

The Perspective of Plato Concerning the Position of Love in Philosophy Analysis of The Symposium

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Abstract

Plato was the first philosopher who discussed love philosophically. The discussion can be found in his work entitled Symposium. Through text analysis of Symposium, the perspective of Plato about love and the position of love in philosophical discourse can be concluded. For Plato, ultimate love does not have a relation to the body anymore. Plato believed that love is hierarchical, and it ascends from the lower level to the higher level as illustrates in *Scala Amoris*. The ultimate love is about a mental state which aims to gain absolute beauty and it is the highest level of love. However, in romantic relationships, love is not only about the mental state but also physical contact because romantic love relates to sexual things such as sexual intimacy. And according to Plato, love that still has attachment to the body is the lowest level of love. Thus, Plato's perspective about romantic love cannot be said as positive because romantic love strongly relates to the body. Plato believed that the highest level of love has left body behind, and it only focuses on mental aspiration.

Keywords: Plato; symposium; love; philosophy

1. Introduction

The first philosopher who seriously discussed love was Plato. His writings that elaborated on love is Symposium. People often mention the terminology of Platonic love, a concept attributed to Plato. The general definition of Platonic love is a non-sexual love (Amir 2001). Platonic love then only refers to a non-sexual love and ignores the other expressions of love. However, in the Symposium, Plato explains not only non-sexual love but also sexual love.

Plato's explanation of love is very complex and deep; it is not limited to only one concept of love. Suppose referring to Plato's theory of love just as non-sexual love is severely reduced to Plato's conception of love. French scholars try to create two distinctions between love concepts to avoid misunderstanding of this issue. There are (1) *Amour Platonique*, a concept of non-sexual love and (2) *Amour Platonicien*, a concept of love according to Plato's theory; thus, it is not only non-sexual love but all the kinds of love that Plato describes (Gould 1963 in Amir 2001). The distinction creation aims to prevent the misconception that always assigns Plato's theory of love to a non-sexual love. Platonic love is widely regarded as a non-sexual love, while Plato's exploration of love extends beyond it.

In the Symposium, Plato also explains sexual activities. Therefore, Plato's theory of love includes sexual relationships in it. However, different from sexual relationships, in terms of love relationships, Plato's theory only refers to homosexual love and excludes heterosexual love. Here, Plato differentiates a love relationship from a sexual relationship. According to Plato, a sexual relationship might be homosexual or heterosexual. However, a love relationship only applies exclusively to homosexuals (Amir, 2001). It is interesting because, for most people today, a homosexual relationship is regarded as abnormal, while in Plato's era, a homosexual relationship is viewed as something normal. We cannot ignore the context of the era in seeing this phenomenon. In Plato's era, women were not characterized as a complete subject. Women were regarded only as "the machine of production".

Therefore, a sexual relationship aims at procreation, while a love relationship aims to attain passion. Thus, for Plato, a love relationship is automatically a relationship between two

equal subjects, and in that era, only men who were considered as the complete subject. It is understandable why people in Plato's time were permissive to men's homosexuality because love relationships can only happen between men.

"Men were married for reproductive ends, yet reserved the term 'love' and the passionate activity of sexual love for homosexual relationships" (Gonzalez-Reigosa, 1989; O'Connor, 1991; Tannahil, 1989 in Amir, 2001).

A sexual relationship may happen inter-sexes because the primary purpose of the relationship is to support the reproduction process. On the other hand, the purpose of a love relationship is to achieve eternal good. A love relationship is not merely an activity to reproduce or the fulfilment of desire, more than that, it aims to pursue the ultimate virtue.

This article tries to explain the position of love in philosophy. The primary source in this study to find Plato's point of view about love is his writing entitled Symposium. Plato wrote many books, but Symposium is the only book dedicated to discussing love.

This study analyses Symposium from the English translation version; the version to review is Symposium, translated by M. C. Howatson from St. Anne's College Oxford University. It was published in 2008 by Cambridge University Press, United Kingdom. In this version, Frisbee C. C. Sheffield from King's College London, and M. C. Howatson act as the book's editors.

2. Method

This study utilizes a qualitative method with a narrative-descriptive approach through text analysis. The narrative-descriptive approach is a turning point in scientific research, especially in social and humanities since many scholars have begun to distance themselves from positivism. Many issues in social and humanities are more appropriate to analyze using the interpretative technique (Sandelowski, 1991). Narrative-descriptive introduces temporality as a part of the investigation process. Social context and events during research activities are reflected and considered to create a coherent story (McAlpine, 2016).

Data analysis relies on the primary source, Symposium. The English version of this book is scrutinized for review. Other works of literature also complement the analysis specifically discussed Plato's theory of love.

3. Discussion

Plato is the pioneer who elaborates on love philosophically. However, in the end, Plato closed the conversation about love because Plato failed to formulate love comprehensively. F. Sheffield states,

"Plato is often held to be the first great theorizer of love in the Western tradition, and yet his account has been taken to be a resounding failure by many scholars working on this topic." (Sheffield, 2011).

Sheffield's argument can be justified by reviewing Plato's Symposium carefully. The Symposium is the first opus elaborates on love. It is believed that Plato wrote Symposium around 385-370 BCE. The Symposium was written in the same period as other Plato's works such as Phaedo, Phaedrus, and Republic (Hunter, 2004). Symposium was composed when Polis of Athens was in a glorious moment before the tragic fell back because of an unsuccessful military expedition to Sicily. The military expedition ended disastrously.

Plato wrote Symposium with a dialogue writing style which was entirely fiction. In this work, Plato presented Socrates as one of the characters in the book. The dialogue writing style was purposively chosen because Plato tried to imitate the style of Socrates in performing philosophical examinations while he was alive. Plato viewed Socrates as his mentor and *guru*.

Besides Socrates, in Symposium, Plato also presented other characters as participants in the dialogue. Those characters are (1) Phaedrus, a poet; (2) Pausanias, a law expert; (3) Eryximachus, a medical doctor; (4) Aristophanes, a comical poet; and (5) Agathon, a host where the dialogue took place. Around midnight, (6) Alcibiades, drunk, joined the conversation. Dialogue in the Symposium was narrated by a narrator named Apollodorus.

As a narrator of the story, Apollodorus said that Symposium was a dialogue that happened in the house of Agathon. This dialogue occurred at the party to celebrate the victory of Agathon's tragedy drama script. This script was contested at Lenaia Festival. As Apollodorus narrated, the characters in the book come to Agathon's house to honor him and have a drinking party. The Symposium is an Ancient Greek word derived from symposia which can be translated into English as a drinking party (Cooksey, 2010).

Every character at the party delivered an oration to praise Eros; a God loved in Greek mythology. In the oration, everyone conveyed their perception of love. Phaedrus commenced the oration, followed by Pausanias, Eryximachus, Aristophanes, Agathon and Socrates. Socrates was the last orator who delivered his view regarding love. Socrates' oration was counted as the climax part of the Symposium.

Socrates commenced his oration by quoting a wise woman from Mantinea. Her name was Diotima. Plato is the writer of the Symposium, and this book illustrates Plato's thoughts. However, the plot in Symposium made Socrates the one who spoke, and Socrates spoke through Diotima. Socrates' oration is available from part 210d until 212c.

In the dialogue, Socrates stated that love is like a ladder that begins from the lower position and ascends to the higher one. In the beginning, love emerges as the feeling of attractiveness to a person's physical beauty. A person falls in love because he is attracted to the physical appearance of someone. This attractiveness may arise from a sexual desire for a particular body, such as a beautiful face, sexy body shape, soft skin, or other physical appearances. It derives from parts 210a-210b in the Symposium.

"A person who would set out on this path in the right way must begin in youth by directing his attention to beautiful bodies, and first of all, if his guide is leading him aright, he should fall in love with the body of one individual only, and there procreate beautiful discourse." (Plato, 2008).

After passing the first rung, where love orients to physical appearance, it will ascend to the next rung. In the second rung, a person realizes that the beauty of physical appearance is available to everyone. Everyone has a unique beauty in their body. In this higher step, a person does not aim his love only at a particular person because physical beauty is in everyone, and it is universal. Black people, white people, fat people, skinny people, tall people, short people, everyone is unique and beautiful. In every human physic, there is beauty in it.

Love will keep moving to the higher place, the third rung. In this stage, love emerges not because of physical beauty. Love emerges because of the beauty of the soul. The human soul passes over the human body. Love does not direct to the visible object but orients to the invisible object, the soul. When falling in love, a person in this stage will ignore their physical appearance. The most important thing is the beauty of the soul. In this position, love is beyond physical attachment. This statement is in parts 210b-210c of the Symposium.

"After this, he will realize that the beauty in souls is more to be prized than that in the body. If someone's soul is good, even if his physical attraction is slight, that will be enough for him, and he will love and care for that person and seek out and give birth to the kind of discourse that will make young men better people." (Plato, 2008).

Love does not stop in the third stage. It keeps mounting to the higher step. In the fourth stage, people realize that beauty is not only available in the body and soul, but we can also find beauty in practice and law. It implies that love directs to morality. The source of love is not human anymore. In the previous stages, love always leads to a person. Either because of the beauty in his physical appearance or the beauty of his soul. However, in this step, love directs to a different object, something good. In morality, as something good, we discover beauty. Beauty as a source of love does not depend on any more to a human figure, but it is available in every good thing. This excerpt is available in part 210c.

"He will be compelled to contemplate the beautiful as it exists in human practices and laws, to see that the beauty of it all is of one kind, and to realize that what is beautiful in a body is trivial by comparison." (Plato, 2008).

In the next stage, people will see beauty in knowledge because knowledge allows people to think about beautiful things. Humans do not direct their love to beauty in a single case. Such as the beauty of the body, the soul, or the beauty of morality. Love will orient to the beauty of knowledge in general or straightforward explanation; we can perceive beauty because we have a mind. The mind enables us to think. Knowledge gives us the capacity to think about everything, including to think of beauty; thus, knowledge grants human consciousness, and through it, human conceives beauty. It is impossible to be conscious without the knowledge that makes people enlightened. If we are not conscious, it is implausible to conceive the concept of beauty that transcends the objects. Beauty is already detached as a property or attribute of an object, the transcendental beauty. Plato explained it in parts 210d-210e.

"After this, his guide must lead him to contemplate knowledge in its various branches so that he can see beauty there too, and looking at 210d what is now a wide range of beauty, he is no longer slavishly content with the beauty of any

one thing, such as the beauty of a young boy or some other person, or of one particular practice, and will not become petty and small-minded through this kind of servitude. Instead, he will turn towards the vast sea of the beautiful, and while contemplating it, he will give birth to many beautiful, indeed magnificent, discourses and thoughts in the boundless love of wisdom until there, strengthened and invigorated, he discerns a unique kind of knowledge, which is knowledge of a beauty whose nature I will now describe." (Plato, 2008).

At last, love arrives in the ultimate stage. It is the highest place. In this stage, humans will direct love to absolute beauty. Here, humans feel love not because of the beauty in the body or the idea. Humans feel love because he has grasped the essence of beauty, the form of beauty.

The form of beauty is an abstraction of an essence. It is a basis or a core of eternal and absolute beauty. The beauty in the body, beautiful clothes and high morality are nothing more than disposable and perishable rubbish. While the essence of beauty is eternal, sublime, unaltered, detached from time-space, even divine. In this stage, human experiences love because of the ability to absorb the essence of beauty. The essence of beauty is inexpressible in worldly things. Love is conceived as something grand. Any form or shape does not shackle people who love, but he sees the source of love in its purest nature as a unified substance. This explanation is written in part 211e-212a.

"For someone to see the beautiful itself, separate, clear, and pure, unsullied by the flesh or by color or by the rest of our mortal dross, but to perceive the beautiful itself, single in substance and divine? Do you think", she continued, "that a person who directs his gaze to that object and contemplates it with that faculty by which it has to be viewed, and stays close to it, has a poor life? Do you not reflect," she went on, "that it is there alone when he sees the beautiful with that by which it has to be viewed, that he will give birth to true virtue? He will give birth not to mere images of virtue but true virtue because it is not an image that he is grasping but the truth. When he has given birth to and nurtured true virtue, it is possible for him to be loved by the gods and become immortal if any human can, immortal himself" (Plato, 2008).

The stages of the ladder of love explained by Plato are widely recognized as *Scala Amoris* (Scott, 2000). In the Symposium, Plato emphasized that the ultimate aspiration of humans in life is to pursue happiness, and love is a means to achieve it. *Scala Amoris* is a spiritual production of humans to attain the highest true happiness. Human starts the journey from the first step to the lowest rung, and with spiritual development, people will step into the higher stage. Love is a vehicle for a human to be able to pursue the highest happiness. The highest happiness is the ability to absorb an essence or substance that is eternal or even divine.

If a human stays in one step and cannot move higher, it means he is trapped in an illusion that will prevent his spiritual maturity. For example, if a man only focuses on the physical beauty of a person to feel love and is incapable to over it, it implies he stays in the below. That person will not be able to attain the highest happiness as a virtue in life because the highest happiness is achievable if he is already at the highest level of the ladder of love.

What is the implication of Plato's *Scala Amoris*? The implication is that romantic love will not allow humans to pursue ideal life, sublime life, or life with virtue. The characteristic of love is reciprocal. Love is not directed to an inanimate subject because an inanimate subject is unreciprocal.

Moreover, the body is always involved in love. In love, sexual activity is strongly related to the body. Meanwhile, in *Scala Amoris*, the lowest step of the ladder is love which aims at the body. If a human cannot detach from the body, he cannot ascend higher on the ladder of love; thus, life with virtue will never be achievable, and happiness remains a fantasy.

Plato's love concept left the individual as a target of love behind as people climb the ladder of love. In the beginning, we need a person as our love target because, in this stage, love aims at someone. However, when a man climbs higher, this person will be discarded. Human climbs alone because, in the higher stages, love does not direct to a human figure anymore. We left and cast away our love partner (Scott, 2000).

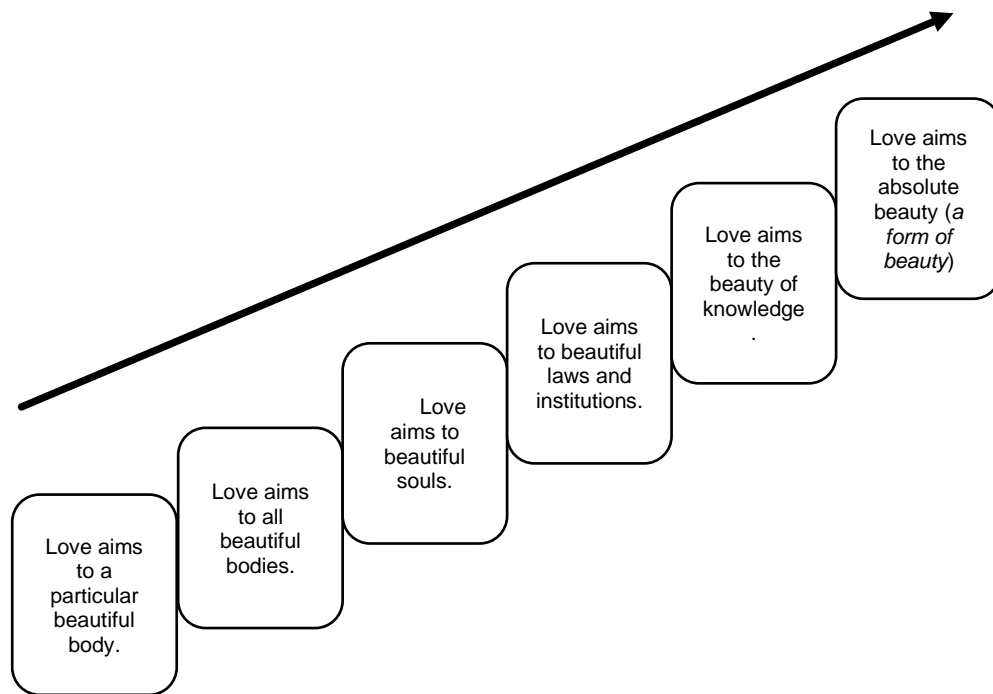


Figure 1. *Scala Amoris* or Plato's Ladder of Love
(Source: Reflection from Plato *Symposium* (2008) M. C. Howatson translation)

From this on, philosophy abandons love. Plato as a pioneer rejected love. Plato saw love as incapable of making people's life full of virtue. Love, which is characterized by a partnership with other people, will make us entrapped in the human body and prevent our spiritual growth. There is no room for love in philosophy, especially romantic love because it involves sexual intercourse. In romantic love, sexual intimacy is a form of our love expression toward our partner. Sexual activity involves our bodies, and it is implausible to have sexual intimacy without the body. According to the theory of love formulated by Plato, philosophy only provides room for love which has transcended attachment of the body, which is not contaminated by flesh and perishable waste in our bodily form.

Many scholars criticize Plato's theory of love as cold-hearted egoism because love only focuses on abstraction to gain spiritual egoism. Love, following Plato, does not allow the recognition of the beloved, and our love partner is merely an instrument of our self-egoism (Sheffield, 2011).

In Plato's perspective, love is a willingness to have eternal virtue. Plato criticized the statement that argues the purpose of human life is to discover soulmates (Shepherd, 2018: 521–522). People who love will seek love in themselves, not in others. The others are mortal. Our partner will not stay for good, while love is always longing for immortality. Our immortality depends on ourselves, not the other. The idea of love in Plato's perspective is the love of self (Whiting, 2013). Love is an effort to find eternity for us. The concept of love for Plato is solitary and contradicts love's character, which always involves the other as our target of love.

However, some scholars have a different opinion in interpreting Plato's love in the *Symposium*. For example, M. Finkelberg (1997) argued that the main idea of Plato's love does not lay in the idea of love per se but in the idea of love as an instrument to pursue the good life. Moreover, in interpreting *Symposium*, we must regard it as a unified story and not only focus on the character of Socrates, who spoke near the last part of the book. Other characters also gave orations about love, and every character conveyed different views of love. Finkelberg says Plato created these characters; thus, these characters were also manifestations of Plato's thoughts about love. If we focus only on what character Socrates said, it is a reduction of the whole *Symposium*.

According to Finkelberg (1997), for example, Phaedrus, the first speaker in the *Symposium*, said that the most important thing about love is the effect of love. Phaedrus said the effect of love is the most important thing, not what love is or how a person understands love. It implies *Scala Amoris* as a ladder to attain virtue is inapplicable similarly to everyone. If, in the first stage (when love aims for the beauty of the physical appearance), a person who loves already

attained virtue, it means love has gained its purpose. Love must be seen from the effect it causes, not only focused on the hierarchical step of the ladder.

"In the course of his talk on Eros, the first in the Symposium, Phaedrus embarks on a demonstration of the ability of love to prompt people to be noble and courageous deeds." (Finkelberg, 1997).

Therefore, if we read the Symposium carefully, even at the beginning of the book Plato has shown (through the character Phaedrus) that love that attaches to the body can still guide people to attain a life with virtue. It does not necessarily detach our body connection to attain the highest ladder level.

The accusation of Plato's theory of love as focusing on self, even egoistic, Finkelberg says there is an alternative interpretation regarding that issue. According to her, Plato's concept of love only focuses on us, not the other, as our partner in a relationship because Plato assumed the other has had self-contained, has become independent and thus was perfect in themselves. However, the subject who loves is deficient; thus, the subject seeks the "perfect" other to become his partner to complete his deficiency. The subject looks for perfection, which is reflected in the self of others.

"This state of imperfection turns "that which loves" into the active principal par excellence because it causes the lover to desire and pursue the good and the beautiful, reflected in "that which is loved". Plato thus repeats over and over again such statements as: "That which desires has the desire not for what is ready and present before him but for that which he does not possess, and that which is not himself, and that in which he deficient." (Finkelberg, 1997).

Moreover, R. Rojcewicz (1997) says Plato's love concept relates more to the human journey in living his existence and does not concern the relationship between the subject that loves and the other that is loved. Hence, it is entirely incorrect to put Plato's love concept as a reference to romantic love. Plato's love concept is existential love, a journey to reveal the Being that composes self.

"Platonic love is, therefore, characterization of human existence in general...

Platonic love, as the urge toward Being, as the pathway to a revelation of Being, is what essentially constitutes Dasein. In other words, only those with Platonic love are human." (Rojcewicz, 1997).

Nevertheless, the availability of alternative interpretations of the Symposium does not erase the impression that Plato created the closure of love in philosophy. If we want to deliberate love in philosophy, it is only possible for abstract love, which detaches the body. While in a romantic love relationship, the body is an essential element. Sexual intimacy is part of romantic love, and it requires the body.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, there is an impression that the perspective of Plato concerning love is not favorable. For Plato, the primary purpose of love is to attain eternal good. The eternal good cannot be achieved through the way of desire but through the way of intellectuality. Love should be interpreted as a love of wisdom and not a love of a human figure. If love still aims for the enjoyment or desire based on physical beauty, soul, or even morality, it still loves in the lower level because love still directs into an object entrapped in a human body.

The ultimate love always aims for the highest wisdom detached from the body. Plato eliminated the body from his concept of love; thus, for him, love is entirely intellectual because it is a rational process and ignores emotion. For Plato, love is not a medium for expressing our feeling or sensuality. The highest level of love removes all those things. L. Amir says, "*His ideal lover leaves emotionality behind, his love being not an attempt to express or purify sensuous feelings but rather to suppress them by sheer rationality*" (Amir, 2001). Since then, many people have always related Platonic love with non-sexual love. Plato did not directly discourage sexual love, but for him, sexual love is in the lower stage of the love ladder, and it is not the ultimate love. The ultimate love is not attached to the body anymore.

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