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## THE EROTICS OF PHILOSOPHICAL DISCOURSE

David L. Roochnik

IN Plato's *Symposium*, Socrates makes an extraordinary claim: "I say that I understand nothing other than *ta erotika*" (177d8).<sup>1</sup> Most literally, these last two words mean "the erotics" or "the things having to do with eros." Since a neuter plural in Greek is often regarded in a collective sense, the phrase comes very close simply to meaning "eros." This word, in both Greek and English, means "love," particularly that love expressed in sexual passion.

This is startling. Why would Socrates, that most sober of men and (even worse) a founder of western rationalism, declare that his *only* field of expertise is eros? Why didn't he say, "I understand nothing other than the theory of Ideas," a statement that would have been far more palatable to contemporary philosophers? In what sense does an understanding of eros comprise the extent of Socrates' knowledge?

This statement is puzzling for another reason. Socrates is not given to making positive knowledge claims. After all, he is most famous for knowing only that he does not know, i.e., for his ignorance. How, then, does this very positive assertion in the *Symposium* harmonize with his more typical negative or "aporetic" stance?<sup>2</sup>

In what follows I attempt to answer these two related questions. To do so will require me to address a third, meta-philosophical question, what is the nature of philosophical discourse, for we shall see that for Plato eros and logos (the word I occasionally use in lieu of "discourse")<sup>3</sup> are inextricably connected.

### I

I will be concerned mainly with *Symposium* 210a-212a, Diotima's famous "ascent passage." Before proceeding to that, I must partially retrace her (and Socrates') preliminary account of eros. The first step of this is found in Socrates' examination of Agathon (199c-201d).

Eros, says Socrates, is always *eros tinos*, love of something. When *P* loves or desires, *P* loves or desires some *X*.<sup>4</sup> Like consciousness, eros must have an object. Just as, when sensing or thinking, it is impossible not to

sense or think of something, so, when loving, it is impossible not to love something: eros is intentional. Furthermore, the something that is loved by *P* is not possessed by *P*. When I am hungry and desire food, it is because my stomach lacks food. When my stomach is totally full, I feel no hunger. If I am weak or sick, then I desire to be strong and well. The general statement, “if *P* loves *X*, then *P* does *not* possess *X*,” thus seems to hold: eros is “negative.” The statement in quotation marks, however, cannot stand as formulated, for there is an obvious counterexample to it: if I now possess health, I may still desire to be healthy. Socrates explains this by saying, if *P* loves *X*, and *P* possesses *X*, then *P* desires to possess *X* in the future. Since this third statement contradicts the second (because it allows *P* to love and possess *X*), we should amend the second: if *P* loves *X*, then *P* does not possess *X* permanently and completely. If I am healthy and still desire health, it is because health requires continual maintenance to be preserved.

These few remarks shape what follows, for they disclose the essentially temporal nature of eros. Human beings are incomplete, or finite, and aware of their incompleteness. We love what we lack and so our lives are spent in perpetual striving to overcome incompleteness, or finitude. Aristophanes had touched upon this earlier in the *Symposium* when he had said, “the desire and pursuit of the whole is called eros” (192e10). For Aristophanes, however, wholeness was found only in sexual union with a well matched partner (accompanied by a healthy dose of religious peity). In other words, Aristophanes, true to comic form, retained the ordinary meaning of “eros.” Socrates does not. For him, Aristophanes’ was an insufficient account of *ta erotika* because, as we shall see, human beings can never be fully satisfied through intercourse with other human beings.

When Socrates dispenses with Agathon and retells the instruction he received from Diotima, the above, particularly the *X*, the object of eros, is reformulated. Eros, Diotima says, has as its object “beautiful things” (204d3). Quickly, and without argument, she substitutes “the good” for “the beautiful” (204e1).<sup>5</sup> If *P* loves, *P* loves and desires to possess *X*. If *P* loves and desires *X*, it is because *X* is felt to be good. *P* expects that attainment of *X* will result in a state of affairs better than the one not including *X*. Alternatively formulated, the object of *P*’s eros is the attainment of “happiness” (204e7), the standard, but never quite adequate, translation of *eudaimonia*.<sup>6</sup> By definition, *eudaimonia* is that state of affairs achieved when *tagatha*, good things, are possessed.

Desire is by nature teleological in the sense that the object towards which human beings desire to move must be judged to be good by them. Of course, this process of judging is rarely made articulate. Diotima’s point is that, in principle, every action propelled by desire could be made articulate. If *P* desires to move towards *X* it is because *P* “thinks,” however inarticulately, that *X* is good. In sum, “human beings love nothing other than the good” (206a1).

Three comments. First, this statement is potentially misleading, for it may seem to posit an objective good. It does not. Nothing stated so far requires any ontological commitment. "THE" good may or may not exist, i.e., the statement in no way claims to refute relativism. It is descriptive and speaks only from the side of the subject. Second, Diotima greatly expands the meaning of "eros." It no longer is restricted to sexual passion, but refers to all human striving for the good, for happiness. As such, eros comes exceedingly close to being equivalent with human nature itself, a point made explicit at 212b3. Third, the shift from the plural, "good things" (205d2), to the singular, "the good," is perplexing. If it is true that when *P* loves *X*, *P* does so because *X* is good, is it fair to say that *P* loves *X* at all? Does *P* love *X*, one of many good things, only insofar as *X* is an instance of the singular "good," i.e., exhibits the general property, goodness? If so, does Diotima falsify human nature by denying that we love individuals? This will be discussed below.

The next stage in Diotima's analysis begins with a crucial transition. If *P* loves *X*, *X* is thought or felt to be good and so *P* desires *X* to be his own in order to be happy. Furthermore, *P* desires *X* *always* to be his own (206a9). The desire for the good is a desire for the permanent possession of the good. Soon this is reformulated even further: eros is eros of immortality (207a3) in the form of the immortal possession of the good.

This lofty utterance can be translated into terms less forbidding. Eros necessarily contains within it a negative moment: we desire what we do not have. Eros is essentially temporal. We desire good things whose possession extends into the future. Ultimately, what we do not possess is immortality. Immortality, then, is the ultimate object of desire. This point can be made as follows: if *P* ever got totally what he wanted, he would cease to desire. Since desire is a necessary condition of life, if *P* ever got totally what he wanted he would cease to be alive as a human being. This can mean two things: either he would be dead or would become immortal. Rarely do human beings wish to die. Therefore, insofar as *P* desires to get totally what he wants, he desires immortality.

Consider the contrary thesis. Assume *P* desires some *X* which is in itself fulfilling even though, or just because, it is an object only to be temporarily possessed. A woman might desire to scale a mountain even though she knows she must return to the plains. She might argue that mountain-climbing is made even more desirable just because she must return to the plains. Diotima's response might take the following form. Assume *X* is an object of desire fulfilling in and of itself. If *P* desires to possess *X* on a temporary basis, there must be some reason why *P* does not desire *X* on a permanent basis; why, in other words, *X* is not totally fulfilling. There must be some desirable object *Y* which supplements, replaces, or conditions the desirability of *X*. But *X* has been assumed to be fulfilling in and of itself, and so it does not require or permit any supplementation. Therefore, either *X* is not in itself fulfilling, in which

case some other object is more desirable, or *X* must be desired on a permanent basis.

Diotima's opponent might argue that human desire seeks an indefinite array of objects, none of which it desires permanently. On this account, we love the seeking of new pleasures and neither permanence nor total satisfaction. The problem here is that the opponent cannot explain why any object is not totally fulfilling. Why is there a need to return to the plains at all? Why not perish on mountain tops? Human beings are restless and never quite satisfied: this is what Diotima wishes to explain.

The next question is, how can that which is finite gain access to that which is not? At this point a metaphor takes command; all human beings are pregnant. Our lives are spent giving birth to that which will remain when we are gone. The parent's child, the family legacy, the poet's poem, all represent the human urge to overcome finitude. As Aristophanes had put it, even in sexual embrace the soul desires something else which it is unable to articulate and only intuit, namely wholeness (192d). Diotima supplies the articulation which the comedian thinks would be hybriotic to express: mortal human beings desire that which is immortal. Please note, however, that this statement is ontologically noncommittal. There is no need to posit a being in fact immortal in order to claim that human beings are essentially in love with the immortal.

## II

We now enter the ascent passage proper and begin our examination of the nature of philosophical discourse. Diotima says the following about those who are to be "initiated" properly into *ta erotika*.

He who is to proceed correctly in this matter must begin, when young, to go towards beautiful bodies and first, if the one guiding guides correctly, he must love one body and there engender beautiful discourse (*logous*). Next he must realize that the beauty found in any single body is kindred to that found in any other body, and if it is necessary for him to hunt the beautiful in form, it is much mindlessness not to suppose that the beauty in all bodies is one and the same. Having had this insight, he must become a lover of all beautiful bodies and slacken his excessive love of one by being contemptuous and counting it something small. (210a4-b6)

The erotic ascent begins with sexual attraction to a beautiful body. But this first stage is soon counted "something small." Why? At this very first stage of loving individuals "beautiful discourse" is engendered. This is neither false idealism nor prudishness. Instead, Diotima's account is phenomenological: eros does not remain mute. We speak to our lovers, call them beautiful, tell why we love. Bodies, in and of themselves, simply do not satisfy for very long. For whatever reason, the urge is soon felt "to give birth" to discourse. The logos that results is a human production, but it leads to an insight. By saying, "I love you because you're beautiful," the hypothetical initiate steps beyond rank individuality, for "beautiful"

refers not only to the body beside his, but to many others as well. He “sees” that his logos somehow gives voice to that which is universal.

It is false to say that Diotima does not allow for love of individuals. The initiate begins with such love. In the process of generating speeches about that individual, however, he moves beyond this stage. This does not mean he ceases to love the individual. Instead, as the initiate talks about his beloved he recognizes that his words refer to many individuals. He is forced to acknowledge a disparity between the content of his logos and the particular body that inspires it.

It is conceivable that a lover not speak, that eros remain mute. Observation tells us this is unlikely. Nevertheless, it is true that the steps of the ascent are not strictly necessary. The passage outlines in skeletal fashion a series of possible stages through which a developing psyche may well pass. Only the first is necessary.<sup>7</sup> The passage describes what occurs when dissatisfaction, a contingent response, is experienced with any given stage. It shows a possible history of a philosophical psyche which, Plato believes, illuminates the nature of philosophy itself.

Our hypothetical initiate has spoken and realized that the individual body he loves is not totally satisfying. He moves to stage two, love of all beautiful bodies. It is not obvious what Diotima means here. Does she allude to a bisexual Don Giovanni? Probably not. More likely she indicates that the production of logos leads to the realization that the extension of “beautiful” widely outstrips any single body. Such a link between logos and realization will soon become the central dynamic of this entire analysis.

Logos is a human production analogous to giving birth. There is thus a tinge of subjectivity here one might not expect in an ancient author. The meaningfulness of logos, for Plato, does not unambiguously originate in objects in the world. Contrast this with the following lines from Aristotle’s *On Interpretation*.

Spoken words are symbols of affections (*pathemata*) of the soul, and written words are symbols of spoken words. And just as written words are not the same for all men, so spoken words are not the same for all. However, those first things of which these spoken words are signs, namely the affections of the soul, are the same for all, and the things of which these (the affections of the soul) are likenesses are also the same.<sup>8</sup>

Aristotelian logos originates in the capacity of the soul to experience, in a non-distorting manner,<sup>9</sup> an invariable set of objects in the world. Plato is less sanguine about this possibility. The origin of logos is in the human subject, understood as an erotic agent, not the world. This statement is not, of course, incompatible with the belief that logos is reflective of objects in the world. Indeed, through the speeches to which the soul gives birth, an insight becomes available; a perception of the universality of “beauty” found in all bodies. But there is an ambiguity here: what exactly is the ontological status of this beauty? Is it an objective entity,

existing independently of the human subject, or is it a mental or linguistic construct? Diotima does not say. As has been the case all along her analysis is neutral with respect to this type of question. Hers is an account of the ascent of eros, the motor of which we now see to be logos.

We proceed to the next stages.

After this it is necessary (for the one proceeding correctly) to suppose that the beauty in souls is more honorable than that in the body, with the result that even if someone is but slightly attractive, if he is fair in his soul he will be satisfying and the one proceeding correctly will love and care, and seek and give birth to such speeches which make better the young, so that he is constrained to behold the beautiful in institutions and laws and to see that it is all bound together in kinship. As a result the beautiful found in the body is considered to be something small. (210b6-c6)

What occurs at this third stage is the realization that the object of logos is not bodily at all. A body is necessarily particularized, and the initiate's love is now for the universal. Thus, he must transfer his love to the soul, which he takes to be the locus of universality. After all, it is the soul, not the body, which is the origin of logos and it was the "generation of beautiful discourse" that sparked the initial drive towards universality. Our initiate now realizes that genuine satisfaction is available only through discourse.

This realization brings with it the fourth stage: the love of institutions and laws or, we might say, the love of the city. Here eros is not concerned with bodies at all, for the city is not simply an aggregate of bodies. Instead, it is a formal unity, a *politeia*, capable on its own of commanding the loyalty and passion of its citizens. The politician loves, not individuals, but the "soul" of the city, its principles, ideals, history. These are a matter of logos, which is in fact the medium of political life.

Diotima is virtually silent about this and the next, the fifth, stage. She appears eager to arrive at the sixth and highest stage in the development of eros, philosophical discourse.

After institutions it is necessary (for the one guiding) to lead (the initiate) to the sciences, in order that he might see the beauty of the sciences. And looking at beauty on a grand scale, no longer is he a trivial and worthless slave who loves only an individual, either the beauty of a child or of some man or one institution, but turning towards and seeing the great sea of the beautiful he gives birth to many beautiful and magnificent speeches and thoughts in unstinting philosophy. (210c6-d6)

Politics and the "particular sciences" are briefly mentioned and then soon left behind in the ascent. We are not told why. An obvious inference is that it is because neither is fully satisfying, and the ascent passage presents the structural development of a psyche in search of genuine satisfaction. But why are these two human activities unsatisfying? First, to politics.

In concrete political terms, cities always suffer from factionalism. They

are rifled by contention and can never become either fully harmonious or just. This is due precisely to the erotic nature of human beings. There are always individuals who seek “to have more” (*pleonechein*) than their fair share. (See *Gorgias* 483c ff.) There is among some of the citizens an urge to tyrannize, a desire for power. This is simply a specific application of Plato’s general teaching: eros is the desire for completeness, for full satisfaction. And one variant of such a desire is political. As such, “eros has from old been called a tyrant” (*Republic* 573b6). The city cannot fulfill the desires of our initiate since it is a conglomerate of competing desires, more specifically, of competing speeches. Each *politikos* speaks to the public (or, in a less democratic system, to his competitors), but only to advocate a political platform. The goal is not realization of a universally just city, but the attainment of particular political power. Eros cannot be controlled, these speeches cannot be purged of their particularized desires, and so the city cannot be made either fully just or secure.<sup>10</sup> Political logos, therefore, is necessarily limited. If a politician’s goal is total satisfaction, he has gone into the wrong business.

Earlier we saw that eros seeks that which is immortal and so non-human. Since the city is strictly a human affair, eros cannot be satisfied through politics. Upon realizing this, the initiate must again metamorphize the object of his eros. He turns to the particular sciences.

The vision of beauty, i.e., the intellectual satisfaction, gained through the study of the individual sciences itself gives way to a love of a greater beauty: the “magnificent speeches” of philosophical discourse (stage six). We wish Diotima had said more about why the sciences are unsatisfying. It must be because, like politics, they are partial and eros desires completeness. The problem is specifying the nature of their partiality. It is useful here again to cite Aristotle. He formulates the classic “objection” to the particular sciences vis-a-vis philosophical discourse:

There is a science which studies being as being and the attributes that belong to it in virtue of itself. This is in no way the same as those sciences which are said to be particular. For no one of the other sciences investigates universally being as being; instead, cutting off some portion (of being), they study the attributes of this portion as, for example, do the mathematical sciences.<sup>11</sup>

Classical formulations of what is unique about philosophical discourse take their bearings from remarks such as these. Unlike other sciences, philosophy studies being itself, reality uncut and whole. Philosophy is the study of those categories, call them ontological or epistemological, which determine, make possible, or define all other sciences. Philosophical discourse is characterized by the universality of its purview.

This peculiar drive towards universality is also operative in Plato’s characterization of philosophical discourse. I shall argue below, however, that it operates in a significantly modified manner. For the moment, let us accept only this: the transition to the sixth stage is prompted by a



dissatisfaction with the partiality of the particular sciences. Diotima describes this as a “turning” (210d4) towards that which is most universal. The initiate turns away from, for example, mathematics, biology, or history, towards “the great sea of the beautiful.” (For a comparable use of the language of “turning” see *Republic* 515d4, 518e4.)

In the *Phaedrus* philosophy is described as an erotic madness. (See 249d-e.) Why? The sciences are the concern of the most typical, even the most “natural,” intellectual activity of human beings. Most of us, when we make a profession of using our intellects, become mathematicians, biologists, or historians. The individual sciences allow us to master a definite field, to become experts and (often) to apply our expertise to perform useful tasks. Since no one can be an expert in all things, only they provide the arena in which true expertise emerges. In this sense, they are similar to politics. The city, any city, is in need of reform and it is a natural, or at least a familiar, desire to propose a specific program of political activity. No one becomes politically efficacious by advocating universally applicable ideas. Political logos, like the sciences, is necessarily particularized.

The philosopher turns away from both these most familiar pursuits. And so he appears mad. Like Thales, he “looks upwards” and risks falling into a ditch. (See *Theaetetus* 174a.) As the divided line in the *Republic* makes clear, philosophical intelligence reverses the typical direction of human thought. What the sciences take for granted and use as axioms in order to complete their work, i.e., the hypotheses (510c), the philosopher investigates. While other intellects move “downwards” from principles towards application in the material world, philosophical intelligence moves “upwards,” seeking to comprehend the formal nature of such principles themselves. Unlike all the more familiar sciences, the philosopher “using forms themselves, going through forms to forms,” turns around and seeks to understand that which “is free from hypothesis at the beginning of the whole” (511b6-9).<sup>12</sup>

This is madness, almost literally perversion: a turning away from the usual channels of intellectual satisfaction and towards the great sea where navigation is precarious. “Unstinting” describes philosophical discourse, for it cannot reach its desired end, since its object is “the whole.” As such, it is a desire that, like all others, cannot meet with complete satisfaction. For the first time in the ascent, however, the cause of this lies in the subject, and not the object, of eros, namely in the finitude of human beings. Philosophers, unlike most reasonable people, want to talk about, to know, “everything.” (See *Republic* 475c-d.)

But what, more precisely, is the object to which the initiate turns on this final step of the ascent? To what does philosophical discourse refer? Typically this is described as the “Idea of beauty,” although the phrase is not used by Diotima. At the pinnacle of the ascent, the initiate suddenly sees:

A certain beauty, amazing in its nature. And this, Socrates, is that for the sake of which all the previous labors were. First of all, it always is, and neither comes to be nor passes away; nor does it increase or diminish; nor is it beautiful in one way, but ugly in another; nor is it sometimes beautiful and sometimes not; nor is it beautiful in relation to something, but ugly in relation to something else . . . but itself with respect to itself with itself it is always singularly formed and all the rest of the beautiful things in some way participate in it. (210e4-211b3)

Here we find what scholars describe as an outline of the “theory of Ideas.” But is it accurate to describe Platonic discourse, even its most purified form, as a theory of Ideas? Is it analogous to Aristotelian discourse, i.e., to an articulation of being as being? Yes, insofar as the object of the ascent’s highest moment is universal; no, in that there is no possibility of a theory of Ideas for Plato.

The Idea of beauty is broached by Diotima only insofar as it appears as the ultimate object of desire. The ascent passage speaks only from the side of the subject: it is neutral in its ontological commitments. The statement, “*P* desires immortality,” does not imply that any immortal object actually exists. It describes the structure of *P*’s desire and is paradigmatic of the entire passage. At this stage, when the initiate has experienced dissatisfaction with, and has questioned the grounds of, political institutions and the particular sciences, he is driven by the desire for complete satisfaction to philosophical discourse. As a result an objective and independently existent object must be postulated.<sup>13</sup> The Ideas “exist” (and so can be “seen”), but do so only within the discourse that wants to know them, and this discourse originates, not in a cognitive capacity for the apprehension of objects, but in the desire to give birth to beautiful speeches. The Ideas are the condition for the intelligibility of philosophical discourse.

Perhaps this can be clarified by means of a contrast. The initiate’s logos strives for what is most universal; the philosopher wants to talk about everything. This is, however, not a sufficiently determinate description because there are at least two other modes of discourse that also desire to talk about everything. One has already been noted: Aristotelian metaphysics, the logos of being as being. More accurately this should be called “theoretical-ontological” discourse; the theoretical articulation of the ultimate categories of all that is. What does “theoretical” mean? *Theoreo* means to view, to see; a theoretical logos aims for transparency and the making visible of its object. In the citation from *On Interpretation* we saw that for Aristotle logos is non-distortingly reflective of the “affections” of the psyche, which in turn are non-distortingly reflective of objects in the world. Being as being is the ultimate such object and is taken up by the theoretical discourse of first philosophy, or ontology.

The ascent passage allows for no such ontological theory. Logos is analogous to a child; it is born from passion. Its object never simply shows itself. Instead, it shows itself only through the lens manufactured by the

erotics of discourse. The lens is, literally, kaleidoscopic.<sup>14</sup> It sees what it wants to see, namely what is beautiful and most satisfying. To vary the Aristotelian formula, the object of Platonic discourse is not being as being, but (being as being) as object of desire. There can be no undisturbed theory of the real for Plato. Instead, Diotima tells us that as philosophers our logos gives voice to a desire for the real.

One might protest that this description of Platonic philosophy is indistinguishable from the subjectivism of the sophists. Indeed, the sophist is the second competitor for, like the philosopher, he wants to talk about everything. Gorgias, for example, claims to be able to answer *all* questions (*Gorgias* 447c). Hippias claims to be master of all subjects (*Hippias Minor* 368b). What differentiates sophistical from philosophical logos, however, is that it aims, not for knowledge, but for persuasion. Gorgian discourse persuades the ignorant without providing knowledge (*Gorgias* 455a); it produces only belief. The sophist denies the desirability of objective knowledge. The content of his discourse, to vary the Aristotelian formula once more, is neither being as being, nor (being as being) as object of desire, but simply being as object of desire.<sup>15</sup>

Plato's foremost objection to this is the following: when the sophist attempts to defend rationally his conception of discourse to one disagreeing with him, i.e., to Socrates, his logos becomes internally incoherent. He makes the objective claim that there are no objective claims. He claims to know that there can be no objective knowledge. As such, although the sophist appears to disown reason, as he attempts to defend his position he affirms it. To defend a position implies a specific desire: to have the position validated by others and win for it general assent. This is quite different from simply wishing to be persuasive; it implies the belief that the position *is* itself worthy of assent. As such it is a desire the sophist cannot account for, since he officially claims only to persuade the many of a position in principle of no greater or less value than any other. If a sophist exhibits the desire for dialectical validation, as do Gorgias and Thrasymachus, he is thus easily refuted by Socrates, for such a desire itself betrays a belief in the possibility of an objective "victory" for his position. The conditions for the intelligibility of such a belief are, in a broad sense, the Ideas, the objective structures of reality. However, if a sophist does not desire to defend his position, as Cleitophon does not, he cannot be refuted and the Ideas disappear.<sup>16</sup>

The Ideas are the objects of the desire operative in philosophical discourse. In their existence the philosopher invests his belief, not because he is sure they exist, but because insofar as he is engaged in the kind of discourse he desires he must believe in them. The ascent passage thus comes close to being a transcendental argument. But it is not quite, for it is an argument whose validity is secured only in the act of its being posed. When it ceases, or if its desirability is challenged from the outset, its conclusion is untenable. Only as logos becomes philosophical and seeks discursive completeness is there an unveiling of those structures whose

comprehension would be wisdom, namely the Ideas. Only as philosophical logos attempts to explain (or defend) itself is there an argument that demands the postulation of the objective correlate to the ultimate human desire (i.e., philosophy), again the Ideas. Thus, when the philosopher argues against the sophist concerning the possibility of objective knowledge the Ideas invariably win the day. However, if the sophist does not desire to argue, the Ideas disappear. There is no argument which can positively establish their existence independent of the human subjects who are doing the arguing. At best there is an analysis of the erotic agent who is compelled to philosophize and whose compulsion implies a certain belief.

Philosophical discourse is erotic in origin. It is maniacally perverse: it turns away from all that is naturally familiar to human being, namely the particularized world of bodies, cities, and sciences. It is about everything: its object is universal. This, however, it cannot articulate theoretically. Its object is not being as being, but (being as being) as object of desire. This means two things: first, that philosophical discourse desires objective knowledge; second, that it can never loosen itself from the discoursing agent in order to make visible with certainty an undisturbed object. Its object is seen through a kaleidoscopic lens manufactured by an erotic being who desires to overcome finitude.

Philosophical discourse never reaches its desired terminus. It is forever the *love*, and not the possession, of wisdom. To formulate this, and much of the above, succinctly, *philosophical discourse is fundamentally interrogative*. Its paradigmatic sentence is the question, and not the assertion.<sup>17</sup> This is not to say that all philosophers do is ask questions: that would be absurd. They ask questions, entertain possible answers, review such answers, and then proceed forward once again. To describe philosophical discourse as interrogative is thus very close to calling it dialectical or, more precisely, dialogical. Nevertheless, the italicized phrase should not be retracted. The question is the animating force in philosophy, for it is the most erotic form of discourse with a logic all its own. To question is to seek an answer. Its being posed implies the answer is not possessed, not known, by the questioner. The questioner, however, does know that he does not know the answer, which is why he chooses to ask the question. Furthermore, the question assumes that an answer is desirable and, in some sense, possible. The question thus puts the questioner in a position in-between knowledge and ignorance. (Eros itself is described as being in-between the mortal and immortal at 202e.) The questioner is not totally ignorant, for he knows enough (about himself and the object of his question) to pose the question; he is not totally knowledgeable, for he lacks an answer. Philosophical discourse is not typified by a theory of Ideas. Nor is it sophistry. It is a life long process of posing questions.

I return to the two original questions. In what sense does eros comprise the extent of Socrates' knowledge, and how do we reconcile his very positive claim in the *Symposium* with his more famous claim that he

knows only that he does not know? To understand eros means to understand human nature. But such a claim is empty in and of itself, for human nature, as erotic, is no-thing in itself: it is not an object but a capacity to enter into relationships with objects. Eros is polymorphously perverse and has no shape until some object is desired and pursued. Socrates understands how various objects satisfy different kinds of human beings. He understands how logos is the principal motor of satisfaction for those moving beyond the first stage of human development. As we have seen, the most satisfying form of logos is philosophical, for here, and only here, do we find an object commensurate with the erotic desire for immortality. In turn, the paradigmatic form of philosophical discourse is the question, which itself is erotic in structure. To understand *ta erotika* is thus to understand the primacy of the question, that mode of discourse emanating from the knowledge of ignorance.

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## NOTES

1. My Greek text is *Platonis Opera*, by J. Burnet (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1900-05). Translations are my own. With the name "Socrates," I refer *only* to Plato's character.
2. Socrates also claims knowledge of eros in the *Phaedrus* 257a, *Theages* 128b, *Lysis* 204c and *Theaetetus* 149a ff. A chronological question could be posed. Was Plato aporetic only in his early works and more positive in his later ones? In this short paper I am concerned only with Socrates' positive claim in the *Symposium*, one which he himself contrasts with his ignorance of other subjects.
3. "Logos" is broader than "discourse," for it encompasses "speech," "argument," "account," and "reason."
4. The shift from "love" to "desire" is Plato's and it obviously contains an assumption. The limits of this paper, however, prevent me from discussing this (and other issues) as fully as it deserves.
5. This transition is not so abrupt in the Greek. *Kalos* means "fine" and "noble" in addition to "beautiful."
6. This word is rich in connotation, since Diotima has characterized eros as a *daimon* (202d12).
7. This is simply a biological fact: the infant (from the Latin *infans*, "not speaking,") must love the mother's body.
8. *De Interpretatione*, 16a3-8.
9. Defense of this claim would require a full discussion of the cognitive psyche in *De Anima* III.
10. See Allan Bloom, *The Republic of Plato* (New York: Basic, 1968), pp. 423-426, for an elaboration of this point.
11. *Metaphysics* 1003a21-26.
12. See Jacob Klein, *A Commentary on Plato's Meno* (Chapel Hill: University of North

Carolina Press, 1965), pp. 112-125, for an elaboration of this issue.

13. "Postulate" translates *tithemi*, a word frequently used to discuss the Ideas. A good example is *Rep.* 596a7. My intention is to preserve the ambiguity concerning the question of subjectivity/objectivity that is inherent in the Greek.

14. I refer to the etymology of "kaleidoscope:" *kalos* (beautiful), *eidos* (form), and *skopeo* (to see).

15. A third competitor is poetry. Like philosophy, poetry attempts to speak about everything. (See *ion* 531c.) Like the sophist, the poet does not desire objective knowledge. As such, he is finally but a disguised version of the sophist. (See *Protagoras* 316d and *Gorgias* 502 ff.)

16. This may sound trivial and from a strictly logical perspective is (i.e., is tautologous). Nevertheless, this notion is of crucial importance in understanding the limits of philosophical discourse as I have shown in "The Riddle of the Cleitophon," *Ancient Philosophy*, vol. 4 (1984), pp. 131-145.

17. I am aware of the apparent self-contradiction here. I believe, however, that in a future discussion I could show why this paper is in fact self-referential.