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Henry Mitchell April 10, 2024

Finding True Love: Incorporating Mahāyāna Buddhism with Plato's *Symposium*

By

Henry Mitchell

Dr. Cynthia Willett
Adviser

Philosophy

Dr. Cynthia Willett
Adviser

Dr. Sara McClintock
Committee Member

Dr. Jessica Wahman
Committee Member

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Henry Mitchell

Dr. Cynthia Willett
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ABSTRACT

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By Henry Mitchell

Philosophers have explored the notion of romantic love since the origins of recorded history. One of these philosophers who has been particularly influential in Western culture is Plato of Ancient Greece. His *Symposium* has served as the foundation of what European and Anglo-American classrooms look to when they study love. This thesis incorporates the ideas of the Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition with Plato's conception of social love. Both fields of thought developed at roughly the same time in history, but in different parts of the world, and thus each possesses important contributions in coming to a definition and way to go about love. Expanding the scope of consideration beyond what Western philosophy has offered is crucial to come to a more complete and accurate understanding of what it means to love. This thesis is a small step on a long journey toward synthesizing the vast traditions of cultures across all of human society in the context of love.

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Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION 1
CHAPTER 1 6
CHAPTER 2 21
CHAPTER 3 36
CONCLUSION 47
BIBLIOGRAPHY 51

INTRODUCTION

I believe that no one is born free from the need for love.

His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama[1]

Love has been a central component of every human society in recorded history. Whether it be for a romantic partner, for family, for friends, or for higher beings, the feeling of love is universal to our species. As such, it has been the object of study for poets, musicians, psychologists, writers, and philosophers alike for centuries. Each culture possesses its own unique understanding of what it means to love and to do so properly. Some common notions include the feeling we have toward someone or something, an abstract emotional state, or a drive within us that motivates action. But one thing remains constant across all cultures and among all understandings of love: all humans love. It is this universality that makes the study of love so important. If everyone loves, what it looks like and how it is done seems of the utmost importance.

The inspiration for this paper came from a conversation I had a little less than a year ago with my mother. It took place just after I had returned from studying Tibetan Buddhism in India, and the discussion's focus was on the Buddhist principle of non-attachment with respect to love. We will explore this concept much more thoroughly in Chapter 1. But to offer a brief glimpse, it is the idea that we ought to avoid clinging to our possessions, emotions, and relationships such that we can cultivate inner contentment. This concept was foreign to my mother. For her, attachment was a

[1] His Holiness the XIVth Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, "Compassion and the Individual," His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet, Office of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, No Date. https://www.dalailama.com/messages/compassion-and-human-values/compassion.

defining feature of the love she had, especially for her family. She asked me, "what does it mean to love without attachment?" I had some idea, but I realized that it was very hard for me to articulate it exactly, especially when it was outside the scope of my lived experience of what it means to love. So, I set off to find the answer to her question, and this paper serves as a great step forward in that endeavor.

Rather than try to pin down the entirety of Western love across all its cultures, this paper will use Plato's *Symposium* as its reference for the foundations of what love looks like in the West. Plato is one of the most prolific and influential philosophers in history, regarded by some as "the world's greatest philosopher."[2] The ideas in *Symposium* reverberate throughout much of Western philosophy and cultural sentiment regarding love. While Plato's work is not the earliest recorded philosophy on love—he was preceded by Empedocles' notion of Love and Strife[3]—it is almost certainly the most well-known and the most influential early exploration of it in the West. Similarly, rather than lumping all of Buddhist thought into one category, I will focus my attention on that of the Mahāyāna tradition, which encompasses both Tibetan and Zen Buddhism. This is not intended to be a critique of non-Mahāyāna traditions like Theravāda or to say that they were lacking in richness when it comes to grappling with love, but the principles of universality regarding concern for other beings in Mahāyāna Buddhism serves as a vast and potentially controversial response to the individuality that we find in Plato's work. I make no claim to be an expert on either Ancient Greek or Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy, but I have made great efforts to characterize them as

[2] Ed Whalen, "Plato's Symposium: Love and Philosophy," Classical Wisdom, Oct. 9, 2020. https://classicalwisdom.com/symposium/platos-symposium-love-and-philosophy/.
[3] Katarina Majerhold, "History of Love," Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, University of Tennessee at Martin, No Date. https://iep.utm.edu/love-his/.

accurately as possible here. This paper will incorporate Mahāyāna Buddhist understands of love with Plato's *Symposium*, identifying their similarities and attempting to resolve their points of contrast. The point in doing so is not to conclude a preference for one perspective over the other, but to lay out both unique positions such that the reader might begin to think differently about love. We may then be able to find the seeds of the answer to our central question: "What does it mean to love?"

Before laying out the structure of the paper, there are two important concepts we must establish. The first is that although quite distant, Ancient Greek and Ancient Buddhist cultures were not entirely separated. It has been revealed by historians that Greek philosopher Pyrrho was heavily influenced by Ancient Indian philosophy. He served on Alexander the Great's court for more than a decade, and five of his years with Alexander were spent in Central Asia and India.[4] Proof of this influence can be found throughout much of Pyrrhonic philosophy, such as Pyrrho's understanding of *pragmata* (ethical matters, questions) which lays out three characteristics almost identical to the ternary division of the Indic *dharma* (duties related to virtue).[5] While it would be tempting to make this same kind of connection to *Symposium*, there is no proof that Plato himself was ever exposed to Buddhist thought. Pyrrho would have been just twelve years old when Plato passed away, and *Symposium* was almost certainly written before Pyrrho was even born. As such, we will operate under the assumption that the Buddhist ideas we discuss here would have been foreign to Plato and the other members of

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[4] Christopher I. Beckwith, "Pyrrho's Thought: BEYOND HUMANITY," in *Pyrrho's Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 48.
[5] Ibid, 28-29.

Symposium. This makes the similarities we find quite astonishing, as there were no documented interactions between the two societies before Plato's time.

The second concept we must establish is related to the first; it is the difficulty in dealing with scholarship from very different cultures. Beyond the obvious problems with cross-cultural philosophy, such as that translations are imperfect, the way that philosophy has been practiced by different groups can sufficiently diverge such that perfect mapping of one onto the other is an impossible task. Buddhist philosophy is principally concerned with practical and ethical concerns, discovering truths about the world as a means of navigating the world ethically, whereas Plato's work largely deals with discovering those truths about the nature of knowledge and reality as an end in itself. This is not to say that the two philosophies did not overlap at all—if they had nothing in common, this paper would be quite uninteresting—but that we should be careful not to misconstrue either one in our comparison with the other. What I hope to accomplish here is to expand the scope of consideration for those who have, like me, had their academic foundation built on European and Anglo-American thought. Buddhist philosophy is rich with insight, including regarding the concept of love, and incorporating its merits with Plato's work should move us toward a more well-informed position on the matter. As philosopher Thaddeus Metz tell us, "Any long-standing epistemic tradition probably has some insight into the ways things truly are."[6] While there are great difficulties in cross-cultural philosophy, it is only when we do the hard

[6] Thaddeus Metz, "The Assumptions of Cross-Cultural Philosophy: What Makes It Possible to Learn from Other Traditions," Indiana University, *Journal of World Philosophies* 2 (Winter 2017): 104.

work of considering a diversity of perspectives that we move close to the truth, so long as we recognize that these comparisons will be inherently imperfect.

Chapter 1 of this paper will analyze the opening speeches in *Symposium*, bringing in Mahāyāna scholarship when the ideas presented are touched on by both schools of thought. These first speeches are not thought to be Plato's personal philosophy, but rather pieces of a dialectic that he sees as important to fully understanding what he wants to convey. Many of the comparisons in this chapter will be observational, but that practice alone has great merit, in addition to giving us a feel for the different perspectives within Ancient Greek philosophy and their relation to Buddhist scholarship. Chapter 2 will unpack Plato's own beliefs regarding love and compare them with Mahāyāna Buddhist thought, focusing mainly on the penultimate speech of *Symposium* delivered by Socrates, but also bringing in elements of Plato's other works such as *Laws* and *Phaedrus*. The final chapter will explore the last speech of *Symposium* delivered by Alcibiades and related secondary work by Martha Nussbaum, who offers the perspective that the final two speeches are both significant in terms of revealing what Plato's argument really was. She understood the final two speeches to be contradictory by nature, and so I will offer Buddhist perspectives in an attempt to reconcile those differences.

CHAPTER 1

Plato's *Symposium* is one of the foundational Western texts on the concept of love. Studied by countless scholars, it offers the reader a multitude of perspectives on what it means to love, why we ought to love, and what our goals are when we love. While not all the content in *Symposium* reflects Plato's personal philosophy, the piece is set up such that every idea is important context for the thrust of Plato's argument. After all, it is a dialectic piece, one with characters who did exist, but which is nevertheless fictive in its content. Plato is merely recounting the event as it was told to him, as he would have only been eleven years old at the time it took place. So, while every speech analyzed in this chapter may not contain exclusively the beliefs of Plato himself, they are nonetheless crucial to a complete understanding of how he thought we should understand and think about love. The similarities with and differences between Buddhist philosophy we find here will seep into our breakdown of Plato's own thought as well as serve as a cross-cultural analysis that has merit on its own.

The setting of *Symposium* is referenced by its title. For the Greeks, a symposium was a sort of drinking party popular among the male elite at the time. The night starts with a collection of friends, including Socrates, who decide that in place of a heavy night of drinking, they will each offer an encomium to Eros, the god of love, at the suggestion of Exyximachus. The focus of much of their discussion is on a particular type of love, that between an *erastes*, an older male lover, and an *eromenos*, a younger male beloved. This type of pederasty was prevalent in Athenian society, seen as a means of transferring

wisdom and experience.[7] This mentoring relationship as not necessarily romantic or sexual, but as we will soon see, it often was.

I

Once Eryximachus proposes the round of speeches, Phaedrus is the first to deliver. While Phaedrus does not offer an explicit definition for how we ought to go about love in our relationships, he does outline what he believes to be the value of love. For Phaedrus, what makes the practice of love valuable is that it motivates people to perform virtuous acts. “For I cannot say what good is greater, from youth on, than a worthy lover, and for a lover, a worthy beloved. For those who intend to live beautifully must be led through the whole of life by what neither kinship nor honors nor wealth nor aught else can instill so beautifully as Eros.”[8] What causes humans to perform virtuous deeds, then, is best motivated by love. This goes beyond merely trying to impress a crush but is rather a strive toward the best version of oneself for the beloved.

The idea that the feelings we have toward others can transcend our relationships with them resonates with certain tenets of Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy, which focus on utilizing compassion to inspire good deeds. The principal effort for practitioners of Mahāyāna Buddhism is not an individual quest for *nirvana* (enlightenment)—as some have characterized the Theravāda tradition—but to become a *bodhisattva*, one who refrains from entering Buddhahood to aid the living in alleviating *dukkha* (suffering).[9]

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[7] Megan Bowler, “What is Love? (According to Plato) – by Megan Bowler,” Academus, Feb. 17, 2021. https://www.academuseducation.co.uk/post/what-is-love-according-to-plato.
[8] Plato, “Symposium” in *The Dialogues of Plato, Volume II: The Symposium*, trans. R. E. Allen (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1991), 178c-d.
[9] José Antunes da Silva, “Compassion in Mahayana Buddhism,” *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia* 52, fasc. 1/4, Homenagen ao Prof. Dotour Lúcio Craveiro da Silva (Jan. – Dec., 1996): 814.

The selfless act is motivated primarily by *karunā* (compassion) for all sentient beings, manifested in ways similar to how Phaedrus describes Eros. Compassion is that which drives us to recognize the suffering of others as equivalent to our own and thus act virtuously on their behalf as we would for ourselves.

Phaedrus deploys an account of the mythological sacrifices performed by Alcestis and Achilles on behalf of their respective beloveds as proof of his argument. Alcestis's husband Admetus was deemed destined to die, and the Fates would only allow his life to be extended if someone died in his place, so she sacrificed herself for him. Similarly, Achilles slayed the Trojan prince Hector outside the gates of Troy to avenge the death of his friend Patroclus, knowing it would mean he himself would be killed at the end of the war. Both stories are revered as acts of loyalty, friendship, and love. According to Phaedrus, neither would have been so selfless if not for their affections.[10] The idea that Eros is a means to an end other than love itself is also reflected in the speech of Eryximachus later in the *Symposium*. His speech is dedicated to an analogy between the love we experience in social settings and elsewhere, namely medicine, his area of expertise.[11] Referring to Eros, he says, "So all medicine, as I said, is governed by this god, as are gymnastics and agriculture."[12] As does Phaedrus, Eryximachus spends much more time touting the value of love itself rather than any particular set of descriptions or practices. For Eryximachus, love is a kind of harmony, order, or consonance found in nature. Further, he argues that the act of loving has a sort of health-promoting quality

[10] Plato, "Symposium," 179b-d.
[11] Bowler.
[12] Plato, "Symposium," 186e-187a.

that makes partaking in it worthwhile regardless of how we love, much as Phaedrus understood love to be a motivator for virtuous deeds.

What differentiates both these understandings from the Buddhist doctrine of *karunā* is not some fundamental disagreement about the value of love, but rather how we ought to understand its scope. Phaedrus and Eryximachus understood love to be something special that can be cultivated amongst a select few deserving individuals, as Alcestis did for Admetus and Achilles for Patroclus. Phaedrus, for example, understands the virtuous act of sacrifice to be reserved for a lover on behalf of their beloved. "And again, only lovers are willing to die [on] behalf of others."[13] To translate this practice to be that of a *bodhisattva*, one must be a lover of all sentient beings. Differentiation in who is deserving of our compassion, or our affection, is contrary to what it means to be dedicated to alleviating suffering in the world. Setting aside Buddhist principles of nonviolence that might complicate the act of Achilles touted by the Greeks as virtuous, a *bodhisattva* takes each and every being to be the object of their "affection" such that self-sacrifice would be without question, regardless of the virtue or beauty of whom that sacrifice was on behalf of. A quote from Lama Zopa Rinpoche captures this position well:

> When we understand that all sentient beings are the field from which we receive all happiness, up to and including enlightenment, we will naturally want to take the best possible care of them, serving them in whatever way is best to repay their kindness. Even if we must give up our life—even if we must give our life numberless times—there is still no way we can repay that kindness.[14]

[13] Ibid, 179b.
[14] Thubten Zopa Rinpoche, "Sentient Beings and Buddhas Are Equal in Deserving Our Respect," Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition, Oct. 5, 2020, https://fpmt.org/lama-zopa-rinpoche-news-and-advice/advice-from-lama-zopa-rinpoche/sentient-beings-and-buddhas-are-equal-in-deserving-our-respect/.

There is nothing, for Mahāyāna Buddhists, misguided about self-sacrifice. But reserving our selfless deeds for only those we hold dear to us prevents us from treating all beings as equally deserving of being liberated from *dukkha*.

II

Once Phaedrus' encomium concludes, the next is delivered by Pausanias. This speech is much clearer in terms of its insight into how one ought to navigate their relationships, and thus will be where we begin to see more pronounced similarities and tensions with Buddhist philosophy. Much of Pausanias' speech is dedicated to differentiating between the two embodiments of Eros, one Heavenly and one Vulgar.[15] For Pausanias, the Heavenly Eros is that of true love, a deep respect for an individual that shows no bounds. Vulgar Eros, on the other hand, is that desire which causes us to be unvirtuous, to focus solely on the hedonistic pleasures and hinders our ability to experience true love. This appears to be the closest resemblance in *Symposium* to the good and bad forms of love found in Plato's *Laws* and *Phaedrus*, which we will explore more thoroughly in the next chapter. Toward the end of his speech, Pausanias says, "The vulgar lover, who loves the body more than the soul, is base; his is inconstant because the thing he loves is inconstant. For as soon as the bloom of the body he once loved fades, 'he takes off and flies,' many speeches and promises disdained."[16] What Pausanias is getting at here is something that some Buddhists, namely what John Stevens, a Zen Buddhist priest, refers to as "puritan elders," held central to their philosophy.[17] As Stevens notes in his book *Lust for Enlightenment*, puritan Buddhists believed that a

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[15] Plato, "Symposium," 180d-e.
[16] Ibid, 183d-e.
[17] John Stevens, *Lust for Enlightenment: Buddhism and Sex* (Boston/London: Shambala Publications, 2014), 22.

necessary component of the path to alleviate suffering involved ridding oneself of attachment to sexual pleasures. As established in the previous section, the primary objective of spiritual practice for Mahāyāna Buddhists is liberation from *dukkha*, not just for oneself but for all sentient beings. *Dukkha* can take many forms, and it does not always translate perfectly to the Western concept of suffering. Bhikkhu Bodhi offers us a comprehensive definition of what suffering means for Buddhists:

> Here *dukkha* shows up in the events of birth, aging, and death, in our susceptibility to sickness, accidents, and injuries, even in hunger and thirst. It appears again in our inner reactions to disagreeable situations and events: in the sorrow, anger, frustration, and fear aroused by painful separations, by unpleasant encounters, by the failure to get what we want.[18]

For puritan Buddhists, and seemingly for Pausanias as well, the frustration, painful separation, and failure to attain desires is manifested in sexual relationships. Because physical beauty possessed by the body withers and fades, centering attraction in our romantic pursuits is sure to breed suffering as our attachment to physical beauty loses the object it had once clung to. Buddha taught, "Be always mindful of the body's impermanence and corruptibility, and turn away from the enslaving pleasure of the senses; then you will be capable of experiencing a pure form of rapture untainted by desire or clinging."[19] There are countless stories in Buddhist texts that support the puritan elders' argument. A young monk in Rājagaha fell madly in love with woman named Srimā who served food to the Buddhist mendicants there.[20] He became so attached to her that he refused to eat. Suddenly, the woman died, and rather than

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[18] Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Noble Eightfold Path: The Way to the End of Suffering* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1984), second edition (revised) 1994, 6.
[19] Stevens, 23.
[20] Ibid, 23.

cremate the body, Buddha ordered it be placed outside such that the monks could bear witness to its decomposition. The story is meant to highlight the impermanence of physical beauty, showing the lovesick monk that his pining had been toward her body, an object, and nothing more. The contemplation of a decaying corpse is a standard Buddhist meditation to decrease lust and attachment as well as to increase one's awareness of one's own impermanence and inevitable demise. Another tale involves a young hermit who fell in love with a woman who enticed him from his master.[21] He left the hermitage only to be married to someone who ordered him around incessantly and made his life miserable, leading him to eventually go back to his master in shame. These few examples, and many more Buddhist stories, resonate with the Pausanias' Vulgar Eros. It seems that the suffering arising from our attachment to and desire for sexual pleasure and bodily beauty was understood by both Buddhists and Pausanias in the *Symposium*. Both recognized that the physical body is not something that remains constant, but rather constantly degrades. The disappointment that comes with losing what we once had, in this case an object of our sexual desire, is a delusion for the Buddhists and Vulgar Eros for Pausanias.

While the "puritan elders" and their refrain from all sexual acts occupies one position held by some Mahāyānists, that stance is by no means universal in the Buddhist tradition. Monastics do typically take on pledges to refrain from sex, but there is nothing unvirtuous about the act itself when it comes to laypeople, so much so that even sex before marriage is not considered a defilement. Bhikkhu Bodhi tells us, "When mature independent people, though unmarried, enter into a sexual relationship through free

[21] Ibid, 27.

consent, so long as no other person is intentionally harmed, no breach of the training factor is involved."[22] And John Stevens notes, "If the act of sex is consummated selflessly and with compassion, if it is mutually enriching and ennobling, if it deepens one's understanding of Buddhism, promotes integration and spiritual emancipation, and is, above all, beneficial to *all* the parties involved, it is 'good.'"[23] So, rather than sex itself being the object of critique for Buddhists, it is the way in which one goes about sex. If it is an impulsive succumbing to primal desire, or if it increases one's delusion such that one is less mindful of radical impermanence, then it causes suffering. But if it is a selfless act free of attachment to the sense pleasures, it can even be considered a means of spiritual advancement.

There are even specific Buddhist teachings that promote the use of sex for spiritual purposes, called *tantra*. Tantric Buddhism is an incredibly complex tradition. Every account I give here will be the perspective of the particular scholar I am citing, and not necessarily a perfect reflection of every Buddhist practitioner. John Stevens explains it as such:

> Tantra, in whatever guise, bases itself on these principles: the affirmation of life in all its forms and the validity of the phenomenal world; the innate purity of natural conditions; the complexity of the psychophysical makeup of human beings; the body as a microcosm of the universe; and the necessity of realizing the truth in this present mode of existence.[24]

Since sex is fundamental to "this present mode of existence," Stevens says that Tantric Buddhists hold that ruthless suppression of our sexual urges is more likely to make

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[22] Bodhi, 55.
[23] Stevens, 109.
[24] Ibid, 46.

people neurotic than to make them virtuous as Pausanias would hold. Rather than annihilating or suppressing sexual urges, Stevens explains that Tantra offers its practitioners a way to meditate on the act of sex to redirect and transform its experience, all the while maintaining the goal of ridding ourselves of attachment to sexual pleasure. Other scholars, such as José Cabezón, believe it to be much more complicated. He explains that Tantric meditation on sexual pleasure falls under an umbrella of practices aimed at breaking down the purity/impurity binary, with related meditations such as the consumption of "prohibited" substances like alcohol and meat.[25] According to Cabezón, Tantra is more about nonduality itself and detaching from identity than a mastery of the senses.

Where this leaves us in terms of comparing it with Pausanias' position is not entirely clear, but the similarities remain with either the puritan or Tantra schools of Buddhism. Both understood the ultimate goal to be shedding our sexual desires, but adopt different practices based on what they believe to be the best path to do so. Either way, we can safely conclude that Pausanias and both sects of Mahāyāna Buddhism share their concern for the impulsive nature of sexual desire.

III

Having already discussed the speech of Eryximachus with Phaedrus', Aristophanes delivers the speech following. He does so in a humorous tone, fitting for the comic poet. At times, it is difficult to parse through whether Aristophanes truly meant the entirety of what he says given the ironic nature of his cadence. Having no way

[25] José Ignacio Cabezón, "Desire and Human Sexuality," in *Sexuality in Classical South Asian Buddhism* (Somerville: Wisdom Publications, 2017), 63-132.

to ask him ourselves, though, we shall take his words at face value. There is much in this encomium that is worth exploring, but perhaps the most important is that of the mythologized explanation of two souls separated by the gods. He tells a story whereby humans began as three sexes, male, female, and a share of both, each with four arms, four legs, and two heads.[26] Having developed conspiracies against the gods, Zeus devised a solution that involved slicing them in two to eliminate the threat they posed to his power. An unfortunate side effect of this decision was that the two halves longed for each other, desiring to return to their complete selves. As a compromise, Zeus allowed them to procreate by means of embrace. And so, for Aristophanes, romantic love at least is a long and arduous process of finding one's soulmate. He says that "this is how our race would become happy, if we should fulfill our love and each meet with his own beloved, returning to his ancient nature."[27] What is fascinating about this narrative is that it closely resembles modern cliches regarding romance, that of "finding one's other half" or seeking a "soulmate." While there is much to unpack, I will save the metaphysical discussion of the soul for the next chapter and focus now on the practical implications of Aristophanes' mythological account.

There is a stark contrast between the implications the "other half" story has for human behavior and what Buddhist believe to be right conduct. First, the idea that we are not complete without our other half differs from what Buddhists believe to be the highest form of existence, that of alleviation of *dukkha* through the attainment of *nirvana* (enlightenment), the "unconditioned state experienced while alive with the

[26] Plato, "Symposium," 189e-191e.
[27] Ibid, 193c.

extinguishing of the flames of greed, aversion, and delusion."[28] Notably, this does not necessarily require anyone else to achieve. It is an individual's spiritual journey, accomplished by following the teachings of the Buddha and practicing toward making one's mind free from the roots of suffering. The concept of *sangha*, referring to the entire Buddhist community, does complicate this analysis, however. Friendship and community are considered by many practitioners to be indispensable in one's spiritual journey. Nonetheless, we can still draw the following conclusion: we can play an important role in others' spiritual journeys, and they can play a role in ours, but having someone we are romantically involved with is not a necessary condition of our own enlightenment. Monastic Buddhists forswear the practices of romance, sexual activity, and marriage. If it were the case that we could not be happy without our other half, monastic practices would seem to be severely misguided. Even Buddha himself attained enlightenment only after leaving his wife and infant son (or, in some narratives, his pregnant wife).

Second, being split in two with our ancient selves forwards a notion that we have only one perfect beloved. Beyond the Mahāyāna notion of having equal affinity for all sentient beings, the structural arrangement of romantic marriages in Buddhist culture indicates that having one "other half" might not be fitting for everyone. While some Buddhist texts do recommend monogamy, there are teachings that do not restrict lifelong romantic engagement to just one person. A particular Buddhist story from the Jātaka tales of the Indian subcontinent in roughly the second century BCE involved a father asking the Buddha how to match his four daughters with their respective

[28] Bodhi, 24.

suitors.[29] One was virtuous, one older, one handsome, and one of noble birth. The Buddha's response was to set up all four of his daughters with the virtuous suitor, as he would make the best husband for all. This is fitting with Buddhist non-attachment principles. Rather than trying to confine the scope of one's romantic affiliations to social norms, Buddha recognized that these restrictions were arbitrary, and felt that every experience, including the sexual and romantic, was contingent and situational. Even today, polyandry, the practice of a woman taking on multiple husbands, is not an uncommon practice in Tibetan culture.[30] Nothing about the nature of one's romantic and sexual preference predetermines their ability to be a good Buddhist, so long as one avoids sexual misconduct.

Another component of Aristophanes' speech that deserves attention is the mention and even endorsement of same sex love. The larger being having been split in two, as he describes, could be male-male, female-female, or male-female.[31] Thus, the desire for one to be rejoined with their other half can most certainly take the form of same sex love. In fact, Aristophanes goes so far as to say that homosexual love is *purer* than heterosexual love. "Those sectioned from a male pursue the masculine; because they are slices of the male, they like men while still boys, delighting to lie with men and be embraced by them. These are the most noble boys and youths because they are by nature most manly."[32] This is echoed in Pausanias' speech as well, where he slights heterosexual love as that of "common sorts of men."[33] These accounts can and should be

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[29] Stevens, 107.
[30] Li Zhi-nong and He Shu-qing, "Tradition, Habitat, and Well-Being: Polygamous Marriage in a Tibetan Village," in *Rural Life in Late Socialism: Politics of Development and Imaginaries of the Future*, ed. Phill Wilcox, Jonathan Rigg, and Minh T. N. Nguyen, (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2023), 263
[31] Plato, "Symposium," 191d-e.
[32] Ibid, 191e-192a.
[33] Ibid, 181b.

read as a patriarchal hierarchization of masculinity over femininity, but they nonetheless offer what many might consider a quite progressive take on same sex intercourse for the time. Their place in *Symposium* makes perfect sense, too, a setting in which the goal was to offer an encomium to Eros specifically of the pederastic variety between two men. Ancient Buddhist acceptance of same sex intercourse comes from a similarly sexist origin. While Cabezón is right to observe that Buddhist traditions never laid out forbidden sexual practices, such as the Christian aversion to same sex practices[34], Stevens argues that homosexuality was only as accepted as it was in Tibet "since it meant that a monk had completely conquered sexual attachment to women."[35] What we see here is a glaring parallel between the cultural sentiments that made homosexuality acceptable at a time when approval of the practice was by no means given. Desire geared toward that which is feminine was far more likely to be a source of attachment, an embodiment of Vulgar Eros, whereas masculine affection could be noble, even if it did involve a degree of restraint in acting on those sexual urges. A cross-cultural analysis between homosexual love and gender in Greek and Buddhist philosophy, even just what is found in *Symposium*, could be an entire thesis, so I will leave it at this simple observation to avoid doing the subject a disservice.

IV

The last speech in *Symposium* before we get to Socrates is delivered by Agathon, the tragic poet. Here he depicts Eros as a beautiful, virtuous poet himself who compels others to pursue beautiful things. Part of Eros' virtue, according to Agathon, is his

[34] Cabezón, 7.
[35] Stevens, 108.

temperance. He says, “For it is agreed that temperance is mastery of pleasures and desires, and no pleasure is stronger than Eros.”[36] We can already begin to see overlap with Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy. One of the central teachings of Buddha was *majjhima patipada*, the “Middle Way.” As Bhikkhu Bodhi explains, *majjhima patipada* “steers clear of two extremes, two misguided attempts to gain release from suffering. One is the extreme indulgence in sense pleasures… The other extreme is the practice of self-mortification, the attempt to gain liberation by afflicting the body.”[37] It is a doctrine that teaches that extremes in any form are hinderances on the path to enlightenment, even if they are manifested in the opposite direction of what we have discussed thus far. This can be read as temperance. This is not meant to be understood as a compromise between the two extremes, but rather a transcending of both by avoiding the errors of each through mental practice.

Unfortunately for the pompous Agathon, much of his speech is torn apart by Socrates shortly after he concludes. Having described Eros as both one of ultimate beauty and wisdom but also of desire, Socrates follows up with a witty retort. He first, in his Socratic way, asks Agathon a series of questions to get him to spell out what it means to desire. He asks, “Then could anyone, being large, wish to be large or, being strong, strong?”[38] The answer he receives is no, and that sets up his deconstruction of Agathon’s depiction. Because Eros is beautiful, he necessarily cannot desire beauty, according to Socrates. Agathon cedes, saying, “Very likely I didn’t know what I was talking about then, Socrates.”[39] But in Socrates’ argumentative construction, we find a glimmer of

[36] Plato, “Symposium,” 196c.
[37] Bodhi, 10-11.
[38] Plato, “Symposium,” 200b.
[39] Ibid, 201b.

exactly what the Buddha meant when he warned his followers of the dangers of attachment and greed. Socrates says, before Agathon concedes, "being in possession of wealth and health and strength, you wish also to possess them in the future, since at least at present you have them whether you wish to or not."[40] We often conceive of having our desires fulfilled by attaining what we had desired. If we desire a nice pair of shoes, purchasing them could be said to fulfill that desire. But as Socrates and the Buddha warn us, it only changes the nature of our desire, leaving us wishing to secure our possessions, material or otherwise.

Having explored all but two *Symposium* speeches, we now have a baseline idea of where Ancient Greek and Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy might have agreed and disagreed. Importantly, it is not until the final speeches that we will find Plato's personal philosophy. This section is merely meant to serve as both context for Plato's position and to begin to parse through what may have been examples of the philosophical perspectives on love of Ancient Athens. But now that we have laid the groundwork, the following chapter will explore the penultimate speech delivered by Socrates and return to the central question: how should we understand love?

[40] Ibid, 200c-d.

CHAPTER 2

While the previous chapter analyzed the broader themes and a diversity of perspectives found in *Symposium*, this chapter will focus on just one speech, that delivered by Socrates. Many Platonists hold that this speech gives us the best picture in terms of Plato's own views on love, the rest of the dialectic having ideas borrowed from them but serving primarily as context.[41] Before we get into the speech itself, a sidenote on Plato's metaphysics will make the content easier to understand. Plato conceived of reality as a set of Forms, abstract ideas that have idealized versions of themselves and are instantiated imperfectly by perceivable objects in the material world. To take a very simple example, an object that is a green square could be said to be an instantiation of the Forms of "Green" and of "Square." One of the Forms most important to the works of Plato is that of the Beautiful, used interchangeably with the Good, that which is perfection. Just as the square embodies greenness, people, objects, and ideas can embody beauty; the Beautiful exists independently in an abstract, pure state. For a better explanation of how individuals interact with these Forms, we must look to *Phaedrus*, where Plato lays out a metaphysics of self. He describes the soul as immortal, and when not dwelling on Earth in human form, it roams the cosmos, briefly encountering the Forms in their abstract state. Plato analogizes this soul to a charioteer with a pair of winged horses. He says, "one of his horses is beautiful and good and from stock of the same sort, while the other is the opposite and has the opposite sort of bloodline."[42] The bad horse is the part of our soul that drags us further from that which

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[41] Donald Levy, "The Definition of Love in Plato's Symposium," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 40, no. 2 (Apr. – Jun., 1979): 285.
[42] Plato, "Phaedrus" in *Plato: Complete Work*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 246a.

is good, further from knowledge of the Forms, and distracts us from that which leads us on a path toward wisdom. The good horse is that which assists us in attaining encounters with the Forms of the Good or of the Beautiful. The task of the charioteer is to rein in the bad horse such that the good one can lead them toward wisdom. For humans to acquire wisdom of the Forms, they must embark on a process of remembering what the soul had encountered in the cosmos.

Plato's metaphysical account alone gives us plenty to discuss in Buddhist terms. While the Buddha rejected the notion of a soul, there are certainly some ways in which Platonic and Buddhist metaphysics of self are strikingly similar, namely in their concepts of rebirth. While Buddhists reject the notion of an immortal soul, they do believe in the concept of *karma*, or "action," used to explain how one's conduct shapes the trajectory of rebirth. More specifically, *karma* explains the set of moral consequences that stem from action, those that extend beyond the present moment and into future lives. Mahāyāna Buddhists understand *karma* to accumulate, meaning that good actions produce good results and bad actions produce bad ones. So, while karma is not something possessed by an immortal and independent soul, there is continuity of the midstream after death. Gananath Obeyesekere explains that "Because *karma* operates, the person who is reborn is neither the same nor different from the person in the previous birth. The rebirth-seeking entity that moves from one birth to another is the [*gandharva*], the 'rebirth-linking consciousness,' and is not a discrete spirit entity."[43] Importantly, unlike Plato's wandering soul, the reborn consciousness in Buddhism generally does not have access to the thoughts, feelings, or memories of any

[43] Gananath Obeyesekere, *Imagining Karma: Ethical Transformation in Amerindian, Buddhist, and Greek Rebirth* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 2002), 331.

of its previous manifestations. This consciousness does not have ontological status independent of a mind and body. It can only *be* when it exists as part of a subject.

I

While *Symposium* is likely what most think of with respect to Plato's philosophy on love, it does not offer the reader a complete vision for what loving relationships do or what they should look like. Although we are told what love ought to help us achieve, what does it mean in practice to love a Platonic Form? And what can we do to cultivate romantic, platonic, and familial relationships in an ethical manner? Fortunately, Plato offers some of what *Symposium* lacks elsewhere, namely in *Laws* and in *Phaedrus*. Philosopher Jeremy Reid explores much of this overlapping dialogue in "Plato on Love and Sex." Here, he recounts a passage from *Laws* in which the Athenian Visitor, who he regards to be Plato's spokesperson throughout the book, explains the connections between love, desire, and friendship. He explains that love, or Eros, is a subset of *philia*, or friendship.[44] These relationships are divided into "bad love" and "good love," the first being a primal desire for sexual pleasure that involves an imbalance in desire and in virtue, the second being a reciprocal love of the souls of two lovers. This is largely in line with what Pausanias understood to be Vulgar and Heavenly Eros. Plato does carve out a third kind of love, one that is a combination of the two and that exemplifies that these kinds of love can coexist, but for simplicity of discussion and recognition of importance, we will treat the two forms as opposite ends of a kind of spectrum.

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[44] Jeremy Reid, "Plato on Love and Sex," *The Routledge Handbook of Love in Philosophy*, ed. Adrienne Martin (2019): 106.

Most of the love discussion in *Laws* is of the bad form of love. As Reid explains, the dynamic between a lover whose unvirtuous horse has taken control and their relations with their beloved is one of submission and coercion.[45] The lover attempts to make their beloved as pleasing to them as possible, and in doing so places them in a position of inferiority to maintain control and status over them. They attempt to restrict them from success, whether it be wealth, power, physical stature, or wittedness, as a jealous means to prevent others from occupying their company. This type of relationship is doomed to fall apart. As their love fades, the lover flees from their beloved, ashamed of what they have done, much like the suffering that Buddhists understood to be caused by our attachments.

In *Phaedrus*, we see a clearer vision of the good form of love, translated sometimes as that of the philosophical lover.[46] Upon witnessing physical beauty, the philosophical lover is tempted by its "bad horse," but can tame it such that the virtuous aspects of the soul guide action. Their attitude toward their beloved becomes one of reverence rather than lust, which opens the possibility of doing good deeds on behalf of their beloved and having appreciation for their virtues and beauty. Only in this relationship can the beloved begin to love the lover back, creating the possibility for a desirable relationship. If the two can maintain their suppression of lust, they are sure to live a long and mutually beneficial life together.

The lessons drawn from *Laws* and *Phaedrus* do give us an account of what Plato considered to be characteristics of positive and negative relationships, but the

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[45] Ibid, 107.
[46] Ibid, 109.

importance of discussing Eros in *Symposium* is that it gives us, in the words of Donald Levy, "not a definition of what love is, but of what love ought, perhaps, to be."[47] This, I think, will give us a stronger starting point for a comparative analysis, for much of what is taught in Buddhism is prescriptive, discussing how we ought to act rather than just how we do. If we can get to the crux of what Plato believed to be the truest form of love, the right love, it will give us plenty to critique, affirm, and analyze through a Buddhist lens.

II

Returning to the speech of Socrates, we find its main argument in the words a Mantinean priestess named Diotima whom Socrates had encountered years prior, who is said to have great wisdom regarding the topic of love. Diotima argued that there is "one ultimate object of love to which all the other must be tending in order for them to be objects of love at all."[48] The "ultimate object of love" should be interpreted as the Beautiful, with all beautiful people and objects striving toward it but never embodying it perfectly. This understanding allows us to take Diotima's definition and fit it neatly into Plato's ontological frame. He quotes Socrates's repetition of Diotima's lesson as such:

> For this is the right way to proceed in matters of love, or to be led by another—beginning from these beautiful things here, to ascend ever upward for the sake of *that*, the Beautiful, as though using the steps of a ladder, from one to two, and from two to all beautiful bodies, and from beautiful bodies to beautiful practices, and from practices to beautiful studies, and from studies one arrives in the end at *that* study which is nothing other than the study of *that*, the Beautiful itself, and one knows in the end, by itself, what it is to be beautiful. It is there, if anywhere, dear

[47] Levy, 286.
[48] Ibid, 286.

> Socrates, said the Mantinean Stranger, that human life is to be lived: in contemplating the Beautiful itself.[49]

The love we cultivate in our relationships with people is not our ultimate aim. Rather, Diotima recommends we use the minimal contact with the Beautiful that we get from the love of physical beauty to ascend toward study of the Beautiful itself. Many Platonic scholars have interpreted this as the central prescriptive element of Diotima's recommendation. Levy, in "The Definition of Love in Plato's Symposium," explains it as such:

> To achieve the vision of absolute beauty one must first progress from love of physical beauty in an individual to love of all physical beauty; then, love of beauty in the soul leads to awareness of the beauty of activities, institutions, and sciences. Upon surveying all these different kinds of beauty, one will be led to a glimpse of the science whose object is absolute beauty.[50]

Jeremy Reid similarly interprets Socrates to be arguing that, "those who love properly will move their attention from one beautiful body to many beautiful bodies, then to beautiful souls, then to beautiful customs and laws, then to different kinds of knowledge, then ultimately to the Form of Beauty."[51] In any sense, it seems clear that Diotima's prescription involves using love of people as a means rather than an end, a "ladder of love" or an "ascent" toward something greater.

The practice of using the love, or *maitrī*, one has already cultivated and expanding it toward greater ends is something Buddhists have been practicing for centuries. This rests within a fourfold practice, involving cultivating love, compassion,

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[49] Plato, "Symposium," 211c-d.
[50] Levy, 286.
[51] Reid, 105.

sympathetic joy, and non-discrimination toward all sentient beings. But most closely associated with love is a meditative practice called *maitrī bhāvanā*, and it roughly translates to "the cultivation of loving-kindness." *Maitrī* is not merely being nice to someone; it is a genuine wish that they experience happiness in life. *Maitrī bhāvanā* starts with contemplating our own desire to be happy and moves in stages to wish that same thing for a friend, a "neutral" person (someone we do not have strong feelings for), a "difficult" person (someone we have conflicts with or feelings of ill will for), and finally all sentient beings in the universe.[52] This process mirrors Diotima's ladder of love, that of using what we are familiar with toward a greater end. For Plato, the goal is wisdom of the Forms. For Buddhists, it is cultivating compassion for all sentient beings such that we might be able to aid them in achieving liberation from suffering. The process of expansion is quite similar, the difference being that for Buddhists, it is about moving from a particular to a much larger particular and for Diotima from a particular to the abstract.

III

While Plato established the immortal soul as the basis for human wisdom in *Phaedrus*, Diotima's speech includes another ontological explanation for the self. Socrates recounts it as such:

> …a man is said to be the same from youth to old age—though he never has the same things in himself, he nevertheless is called the same, but he is ever becoming new while otherwise perishing, in respect to hair and flesh and bone and blood and the entire body. And not only in respect to the body but also in respect to the soul, its character and habits, opinions, desires,

[52] Bodhipaksa, "Introduction to lovingkindness meditation," Wildmind Meditation, No Date, https://www.wildmind.org/metta/introduction.

> pleasures, pains, fears are each never present in each man as the same, but some are coming to be, others perishing.[53]

This closely resembles the Mahāyāna Buddhist notions of *anātman*, or non-self. Despite being called the same person one's entire life, Buddhists contend that there is no permanent self or essence that can be found at the core of our identity. We would, of course, have to replace Diotima's reference to the soul with something like "mind," but nonetheless the recognition of impermanence in identity is resoundingly similar. This parallel between Diotima's description and the teachings of Buddha has been identified by Michael Griffin. He regards this section of *Symposium* as, "[coming] close to treating a human being as a causal chain of psychological and physical processes, a treatment that would resonate with the characteristically Buddhist analysis of a human person as collections of impermanent but causally related factors, mental (*nāma*) and physical (*rūpa*)."[54]

The Buddhist notion that even our fundamental selves cannot be held constant can be quite difficult to grasp for those who are exclusively familiar with Western philosophy, seemingly pulling the rug out from under everything we know about identity, agency, and sociality. What it means for someone to be themselves, to act on behalf of their own wills, and to situate themselves in the web of other independent beings appears at first to be unexplainable absent the notion of a stable self. To make things clearer, philosopher Jay L. Garfield, in his book *Losing Ourselves*, draws our attention to a story titled "The Questions of King Milinda." Here, the monk Nāgasena

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[53] Plato, "Symposium," 207d-e.
[54] Michael Griffin, "The Ethics of Self-Knowledge in Platonic and Buddhist Philosophy: Western and Buddhist Philosophical Traditions in Dialogue," in *Ethics without Self, Dharma without Atman*, ed. Gordon F. Davis (Cham: Springer International Publishing): 41.

engages King Milinda in philosophical discussion regarding *ātman* (self). The monk asks the King to consider the small clay lamps that were commonly used in Ancient India. Because the lamps did not have enough oil to last the whole night, one would use a nearly depleted lamp to light the next one, again and again until the morning. And so, Nāgasena asks King Milinda, "consider the flame by one's bed that was lit at dusk last night, and the flame to which one awakes this morning. Are they the same, or are they different?"[55] While we might refer to the two flames as the same, in reality their beings share nothing fundamental in common, other than that they are offspring of the same ignition. In relation to the self, as Garfield says, "I am not *identical* to the person called by my name yesterday. We are *alike*, causally related, but numerically distinct. In another sense, though, we are the same person. We share a name, many properties, a causal history, and a social role; and that, while not involving a self, is enough."[56]

Where Plato's and Buddhists' theories of identity differ, then, is not found in observable characteristics of personhood, but in how we refer to and understand any form of continuity that does exist. That, too, is identified by Griffin, noting that "Plato elsewhere stresses the definitional necessity of the individual soul's permanence, unchangeability, and immortality."[57] Buddhists maintain that that continuity is nothing but a conventional method that allows us to reference individuals, whereas Plato held that our essence is found somewhere in the soul that never dies. It is this understanding in his philosophy, that there is an essence, *ātman*, self, that persists no matter what that

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[55] Jay L. Garfield, *Losing Ourselves: Learning to Live without a Self* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022), 19.
[56] Ibid, 20.
[57] Griffin, 41.

distinguishes the similar narratives present in "The Questions to King Milinda" and Diotima's depiction of an ever-changing self.

IV

Despite recognizing the impermanence of the human condition, Diotima deploys the human desire for immortality as much of the basis of her recommendation regarding love. In dialogue with Socrates, she teases out the idea that all men desire good things, not just in the abstract but to be possessed by them, now and in the future. So, part of her definition of love becomes desiring to forever maintain that which is good, or beautiful. "In sum, then, [Diotima] said, Eros is of the good, being his own forever."[58] This notion of desire is reflected elsewhere in *Symposium* as well. It appears in Pausanias' speech when he says, "But the lover of a worthy character abides through life, for he is joined to what is constant."[59] And it appears again when Aristophanes romanticizes the idea that two lovers might be fused together as one, "so that from being two [they] become one and, as one, share a life in common as long as [they] live."[60] She uses this, too, to explain the virtuous acts of mythological heroes that Phaedrus deployed in his speech, asking, "Do you think, she said, that Alcestis would have died for Admetus, or Achilles after Patroclus, or our own Camdus for his children's kingdoms, if they had not thought the fame of their own virtue, which we know cherish, would be immortal?"[61]

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[58] Plato, "Symposium," 206a.
[59] Ibid, 183e.
[60] Ibid, 192d-e.
[61] Ibid, 208d.

I have already established in the previous section that Buddhists reject attachment to the body, it being impermanent and a site for constant change. It is not just the body in flux, though, but our fundamental nature as well. Diotima recognizes this when she explains that, like Nāgasena's lamps, there is no throughline for our essence. To then argue that we ought to strive for permanence via immortality in our practice of love as Plato does seems problematic. The desire for that permanence, to be "joined to what is constant," is an impossible pursuit, one sure to bring suffering as one loses what they had attached to. As Bhikkhu Bodhi explains:

> We feel driven to secure our position, to safeguard our territory, to gain more, to rise higher, to establish tighter controls. The demands of desire seem endless, and each desire demands the eternal: it wants the things we get to last forever. But all the objects of desire are impermanent. Whether it be wealth, power, position, or other persons, separation is inevitable, and the pain that accompanies separation is proportional to the force of attachment: strong attachment brings much suffering; little attachment brings little suffering; no attachment brings no suffering.[62]

Leaning into that desire for immortality should be futile in a world where nothing is truly constant, including persons. We could cohere these positions if we, as Pausanias had, differentiate between an impermanent body and a permanent soul, but Diotima takes this option away from us in recognizing the impermanence of the soul as well. To desire what is fleeting is to bring suffering.

Diotima deploys the strive for immortality as the motivation behind procreation as well. Perhaps this will allow us a way out, a way to make ourselves truly permanent in the face of an unfixed self and the inevitability of our mortal deaths. She explains that in having children, "all that is mortal is preserved: not by being ever completely the same,

[62] Bodhi, 32.

like the divine, but by leaving behind, as it departs and becomes older, a different new thing of the same sort it was."[63] But this, too, falls short of being able to avoid what Buddhists understand to be a root of suffering. A few more words from Lama Zopa Rinpoche explain precisely why:

> The correct reason for having a child is to cause happiness to that child, to that sentient being. It is not the thought, "This is my child," no. It is not the attitude, "Those who are not born to me are not my child. They are to be abandoned. I will only look after those who are born to me. I will only work for them." It is not like that. The reason to have a child is to cause happiness to that sentient being. The reason to make a child is to cause happiness to this kind sentient being.[64]

To have a child such that one might extend their legacy in a strive toward immortality is inherently selfish. It speaks to no one else's well-being, especially the child's. Planting a seed in one's backyard as a testament to their power of creation and then becoming frustrated when it grows into a bush rather than a glorious oak tree is just one example of how this attempt might bring us dissatisfaction. Secondly, caring for one's offspring as a means of caring for one's own immortal self establishes the same differentiation that we established in the prior chapter's critique of Phaedrus' encomium, that of who is deserving of our compassion. It places those who are not our children in an inferior position, ready to be left at our earliest convenience unless it helps us reach that ever-impossible target of immortality. This does not mean that we ought not to have children. Buddhists understood that childbirth was a natural part of the human condition. But the reason for doing so should be informed by Buddhist lessons of kindness, wisdom, and

[63] Plato, "Symposium," 208a-b.
[64] Thubten Zopa Rinpoche, "Motivation for Having a Child," Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archive, Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition, Jan. 2023, https://www.lamayeshe.com/advice/purpose-having-baby.

compassion, hoping to bring a being into the world that will advance the well-being of all rather than serve as a vessel for an extension of our mortal lives.

V

So, what is love for Buddhists? It is not just a means to encounter a greater force, not an attempt to find our "other half," and not a vehicle for acquiring elements of immortality. Rather, it is a microcosm of the greater ethic for Mahāyāna Buddhists: to alleviate suffering and bring happiness to all sentient beings. The only "proper" way to love is that which strives toward this end alone. The Vietnamese Buddhist scholar and practitioner Thich Nhat Hanh has dedicated much of his life's teachings to the topic of love, particularly on how we ought to go about the practice of love in our relationships with others. In his book titled *True Love: A Practice for Awakening the Heart*, he outlines what he considers to be the "four aspects of love"—reflecting the fourfold practice we mentioned in the previous chapter—according to Buddhism.[65] These are contextualized to the project of romantic love, but much of what he holds to be valuable is applicable to the many types of Eros discussed in *Symposium*. The first is *maitrī*, the notion of loving-kindness that we established in the second section of this chapter. Importantly for Thich Nhat Hanh, this goes beyond having the intention of bringing someone joy and happiness but includes also the *ability* to do so. The second element is *karunā*, or compassion, another topic that we have already covered, this time in Chapter 1. This serves as the counterpart to *maitrī*. Because we desire to bring joy to others, we necessarily desire to alleviate them from suffering and understand their pain as

[65] Thich Nhat Hanh, *True Love: A Practice for Awakening the Heart*, trans. Sherab Chödzin Kohn (Boston/London: Shambala Publications, 1997), 4.

equivalent to our own. Again, the intent to do so alone does not constitute *karunā* for Thich Nhat Hanh; we must do the work of understanding the depth of our beloved's suffering and be able to aid in its alleviation. The third element is *muditā*, a particular type of joy that we receive in delighting in others' well-being. If there is no joy in our relationships, we cannot consider it to be true love. And the last aspect is *upeshka*, which translates to equanimity, freedom, or non-discrimination. If our relationships do not bring freedom to all parties, they cannot embody true love.

The entirety of Thich Nhat Hanh's book is dedicated to offering lessons on how to navigate our romantic relationships, and there is much more detail given with respect to how we ought to practice conforming our action with the four tenets. But already, we can begin to see a piece missing in Plato's—and the rest of the *Symposium* attendees'—understanding of love: that of the well-being of the beloved. Aristophanes' speech recognizes that both lovers would benefit once conjoined but forwards one's own desire to be reunited with their other half as why that force constitutes love. Again, Plato in *Phaedrus* realizes the harm we might do to our beloved if we fail to dissociate our love from sexual desire but concludes that the ultimate separation that follows is why this is undesirable. For Plato, through Diotima's speech, what dictates how we love is almost exclusively our *personal* gain from it, whether that be an encounter with the Beautiful or an inkling of that notion of immortality. For Mahāyāna Buddhists, it is that which benefits all sentient beings. This is the principal distinction between the two schools of thought, and what serves as the source of every Buddhist critique of the ideas in *Symposium* we have laid out.

While Diotima's lesson through the words of Socrates is considered the crux of Plato's philosophy on love, it is not the final speech. Following Socrates' seemingly persuasive encomium, the speech of Alcibiades gives us a vision of love almost completely opposite to what Diotima understood "good" love to be. The final chapter will analyze this speech, a speech that will perhaps make us question whether Diotima's ladder of love is Plato's final say on the matter.

CHAPTER 3

Socrates recounting of Diotima's ladder of love may have convinced some. But for others, there remain questions about whether her orientation toward love is practical or even desirable. One of the places that deserves attention is Diotima's dismissal of the value of unique love for an individual. If loving someone means nothing more than using them as a steppingstone toward love for some greater essence, that person would seem to be fungible, serving as a tool for our own personal aspirations. This concern has been explored deeply by Professor Gregory Vlastos.[66] Martha Nussbaum, in her work on *Symposium*, lays out the problem as such:

> It is commonly charged against Plato that, in *Symposium*, he ignores the value of the love of one unique whole person for another such whole person. By treating the person as a seat of valuable properties and describing love as directed as those repeatable properties, rather than at the whole person, he misses something that is fundamental to our experience of love.[67]

The hesitation in accepting the notion of fungibility in our experience of love is not only fitting with our common understanding of love but is also echoed in prior speeches of *Symposium* as well, such as Aristophanes' notion that we are in search of our "other half." Nussbaum points our attention to this example, noting that for Aristophanes, "The individual is loved as a whole, but also as a unique and irreplaceable whole."[68] It is also, as we have established, counter to Mahāyāna Buddhist understandings of love, which place the well-being of the object of love at its core. Even if there are spiritual goals

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[66] Gregory Vlastos, "The Individual as Object of Love in Plato," in *Plato 2: Ethics, Politics, Religion, and the Soul*, ed. Gail Fine (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).
[67] Martha Nussbaum, "The Speech of Alcibiades: A Reading of Plato's *Symposium*," *Philosophy and Literature* 3, no. 2 (Fall 1979): 132-133.
[68] Ibid, 141.

beyond love of just one person, Buddhists like Thich Nhat Hanh reject the notion practicing "true love" can be removed from the practice of recognizing and acting upon the unique needs of the person we love.

But this may not be a critique of Plato's concept of love at all. Nussbaum interprets the final speech of *Symposium*, delivered by Alcibiades, to serve as an embrace of the love that comes to us only for the individual, a qualification to Diotima's recommendation. Alcibiades enters the scene in a drunken stupor, interrupting the party just after Socrates concludes his speech. He has a bold presence, physically beautiful in every sense of the term, and touting a crown wreath of "ivy and violets and a multitude of fillets on his head."[69] He is the embodiment of passionate love, the opposite of the stoic Socrates who has begun his ascent.

Alcibiades dedicates his speech to his own affection for Socrates, not always having the nicest things to say but nonetheless making clear his infatuation with the man. The speech is filled with dramatic metaphors and visceral recounting of their interactions. He tells us, "I don't know whether anyone else has seen the images within when he is in earnest and opened up, but I saw them once, and I thought they were so divine and golden, so marvelously beautiful."[70] He describes the feelings that arise in him when Socrates' refuses his advances as being "bitten by something more painful, and in the most painful place one can be bitten—in the heart or soul…"[71] Alcibiades is lovestruck, hurt by fact that his love for Socrates is not reciprocated. For Nussbaum, this speech offers us what Vlastos believes Socrates' speech lacked. She explains:

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[69] Plato, "Symposium," 212e.
[70] Ibid, 216e-217a.
[71] Ibid, 218a.

> If a writer describes a certain theory of love and then follows that description with a counterexample to the theory, a story of intense passion for a unique individual as eloquent as any in literature—a story that says that the theory omits something, is blind to something—then we might want to hesitate before calling the *author* blind.[72]

Alcibiades does not see Socrates as a steppingstone on his journey toward appreciation of the Beautiful. He sees him as someone he loves, for his unique traits, for the particular beauty he possesses. This is the passionate, even irrational, kind of love for someone as an individual. It is the love that "disrupts our rational planning to the point where we would be willing to give up everything else, even health, even life."[73] This may not be the kind of love we want for ourselves in the end, but it is something that might be crucial to our understanding of love. And its inclusion at the end of *Symposium* should indicate to us that Plato recognized that Diotima's ascent may not give us a complete explanatory theory for our pre-philosophical experience of love.

I

Nussbaum's critique of accepting the conclusion of Socrates' Diotima is carefully constructed and quite dense. As such, I will outline what I see as the most important objection that she raises. For Nussbaum, the kind of love expressed by Alcibiades, that of the senseless and emotional overcoming, is crucial to an understanding of any kind of love, one that she believes Diotima's proposal forecloses us from experiencing. This is most apparent when she tells us that "the lover's knowledge of the particular other, gained through an intimacy both bodily and intellectual, is itself a unique and uniquely valuable *kind* of practical understanding, and one that we risk losing if we take the first

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[72] Nussbaum, "The Speech of Alcibiades," 133-134.
[73] Ibid, 150.

step up the Socratic ladder."[74] While the use of the phrase "practical understanding" might seem emotionally detached, Nussbaum is making quite the opposite argument. To her, that emotion is the foundation of any philosophical or logical conclusion we draw regarding love. This echoes Vlastos' concern, that love as ascent leads us away from the love of the whole person, but it goes beyond that. It is a call for a kind of vulnerability, a surrender to the passion that we experience when we love someone, and an embrace of that senselessness that might even cause us great pain. She leads us "to ask most seriously whether personal *erōs* can have, after all, any place in a life that is to be shaped and ruled by practical reason."[75] Nussbaum recognizes that without this personal *erōs*, we might not be able to even begin our ascent, but that the ascent itself calls for a discarding of the overly emotional. She does not deny the possibility that climbing the ladder of love might be desirable, but she seems to question the compatibility of all that is necessary to make it to the top.

Nussbaum's broader philosophy falls into the category of liberal individualism, a school of thought that outlines the importance of the rights of an individual and their autonomy as the basis for equality. Her important contributions to the "Capabilities Approach" are perhaps her most well-known scholarship, which modifies the traditional political liberalist paradigms through a feminist lens.[76] In her work on *Symposium*, we see much of the same sentiment in terms of placing value in freedom, opportunity, and autonomy. Nussbaum emphasizes the unique characteristics of each person as the basis

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[74] Ibid, 158-159.
[75] Ibid, 166.
[76] Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach* (Cambridge/London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011).

for their value.[77] She frames the desire to explore the deep character of one's beloved as a "respect for the autonomy of the other's reason."[78] She reworks the way Aristophanes describes his divided creatures becoming one with their other halves as a desire to find another autonomous individual, a "unique and irreplaceable whole."[79] She even tells us explicitly, "We would like to find a way to retain our identity as desiring and moving beings, and yet make ourselves self-sufficient."[80] Nussbaum's task, then, in parsing through the visions of love forwarded by Diotima and Alcibiades, is to find that which gives us what is needed to be free and autonomous beings.

Accepting the move Nussbaum makes in "The Speech of Alcibiades" to embrace a deeply personal experience of love is tempting. It appeals to the concerns Vlastos has in his reading of *Symposium*, that the passionate love we have for a unique individual serves as the foundation of our knowledge of love. But Mahāyāna Buddhism offers a different perspective. I established in the previous chapter that Buddhists reject *ātman*, or self, as ultimate reality. We do not have souls, nor essential selves that make us who we are. The impermanence of our identity describes our emotions, too. Feelings rise and fall as waves crashing on a shore, and while they contribute to our collective memory of worldly experience, they do not represent fundamental characteristics of *us*. It follows from this insight that placing great value on our unique experiences might be harmful, placing us in a position of identifying with our emotions. Cory Michael Sukala explores this tension in the context of liberal individualism in depth in his doctoral dissertation. He explains:

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[77] Nussbaum, "The Speech of Alcibiades," 153.
[78] Ibid, 166.
[79] Ibid, 141.
[80] Ibid, 144.

> "While this personalization of experience through the rise of individualism sounds much like the stated goals of modern liberalism, for the Buddha it represented a movement away from the underlying interconnectedness of reality represented by *[anātman]*[81]… What the liberal understands as the freedom to dictate the contours of one's own life the Buddha understands as the origins of man's suffering.[82]

By viewing our emotions as fundamental to our concept of love, Nussbaum is urging us to personalize emotion to inform our knowledge of love. Rather than a recognition of the ultimate lack of an inherent identity, she asks us to internalize the emotions we experience as part of the individualized self. For her, this is necessary for true wisdom regarding love. For Mahāyāna Buddhists, this is one step closer to being invested in the delusion of self.

II

Nussbaum reads the character traits of Socrates, both in Alcibiades' descriptions and in details from other works, as exemplary of what embarking on Diotima's ascent looks like. He is always "in control of his activities, free from the worldly passions and distractions that trouble most of us."[83] "He does not succumb to the most immediate and intense sexual temptation. He can go sleepless without ever suffering from fatigue."[84] He is impervious to strong emotion, able to dissociate the feelings his body experiences from those which happen to *him*. These traits, and many more, are those of a person who has become self-sufficient and hardened. They are the opposite of those

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[81] The Palī term *anatta* is used here, but the translation to Sanskrit is *anātman*, both meaning "non-self," as I have used in other passages. The modification of the quotation is just to provide clarity.
[82] Cory Michael Sukala, "A State of Impermanence: Buddhism, Liberalism, and the Problem of Politics," *Louisiana State University Doctoral Dissertations* (March 2019): 118-119.
[83] Nussbaum, "The Speech of Alcibiades," 150-151.
[84] Ibid, 151.

possessed by the impassioned and temperamental Alcibiades. And, as I would imagine many readers would wonder as well, Nussbaum asks, "Is this the life we want for ourselves?"[85]

From a Buddhist perspective, I think the answer to be a resounding "no." The stoic, hardened Socrates has too far removed himself from the openness needed to live happily amongst others. He has removed himself from dependence on the world around him. This, for Buddhists, is misguided. One of the fundamental tenets of all schools of Buddhism is *pratītyasamutpāda*, or dependent origination. Nothing comes to be or can continue to be without a complex web of surroundings that makes it the way it is. Importantly, this includes people. Remember from the previous chapter that Buddhists deny a fundamental or essential self. What makes us who we are, then, is a set of causes and conditions that inform every aspect of our being. Our relationships with others make up a large part of those causes and conditions. It is not just who we are, but *how* we are, too. As Thich Nhat Hanh tells us, "None of us can be by ourselves alone; we have to inter-be with all living beings."[86] Our well-being, our mood, everything about our lives depends on the well-being of those around us. By embarking on the strictly personal journey of ascendance that Socrates has at the advice of Diotima, he fails to grasp the ways in which his being is radically dependent on the people around him. To him, "Words launched 'like bolts' have no effect."[87] He is, in a way, dependent on the Forms in that they provide the basis for all his wisdom, but only in the same way we are "dependent" on oxygen for life. They are logical preconditions, the latter given the

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[85] Ibid, 151.
[86] Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Mindfulness Survival Kit: Five Essential Practices* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 2013), 12.
[87] Nussbaum, "The Speech of Alcibiades," 165.

biology of human beings and the former given Socrates' views of knowledge. He is nonetheless able to separate that from any kind of dependence on other people. Beyond foreclosing a complete understanding of Eros in his radical independence, he has guaranteed himself suffering, refusing to accept the truth that we are fundamentally interconnected beings, even if he has mitigated the unpleasant feelings that come from a sleepless night or an unrequited love.

III

Unsatisfied with the life that Socrates has chosen for himself, we might be tempted to fully lean into the immense vulnerability that Alcibiades has embraced in allowing his impassioned love to overtake him. This seems to be the direction that Nussbaum takes us. For her, "the nature of the personal erotic passion may be such as to be always unstable, always threatening, when given a part, to overwhelm the whole"[88] The clouded judgement, the endless pining, and the pain we suffer as a result are, for Nussbaum, unavoidable and essential parts of what it means to be a human experiencing love. For her, "to make yourself a lover is to accept the reality and the power of another world."[89] This means surrendering. It means recognizing the limitations of our control and viewing the feelings that come with that recognition as inevitable. The philosophical project does not stop there, of course. Nussbaum still wants us to understand these emotions as something that might inform our concept of love, but she places great value in being fully immersed in the experience of doing so as a precondition.

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[88] Ibid, 166.
[89] Ibid, 166.

To embrace vulnerability is one thing. But to embrace the extreme emotions that come with it as an inevitable result is another. The Buddhist concept of *upeshka*, equanimity, comes to mind here. *Upeshka* is the practice of training the mind to view the world as is, to maintain even-mindedness in the face of all experience, pleasant or painful.[90] Being calm, stable, and composed in the face of even very positive emotions allows us to avoid the pitfalls of craving that Buddhists believe to be the cause of suffering. If we are to approach the very pleasant experiences that come with love, as Alcibiades does in the beginnings of his infatuation with Socrates, we are equally doomed to a kind of clinging to what we feel and left with utter frustration when our object of affection inevitably falls out of our reach. Similarly, *upeshka* in the face of very unpleasant feelings can help quell our instinct to lash out and to blame others. Alcibiades might benefit from this sort of practice, as he might avoid not only the feeling of being "bitten in the heart," but also the desire to take out his anger on Socrates for not reciprocating his love.

The practice of cultivating *upeshka* is certainly easier said than done. It requires someone well-trained in mindfulness, able to remain consciously aware of their psychological processes while being able to shape their mental inclinations in the direction needed for any given situation. But if successful, it allows us to avoid the negative aspects of both what Socrates has adopted and what Nussbaum urges us to do with the kind of love expressed by Alcibiades. Unlike the self-sufficient quest for knowledge Diotima offers, *upeshka* accepts that we are vulnerable, interdependent with the universe and all sentient beings in it. But it does not require us to accept the mental

[90] Gaëlle Desbordes et al., "Moving Beyond Mindfulness: Defining Equanimity as an Outcome Measure in Meditation and Contemplative Research," *Mindfulness* 6 (2015): 357.

turmoil that Socrates believes to be an inevitable result of that acceptance. The possibility of attaining *upeshka* questions whether we must "entrust [ourselves] to equally uncontrollable forces within [us]."[91] Else, we may find ourselves quite like the mythical creatures in the speech of Aristophanes, indifferent to eating, drinking, and "all other pursuits."[92]

IV

Even if we reject both the radically independent ascent of Diotima's ladder of love and the senseless passion of Alcibiades' love, we are left still with the concern raised by Nussbaum, that those feelings that make us feel vulnerable are necessary to an understanding of love. This might be true if we understand the practice of love like Alcibiades does, an impassioned display of irrationality, or like Aristophanes, as a quest in search of our other half. But if we recall the teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh, true love requires neither interpretation. Rather, it just means bringing happiness to those we love. This can be transcendent in the sense that we expand our love to bring happiness to others as well, but practicing love toward an individual is bringing joy. Nothing more, nothing less.

In loving like a Buddhist, we do recognize and love the beauty unique to an individual, and we use that understanding to best serve our beloved in living a happy life, free from suffering as much as possible.[93] It can mean that we recognize the beauty of all beings and all things in the universe, and we may even use the love we have for those close to us to expand our horizons and cultivate a love for all sentient beings. This

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[91] Nussbaum, "The Speech of Alcibiades," 166.
[92] Ibid, 166.
[93] Hanh, *True Love*, 3.

is only a quest for personal wisdom in the sense that we learn to fulfill our desire to bring happiness to all those beings we come to love. It recognizes a certain vulnerability inherent in our nature, that the well-being of those we love is fundamental to our own happiness. But it avoids the emotional extremes that bring the character of Alcibiades great suffering. We need not become the hardened Socrates to make this a reality but come face-to-face with our emotions and channel them toward cultivating compassion for all sentient beings. That is true love.

CONCLUSION

This paper began by asking, to what extent are commonplace Western understandings of love compatible with the Mahāyāna Buddhist notion of non-attachment? While we may not have reached a definitive answer, I have hopefully shown that finding the best way to understand love requires more than just one perspective on the matter. By carefully examining each of the initial speeches, I have shown that despite their similarities, many of the ideas presented fall short of being wholly acceptable from a Buddhist perspective. While expanding the scope of our affection like Phaedrus recommends is a worthwhile practice for Buddhists, it is only so if we are willing to ensure that that scope has the aim of universality. Pausanias' "Vulgar Eros" is quite like the way some Buddhists understand sexual passion, reminding us that we ought not be attached to that which is impermanent. But we should be cautious not to make this practice too totalizing, recognizing that sex is not necessarily a defilement and that Tantra has served a complex yet important role in Buddhist culture. The divided beings of Aristophanes' speech mirrors much of our modern understanding of love as a search for our other half. Buddhist thought offers us an alternative to this, one that denies that there is just one person that can complete us spiritually. And Agathon's notion of temperance is quite like Buddha's "Middle Way," but Socrates and Buddhists alike share concern with the way that he interprets desire. Each of these brings us one step closer to incorporating the full picture in search of how we ought to understand love.

Buddhist thought with respect to the lessons of Diotima that Socrates has proclaimed himself persuaded by has also given us much to consider. Platonic and

Buddhist metaphysics are not perfectly compatible, but their shared notion of rebirth is fascinating given the distance between the two cultures. The ladder of love mirrors the way that Buddhists recommend we expand our scope of compassion, but it has a different goal in mind, one focused on the liberation of all sentient beings rather than an individual's quest for knowledge of some higher truth. Diotima and Buddha both recognized the impermanence of the human condition, but they came to very different conclusions about what we ought to do with that recognition. The question of whether we ought to lean into the glimpses of immortality we are able to achieve or refuse them altogether and accept our impermanence is answered in part by an exploration of both philosophies. It is also in this middle chapter that we discovered one potential answer to our original question of what it means to love without attachment in the beautiful words of Thich Nhat Hanh.

The last chapter has given us much to consider further through its analysis of the works of Martha Nussbaum. Whether Plato was advocating for either the character of Socrates or of Alcibiades is ultimately an unsettled question, one that the reader may begin to answer for themselves having thought about *Symposium* from a new perspective. I established in the beginning of this paper the importance of approaching philosophical questions from many ways of thinking, and this paper serves as just a small part of that endeavor. Further scholarship that offers new perspectives, incorporates more work, or even challenges the notions that I have laid out here are invaluable in the pursuit of knowledge. Exploring the ways that Ancient Greek philosophy evolved in response to Ancient Indian influence like in the works of Pyrrho, questioning to what extend Plato's writings really do shape our modern notions of love,

or even offering any number of alternative epistemological, metaphysical, and phenomenological perspectives on the matter can only move us forward in answering the important questions surrounding love. I urge you, reader, to continue your own pursuit of this kind of knowledge, to take nothing as given, to ask questions, to use your own experience to inform the way that you love, and, most importantly, to love.

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Alcibiades finishes his speech with a warning to Agathon, telling him, "Don't be deceived by [Socrates], but learn from our own experiences and watch out, instead of, as the proverb has it, learning by dumb suffering."[94] Socrates all but scoffs at him, accusing him of merely trying to turn Agathon against him out of jealousy.[95] This scene can be read in two ways. On the one hand, we might interpret this as exemplary of the cold hostility that stems from Socrates' invulnerability. He exhibits no compassion for Alcibiades, who has clearly suffered greatly from his unrequited love. Perhaps this is Plato trying to put Socrates' faults on display, showing us that his hardened path has left him without the ability to accept the love of others. On the other hand, we may read this as proof of the suffering caused by impassioned love, an example of the dangers of Vulgar Eros that Plato warns us against in *Laws* and the attached feelings Buddhists understand as suffering. Alcibiades leans into his emotion and is deeply hurt because of it. Perhaps rather than warn us against becoming Socrates, Plato is trying to tell us that we are worse off in the position of Alcibiades.

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[94] Plato, "Symposium," 222b.
[95] Ibid, 222d.

Rather than a definitive position on either character, I think Nussbaum is correct in her belief that Plato is intentionally ambiguous. *Symposium* is about Eros, and Eros takes many forms. Each extreme that we may take in our relation to love has its merits and demerits, and I think Plato to be ultimately giving the reader the option of choosing for themselves. This paper has shown that a Buddhist understanding of love as caring for others might give us the space to access the best of both versions of Eros. It lets us recognize our vulnerability while avoiding the pitfalls of total surrender to our passions. This gives us one more piece of the puzzle, one that might help us take Plato's work not as a final say, but as a collection of important and influential perspectives in the search for discovering what it means to truly love.

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