

Alcibiades, the Bad Lover: A Defense of the Ethics of Plato's Erotic Philosophy

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Introduction

In the *Symposium*, Socrates states: (177e) “the only thing I say I understand is the art of love?” (tr. Nehamas and Woodruff).¹ The experienced reader of Plato, however, knows that this claim extends beyond the knowledge of interpersonal relationships to encompass quite a lot of knowledge regarding the nature of the human soul and the reality which it inhabits. Plato envisions human beings as creatures who exist in relation to both particulars and universals, and *erôs* plays a fundamental role in mediating such an existence. We are not only beholden to the changing needs of the body and our relationships to other embodied particulars, but we are also ensouled individuals with minds that seek to know and understand the Forms and the Good. This twofold nature of the human being entails that she is initiated into her contemplation of what is changeless and eternal through her fluctuating and temporally embodied experience. Accordingly, human *erôs* in its mundane manifestation as sexual and romantic desire for other persons can ultimately reveal the erotic compulsion of the human *psychê* toward knowledge of the Forms and the Good. Desire fundamentally communicates to us our position in the cosmos and our longing for what is good, and the first way in which it does this is through our desire for other persons. Hence, Plato grounds the metaphysical claims of the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus* in just this human experience of desire for another person. Consequently, Plato can, and I would argue should, be read as acknowledging and valuing the embodied human and her concerns as irreducible elements of what it means to be human. However, since Plato's erotics clearly focus on the role of interpersonal desire as an initiator to metaphysical desire,

¹ “ὅς οὐδεν φημι ἄλλο ἐπίστασθαι ἢ τὰ ἐρωτικά.” All Greek text is taken from Loeb Classical Library. The *Phaedrus* also includes the theme that Socrates is versed in matters of love. When Phaedrus is asked by Socrates to repeat Lysias' speech, he responds thus at 227c: “In fact, Socrates, you're just the right person to hear the speech that occupied us, since, in a roundabout way, it was about love.” (Tr. Nehamas and Woodruff)

the erotic dialogues raise important questions regarding the ethical nature of our embodied relationships with others and whether or not they have any intrinsic value on their own. Problematically, if our erotic relationships only serve to teach us about the terminus of our desire in knowledge of Forms and the Good, then those relationships appear to be predicated upon valuing others as means to an end only.

Does Plato's erotic philosophy ultimately reduce the beloved to nothing but a rung in the lover's journey up Diotima's ladder? Gregory Vlastos argues that it does. In his essay, "The Individual as an Object of Love in Plato," Vlastos argues that Plato's erotic philosophy does not allow for loving others intrinsically and in their particularity.² Rather, Vlastos claims that Platonic *erôs* treats beloveds as "placeholders"³ for abstract qualities that direct us toward our terminal desire for the Good. If Vlastos is right, Plato's erotic philosophy finds itself on ethically problematic ground, as it not only denies that our relationships with others are meaningful for their own sake, but it also fails to reach the low ethical bar of treating others as ends in themselves. Plato's erotic philosophy may make metaphysical gains by showing a kind of continuity between the desires of our embodied

² Vlastos treats *philia* and *erôs* as if they were both equivalent to the English word "love," and, by extension, to one another. While he does indicate that the two terms differ in intensity, and that *erôs* is "more heavily weighted on the side of desire than of affection," and "is more closely tied to the sexual drive," (Vlastos 1973, 4) it is worth noting that *philia* and *erôs* are actually relatively distinct in meaning. This is potentially problematic for Vlastos' argumentation, for he often uses passages that discuss *philia* to make points that he later builds upon and strengthens with passages that only discuss *erôs*. However, it must be acknowledged that treating *erôs* and *philia* both as if they were equivalent to love is commonplace in translation. Nehamas and Woodruff do it, as does Jeffrey Henderson in the Loeb Classical Library translation. The inadequacy of these translations is not due to faults on the part of the translators, but rather to the inadequacy of English to render the full meaning of *erôs* without appearing clumsy. Furthermore, the argument can, and I believe should, be made that both *philia* and *erôs* are essential dimensions of interpersonal love, and therefore many of the potential problems identified by Vlastos are still substantial. Hence, even if certain problems arise for Vlastos' arguments due to his lax treatment of these terms, he still compellingly points to ways in which Plato may have rendered aspects of interpersonal relationships to be nothing more than utilitarian, and thus, his essay remains relevant and points to potential problems in the ethical content of Plato's erotic philosophy. I will therefore address these points without further addressing issues of translation.

³ Vlastos (1973) 26.

life and those of our *psychê*, but, for Vlastos, these gains come at the cost of an ethical loss.

However, Vlastos' claims are not without critics. Several scholars, including A. W. Price⁴ and – more recently – Frisbee Sheffield,⁵ have argued against Vlastos regarding Platonic *erôs*. In this paper, I offer my own contribution to that legacy. I contend that Vlastos' essay relies on certain misunderstandings of the way in which Plato conceives of value and the relationships between particulars and universals. Because Vlastos' essay surveys several erotic dialogues, which would take far too long to unpack here, I distill Vlastos' arguments into two important claims: (1) Platonic *erôs* is solely about attaining to the knowledge of universals, and therefore treats others as means to that end *only* rather than as intrinsically valuable ends in themselves, and (2) since our erotic relationships are for the end of our knowledge of universals, we do not love others *as individuals* in their particularity, but only as abstract amalgamations of good qualities.⁶ In response, I first argue that Vlastos' analysis hangs on two misconceptions relating to Plato's treatment of intrinsic and extrinsic value (section two) and to particularity and universality (section three). Next, I argue that these misconceptions are particularly problematized in the character of Alcibiades and his relationship with Socrates (section four). My central claim is that Socrates' pursuit and later rejection of Alcibiades reveals that the character of erotic relationships is based on mutuality rather than exchange, and that Alcibiades displays the same misunderstandings about Platonic *erôs* as does Vlastos. Therefore, Plato's depiction of Alcibiades as being rejected by Socrates demonstrates that Vlastos' view of Platonic *erôs* is likely to be at odds with Plato's own position.

Intrinsic and Extrinsic value

Vlastos claims that Plato's view of interpersonal *erôs* corresponds to what he calls "utility-love," which is described as "affective bonds with men or women whose good we want because they serve our need, or interest, or pleasure, and for no other reason."⁷ Hence, Platonic *erôs* and *philia*, for Vlastos, only values others extrinsically. Vlastos sets up

⁴ Price (1981) 25-34.

⁵ Sheffield (2012) 117-141.

⁶ Vlastos (1973) 31.

⁷ Vlastos (1973) 5.

this claim via a discussion of the *Lysis*, drawing primarily from the passage in which Lysis and Socrates have the following conversation:

“Well, then, are we going to be anyone’s friend, or is anyone going to love us as a friend in those areas in which we are good for nothing?”

“Not at all,” [Lysis] said.

“So it turns out that your father does not love you, nor does anyone love anyone else, so far as that person is useless.”

“It doesn’t look like it.”

“But if you become wise, my boy, then everybody will be your friend, everybody will feel close to you, because you will be useful and good. If you don’t become wise, though, nobody will be your friend, not even your father or mother or your close relatives.” (210c-d, Tr. Lombardo)

From here, Vlastos builds the case for his claim that Plato clearly conflates lovability and usefulness. For further evidence, he offers Socrates’ comment at 215b which indicates that love has to do with lack or need: “a self-sufficient person has no need of anything, just because of his self-sufficiency.” (tr. Lombardo) He also appeals to the discussion at 219c of the “first love/friend” (πρῶτον φίλον) and argues that, since Socrates believes there is a “terminal love,”⁸ all other love is utilitarian and serves the purpose of directing us to that end. Vlastos concludes that Plato is asserting “straightforward utility-love”⁹ in the *Lysis*, and he states: “The love Socrates has in view seems positively incapable of loving others for their own sake, else why must he feel no affection for anyone whose good-producing qualities *he* did not happen to need?”¹⁰ If correct, Vlastos’ analysis of the *Lysis* shows Platonic *philia* to be rooted in the simple use-value one person may afford to another person or to people in general, and Vlastos extends this conclusion to erotic relationships as well. He identifies the cause of love to be personal lack, and assumes that the corresponding act of Platonic love is nothing more than that of using and being used by another to address this lack.

⁸ Ibid., 10.

⁹ Ibid., 8.

¹⁰ Ibid., 8-9.

Vlastos therefore identifies intrinsic and extrinsic valuation in erotic contexts as mutually exclusive for Plato. Yet, Vlastos explicitly denies this to be the case for Aristotle, stating:

But suppose we do wish for someone's good for his own sake. Must we then forfeit utility and pleasure? Not necessary, Aristotle would insist... In friendships with good and noble men one who is himself good and noble will find both profit and delight; so he will love his friends for his own sake as well as for theirs.¹¹

Since Vlastos does not explicitly reject Aristotle's position here, it is fair to assume that he sees nothing that logically necessitates a mutual exclusivity between intrinsic and extrinsic value. His task is therefore to show that Plato *did* see such a mutual exclusivity. However, far from demonstrating that Plato views interpersonal relationships as extrinsically valuable goods only, Vlastos' arguments appear to be already informed by the assumption that this is the case. But, there are at least two ways in which one can read the passages that Vlastos quotes from the *Lysis*. First, she can read them as communicating the idea that we *only* love and desire people insofar as they are useful to us, or useful in general – i.e., Vlastos' reading – or, second, she can read them as if recognition of usefulness is a necessary, but not sufficient condition for loving and desiring someone. Under this second reading, one recognizes that the extrinsic value of a person, while important, is not necessarily divorceable from her intrinsic value. Thus, while Vlastos is correct in asserting that the *Lysis* states that someone is lovable if she is useful, it does not necessarily follow that good for the sake of the beloved is not *also* pursued by the lover. In short, it may simply be the case that all Plato is saying is that there are rational *reasons* why we come to have love for someone. A person in whom we see absolutely no good at all is not a rational object of erotic desire or friendship. What Socrates is pointing out to us in the *Lysis* is the reality of human dependency on others for self-knowledge and the care of our souls; but he is not thereby stipulating that those relationships are *purely* utilitarian. Rather, perhaps Socrates is pointing to the preconditions that make certain kinds of relationships possible. Such preconditions are hardly mutually exclusive of the proposition that we love others by seeking the good *for them*. Thus, in pointing out that there are rational reasons why we come to desire

¹¹ Ibid., 5-6.

others, Plato is not necessarily asserting that our love for others is entirely reducible to these reasons.

In fact, there is much textual evidence that opposes Vlastos' position. In Book II of the *Republic*, for example, Socrates and Glaucon discuss three categories of value. The first category consists of those goods that are valued purely for their own sake. By way of example, Glaucon mentions (357b) "enjoyment and all the pleasures which are harmless and leave no after effects other than the enjoyment in having them." (Tr. Bloom, second edition) The second category includes goods that (357c) "we like for [their] own sake and also for the sake of what comes from [them]." (Tr. Bloom) These goods include "thinking and seeing and being healthy." (Tr. Bloom) Vlastos appears to place interpersonal *erôs* within the third category which consists of goods that we value only for their utility. Glaucon states that these kinds of goods, which include (357c-d) "gymnastic exercise" and "medical treatment when sick," are "drudgery but beneficial to us." (tr. Bloom) This passage clearly indicates that, for Plato, intrinsic and extrinsic value are not mutually exclusive. In fact, the finest goods for human beings are stated to be those things that lie between these extremes of value.¹²

The question, then, is whether or not this median category applies to interpersonal relationships for Plato, and there is evidence behind the claim that it does. What is said in the *Lysis*, for example, should be read alongside the *Phaedrus*, in which Plato explicitly addresses and rejects the idea of utilitarian friendship that is devoid of *erôs*. Phaedrus reads the speech of Lysias, in which it is claimed that a friendship based on simple exchange is free from all of the debilitating mania of love and allows both parties to get what they want.¹³ If Vlastos is right in claiming that Platonic love is only about utilitarian value, then it is surprising that Socrates does not simply put a more philosophical spin on Lysias' proposed ideal relationship. In contrast, however, Socrates states that the madness of *erôs* is from god,¹⁴ and gives his own speech contra Lysias in which he praises *erôs*. It is true that in Socrates' speech, there is a reason why the lover falls for the

¹² *Republic* 358a.

¹³ *Phaedrus* 230e-234c. There are several place in which Lysias puts things in terms of a clear exchange. See, for example, 233b-c: "I will... give you my time with no thought of immediate pleasure; I will plan instead for the benefit that are to come." (Tr. Nehamas and Woodruff)

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 249e.

beloved, for it is in seeing the beloved that the soul of the lover is reminded of her vision of Beauty and wants to return to seeing it.¹⁵ But the relationship is also characterized by a kind of selflessness, and it takes on an activity that is not centered around the ego of the lover. The Zeus-like soul finds another Zeus-like soul, and is driven to madness by the desire awakened in her to spread her wings and ascend. Not only this, but the lover, in recognizing that the beloved has awakened the possibility for ascension, turns to love the beloved even more, implying that there is both an extrinsic and intrinsic value placed on her: (253a-b) “For all of this they know they have the boy to thank, and so they love him all the more; and if they draw their inspiration from Zeus, then, like the Bacchantes, pour it into the soul of the one they love in order to help him take on as much of their own god’s qualities as possible.” (Tr. Nehamas and Woodruff) There is no reason to turn back to the beloved and “love him all the more” if the love they feel is extrinsic only. They may feel gratitude, but not the need or desire to turn back to the boy and love him more intensely, nor the desire to pour their inspiration into him and help him become more Zeus-like himself. But they do; they turn back to the boy and their love for him intensifies. Rather than leave the boy and pursue Beauty itself, they are compelled by their love *for him* to take him with them and share with him everything that they have. The *Phaedrus*, then, simultaneously demonstrates that there can be reasons for our attraction to people, but that the experience and actions of love itself overflow the comprehension and limitations of reason.

Moreover, throughout dialogues such as the *Alcibiades I*, the *Phaedrus*, and the *Lysis*, Plato points out that *erôs* is not something individualistic. He continually points out the role that others play in the cultivation of our souls, and he effectively rejects the robust individualism upon which exchange-based relationships are predicated in favor of a model of mutual cultivation in which both parties take on the care of the other. Fundamentally, then, interpersonal *erôs* attains to the second category of value by requiring a blurring of the boundaries between self and other that at least partially collapses the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic valuation. This theme is demonstrated throughout the *Alcibiades I*, in which Plato explicitly writes of the need to see oneself in another in order to pursue self-knowledge. In

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 249d.

reference to the Delphic Oracle's command to "know thyself", Socrates states:

I'll tell you what I suspect that inscription means, and what advice it's giving us. There may not be many examples of it, except the case of sight... If the inscription took our eyes to be men and advised them, "See thyself," how would we understand such advice? Shouldn't the eye be looking at something in which it could see itself?... Then let's think of something that allows us to see both it and ourselves when we look at it... And isn't there something like that in the eye, which we see with?... I'm sure you've noticed that when a man looks into an eye his face appears in it, like in a mirror. We call this the 'pupil', for it's a sort of miniature of the man who's looking... Then an eye will see itself if it observes an eye and looks at the best part of it, the part with which it can see... But it won't see itself if it looks at anything else in a man, or anything else at all, unless it's similar to the eye... So if an eye is to see itself, it must look at an eye, and at that region of it in which the good activity of an eye actually occurs, and this, I presume, is seeing... Then if the soul, Alcibiades, is to know itself, it must look at a soul, and especially at that region in which what makes a soul good, wisdom, occurs, and at anything else which is similar to it. (132d-133b, tr. Hutchinson)

Hence, Socrates explicitly links the soul's journey to understand itself and commune with the Good to a metaphor of seeing ourselves in the beloved and the beloved in us. It is only in trying to help one another that both can attain to higher human goals. But, if I see myself in the other and also allow her to see herself in me, then we are both in one another and the distinction between self and other is partially dissolved. I allow the other to exist in me, which requires a kind of selflessness as I become a place in which she can be nurtured and learn about herself for her own sake. Furthermore, I must be willing to extend myself into the other and look for what I seek there. This requires not only a willingness to give oneself to another on both sides, but also a receptivity and vulnerability to look beyond the boundaries of our own selves. In both cases I must relax the limits around my own sense of self and to pursue something together with the beloved that is no longer strictly "mine," but is now irrevocably "ours."

It is true that this mutual giving could be explained in terms of Vlastos' exchange-based, utility-focused understanding of Platonic

love, but there are a few pieces of textual support that call such an explanation into question. First, there is the passage from the *Phaedrus* given above.¹⁶ The lover does not simply use the beloved and then return the favor out of duty, but Plato's language indicates that the lover truly desires that the beloved be cultivated for her own sake. This means that the lover must make herself vulnerable, for she is no longer totally in control of her own good, but, in loving the other, actually reconceives of the good for herself in terms of what is also good for her beloved. Additionally, the cave analogy of the *Republic* illustrates clearly that souls that have ascended can choose to descend again solely for the good of others. Plato therefore does allow for a selflessness to our love of others that is concerned with their good and not our own. The good lover, the wise one, then, would be one who allows herself to be a reflective surface upon which the beloved can see herself and come to better knowledge. Insofar as she desires the beloved, she must willingly make herself open and available as a space in which the other can be cultivated and cared for. In fact, the contrast between the speeches of Lysias and Socrates in the *Phaedrus* indicates that the lover cannot reap the benefits of love without actually caring for and being driven mad with desire by and for her beloved. How, then, could this mirroring not be, at least in part, an instance of vulnerability and selfless giving for Plato?

Thus, we desire the other because we are the kinds of beings who cannot achieve our goals, cannot come to know ourselves and be ourselves, without seeking to understand ourselves in the eyes of another; but this requires a mutual *giving* of self to the other, as love involves becoming a "mirror" of sorts for the beloved. Any benefit that the relationship confers is only possible in this moment of vulnerability that occurs expressly for the benefit of both the beloved and the lover when they give themselves to one another. One cannot "cheat" love. Unless she is prepared to give herself to the other person, for the other person, there is no erotic relationship to begin with, and therefore no benefits. As A. W. Price points out in reference to the *Symposium*, "my desire for the good to belong always to myself becomes a desire for the good to belong always to [my beloved]. I succeed in living in him to the extent that 'his' future concerns me as intimately as 'mine'. If I view him as a means and not an end, he remains precisely another person, in whom I am not alive."¹⁷ Price

¹⁶ Ibid., 253a-b.

¹⁷ Price (1981) 31-32.

uses the word “mine” here, but it is important to understand that this “mine” in an erotic relationship for Plato is always and already wrapped up in an “ours.” This is clearly shown in the very dialogue with which Vlastos begins his critique, the *Lysis*. Socrates remarks to Lysis and Menexenus:

If you two are friends with each other, then in some way you naturally belong to each other... And if one person desires another, my boys, or loves him passionately, he would not desire him or love him passionately or as a friend unless he somehow belonged to his beloved either in his soul in some characteristic, habit, or aspect of his soul.¹⁸ (221e-222a, tr. Lombardo)

This point of belonging to one another indicates that the desire for the Good to become mine involves a desire for the Good to become my lover’s, and a desire for the Good to become “ours.” Yet, if I am pursuing what is “ours” and not simply “mine”, it is impossible for me to value my beloved only for my own “need, or interest, or pleasure” without also valuing her for her own needs, interests, and pleasures.¹⁹ Interpersonal, erotic relationships for Plato, then, cannot be reducible to strict “utility-love”, because they do not admit of a strict dichotomy between intrinsic and extrinsic value.

Particularity and Universality

However, even if Plato is not advocating “utility-love”, there is still Vlastos’ claim that Plato’s theory of interpersonal love “does not provide for love of whole persons, but only for love of that abstract version of persons which consists of the complex of their best qualities.”²⁰ Writing decades later, Martha Nussbaum expressed similar concerns relating to Socratic (but, perhaps not Platonic) *erôs*. In reference to Socrates’ claim in the *Symposium* to know of nothing but love, she states:

...the claim to have grasped and understood the nature of love is part and parcel of an enterprise that is busy converting loved

¹⁸ “Υμεῖς ἄρα εἰ φίλοι ἐστὸν ἀλλήλοις, φύσει πη οἰκεῖοί ἐσθ’ ὑμῖν αὐτοῖς. Κομιδῆ, ἐφάτην. Καὶ εἰ ἄρα τις ἕτερος ἑτέρου ἐπιθυμεῖ, ἦν δ’ ἐγώ, ὦ παῖδες, ἢ ἐρᾶ, οὐκ ἄν ποτε ἐπεθύμει οὐδὲ ἦρα οὐδὲ ἐρφίλει, εἰ μὴ οἰκεῖός πη τῷ ἐρωμένῳ ἐτύγγανεν ὧν ἢ κατὰ τὴν ψυχὴν ἢ κατὰ τι τῆς ψυχῆς ἦθος ἢ τρόπους ἢ εἶδος.”

¹⁹ Vlastos (1973) 5.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 31.

persons into instantiations of a universal, and so into proper objects of (scientific) understanding, all in order to *repudiate* and *transcend* the phenomenon of love as ordinary mortals experience it.²¹

Nussbaum neatly summarizes the consequences of Vlastos' version of Platonic *erôs*: the value of interpersonal love is not merely limited, but is actually *repudiated*. David Halperin fleshes out similar claims in vivid detail:

But what I desire... whenever I am passionately attracted to an individual human being is, by contrast, some valued quality which he or she manifests – or instantiates – and thereby makes locally accessible to me. What attracts me to a particular individual, in other words, is not in reality something unique to that individual but is rather a combination of qualities or properties that can be abstracted, generalized, and repeated in other human instances. Any person who similarly manifests the constellation of qualities I cherish in my beloved is, therefore, an equally likely candidate for erotic investment on my part, whether I realize it or not; once I have come to understand my own motives a little better, I may even be able to disintoxicate myself from infatuation with specific individuals altogether.²²

This account of Platonic love, however, neglects the possibility that individual participation in universals is nonetheless nonrepeatable and is, in virtue of that very nonrepeatability, highly valuable in its very particularity.²³

The views put forth by Vlastos, Nussbaum, and Halperin come up short, for they fail to take proper account of the value of particularity in Plato's epistemology and to recognize certain conclusions that may

²¹ Nussbaum (1990) 316. Emphasis mine.

²² Halperin (1985), 175-176. See also Halperin (1985) 170, where Halperin's comments on the difference between sexual appetite and sexual desire potentially throw doubt onto what he says here about the erotic transcendence of individuals. He states that sexual appetite has to do with lust which can be satisfied by many different bodies, whereas sexual desire has to do with longing for a particular individual. Plato's erotics rely on the latter experience in which we are drawn to an individual. When we are erotically drawn to someone, it is not the case that any body will satisfy our desire for *her* body.

²³ My use of the term "nonrepeatable" comes from Nussbaum (1990) 320. Nussbaum states that "unique, nonrepeatable properties are essential to love."

be drawn from descriptions of love in dialogues like the *Phaedrus*. As we see in the Divided Line and Cave analogies, while Plato's ontology is top-down from the stable universals of Being, human epistemology is a bottom-up process that requires a continued acquaintance with particulars. But, while this indicates that our desire for particulars teaches us about our ultimate desire for Forms and the Good, there is no reason to assume that our love for these particulars is not also sincere. Moreover, the *Phaedrus* further demonstrates that love is particular, for while the Zeus-like lover falls for a boy with a Zeus-like soul himself, the lover does not fall for just *any* boy at all who seems to display Zeus-likeness. While Plato does not say so explicitly, it is reasonable to submit as a logical conclusion that there is therefore something nonrepeatable about the beloved which is uniquely capable of igniting the desire of the lover. The fact that the lover is driven mad by desire for *this* boy, and persists in and deepens his love for him demonstrates that the particularity of others is fundamental to love for Plato.

There is also no reason to assume that our desire for the particularity of our lover is something that we come to transcend, for we need to be constantly reinitiated into the ascent toward universals through particulars. This is shown, again, in the *Phaedrus* 246a-248d. Socrates tells of the gods viewing the Forms in their perfection. The human soul has opportunities to catch glimpses of the forms as they are, but only temporarily, for, unlike the gods, the human soul is like a chariot with one bad horse and one good. The beloved helps the human soul to sprout wings by reminding it of the beauty it saw when it was aloft, and therefore, the recognition of beauty in others is the catalyst for the ascent of the chariot of the human soul to the divine realm. However, the chariots of the gods are pulled by good horses, whereas the bad horse of the human soul fights against the ascent via is unruliness, and because of this, to eternally view the divine reality "is the life of the gods" and not the life of the human soul:

Although distracted by the horses, this soul does have a view of Reality, just barely. Another soul rises at one time and falls at another, and because its horses pull it violently in different directions, it sees some real things and misses others." (248a)

This passage indicates that the soul does not remain in a state of enlightenment regarding the divine. Consequently, it is reasonable to assume that one needs to be continually reminded of her erotic compulsion towards Forms and the Good through her desire for

particular, nonrepeatable persons. Again, however, this in no way implies that one *only* loves others because of this need, and it is still the case that this ascent comes about through this mutual care of what is deemed “ours.”

How might this work, then, for Plato? While he is not explicit about how the particularity of a beloved might inspire us, I submit that it is reasonable to posit something like the following: it is in seeing justice manifested in a particular way in my beloved, that I come to know and seek the Form of justice at all. This makes my beloved’s participation in justice valuable *as* a particular, for it is *her* particular instantiation of justice that inspires me and draws me toward Justice itself in a way that another’s way of participating in Justice would not. The particular way in which my beloved instantiates justice, however, is enmeshed in her whole being. The way she speaks, her unique thought patterns, and her facial mannerisms cannot be clearly separated from her participation in justice. And so, my lover’s particularity is an absolutely crucial and continual element of my love for her; it is, in many ways, what I love about her. Contra Vlastos, then, we can still love the person as a particular, whole person, for my recognition of the way in which my beloved has qualities that I lack, or that I would like further to cultivate in myself, is not mutually exclusive of my treating her as a valuable particular. In fact, quite to the contrary, it is in having these qualities in her *particular* way that she is loveable as herself and not as someone else. We do not experience our desire for a loved one as reducible to any amalgamation of goods that can be extracted from her manner of existing as a particular. Her laugh, her smile, and the way in which she sips her coffee all become part of why we find her special, compelling, and inspiring.

Alcibiades, the Bad Lover

I have chosen to focus this final section on the character of Alcibiades for several reasons. First, since Socrates claimed to be the only true lover of Alcibiades, it should come as no surprise that the *Alcibiades I* contains a wealth of insight into interpersonal *erôs*.²⁴ Furthermore,

²⁴ Though it plays an important role in my paper, the authenticity of *Alcibiades I* has been debated since it was first deemed spurious by Friederich Schleiermacher in 1809. Thereafter, it was regarded by most as inauthentic for more than a century. In recent decades, however, it has become common again to view it as genuinely Platonic, and its legitimacy was notably defended by Julia Annas’ work

there is an important continuity between the character of Alcibiades in the *Alcibiades I* and in the *Symposium* that lends potential insight into the proper course of an erotic relationship, and how it can go wrong. In the *Alcibiades I*, Socrates tries to impart a correct understanding of *erôs* (including, but not limited to, interpersonal *erôs*) to Alcibiades. Despite this, in the *Symposium*, Alcibiades demonstrates a problematic understanding of *erôs* and its role in both philosophy and interpersonal relationships. Finally, I argue that Alcibiades makes the same error that Vlastos makes, in that he places interpersonal relationships within the third category of value: among those things which are valued for their consequences only. In the *Symposium*, we see in Alcibiades the kind of lover that Vlastos thinks Plato is defending. And yet, Alcibiades is ultimately rejected by Socrates, a fact that I argue should throw Vlastos' claims about Platonic *erôs* into considerable doubt.

In the *Alcibiades I*, often called a “philosophical seduction,” Socrates attempts to persuade Alcibiades that he can only achieve his political goals with the help of a true lover, Socrates, who cares for his soul.²⁵ The appeal to Alcibiades' political ambition, however, becomes an obvious deception on the part of Socrates. It soon becomes clear that Socrates' meaning of “success” has to do with the benefits that naturally result from the cultivation of wisdom and self-knowledge for their own sakes, rather than for the sake of the instrumentalization of wisdom. This cultivation comes about through erotic, philosophical relationships.²⁶ Socrates therefore sees the cultivation of virtue in the *psychê* as inherently bound up with erotic relationships, which is why

and by the stylometrical study of Gerard Ledger. I am in agreement with Jakub Jirsa's (2009) conclusion that the arguments against treating the dialogue as authentic are largely unconvincing, and I have therefore included it in my discussion and treated it as authoritatively Platonic. On the debate surrounding the authenticity of the *Alcibiades I*, which plays a central role in section IV of my paper, see Jirsa (2009) 225-244; Annas (1985); Smith (2004) 93-108; and Ledger, (1989).

²⁵ *Alcibiades I*, 105d, 131e.

²⁶ My interpretation of the *Alcibiades I* as involving an inverted concept of power (*dunamis*) is indebted to many lectures and personal conversations with Dr. Danielle Layne, who argues that Socrates is intentionally using Alcibiades' own language of power but in ways that actually confront and dismantle Alcibiades' understanding of the term as involving domination. What Socrates means by power and success is not what Alcibiades means by power and success, and Socrates exploits this gap between their use of terms to demonstrate to Alcibiades that he fundamentally does not understand the nature of the ideas to which he makes recourse.

he proposes that he is needed by Alcibiades, for Alcibiades needs another in whom his own soul can be seen. Thus, Socrates puts forth a philosophy in which erotic relationships are inherently valuable because they are identified as this very process of psychic-cultivation itself. Alcibiades, however, does not value psychic-cultivation as an end in itself, and only seems to value what will make him successful, i.e., what will aid him in increasing his political prowess. Thus, by extension, Alcibiades must view erotic relationships through the same lens of utility according to which persons and their use-value are separable. He therefore sees not only erotic relationships, but even wisdom itself, through the lens of utility. Throughout the dialogue, Socrates attempts to teach Alcibiades that his first priority must be the cultivation of his own soul, which includes learning how to be a lover. However, in my analysis of the *Symposium*, I assert that Alcibiades has not committed himself to this teaching.

On the one hand, both utility-love and intrinsic-value-love can be seen in the *Alcibiades I*. Alcibiades demonstrates the view that Vlastos ascribes to Plato, in which one desires another because they are simply drawn to the possibility of benefit or utility. Hence, Socrates attempts to seduce Alcibiades by pointing to the usefulness of such a relationship for Alcibiades' ambitions. Socrates' appeal appears to be based upon the assumption that Alcibiades is motivated by "utility-love." On the other hand, Socrates' own motivation appears rather selfless. He claims to be the true lover of Alcibiades' soul, and this is exemplified in his ardent desire to help Alcibiades succeed by ridding him of his double ignorance and setting him on a path toward knowledge of the Good. Socrates thereby demonstrates a view of erotic relationships that sees the desired one as possessing intrinsic value, and he clearly views the role of the lover as demanding the care of the beloved. Thus, at least on the side of Socrates, we see an understanding of love that is oriented towards caring for the other in her particularity, for her good, and as an end in herself.

The key to unlocking the disparity between the appearance of both utility-love and intrinsic-value-love in this dialogue is to understand that Socrates is proposing himself as a lover and Alcibiades is responding as a beloved. In the context of ancient Athenian homoeroticism, such a relationship would be characterized by an

imbalance of power and mentality of exchange.²⁷ Thus, this early stage of their relationship is not characterized by the kind of mutuality that blurs “self” and “other.” However, by the end of the *Alcibiades I*, it becomes clear that Socrates wants to instantiate a relationship of mutuality, and not exchange. Socrates hopes to have opened up within Alcibiades the ability to love. He states: (135e) “Then my love for you, my excellent friend, will be just like a stork: after hatching a winged love in you, it will be cared for by it in return.” (tr. Hutchinson) It therefore appears to be the case that, while on the surface Socrates proposes the traditional relationship between a lover and a beloved, he is actually hoping that the initiation of a genuinely erotic motivation in Alcibiades will break down the power dynamic in such a relationship. Plato therefore appears to be presenting the reader with an understanding of *erôs* that challenges the traditional Greek distinction between *erastes* and *eromenos*. Halperin further highlights this erotic mutuality when he notes that:

...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.²⁸

²⁷ See Sheffield (2012) 122-123: “the tradition of pederastic *erôs*... did not traditionally include the love of other persons for their own sake, but rather an exchange of benefit for both parties – pederasteia for philosophia.” See also Dover (1978) 84: “we notice that... homosexual relationships in Greek society are regarded as the product not of the reciprocated sentiment of equals but of the pursuit of those of lower status by those of higher status. The virtues admired in an *eromenos* are the virtues which the ruling element in a society (in the case of Greek society, adult male citizens) approves in the ruled (women and children).” Also, Dover (1978) 85: “One could be *erastes* and *eromenos* at the same stage of one’s life, but not both in relation to the same person.” Thus, homosexual relationships in ancient Athens traditionally had a subordinate/passive and dominant/active partner. But, while Plato does not seem troubled by the concept of asymmetry itself in a relationship (say, in terms of levels of knowledge, age, or even social standing), the traditional power dynamic presented by the norms of his time required one partner to play the passive/submissive role, whereas Plato envisions both partners as active participants in the cultivation of what is mutually held between them.

²⁸ Halperin (1986) 68. Admittedly, Halperin’s position in this 1986 piece appears to differ slightly from his position in the 1985 piece I have quoted previously.

Thus, part of Socrates' goal in loving Alcibiades is to help Alcibiades become capable of loving others himself. In this way, being a lover is not defined simply by having a lack that another can address, which would be utility-love only, but it is actually defined by a mutual willingness to address the areas of lack in one another through a shared cultivation of what both parties come to call "ours."

However, the *Alcibiades I* makes it clear that interpersonal *erôs* is not something Alcibiades is yet capable of. It will only be in caring for his soul that he can become himself the "mirror" for the *psychê* of another. Since the *Alcibiades I* concludes with Alcibiades agreeing to be taken on as Socrates' pupil and beloved,²⁹ one would expect his appearance in the *Symposium* to reveal a mature Alcibiades who is ready to be a lover. After all, the *Symposium* takes place about twenty years later, and Alcibiades has had the benefit of Socrates' company. And yet, when a drunk Alcibiades shows up to the party, it becomes quite clear that he has failed to understand interpersonal and, by extension, philosophical *erôs* in some fundamental ways. Alcibiades tells us of the time when he decided that Socrates was truly the one to grant him the wisdom he needed, and details his proposition to Socrates as follows:

"I think," I said, "you're the only worthy lover I have ever had—and yet, look how shy you are with me! Well, here's how I look at it. It would be really stupid not to give you anything you want: you can have me, my belongings, anything my friends might have. Nothing is more important to me than becoming the best man I can be, and no one can help me more than you to reach that aim. With a man like you, in fact, I'd be much more ashamed of what wise people would say if I did not take you as my lover, than I would of what all the others, in their foolishness, would say if I did." (218c-d, tr. Nehamas and Woodruff)

For all of Alcibiades' prior talk of being the passionate, jilted lover, this proposal is not particularly passionate or romantic. It is much more like a business proposition than a confession of desire for Socrates himself. His language is practical. He says that not to grant Socrates sexual favors would be "folly," and the end of this proposition for Alcibiades is "the attainment of the highest possible excellence." Alcibiades appears to be motivated to make this proposal because of

²⁹ *Alcibiades I*, 135D-E.

the usefulness of Socrates' knowledge and wisdom. Socrates is only desired insofar as he serves the ultimate end of Alcibiades' ambition, and not as an end in himself, for Alcibiades views the desire for good qualities and the desire for the person who has them to be separable. In his comparison of Socrates to a statue of Silenus, he indicates that getting to know Socrates is like cracking the statue open to discover the divinities within. While this comparison appears to be a proclamation of erotic desire for Socrates, it is, upon further thought, a way of abstracting Socrates' good qualities from the particularity of Socrates as an individual.³⁰ He does not want Socrates, the whole person, but rather he wants the good qualities inside of him that he sees as beneficial. He is therefore willing to initiate a *transaction* with Socrates in order to obtain these abstract qualities.

However, granted Vlastos' analysis of love as something we have for "useful" partners for the sake of achieving higher goals, the only problem with Alcibiades' proposition is that he mistakenly proposes a sexual relationship. There is, however, no strong indication that sex is what Alcibiades wants, only that he thinks it is what Socrates wants, and Socrates does not reject Alcibiades for wanting sex, rather, Socrates rejects Alcibiades on the basis of the latter's belief that the good that Socrates has to offer is something that can be conferred via an exchange. Socrates states:

Dear Alcibiades, if you are right in what you say about me, you are already more accomplished than you think. If I really have in me the power to make you a better man, then you can see in me a beauty that is really beyond description and makes your own remarkable good looks pale in comparison. But, then, is this a fair exchange that you propose? You seem to me to want more than your proper share: you offer me the merest appearance of beauty, and in return you want the thing itself, 'gold in exchange for bronze.' (218e-219a, tr. Nehamas and Woodruff)

Here, Socrates immediately recognizes the lack of interpersonal *erôs* in Alcibiades' proposal, and he puts the proposition in terms of an exchange of goods and services. Socrates, however, reminds Alcibiades that such a trade can only be predicated on an *equal* exchange. You cannot buy gold with bronze. If what Alcibiades wants

³⁰ *Symposium*, 215b.

is knowledge and practical wisdom, but only has physical beauty to exchange, then he is not in a good position to negotiate.

So far, it appears that Socrates only rejects Alcibiades on the basis of the unfairness of the proposed deal. If this were true, however, then erotic relationships for Plato could only occur between individuals who had equal amounts of wisdom to bring to the table. But such a dynamic is clearly not the case in most of Plato's depictions of Socrates' relationships. It is here that one must remember the statement from the *Republic*, *Phaedrus*, and the *Lysis* that friends have all things in common.³¹ Accordingly, had Alcibiades confessed *erôs* for Socrates based on a hope to cultivate the souls of each man through the other, if he had expressed a desire to cultivate mutually what is *theirs*, Socrates may have responded differently; but Alcibiades presents himself as a *buyer*, not a lover, and this is the case regardless of the currency he offers. Alcibiades is therefore rejected as a buyer with insufficient funds, rather than as a lover from whom funds are not necessary because what is gained belongs to both parties together. Sheffield notes the differing attitudes between Alcibiades and Socrates: "Alcibiades attempts to gain Socrates' wisdom, and offers his body in exchange. But Socrates refuses to enter into this kind of exchange, and advocates a relationship of joint inquiry into how to become a good man... Socrates does not reject him as such, but advocates a relationship grounded in a shared aspiration for wisdom."³² Socrates wants Alcibiades to understand what it means to be a lover of both other people and of wisdom, and that the two must come *together* and involve a giving of oneself; neither can be reduced to mere utility. It is a message that Alcibiades spent twenty years failing to learn.

Conclusion

Vlastos' classic essay brilliantly highlights a genuine tension in Plato's erotic dialogues between particularity and what transcends it, between our desire for individuals and our desire for the Forms and, ultimately, the Good. Vlastos pointedly expresses the conviction felt by many a student that Socrates has not been totally honest and has an ulterior motive in drawing our attention to interpersonal desire and friendship. A trick has been played, and one need only keep reading to

³¹ *Republic*, 424a; *Phaedrus* 279c; and *Lysis*, 207c. Socrates is repeating an apparently familiar proverb in all locations.

³² Sheffield (2012) 132.

discover that what appears to be a discussion of human passion for a beloved is revealed as a call to transcend the sensible world entirely. Or is it? It is certainly a call to transcend the contemplation of *only* the sensible world, but this is not the same as a call to *utterly* transcend such a world and leave it eternally behind. Humans desire is to know and commune with the Good, and this requires an understanding of not only higher realities, but also their products in the lower world. It requires one to not merely climb the ladder, but to contemplate the relationships between the rungs, understanding how the whole holds together as she grasps an ever more complete view of reality, a view that *maintains* the integrity of each level and holds it all together as one. Thus, in recognizing the beauty of her beloved, she goes on to recognize the beauty of everyone, and Beauty itself. Nevertheless, she does not cease to see the beauty of her beloved, she only comes to see it and appreciate it more fully in relation to Beauty itself. Thus, Vlastos' misstep is this: he assumes that in ultimately desiring the Good, we negate any sincere desire for its products. But, on the contrary, in loving the Good, one loves its products all the better. To put it another way, borrowing from the language of the *Republic*, the flower teaches one about the sun and directs her to love it, but in loving the sun, she must return to loving its child, the flower, for we cannot love something if we don't also love what it engenders simply in virtue of being itself. This back and forth removes the black and white quality that Vlastos' analysis gives to Plato's erotics, and allows one to embrace multiple levels of desire at once, removing the need to neatly define the love of persons as completely extrinsic or intrinsic.

It is worth recalling that the *Symposium* does not end with Diotima's speech of the grand ascent from particular individuals to universals, but rather with Alcibiades. Can we erase the importance of his appearance here? I think, in fact, we cannot overstate it. With Diotima's speech we have ascended to the universal, but with Alcibiades' speech Plato reminds us that we descend again into the realm of the particular. The theme of ascent and descent is prevalent in several dialogues, as one sees it in the *Phaedrus*, the *Republic*, and here, again, in the *Symposium*. We always descend back into the particular to love particulars again, and we love individuals all the more when we realize our love of them finds its cause in our love for the Good. Because of this, we cannot bear to leave them in darkness. We help them grow wings and ascend with us once more. This is why Socrates and Plato continued to teach, as Sheffield reminds the reader:

That Socrates, the seeker after wisdom par excellence, does engage in interpersonal relationships is clear from his interactions with Apollodorus, Aristodemus and Alcibiades, and that the person who has attained wisdom *continues to engage in interpersonal relationships* is strongly suggested by the activity of the guide who leads the ascent.³³

Socrates and Plato did not sit in a cave by themselves and meditate on the Good. They taught passionately, had friends and families, and they loved.

Hence, while the pinnacle of the ascent is the crucial climax of human desire, the descent is also crucial, for it continues to remind us that we are not solipsistic in our endeavors, and that, as social beings, our erotic, epistemological journey is never to be one we take alone. The descent also shows that, as humans, it is not our embodied destiny to be always viewing the Forms in their total perfection, but rather to be the kinds of beings who are continually caught up in this tension between both realms, as having a nature that somehow belongs to both. For Plato, it seems, nothing highlights and mediates this tension better than interpersonal, erotic relationships. And so, after Diotima's speech has spurred us on to glimpse the lofty beauty of the Forms and the Good, Alcibiades' speech brings us crashing back down to the messiness of particulars; in being a cautionary tale, he reminds us that, in searching for one, we cannot neglect the other, for they are inextricably intertwined.

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³³ Sheffield (2012) 136. Emphasis mine.

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