called into question by John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (Chicago 1980) 28-30, though in a note he admits the possibility that such a hierarchy of roles did exist in classical Athens; against his arguments must now be weighed the evidence amassed by Dover, 84-91, and by Mark Golden, “Aspects of Childhood in Classical Athens” (Ph.D. diss., Toronto 1981) 127-28, 142-47, 156 n. 40 (Boswell, however, remains unconvinced: see his “Revolutions, Universals and Sexual Categories,” in Boyers and Steiner, 89-113, esp. 109 n. 42). The issue has now, I believe, been definitively settled by Golden, 312, 318 n. 47, 321-22.

In order to highlight the historical specificity of the social phenomenon under consideration, I have chosen to speak of male homosexual behavior among Plato’s contemporaries as “paederasty” rather than “homosexuality” (on this point, see Cartledge [infra n. 13] 17-18, and now Patzer [infra n. 13]); the word may have unwelcome associations for some modern readers, but at least it has the advantage of being the word employed by the Greeks themselves to describe their own institutions (other scholars prefer to speak of Greek “pseudo-homosexuality” [Devereux, infra n. 14] or “quasisexuality” [Dover, viii]; cf. Lionel Ovey, *Homosexuality and Pseudohomosexuality* [New York 1969]).

10. Quoted by Dover, 52; see Foucault, 245-46. Xenophon means only that the junior partner does not experience a specifically sexual pleasure during intercourse, and so Xenophon’s remark does not exclude the equally conventional view, voiced by Plato’s Aristophanes, that a willing boy “enjoys” and “welcomes” (*khairin, apazesthai*: *Symposium* 191e-192b) his lover’s physical attentions; welcoming them is one thing, after all, but desiring them sexually is quite another (for the fullest description of a beloved’s affectionate response, which nonetheless stops short of erotic desire, see Xenophon *Hiero* 1.35-37): the objections to Dover on this score raised by Thomas S. W. Lewis, “The Brothers of Ganymede,” in Boyers and Steiner, 147-65, esp. 160, are therefore groundless. The real disagreement between Xenophon and Plato, as a comparison of the two passages quoted in the text implies, hinges on the nature of the beloved’s proper response to his older partner (is it esteem or counter-love?): for a discussion of the ancient controversy, see Bruns (supra n. 4) 26.

11. See Dover, 91-103; Golden (supra n. 9) 128-29, with copious references (148-54); now Golden, esp. 312-15. Possible deviations from the normal pattern are discussed by Golden, 321-22, and by Eva C. Keuls, *The Reign of the Phallus: Sexual Politics in Ancient Athens* (New York 1985) 277-85, esp. 277: “In some cases the youth is shown with what may be termed a ‘puerile erection’: evidently the vase painters wanted to show that the passive partner does derive some pleasure from the contact, even without active participation.” Of particular interest in this regard are two vases discussed by Keuls: London W 39 (*ABV* 297, #16) = Keuls, 281, pls. 249 and 250, and W. Berlin F 2279 (*ARV* 115, #2) = Keuls, 222, pls. 196 and 197, both illustrated also by Dover (who, after considering the evidence, interprets it differently [95-97]) as B 250 and R 196.

The assertion made by Nussbaum, 156, that no *erômenoi* with erections can be found in Greek art may therefore stand in need of qualification, especially in view of Dover’s own willingness to admit the possibility of counter-examples (97) and the evidence of a third vase (*ARV* 15, #11) = Keuls, 286, pl. 255, interpreted differently by Dover (as R 18: 97) and by Keuls, 285. Such counter-examples, if that is what these are, nonetheless remain quite rare.

12. E.g., Aristophanes *Clouds* 979-80; Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 8.1157a3-14, 1159b11-19, 9.1164a3-12; Ovid *Art of Love* 2.682-84 (bizarrely interpreted by Wilkinson [infra n 13] 30); Martial 11.22; *pseudo-Lucian Erotes* 27.
“virtually no male both penetrates other males and submits to penetration by other males at the same stage of his life,” and therefore “the reciprocal desire of partners belonging to the same age-category is virtually unknown in Greek homosexuality”; rather, “in a homosexual relationship . . . the eromenos [i.e., “beloved”] is not expected to reciprocate the eros [“desire”] of the erastes [“lover”]; instead, the younger partner, if he behaves honorably, “does not seek or expect sensual pleasure from contact with an erastes, begrudges any contact until the erastes has proved himself worthy of concession, never permits penetration of any orifice in his body, and never assimilates himself to a woman by playing a subordinate role in a position of contact.” With such rules in force, the very nature of male physiology prevents each partner from both giving and receiving pleasure in the sexual act at the same time and to the same degree: the hierarchical disposition of roles enjoined upon homosexual


In a highly critical review of Dover (AJP 101 [1980] 121–24), Nancy Demand doubts that the eromenos failed to experience sexual pleasure during intercourse (on this point, see supra n.10) and judges Dover’s picture of Athenian sexual behavior generally implausible; her skepticism is countered by Jeffrey Henderson who, in his own review (Classical World 72 [1978–79] 434), accepts Dover’s reconstruction of the Athenian normative ideal, rightly emphasizing “the palpitating gulf between what is prescribed by convention and what actually goes on.” Note, also, Dover’s own skepticism (96), remarked by Nussbaum, 156, and his own awareness of “the gulf between reality and the convention that the eromenos is not aroused” (125n); see, further, Dover’s discussion of the evidence for the prevalence of anal intercourse in paederastic relations among the Greeks (99, 100n; on this issue, see now Golden, 314 n.34). I believe Dover’s thoroughgoing distinction between social norms and sexual practices has tended to escape the notice of his critics.
lovers by Athenian moral convention gives rise in practice to a socially and psychologically asymmetrical relationship. According to the customary Greek idiom, the senior partner in a pederastic love-affair has a monopoly of erós; the junior partner, if he is responsive to his lover, expresses philía: he is philērastēs, "fond of his erastēs." and is moved to antiphilein, "to feel affection for him in return" (only women are said to antēran, to return their lovers' sexual desire). 14. Plato's departure from conventional norms of thought and speech is

14. Dover, 52–53. Cf. George Devereux, "Greek Pseudo-Homosexuality and the 'Greek Miracle,'" *SymbOslo* 42 (1968) 69–92, esp. 74. Michel Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York 1984) 340–72, esp. 344–46. Further evidence for the lack of reciprocity in pederastic relations among the ancient Greeks has been assembled by Anne Giacobelli, "The Justice of Aphrodite in Sappho Fr. 1,” *TAPA* 110 (1980) 135–42. For philía as the proper response of a male beloved, see (e.g.) Plato *Symposium* 191c7; *Phaedrus* 231c2, 237c8; Xenophon *Hiero* 1.32–38, 7.6; *Symposium* 8.16; Plutarch *Moralia* 750d–e, 761a. For antērōs as the feminine equivalent, compare Xenophon *Symposium* 8.3 (most of these passages are cited by Dover). The difference between feminine antērōs and masculine philía, as the only socially validated forms of loving response to the erós of a male erastēs, furnishes the point of Phaedrus' contrasting treatment of Alcestis and Achilles in Plato's *Symposium* (179b–180b): the self-sacrifice of a male beloved who is motivated solely by philía for a lover, not by such erós as women normally feel, is adjudged *eo ipso* more heroic. Later in the same dialogue, Pausanias distinguishes between the erós of Aristogeiton and the philía of his beloved, Harmodius (182c), pointing out that the lover's role is *to eran* and the beloved's is *to philērastēs genesthai tois erastēs* (183c); Socrates similarly distinguishes his erós for Alcibiades from the latter's *philērastēs* (213c–d). Plato's Aristophanes differentiates the roles of lover and beloved by referring to the one as *paiderastēs* and the other as *philērastēs* (*Symposium* 192b4). Plato's earliest hint, in the *Lysis*, at the importance of reciprocity conforms, in keeping with the traditional subject of that dialogue, to the conventional formulation: Socrates brings the conversation to a halt by declaring, "It is necessary, then, for a genuine and not a pretended lover [erastēs] to be loved/liked [philethai] by his boy" (222a). On Plato's manipulation of traditional views in the *Lysis*, see David K. Glidden, "The Lysis on Loving One's Own," *CQ* 31 (1981) 39–59; on reciprocity in the *Lysis*, see Friedländer, I, 50–51, II, 95–102; Robert G. Hoerber, "Plato's *Lysis*," *Phronesis* 4 (1959) 15–28, esp. 21; Laszlo Veresényi, "Plato's *Lysis*," *Phronesis* 20 (1975): 185–98, esp. 197; Hans-Georg Gadamer, "*Logos and Ergon* in Plato's *Lysis*," *Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato*, trans. P. Christopher Smith (New Haven 1980) 1–20, esp. 10–11.

The only counter-example to all this is at best a dubious one: Pausanias 1.30.1 records an altar to *Antērōs* in Athens, dedicated by resident aliens to commemorate the suicide of an Athenian youth who belatedly appreciated the nobility of his foreign lover when the latter threw himself off the Acropolis in obedience to the youth's contemptuous command (see, also, the *Suda*, s.v. Meletus). The boy's suicide was motivated, however, not by antērōs but by *metanoia*, a change of heart, in Pausanias' telling of the story; antērōs is the vindictive interpretation placed upon the boy's impetuous act by the resident aliens, who construe *Antērōs* to be an avenging deity (*alastôr*). In any case, it is worth noting that the boy mimics his lover's antērōs only after the latter is dead. The altars and figures of Erós and Antērōs which Pausanias observed in the gymnasia at Elis (6.23.3, 5) seem to have celebrated the spirit of rivalry (the usual meaning of antērōs), rather than reciprocity, to judge from Pausanias's description of the frieze (so Calame [supra n.3] xi–xiii): an example of the type appears to have survived on a Roman relief (see Roscher's *Lexikon*, I, 1368, cited by J. G. Frazer, *Pausanias's Description of Greece* [repr. New York 1965], vol. IV, 103, ad loc.); but cf. Plato *Symposium* 182b. On the cult of erós, see O. Bronner, "*Eros and Aphrodite on the North Slope of the Acropolis*," *Hesperia* 1 (1932) 31–55, 2 (1933) 329–429; S. Fiske, *Eros: la figura e il culto* (Genoa 1977).
striking. Socrates claims that the beloved youth comes to participate in his lover's passionate desire for him. The younger partner no longer feels mere honor or esteem for his lover but is said to return his desire—though more weakly, Socrates hastily adds in an effort to square his account with contemporary moral standards and unwritten rules of social behavior. What the beloved experiences, according to Socrates in the passage from the Phaedrus quoted above, is not philia but erōs, specifically an anterōs (“counter-love” in Hackforth's translation)—that is, an erōs in return for erōs, which is an image or replica (eidōlon) of his lover's erōs. Understandably, an inexperienced youngster is bewildered by this sensation: nothing in his breeding or in his social training has prepared him for it. He can neither give a clear account of it nor identify the source and object of his desire (the object of his erōs is, unbeknownst to him, his own beauty); instead, he professes to feel philia (“friendship” or affection) for his lover, as propriety requires and his own social instincts encourage him to believe. Nonetheless, he actually shares the erotic passion that has overcome his lover, or so Socrates insists. The motive for Socrates' emphasis in this passage, and for his somewhat over-ingenious special pleading, springs at least in part from the novelty of his analysis.

Because erōs, as Diotima argues in the Symposium (206e–207a), does not aim at the physical possession of a beautiful object but at the lover's perpetual possession of the good—or, in her conceptual shorthand, at immortality—and because the possession of a discrete object, however enticing or adorable, necessarily diverts the lover from the ultimate goal of his longing, no erotic desire, no matter how intense, should (or, indeed, can) be sexually gratified. The Platonic doctrine thereby escapes the scandalous charge of applauding sexual passivity. For should the beloved's anterōs express itself sexually (i.e., as a desire to be subjected to a passive role in intercourse), the unfortunate young man is liable to incur the censure of his fellow citizens for shamelessness and perversion—together with the ridicule which Alcibiades fears (or pretends to fear: Symposium 217e–218b) will greet the recital of his own efforts to be

14a. Pace Calame (supra n.3), xxix–xxx.
15. I have argued this point at length in “Platonic Eros and What Men Call Love,” Ancient Philosophy 5 (forthcoming). I do not, of course, wish to imply that the erotic doctrines of the Phaedrus and Symposium are identical in every respect (they differ strikingly, for example, in the value they place on human beings as objects of erōs); I do regard them as fundamentally compatible, however: see Irwin, 323 n.62, for further arguments, and cf., generally, John D. Moore, “The Relation between Plato's Symposium and Phaedrus,” in Patterns in Plato's Thought, ed. J. M. E. Moravski (Dordrecht 1973) 52–71.
16. See, e.g., Plutarch Moralia 768e; Dover, 52–53; 91: “That the eromenos should initiate a homosexual act for its own sake is not a possibility admitted by [Plato's] Pausanias or by any other Greek enthusiast or apologist for homosexual eros.” See, further, Dover, 168–70, on “perversion.”
seduced by Socrates—and even risks losing his civil rights. Rather, the Platonic approach all but erases the distinction between lover and beloved, between the active and the passive partner—or, to put it better, the genius of Plato’s analysis is that it eliminates passivity altogether: according to Socrates, both members of the relationship become active, desiring lovers; neither remains solely a passive object of desire. Thus, the way is cleared for a greater degree of reciprocity in the expression of desire and in the exchange of affection. Because his (αντερός, if guided properly, does not seek sexual consummation, the younger man is now free to return his older lover’s passion without shame or impropriety.

II. EROTIC RECIPROCITY IN THE PHILOSOPHICAL COMMUNITY

Relations among the members of Socrates’ circle, as Plato portrays them, illustrate the theory of erotic reciprocity sketched out by Socrates in the Phaedrus. For Socrates arouses in the beautiful youths whom he pursues a measure of desire equal to his own; as Alcibiades ruefully testifies (Symposium 217c, 222b), Socrates awakens in them an erotic response so powerful that they pursue him as if he were a boy. For some of his followers, such as Aristodemus, this erotic inspiration is productive and congenial, for others (Alcibiades numbers Charmides and a certain Euthydemus, in addition to himself, among the victims)—namely, those who hope to barter their physical beauty for wisdom and so evade the claims of their own desire, or those who translate their desire wholly into physical terms—the Socratic community is a theater of frustration and torment. Indeed, Socrates maintains what from a conventional point of view is a highly paradoxical position: he is a lover himself, yet he contrives to be surrounded by other lovers to whom he represents, in turn, an object of love, even as they are objects of love for him.

17. Dover, 103–9, 145–48; Keuls (supra n.11) 291–98. Loss of civil rights is the penalty for prostitution, not for αντερός or sexual passivity per se, but because the junior partner is not conventionally supposed to derive sexual pleasure from playing his assigned role, any “boy” who seeks out or otherwise evinces enthusiasm for such a role necessarily exposes himself to unpleasant speculation about the nature of his motives—and so risks courting the general assumption that he has engaged himself for pay (similarly, anyone who performs for hire the sort of job usually assigned to slaves is liable to be accused of being of servile status: see Golden, 310 n.9). That the Athenians appear to have found greed a more plausible explanation for the willingness of an ερώτημα than sexual desire is a telling indication of what they considered sexually pleasurable and what they did not.

18. Cf. Athenaeus 5.219d. For a vivid description of Socrates’ effect on Alcibiades, see Nussbaum, 156–57; cf. also Jaeger (supra n.4), 196.


20. Symposium 222b; Euthydemus also appears in Xenophon Memorabilia 4.2 and 1.2.29–30. On the analogy between Alcibiades and Charmides, see infra n.23.

The reciprocal erotic dynamic distinctive to the Socratic community finds its clearest exemplification in the *Greater Alcibiades*, where it is expressed once again by the image of the mirror. If Apollo, in his Delphic injunction, had commanded man to see himself instead of to know himself, Socrates and Alcibiades agree, man would have to use a mirror—preferably, the pupil of another person’s eye, because therein inheres the power of sight itself: “For, thus, an eye gazing into another eye, and looking at that thing with which it sees and is best, would see itself” (132d–133b). In order to see ourselves truly, we have to see ourselves seeing (since movement is a property of the rational soul); otherwise, we glimpse only a static image of ourselves and do not know ourselves as active, desiring, sentient beings. “Come then, my dear Alcibiades! If the soul is to know herself, must she not in the same way look at another soul, and specifically at that place in it in which occurs the excellence of a soul—namely, wisdom [sophia]?” (133b). Alcibiades is persuaded by these and other arguments; like Charmides before him, he offers to exchange his role of being pursued for that of his pursuer and vows to attend on Socrates as if he were a pedagogue. Socrates replies, “Noble fellow! Will my erōs [sc. for

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22. A detailed commentary on this passage is provided by A. Soulez-Luccioni, “Le Paradigme de la vision de soi-même dans l’ ‘Alcibiade majeur,’” *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 79 (1974) 196–222; see also Bohner-Cante (supra n.5) 306–10; MacCary (supra n.5) 149–51; Foucault (supra n.14) 367–68. For an introduction to the dialogue as a whole, together with a discussion of the questions surrounding its authenticity, see Friedländer, II, 231–38; Guthrie, III, 470 n.2. The passages examined below are considered Platonic by many who doubt the authenticity of the surrounding text.

23. The final paragraphs of the *Charmides* (176b ff.) contain a similar reversal of roles: there is much badinage about Charmides’ intention to pursue and to “force” Socrates, which obviously casts the younger man in the role of the aggressor and the older man in the role of his (helpless) victim; cf. Lewis (supra n.10) 161. This is perhaps part of a larger pattern, to which many of the earlier dialogues conform, involving the interlocutors’ conversion at the climax of a Socratic conversation.
you] differ at all from a stork’s if, having hatched in you a winged erōs [sc. for me and philosophy], it [i.e., my erōs] is to be in its turn served by it [i.e., your erōs]?" (135e). On this note of perfect reciprocity the dialogue closes. In order to comply with the Delphic injunction, then, we must seek to know ourselves in our lover’s intellect; when love is Platonic, each lover grows wise by contemplating himself in the soul of his partner, discovering in this way the nature of the divinity within himself (Phaedrus 252e–253a). Indeed, one’s lover becomes in all literalness another self, an alter ego. The union achieved by such lovers is more complete and perfect, yet allows for a greater sense of individual identity, than mere sexual union (cf. Symposium 209c).

Plotinus alone seems to have understood something of what was at stake in the reciprocal dynamic of Platonic erōs: “One must give himself to what is within,” he wrote in his commentary on the Phaedrus myth, “and thus, instead of a beholder, become object of vision for somebody else” (5.8.11). Plato’s immediate followers, by contrast, resisted the implications of his theory: his model of mutual erotic inspiration was apparently too alien to them. It is interesting to observe how quickly and consistently Plato’s disciples tended to displace the operation of reciprocity from the erotic sphere into which Plato had, against all precedents, obtruded it; in so doing they did not act, I think, upon a conscious and deliberate impulse to correct Platonic doctrine but, far from being aware of any disloyalty to Plato in this one instance, they instinctively reinterpreted his thought in order to make it conformable to the widely shared cultural assumptions from which Plato himself had so firmly deviated. Both Aristotle and Cicero, for example, emphasize the importance of reciprocity in human relations, but they invoke Plato’s analysis in their discussions of non-romantic love, or “friendship” (philia, amicitia), a bond which they define in such a way as to include the force that holds all human communities together in a system of reciprocal exchange. Xenophon similarly transferred Socrates’

24. For a discussion of Socrates’ ability to cause his passion for beautiful youths to be reciprocated, see Friedländer, I, 49, 139–42.


26. Quoted by Friedländer, I, 81.

27. Cf. Wilkinson (supra n.13) 27. For Aristotle’s stipulation about reciprocity in friendship, see esp. Nichomachean Ethics 8.1155b32–1156a5 and cf. Prior Analytics 2.68a39–68b7; note, however, that reciprocity may have figured in Aristotle’s treatment of erōs as well, if Friedländer (“Socrates Enters Rome,” AJP 66 [1945] 337–51, esp. 348–51) is correct in supposing that Aristotle borrowed Plato’s image of one eye looking into another in his own (now lost) dialogue, the Eroticus. For the notion that erōs, when reciprocated, becomes philia, see Plutarch Moralia fr. 135 (Sandbach); Foucault (supra n.14) 344–46. The tradition that held philia to be the universal bond in nature and in human society is very old and is firmly rooted in Plato, esp. in the Republic: see Vlastos, 11–19; for other examples, cf. Gorgias 507e–508a, Timaeus 32c (on the friendship of the created universe with itself), Sophist 242e–243a, and Alcibiades Major 126c–127d. See, generally, Jean-Pierre Vernant, The Origins of Greek Thought (Ithaca 1982) 60–61; Jaeger (supra n.4) II, 57–59, 174–75, who discusses the importance of philia as a social force in Plato but underplays Plato’s distinction between philia and erōs.
emphasis on reciprocity to the context of friendship: in the Memorabilia or “Recollections” of Socrates, Xenophon quotes his admired preceptor as saying, “For when I desire [epithyméō] someone, I give the whole strength of my being to be loved [antiphileisthai] by him in return for my love [philón], to arouse longing [antipotheisthai] in return for my longing [pothôn], and to see my desire [antepithymón] for companionship reciprocated by his desire [antepeithymeisthai].” (2.6.28). 28 Notably missing from Xenophon’s account is the key term anterasthai, “to be desired erotically in return,” which Xenophon must have found intolerable in such a context. Aristotle even goes so far as to consider the myth of Plato’s Aristophanes (Symposium 189d–193d) to be an illustration of the power of philia: what specifically gives rise to binding unions, such as the union between two lovers, is in Aristotle’s view the intense philia generated by the erotic relationship, rather than the erós that generates it (Politics 2.1262b8–17). But Plato, in certain passages at least, insists on using erós, not philia, as the basis for an ideal intellectual fellowship.

Plato’s peculiar insistence on the importance of being a lover, of playing a passionately active part in the philosophical community, is reflected in his faintly idiosyncratic use of language. Plato borrows from conventional Athenian usage the hierarchical terminology employed to differentiate the active and passive roles in a paederastic relationship and converts it to the purpose of articulating the erotic, and aggressive, nature of the philosophical enterprise. In the Gorgias (481d) Socrates claims to be the lover [erôn] of both Alcibiades and philosophy; in virtually the first mention of erós in the Symposium (173b), Apollodorus refers to Socrates’ disciple Aristodemus as the greatest erastês, or active lover, 29 of Socrates among the men of that time, thereby establishing an enlarged meaning of erotic desire from the very outset of the dialogue. 30 In the Republic (501d) philosophers are said to be erastai of being and truth, inasmuch as it is the philosopher’s nature to love [eran] the kind of learning that reveals something of eternal being (485a–b); earlier in the same work, the philosopher’s erós is expected to beget understanding [nous] and truth (490a–b). 31 In the Timaeus (46d) the physicist is similarly described as an erastês of understanding [nous] and knowledge [epistême]. In the Phaedo (68a) death brings the philosopher to a place where he may expect to find what he has loved [érôn] all his life—namely, wisdom [phronêsis]—and therefore the lover

28. Quoted by Friedländer, I, 45; cf. Xenophon Symposium 8.16–18. See, generally, Bruns (supra n.4) 26–30, on Xenophon’s reception of Plato’s erotic doctrine; also, Foucault, 256–57.
30. Cf. Gagarin (supra n.21) 23n., and Dover, 157, on this passage (for a list of other mature men “stung” by Socrates, see Plato Symposium 218a–b). Similarly, Aristippus is called an erastês of Socrates and the Aleuadai erastai of Gorgias in the Meno (70b), while Socrates refers to himself and his friends as erastai of Protagoras in the Protagoras (317c). For other examples in Plato of erastês used in the sense of “admirer” or “fan,” see Protagoras 343a; Euthydemos 276d, 303b; Philebus 23a. The meaning of the word erastês had already been extended in the period when Plato was growing up: see esp. Thucydides 2.43.1; Sophocles Oedipus Rex 601 (all ‘out’ erastês tês gnômês ephyn); and Euripides Heracleidae 377–78 (o polemôn erastai).
31. See Vlastos, 19 n.53; Dover, 156–57.
[erón] of wisdom is more eager to die than those who have merely desired [epethymoun] to meet their loved ones in the beyond; furthermore, Socrates confesses that he and his friends desire and claim to be erastai of wisdom [phronēsis] (66e). In the Phaedrus (266b) Socrates declares himself an erastēs of divisions and collections (the methods of dialectic)—although earlier he acknowledges that he is also an erastēs of speeches (228c). Socrates repeats his self-characterization in the Philebus when he says he is always an erastēs of the proper method (16b), and at the end he speaks eloquently of the natural power of our soul to love [eran] truth (58d); in the Theaetetus (169c) he fully avows his terrible erōs of intellectual gymnastics. In the first book of the Laws (643e) true education is defined as that which makes one an erastēs of becoming a perfect citizen, while in the fourth book (711d) the possibility of political amelioration is made to depend on the rulers' erōs of temperate and just institutions; hence, it was reasonable for Plato to hope that Dionysius, the tyrant of Syracuse, would attain to a love [erōs] of the best life (Epistle 7.339e). Even Xenophon records Socrates' claim to be a synerastēs (or joint-erastēs) with Athens of those who are good by nature and zealous in their pursuit of excellence (Symposium 8.41). Only the transcendent objects of knowledge are passive insofar as they move us by eliciting our desire: as Aristotle puts it in the twelfth book of the Metaphysics (1072b3), the final cause produces motion in the same way as an erōmenos. This kind of language, far from merely reflecting the jocular, if philosophically tendentious, façon de parler in vogue among the intimates of Socrates' circle (as Dover is tempted to believe) expresses the profound conviction that we must all of us be active, desiring lovers. Both the colloquial and philosophical dimensions of Plato's usage often make themselves felt in an individual passage: at Symposium 203c3–4, for example, when Diotima calls the god Eros an erastēs, she means not only that he is, because of the peculiar circumstances surrounding his birth (hamas physei), an enthusiast on the subject of beauty (erastēs . . . peri to kalon), but also that desire, by its very nature (hamas physei), is active and aggressive in the pursuit of its object.

III. EROTIC RECIPROCITY AND THE METAPHYSICS OF DESIRE

There is indeed no role for passivity in the pursuit of truth. No one who is already wise "loves wisdom" (that is, philosophizes) any more than one who is

32. Socrates goes on to pray that Phaedrus (whom he also calls an erastēs of Lysias) may, with the aid of philosophical speeches, live simply for Erōs—i.e., only Lysias himself can be converted to philosophy (257b); in the meantime, Lysias remains the paideia of Phaedrus (236b, 279b), while Socrates claims Socrates for his own paideia (279b): see de Vries (supra n.5) 181, ad 257b4–5.

33. Insofar as the Forms are the ultimate objects of desire, and insofar as our relationship with them is not reciprocal, "the reciprocity between human beings," as Irving Singer observed in a private letter to me, "must be interpreted as a joint pursuit for an ultimate oneness that is not itself reciprocal." For a similar argument, see Enrique Rivera de Ventosa, "El Amor personal en la metafísica de Platon," Helmanica 26 (1975) 495–521.

34. Dover, 156–57. See, further, supra n.30.
totally ignorant and self-satisfied; only those individuals are philosophical who
desire and strive for wisdom (Symposium 203d–204a). Plato’s language is de-
signed to emphasize the active, restless character of the desire that is common
to the passionate paederast and the aspiring philosopher. Sexual desire, insofar
as it is aroused by that measure of transcendent beauty instantiated in a beau-
tiful body, is a low-order form of philosophical activity: every sexual impulse to
possess another person physically—ultimately an impossible and therefore a
limitless longing26—represents (to the extent that it is stimulated by beauty) an
inchoate expression of our metaphysical desire to make the good our own
forever, to become immortal.36 Mortal as we are, we can achieve immortality
only by procreation (or creativity), by striving to make what is best in us a
perpetually living force.37 “All men are pregnant,”38 Diotima declares, “but
our nature cannot give birth in ugliness, only in beauty” (206c). We need
beauty in order to procreate, and only desire can bring us into the presence of
beauty:39 it is an utter sophistry to maintain that we can seek beauty without
desiring it, led purely by a doxa epi to ariston logoi agousa, a “judgement
guiding us rationally towards what is best,” as Socrates fleetingly pretends in
the Phaedrus (237e).40 Rather, as we learn in Book IX of the Republic, the

35. Cf. Proust (supra n.5) I, 234: “l’acte de la possession physique—où d’ailleurs l’on ne
possède rien”; I, 364: “désirer la possession, toujours impossible, d’un autre être.”
36. Cf. Herman L. Sinaiko, Love, Knowledge, and Discourse in Plato (Chicago 1965) 90:
“Thus, to see beauty in another human being and to make him or her one’s beloved remains the
mark of the true philosopher, but to the degree that any man finds beauty in another person he is
partaking of the ‘blessed’ life of the philosopher”; Samuel Scolnoc, “Reason and Passion in the
Platonic Soul,” Dionysius 2 (1978) 35–49, esp. 45–46: “the knowledge of the good is not mere
knowledge but it is a unified activity of the soul, which includes cognition, desire and creation.
At the lowest level, it presents itself as sexual attraction, in which too there is a minimum of cognition,
and physical procreation; at the higher level it appears as philosophical knowledge, whose neces-
sary consequence is political and educational activity”; see, generally, Jon Moline, “Plato on the
Complexity of the Psyche,” Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie 60 (1978) 1–26, esp. 10–13. See
also Nussbaum, 158, who argues that Alcibiades experiences his sexual desire for Socrates “as a
kind of epistemic aim.”
37. Voegelin (supra n.25) 13; cf. Irwin, 167: “Like other people, [the pregnant lover] wants
to create whatever will preserve for ever what he values most.”
38. For a defense of this translation, see Vlastos, 21n., 424; M. F. Burnyeat, “Socratic
Midwifery, Platonic Inspiration,” Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies (London University)
24 (1977) 7–16, esp. 14n.5; cf. Clay (supra n.4) 124–25; J. S. Morrison, “Four Notes on Plato’s
55; James M. Edie, “Expression and Metaphor,” Philosophy and Phenomenological Research 23
(1963) 533–61, esp. 553–57.
39. Bruns (supra n.4) 22.
40. On this passage, see Hackforth (supra n.5) 41–42; Thomas Gould, Platonic Love (New
32–46, esp. 42; Friedländer, III, 224–25; Kenneth Dorner, “Imagery and Philosopher in Plato’s
Phaedrus,” Journal of the History of Philosophy 9 (1971) 279–88, esp. 282–86; Irwin, 238–39; the
most forceful arguments in support of the interpretation followed here are advanced by Malcolm
Brown and James Coulter, “The Middle Speech of Plato’s Phaedrus,” Journal of the History of
Philosophy 9 (1971) 405–23. On the place of the irrational in Plato’s thought, and in the Phaedrus
rational faculty in the soul has its own kind of appetite\textsuperscript{41} and its own brand of pleasure (580d–585e; cf. Timaeus 88a–b); according to the Laws, the virtues themselves must be accompanied by erōs and epithymia (688b). Our erotic impulse is successful, however, not when it is temporarily gratified through sexual release but when it brings us into contact with the sort of individual who is able by virtue of his own beauty to call forth our deepest insights.\textsuperscript{42} Pace Socrates at Theaetetus 155d, philosophy begins not in wonder but in desire.

Diotima concludes (Symposium 204c) that the nature of erōs more closely resembles the nature of the erōn (the lover) than that of the erōmenos (the beloved). Erōs is not static: unlike what we sometimes mean today by “love,” it is not a stable condition but a movement of the soul driven by need and deprivation toward productivity and self-realization;\textsuperscript{43} it is the name we give to the desire and pursuit of the whole (Symposium 192e). To be an erastés, an aggressor in love, is to begin to make progress in the quest for immortality—or, as Socrates puts it in a moment of greater earnestness in the Phaedrus, to begin to grow the wings of the soul. Just as one cannot desire another person without desiring that portion of transcendent beauty embodied by him (and available in purer form in the objects of intellectual beauty), so also one cannot seek wisdom without first being possessed by the mania of erotic desire. Wisdom will not come to us of its own accord: we have to desire it in order to pursue it. Beauty evokes our desire; of all the objects of intellect, beauty alone is immediately accessible to our senses, whereas “in the earthly likenesses of justice and temperance and all other prized possessions of the soul there dwells no lustre” (Phaedrus 250a–d; cf. Statesman 285e).\textsuperscript{44} It is the lover

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\textsuperscript{41} Grube (supra n.3) 135–36; Scolnicov (supra n.36) 42–43; Irwin, 191–95, 233–41, 244–46; Richard Patterson, “Plato on Philosophical Character,” Journal of the History of Philosophy (forthcoming).

\textsuperscript{42} See Friedländer, I, 50–55; Sinaiko (supra n.36) 79–98.

\textsuperscript{43} Cf. Singer (supra n.4) 55–56, 89; Nussbaum, 145–52. Hence Lebeck (supra n.7) 269, commenting on Plato’s imagery in the Phaedrus, observes: “The lover, moved by mania, is somehow more closely in touch with the natural motion of the soul than the nonlover”; cf. Roger Hornsby, “Significant Action in the Symposium,” CJ 52 (1956–57) 37–40, on the unity of erotic and psychic motion. See also Gould (supra n.40) 116–19; Sinaiko (supra n.36) 65–68; and cf. Levy (supra n.4) 289–90. I have not been able to consult B. J. Bardsley, “The Soul as Self-Moving Motion: The Synthesis of Madness and Sobriety in Plato’s Phaedrus” (Ph.D. diss., University of Texas 1975).

\textsuperscript{44} Bruns (supra n.4) 20: “Deshalb ist der von der körperlichen Schönheit Ergriffene, ohne es zu wissen, der höheren Welt näher gebracht”; Sinaiko (supra n.36) 68: “Physiologically this [sight of the beloved] is merely an act of visual sensation, but humanly it is far more than that; for in some degree it reminds man of the transcendent beauty, ‘beauty itself,’ which he once beheld
seeking beauty, not the beloved incarnating a share of it, who is the more
divine (Symposium 180b). Socrates’ unconventional analysis of the dynamic
of attraction in a paederastic relationship reveals, beyond all its psychological
acuity, an underlying philosophical purpose: it is designed to equip both
partners with the requisite erotic response to the stimulus of beauty—with the
capacity to become more divine. We cannot all be (physically) beautiful, but
we all can and do desire beauty. By granting the beloved access to a direct, if
reflected, erotic stimulus and thereby including him in the community of
lovers, Plato in effect elaborates the Socratic precept that philosophy is the
business of everyone inasmuch as all men are responsible for cultivating their
souls. If Plato’s erotic theory escapes—as I believe it does—the charge of
promoting the exploitation of desired persons and objects, it does so not
because eros aims, in Plato’s view, at the moral improvement of the
eromenos (although such improvement is bound to be an incidental result of the Platonic
lover’s manic activity) but because both lover and beloved, aroused alike by
their visions of an identical beauty emanating (apparently) from each other and
driven by the intensity of their separate desires to new labors of visionary
creativity, make simultaneous and reciprocal, though independent, progress to-
ward the contemplation of the Forms.

It is now permissible to speak of the lover and beloved as two lovers—
although Plato himself is never so explicit—for they experience alike the passion
of eros. Moreover, the interests of both lovers fully converge and so, in
theory at least, neither is significantly subordinate to the other. As Socrates

directly in the ‘place beyond the heavens.’ When this reminiscence occurs, then in a quite concrete
sense the man who experiences it, beholds . . . and feasts’ on the ‘Being which truly is’ in the very
act of ordinary visual perception. Thus, according to the myth, the transcendent character of the
contemplative act means that any ordinary sensory experience of a soul within the physical uni-
verse may also be transcendent.” Cf. 81–82; Pieper (supra n.40) 76.

45. See Vlastos (supra n.21) 19–21. Cf. Sinaiko (supra n.36) 82–83 (divinely inspired love is
“the single, all-inclusive motive in the lives of all men”; 83) and 90–91 (“To understand why
a human being is different in kind from all other possible earthly objects of love and is also
the particularly appropriate object for the philosopher,” it is necessary to appreciate the importance
of “the mutuality and reciprocity possible between two friends [sic]” enabling each to be “moved by
that desire for transcendent reality which lies at the heart of the individual human condition”; 90);
also, Versenyi (supra n.14) 197.

46. Dover, 161–62, and Vlastos, 30–33, make substantially this accusation. Cf. also Neumann
(supra n.38) 40–41, who observes, “one can only conclude that this passive role is not natural, if all
yearn to engender the beauties of moderation and justice in others” (40).

47. As Irwin, 167, 169, claims, following the interpretation of Richard Kraut, “Egoism,
Love, and Political Office in Plato,” Philosophical Review 82 (1973) 330–44. Their view was
anticipated by R. Hackforth, “Immortality in Plato’s Symposium,” CR 64.2 (1950) 43–45 cf. also
Plass (supra n.38).

48. Cf. Foucault, 262–64, on the connection in Plato’s thought between erotic reciprocity and
the democratization of philosophical activity within the community of lovers. I hope to argue in
greater detail against the Kraut–Irwin view of the erotic aim in a separate paper.

49. Cf. R. H. S. Crossman, Plato To-day, rev. ed. (New York 1959) 133; Sinaiko (supra
n.36) 100–101: “finally, even this distinction between the lover and the beloved breaks down
IV. EROTIC AND DIALOGIC RECIPROCITY

Voegelin's emphasis on the communion of the dialogue reminds us that it is in conversations, such as the conversation between Socrates and Alcibiades, when, in a successful love affair, each becomes the lover of and the beloved for the other. We should not, however, exaggerate the significance of erotic reciprocity for Plato's model of philosophical inquiry. It does not introduce rival sources of authority into the Socratic community—at least, not in practice—nor does it inject an element of genuine pluralism or relativity into Plato's epistemology. On the contrary: because the content of the beloved's vision of beauty—whatever its actual origin—is identical to that of the lover's, erotic reciprocity in Plato's formulation does not threaten the unity of knowledge or the determinacy of the goal of philosophy. But it does set Plato's outlook apart from other, more traditionally hierarchical methods of handing down knowledge and, in principle, it anchors a mode of access to truth in the existential situation of every human being, of every lover. By promoting an ideal of reciprocity in erōs, in other words, Plato implicitly locates the source of his authoritarianism in the metaphysical structure of his philosophy rather than in its system of practice.

50. Cf. Hackforth (supra n.5) 94; Versenyi (supra n.14) 197.


that the reciprocal bond of erōs is forged. The Platonic lover, obedient to Diotima’s instructions, not only refrains from physically possessing his desired object (even when that object is a beautiful body), but strives to beget logos kaloi, “beautiful speeches,” in its presence (Symposium 210a). As Dover has pointed out, Plato “regards philosophy not as an activity to be pursued in solitary meditation and communicated in ex cathedra pronouncements by a master to his disciples, but as a dialectical progress which may well begin in the response of an older male to the stimulus afforded by a younger male who combines bodily beauty with ‘beauty of the soul.’” We must not forget that dialectic, Plato’s name for the philosophical method, originally meant “conversation” in Greek; the word implies that philosophical inquiry proceeds by a reciprocal exchange of questions and answers. Books can neither answer questions nor ask them, Socrates says in the Protagoras (329a); the written word is inert (Phaedrus 275d–e). Wisdom cannot be communicated in discursive, propositional form—it cannot flow from one person to another like water through a string (Symposium 175d; cf. Republic 518b–d). Each person must discover it for himself or herself, must give birth to it and make it his or her own child. But human contact can help (cf. Protagoras 348c–d), for in the dialectical process of intimate conversation an erotic spark may leap from one person to another as the soul discovers a beautiful and desirable place in which to give birth to the logos quickening within her. As Plato writes in the Seventh Letter,


56. See, generally, Friedländer, I, 156, 166; Tarrant (supra n.7); Guthrie, III, 488.

57. Cf. Bruns (supra n.4) 22: “Aber das Individuum bedarf zu der Vollendung dieses Triebes einer Ergänzung, eines Mediums, welche es nur in einem zweiten Individuum findet, wofern dieses schön ist”; Jaeger (supra n.4) 184.

58. For a survey of the ongoing scholarly controversy over the meaning and authenticity of the Seventh Letter, see Guthrie, V, 399–417.
I do not, however, consider the attempt to speak of this matter a good thing for men, except for some few who are capable of discovering it themselves with little indication; of the rest, it would fill some with an unjustified contempt in a highly unbecoming fashion, others with a lofty and vain presumption, as if they had learned some sacred mystery. . . . For the matter itself does not at all admit of verbal expression like other subjects of study; rather, as a result of a long period of intercourse devoted to it and a common life,59 suddenly—like light kindled by a leaping flame—it is born in the soul and thereafter nourishes itself. . . . When each of these things—names and definitions, visual and other sense-perceptions—are laboriously brought together in the friction of comparison, closely examined in an atmosphere of good will and by an ungrudging56 exchange of questions and answers, wisdom [phronēsis] about each flashes out, and understanding [nous], as one strains61 to the limit of human capacity (341e–342a, 341c–d, 344b–c).

The Platonic dialogue is true to this model of philosophical inquiry. Plato, of course, did not invent the dialogue-form, nor was he the only disciple of Socrates who composed Socratic dialogues. But he was perhaps the only one who fully understood the reciprocal erotic dynamic of a Socratic conversation and he employed the dialogue-form to illustrate its workings. For in Plato’s hands the dialogue-form itself represents an attempt to recapture the original and authentic erotic context of philosophy—the exchange of questions and answers from which emerges, dialectically, an image of excellence: the lover’s beautiful speeches. By its very form, then, the Platonic dialogue aspires to

59. This phrase (all’ ek pollēs synousias gignomenês peri to pragma auto kai tou syzên) has been variously understood and rendered: “rather after a long period of attendance on instruction in the subject itself and of close companionship” (Post); “as a result of continued application to the subject itself and communion therewith” (Bury); “long-continued intercourse between pupil and teacher in joint pursuit of the object they are seeking to apprehend” (Morrow); “only after long partnership in a common life devoted to this very thing” (Hamilton); “only out of much converse about the subject, and a life lived together” (Guthrie). I do not doubt that synousia refers to communion with other human beings rather than with to pragma auto, but in my translation I have tried not to prejudice the issue. For other examples of Plato’s use of synousia in this sense, see F. Novotný, ed., Platonis Epistulæ commentariis illustratae, Opera facultatis philosophicæ Universitatis Masarykianæ Brunensis 30 (Brno 1930) ad loc., who addsuces Gorgias 461b and Laws 12.968c as the closest parallels, though see also Phaedrus 239b (cited by Verdenius [supra n.40] 139) and the opening of the Symposium, especially 172a–173b, where the word occurs five times in connection with Agathon’s dinner-party. Obviously, the subject of such synousiai remains to pragma auto.

60. Plato’s strictures against phthonos deserve a separate treatment; suffice it to say that phthonos is no less out of place in an erotic relationship (ou phthonoi ou de aneleuthērèi dysmeneiā khronemoi pros ta pai'dika: Phaedrus 252b; cf. 239a) than it is in the heavenly choir (Phaedrus 247a; Timea 29e) or in the life of the mind (en philosophiai aphanton: Symposium 210d). See Sinaiko (supra n.36) 71–72; de Vries (supra n.5) 164 ad 253b7–8. Cf. Patterson (supra n.41).

61. Whether one accepts, with Wilamowitz and Bury, the emendation of Eva Sachs (syneteinonti), or the attractive suggestion of Novotný and Franz Egermann (syneteinontin), the sense of the passage is not greatly affected. If one were to retain the reading of the manuscripts (syneteinōn), one would have to translate, with Guthrie, “and nous stretching human powers to their limit.”
engage the reader—by inviting his sympathetic identification with the characters and his intellectual participation in their discourse—in a give-and-take, a mutual exchange of ideas, an open-ended discussion. It seeks, in other words, to awaken erōs in the reader—to arouse, in particular, his hermeneutic erōs, “the desire of the text.” Or rather, since literary interpretation is but a means to understanding, and no piece of writing in itself is a very serious matter, it would be more accurate to speak of hermeneutic erōs in Plato’s conception as “the desire of the idea implicit in a text”—a striving toward something objective. Without such desire or striving or “(counter-)love,” without participating in such a reciprocal exchange, the reader will not be able to interpret a Platonic dialogue and will find it baffling, pointless, incomprehensible. It is the function of the Socratic aporia, and it is characteristic of Plato’s writings in general, to promote in the reader an inner dialogue that extends and continues the dialogue in the text. For thinking itself, or dianoia, is, according to the Eleatic Stranger in Plato’s Sophist (263c), an interior dialogue without sound carried on by the soul; in the Theaetetus (189e–190a), Socrates defines dianoia as speech (logos) which the soul carries on with itself, adding, “The soul, when it is thinking, seems to me to be doing nothing else but conversing (dialegesthai), asking itself questions and answering them, and saying yes or no.” Erotic reciprocity, then, mirrors the dynamic process of thought: it reflects and expresses the distinctive, self-generated motion of the rational soul.

V. CONCLUSION

It may now be possible to understand why Socrates, as Plato portrays him, chooses to spend so much of his time among the young. As Paul Friedländer argues,


Page duBois, “Phallocentrism and its Subversion in Plato’s Phaedrus,” Arethusa 18 (1985) 91–103, echoing duBois (supra n.54) 10, pushes to an extreme the line of interpretation taken here when she calls the Phaedrus “a drama of sexual encounter . . . between the reader and the text” (95). For all the celebrated seductiveness of great literature, I do not believe that anyone can plausibly claim to have had a specifically sexual encounter with the text of a literary work.

63. Some recent overviews of this complex issue can be found in Friedländer, I, 113–24; de Vries (supra n.5) 18–22; Guthrie, IV, 1–3; Partee (supra n.62) 184–85.

64. See Versenyi (supra n.14) 197–98.

65. See Gould (supra n.40) 66–67; Pieper (supra n.40) 101–02.

66. See Moline (supra n.36) 14–15.
Socrates can, indeed, seek only in the process of a common conversation; and this search is a perennial task, never completed for anybody, including himself. Yet does not Charmides, still in the process of developing, look to Socrates as to a man who has already attained perfection? Does not Socrates, though never standing still in his quest for knowledge, indeed represent perfection in every moment of his existence? And does not Socrates need Charmides? Indeed, is not even Charmides, as a youth, perfect in his own natural growth? Thus the peculiar seduction lies precisely in this gentle and concealed dialectical tension: irony is the net of the great educator.67

Plato refuses to separate—he actually identifies and fuses—the erotics of sexuality, the erotics of conversation, and the erotics of philosophical inquiry. Reciprocity provides a crucial link between these different, but equally authentic, species of desire; it guarantees their essential unity and it furnishes an infallible clue to their common nature. When Alcibiades declares, “We shall in all likelihood reverse the usual pattern [metakalein to schima], Socrates, I taking your role and you mine” (Alcibiades Major 135d), he proclaims his allegiance to a law higher and proportionately mightier than the conventional etiquette of Athenian society. For there is indeed something transcendental about mutual desire: it overleaps the barriers that fence in our separate selves and releases us from the isolation of our individual identities. Plato’s philosophical treatment of erotic reciprocity therefore lends itself to the metaphysical conceits devised around it by the poets—by Donne in “The Exstasie” and “The good-morrow,” for example, and by the Romantics, especially Shelley. But the poet whose native transcendentalism may have brought him closest to an independent appreciation of the Platonic outlook is Robert Frost, as these familiar lines so memorably testify:

Eyes seeking the response of eyes
Bring out the stars, bring out the flowers,
Thus concentrating earth and skies
So none need be afraid of size.
All revelation has been ours.

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67. Friedländer, I, 141. See Alcibiades Major 124c.