

A necessary tension: *ἐραστής* vs. *ἐρώμενος* and philosophy vs. politics for erotic ascent
in the speech of Alcibiades of Plato's *Symposium*

This study argues that the speech of Alcibiades in Plato's *Symposium* lends insight into the nature of *eros* in *ἐραστής*—*ἐρώμενος* relationships. For much of the last century, scholars tended to regard the non-Socratic speeches as un-philosophical mistakes waiting to be corrected by Socrates' authoritative view (Friedlander 1930, Dorter 1969, Rowe 1998, Waterfield 2009). More recently, however, a burgeoning group of scholarship represents resistance (Sedley 2006, Gonzalez 2017). In the same spirit of questioning the paradigm of reading non-Socratic speeches as philosophically irrelevant, this study seeks to demonstrate how Plato's view that polarities which result in tension are not only created through the process of erotic ascent but must remain in symbiosis in order for *eros* to be realized.

The first tension arises from a role reversal of the *ἐραστής* and *ἐρώμενος*. According to Greek pederastic relationship ideals, the younger, handsomer Alcibiades would assume the role of the passive beloved, whom Socrates would pursue for sexual gratification. However, a point is reached at which the two switch roles: Socrates does not pursue Alcibiades and leaves him in a state of distress, which Alcibiades attempts to alleviate by instigating sexual advances, assuming the lover's role. Alcibiades traverses a boundary that an *ἐρώμενος* is not supposed to cross, such that he no longer behaves like an *ἐρώμενος* but rather like an *ἐραστής*. This reversal is emphasized by a rhetorical element: words of tracking and seizure and hunting imagery (217 c7–d2). The use of words for “pursuit, flight and capture sustain the notion that the *eromenos* is the quarry” (Dover 1989). Alcibiades signals discomfort with the tension stemming from the role reversal and attempts to resolve them by initiating sexual advances; but these actions only drive the youth deeper into the behavioral realm of the *ἐραστής*. Ironically, Plato insinuates that this

tension is a necessary ingredient for erotic ascent. Alcibiades' use of his body is a "debased erotic deal ... offer[ed to] Socrates" that links "the Alcibiades episode to Socrates' vision of philosophical *eros*, which Alcibiades has missed" (Gribble 1999). While, ideally, Socrates would be able to lead Alcibiades toward a deeper understanding of *eros* as the *ἐραστής*, it is apparent that he must first demolish Alcibiades' assumptions. Just like Socrates forces conversationalists to confront their own misunderstandings through his usual method of dialectic, so does he do the same in romantic pursuits.

Next, the interaction between Socrates and Alcibiades mediates between philosophical and political agendas, fostering tension and, in turn, erotic ascent. Alcibiades compares the words of Pericles with those of Socrates, explaining that the latter's comments are difficult to accept but indubitable, thus causing the youth to question the value in a political career (215 e4). The tension Alcibiades experiences, which arises from the philosopher's love for him and the political duty he feels towards the Athenians, too, forms the space for greater philosophical understanding. This becomes apparent when Alcibiades recounts Socrates' defense of him after he was wounded at the Battle of Potidaea and his defense of Socrates in retreat (220 d7–221 a9), demonstrating how their common political objectives—the defense of the city of Athens—is actually dependent upon their defense of one another. If *eros* is identified by passionate affection for another, its fullest philosophical expression may well be a dialogue about the nature of a certain human virtue or virtues, but its highest political expression may be in the defense of another in battle. Alcibiades' interlude about these events during Potidaea may contain a metaphor for how *eros* is actually secured by the tension between philosophy and politics.

Contrary to the assertions held by twentieth scholarship surveyed, this study seeks to demonstrate how analyzing the non-Socratic speeches can yield significant philosophical

conclusions. In the speech of Alcibiades, the reversal of roles between the *ἐραστής* and *ἐρώμενος* and the seeming divide between philosophy and politics produces tensions that unexpectedly foster a space in which erotic ascent to *eros* and philosophical enlightenment become possible.

Bibliography

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