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Wen Xu April 11, 2017

The Stages on the Way to Life and Love: A Kierkegaardian Reading of Plato's *Symposium*

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Abstract

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This paper explores the nature of love using Plato's *Symposium* and Kierkegaard's writing on love to find out the moral growth people achieve through love and the philosophical and existential values of love beyond ethics. I examine each of the speeches in the *Symposium* and relate them to Kierkegaard's view of love that has arisen in his discussion on the three stages of human existence. I have chosen to use these two authors to evaluate the significance of love because Plato, while attempting to relate love to morality, more or less crosses the boundaries of aesthetics, ethics, and religion, which corresponds to the Kierkegaadian three stages and thus it is interesting to analyze and compare love interpreted by these two authors. My argument is that the aesthetic and the ethical aspects of love are inseparable and both merging together help people to realize human growth; as for the irrational or religious element of love, although it cannot be understood with moral sense or in an intellectual manner, we should appreciate its value for human existence. In Part 1, I go through each of the speeches in the *Symposium,* explaining the reason why the significance of love cannot be fully grasped in its ethical aspect. In Part 2, I introduce Kierkegaard's view of love in terms of the aesthetic, ethical and religious stages respectively. In Part 3, I relate love in the *Symposium* to Kierkegaard's three stages, by means of which I offer an analysis of the significance of love manifested in all three aspects.

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Table of Contents

This paper explores the nature of love using Plato's *Symposium* and Kierkegaard's writing on love to find out the moral growth people achieve through love and the philosophical and existential values of love beyond ethics. I examine each of the speeches in the *Symposium* and relate them to Kierkegaard's view of love that has arisen in his discussion on the three stages of human existence. I have chosen to use these two authors to evaluate the significance of love because Plato, while attempting to relate love to morality, more or less crosses the boundaries of aesthetics, ethics, and religion, which corresponds to the Kierkegaadian three stages and thus it is interesting to analyze and compare love interpreted by these two authors. My argument is that aesthetic and ethical aspects of love are inseparable and both merging together help people to realize human growth; as for the irrational or religious element of love, although it cannot be understood with moral sense or in an intellectual manner, we should appreciate its value for human existence. In part 1, I go through each of the speeches in the *Symposium,* explaining the reason why the significance of love cannot be fully grasped in its ethical aspect. In part 2, I introduce Kierkegaard's view of love in terms of the aesthetic, ethical and religious stages respectively. In part 3, I relate love in the *Symposium* to Kierkegaard's three stages, by means of which I offer an analysis of the significance of love manifested in all three aspects.

Part 1: Is It Possible to Understand Love in the *Symposium* in a Completely Rational Sense?

In this part, I explore and compare the different speeches about love in Plato's *Symposium*, and I argue that all speakers show an aspiration to relate love to morality but none of them interprets love in a purely ethical manner. I first explain the different ethical models that they use to illustrate love, and then evaluate the different ways in which they build up their ethical models. Finally, I

offer some reflections on whether we can understand love in a completely rational and ethical sense both in Plato's framework and in its own terms.

Phaedrus, the first speaker, presents a notion of love that is passionate. He argues nonetheless that love makes us better in several ways. He insists that love grants us a sense of shame and pride that he mainly sees as having a positive effect in the lovers' capacity for courage. In addition, as an extreme form of love's effect, people obtain courage to die for our lover or beloved.

First, people who fall in love have "a sense of shame at acting shamefully, and a sense of pride in acting well" (*Symposium* 178d). According to Phaedrus, people will have a stronger feeling of shame and pride in the presence of their lovers or beloved ones. To illustrate Phaedrus' point we can imagine a young man who looks lean and brittle but is able to fight with a strong robber in the presence of his beloved. Phaedrus would argue that if he is alone, he will not let himself get into that trouble. But with his beloved witnessing, the young man thinks it would be shameful of him to expose his cowardice. Thus he chooses to fight and he feels even greater pride in his behavior under the gaze of his beloved. In Phaedrus' own example, "a city or army made up of lovers and the boys they love" (*Symposium* 178e) will be more capable of defending itself and its people. Therefore, Phaedrus argues that a sense of shame and pride benefits us by leading us to be more courageous.[1]

Nevertheless, it is worth considering whether having a sense of shame or pride is indeed a virtue. In ethical terms, shame is itself controversial, since people do not feel ashamed unless they

[1] Although Phaedrus could have talked about other virtues which can be brought by love as well, he focuses on courage. This shows that he understands love in a passionate way.

have already committed certain misbehaviors, and for this reason, shame cannot be a virtue since it is associated with bad conduct; on the other hand, people who do not feel shame when they do bad things are far from being virtuous either. Hence, having a sense of shame cannot be a virtue but it is not completely independent of moral values. In relation to this point, Aristotle presents a possible interpretation that "the feeling is fitting not to every age, however, but to the young. For we think that young people should have a sense of shame because they live by their feelings and so make many errors but are restrained by shame" (N.E. 1128b16-19). One way of seeing shame positively then is that when people are immature in mind and have no full idea of virtues, the sense of shame restricts their behaviors so that they will not make too many mistakes; however, when they grow into a wise person who knows well what good is and always acts in accordance with the good, the sense of shame is no longer meaningful to them. Consequently, shame would not be a virtue but it could be a useful moral tool sometimes.

A sense of pride can be understood in the same way. The feeling of pride is a response to a praiseworthy deed but it is not the good behavior itself. We are proud of having virtues but the pride itself is not a virtue. Thus, although for young people a feeling of pride can make them more involved in good deeds, this feeling itself is derivative and is not the key to a good life. In general, Phaedrus is right in claiming that love benefits people by granting them a sense of shame and pride, but he does not recognize that the sense of shame and pride is not itself a virtue and thus the profit might be limited to lovers or beloved ones who are young or intellectually immature.

Second, Phaedrus argues that love makes us better because people are able to die for their lover or beloved, since love makes them develop remarkable courage. He uses the examples of Alcestis and Achilles in order to persuade us that such a sacrifice is praiseworthy by showing the blessed rewards that the heroine and the hero received from the gods. Yet the mere fact of

sacrificing one's life is not necessarily a good thing but we need to know why the person is making a sacrifice. Dying for one's lover or beloved is a virtue only if it is done for the good of the lover or the beloved instead of for one's own advantage. For example, we do not consider a person to be virtuous if he dies for his other half in order to have fame.

In this regard, I think Alcestis' story is a proper example of good sacrifice while Achilles' is not. When the goddesses of fate promise that they will revive Admetus, Alcestis's husband, if anyone will die instead of him, Alcestis is the only one who wishes to make the sacrifice. So her sacrifice to save her husband's life is done for the good of the other person and not her own benefits. Consequently, it is morally meaningful. In contrast, Achilles' sacrifice for Patroclus does not fit with what we would normally consider a proper self-sacrifice, since it is hard to find any good that his sacrifice could bring to Patroclus, and it seems that Achilles is the one benefited by gaining fame--everyone praises him as a good friend and hero.

Some may argue that in order to see the benefit brought about by Achilles' death, we might have to look beyond Patroclus. Achilles' death wins the victory for Greece. One problem is that this interpretation separates Achilles' sacrifice from his love by switching his dying out of love for Patroclus to dying for the country. Moreover, in this particular case, it is clear that Achilles does not sacrifice for the sake of the victory. Instead, his goal is to avenge Patroclus' death which he feels responsible for. In other words, the victory is accidental.

In conclusion, we find that the sacrifice may bring larger benefits beyond interpersonal ones, but such a result is not caused directly by love and is unexpected. The agent is not in charge of his own deeds. Such a fortune which comes by chance does not manifest the good of love.

In my analysis of Phaedrus' speech, we can see his efforts to relate love to virtue. However, his attempt is not fully successful because his scope is rather narrow. First, he interprets love in a passionate way. Also, he utilizes the stories from popular classical texts and interprets them emotionally without further reasoning. I believe that Phaedrus' lack of independent reasoning reflects his intellectual immaturity, which is possibly also implied by his image as a beautiful youth in Plato's dialogues while in reality he was probably already in his early thirties when the speech took place (Nails 232). The equivalence of bodily and mental immaturity is indicated in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*--"it makes no difference whether he is young in years or immature in character, since the deficiency is not a matter of time but is due to living and pursing each thing in accord with his feelings" (N.E. 1095a6). This claim is also a good explanation of why Phaedrus interprets love in a passionate way. By choosing Phaedrus' speech as the beginning of the *Symposium*, Plato probably means to start with a relatively shallow tone which reflects the very emotional aspect of love that is accessible for everybody.

Second in the *Symposium* is Pausanias' speech which presents a traditional Greek view of love. While dividing love into two different kinds, he claims that the superior sort of love aims to teach people virtues. Such kind of love between an adult lover acting as the educator and a younger beloved as the educated represents the Greek tradition of pederasty.

Pausanias distinguishes two kinds of love--one is the Heavenly Love and the other is the Common Love. People who enter love relationships with the purpose of fulfilling their bodily desire are under the guidance of the Common Love, which does not deserve praise. On the other hand, people who act in accordance with the Heavenly Love have moral aspirations, because they pursue love relationships for the sake of virtues. According to Pausanias, such a relationship only exists between a lover who "is able to help the young man become wiser and better" and the

beloved who "is eager to be taught and improved by his lover" (*Symposium* 184e). A man and a boy like these are willing to keep a lifelong relationship. The Heavenly Love is laudable because it is explicitly related to virtues. By entering this kind of love relationship people aim to teach and learn virtues.

However, though the Heavenly Love which has a closer relation to morality is a better candidate for praise, it is not ideal for two reasons. First, the relationship guided by the Heavenly Love is unilateral. Second, the lover in such a love relationship is not as selfless as Pausanias suggests. While the lover occupies a dominant position, the beloved is completely submissive to the lover. By saying that "in our city we consider the lovers' desire and the willingness to satisfy it as the noblest things in the world" (*Symposium* 183c), Pausanias attributes virtues to the inner nature of the lover. Before entering the relationship with his beloved, the lover is already a virtuous person; otherwise, he would not be able to teach his beloved all kinds of virtues. Thus love does not grant the lover any good but rather is a manifestation of his pre-existing good. Therefore, love does not benefit the lover.

On the other hand, although love seems to bring more advantages to the beloved, it actually does not because the role of the beloved in the love relationship is relatively passive. If we agree with Pausanias' idea that "to give oneself to a vile man in a vile way is truly disgraceful behavior; by contrast, it is perfectly honorable to give oneself honorably to the right man" (*Symposium* 183d), we admit that the possibility for a beloved to become virtuous is mainly determined by the lover. The beloved in this relationship only receives good from the lover but never returns any moral good back. While we usually think of love as a reciprocal relationship, Pausanias' explanation very much makes love a relationship in which the benefits are given unilaterally.

Nevertheless, although Pausanias tries to impress on us that the lover puts effort into the relationship much more than the beloved does, according to Aristotle's discussion of the relationship between benefactors and beneficiaries in *Nicomachean Ethics* IX 7, we find that a lover is probably not so selfless as Pausanias indicates. When talking about a benefactor's affection for the beneficiary, Aristotle claims that "the cause of this is the following: existence is lovable and choiceworthy for everyone; we are when in activity (since we are by living and doing actions); and the work is in a way the producer when in activity" (N.E. 1168a5-10). Thus, only the beloved can reflect the identity of the lover. Only the beloved who is educated and wise can reflect the wisdom of the lover. In other words, a lover may not be able to validate his own virtues until he successfully brings virtues to the beloved. In this way, Pausanias may not understand the relationship in a proper sense. A lover actually gains benefits from the relationship which makes love more desirable for him.

In sum, Pausanias' interpretation of love is problematic in two ways. First, if we accept that a lover always selflessly teaches his virtues to the beloved without receiving any good back, then Pausanias' model for love does not fit a reciprocal relationship well. Second, I agree with Aristotle's understanding of giving and taking and thus I conclude that a lover enters a relationship with the purpose of obtaining good for himself rather than for his beloved.

Furthermore, Pausanias' method of developing his ethical model for love is ambiguous, hovering between the traditional conventions and his own unconventional principles. For instance, while Pausanias' representation of a homosexual couple is quite conventional—an older and more experienced lover with a younger and more innocent beloved—his idea that their relationship should be life-long is indeed against social conventions which require people to have a heterosexual marriage and offspring. If we relate his speech to his personal life, we will come to a

possible conclusion that his speech indeed defends his own longtime relationship with Agathon. Self-defense is different from pure pursuit of good and self-defined conventions are different from a set of ethical values which can be applied universally. Hence, Pausanias' attempt to relate love to virtues can be marred in the sense that his ethical view is not universal.

Up to now love interpreted by the first two speakers is limited to interpersonal relationships, but Eryximachus' speech expands love to the cosmic stage. According to him, love is like a universal power which harmonizes all conflicts in the world. In this regard, he relates love to morality in the sense that love brings us harmony which itself must be a virtue.

Eryximachus asserts that "Love does not occur only in the human soul; it is not simply the attraction we feel toward human beauty; it is a significantly broader phenomenon. It certainly occurs within the animal kingdom, and even in the world of plants. In fact, it occurs everywhere in the universe" (*Symposium* 186a). In order to explain the wide power of love, he presents the ways in which human body, music, agriculture, and divination are influenced by love. According to him, "mutual love between the most basic bodily elements" (*Symposium* 186d) lead them to become harmonious with each other in our body and as a result our body will stay healthy. In a similar way, the love between "high and low notes" (*Symposium* 187a-b) keeps them in concord and thus brings us euphonious music. By the means of love, a wide range of climatic differences can be mediated into harmony which will yield rich harvests. Divination which is driven by our love for the gods manifests as well the harmonious relation between gods and mortals.

When we first read Eryximachus' speech, love interpreted by him possibly seems to be like Kant's categorical imperative. He claims that "such is the power of Love--so varied and great that in all cases it might be called absolute" (*Symposium* 188d). He places love above all other moral

rules in all circumstances and considers it as an absolute principle which directs everything in the universe towards the good.

But if we look more closely at his praise of love, we may find that love is not categorical but more like a hypothetical imperative, because it is not good in and of itself but rather its value is revealed in its instrumentality. For example, as Eryximachus mentions, love does not cure our diseases directly but it reconciles the conflict between opposite elements in our body by introducing harmony. Thus, we treat love as a vehicle through which we can achieve harmony.

By following Eryximachus' argument, we may then expect that he will persuade us that harmony itself must be a great virtue, but unfortunately his speech does not give any further relevant reasoning. Therefore, Eryximachus gives a speech more successful than the former ones because by expanding love to a cosmic stage, he attempts to interpret love as a universal moral law. However, his aspiration to relate love to morality does not work well either, since while substituting the concept of harmony for love, he does not explain the reason why harmony is a virtue.

Next is Aristophanes' speech which introduces love as a pursuit of wholeness by telling a comic story.[2] Some may think that Aristophanes' idea of love has the least relation to morality because, in contrast to the former speakers, Aristophanes does not talk directly about the way in which love is able to grant us virtues. However, I argue that his speech presents the moral value of love by showing the highest selflessness manifested in the pursuit of wholeness.

[2] Primitively, a human had a round shape with two faces, four arms, four legs and two sets of sexual organs. According to their different anatomical structures, there were three kinds of human beings--the male whose sexual organs were only that of men, the female with those of women and the androgynous with both. With more limbs than we have today, humans at that time were mighty and rebellious, even trying to assault the gods. In order to punish them for their ambitions, Zeus sent Apollo to cut each human body into two. Human beings then became what we look like now--in the form of one face, two arms, two legs and one set of sexual organs.

According to Aristophanes' story, everyone has been born incomplete. In order to overcome this incompleteness, we desire to find our other halves and we call this desire love. Some may insist that the wholeness we are born to pursue is superfluous, because regardless of what we were, we are now individuals standing on two legs with which we are still healthy people and we can live on our own. A possible objection to this, I think, is that we do not discuss here the practical good of love, such as whether it is necessary for our survival; rather we are concerned with its moral good, and the pursuit of wholeness in fact reflects the highest selflessness of people. Aristophanes asserts that two people in love are willing to be welded together and made into one by Hephaestus (*Symposium* 192d). In the *Odyssey*, Hephaestus chains Aphrodite and Ares and exposes them to the public gaze in order to punish them for their adultery. If being bound together is a punishment instead of a pleasure for Aphrodite and Ares, then we may consider that there is no true love between Aphrodite and Ares. In this regard, Aristophanes' statement implies that only those people who find their matching halves are willing to give up their individuality on behalf of their lovers or beloved. Such sacrifice of individuality is the highest selflessness, although according to Aristophanes people make such a sacrifice because of their passion rather than morality.

Furthermore, Aristophanes' story also shows that love is good in and of itself for two reasons. First, people do not aim to obtain further virtues through love. Second, the faithfulness of love also implies that love is not good in its instrumentality.

Since the love relationship aims at recovering one's nature, Aristophanes negates certain widespread bias against the beloved boys being less masculine, and instead he justifies their virtues. Based on his story, those beloved boys involved in homosexual relationships must have a

typically masculine nature.[3] Aristophanes emphasizes that "it's not because they have no shame that such boys do this, you see, but because they are bold and brave and masculine, and they tend to cherish what is like themselves" (*Symposium* 192a). Thus we find that the beloved ones are not simply submissive to their lovers, but rather they engage in the relationship voluntarily. In contrast to Pausanias' idea, they do not wait for others to teach them virtues, but instead they already own certain virtues and attempt to find and cherish those who have the same virtues as they do. In this way, both the lover and the beloved enter the love relationship on equal terms. Here I think that Aristophanes gives a better interpretation of interpersonal love than Pausanias'.

By disproving the idea that love aims at teaching virtues, Aristophanes implies that the moral value of love is not shown in its instrumentality--people do not love each other for the sake of further virtues. He states that "it's obvious that the soul of every lover longs for something else; his soul cannot say what it is, but like an oracle it has a sense of what it wants, and like an oracle it hides behind a riddle" (*Symposium* 192c-d). People are aware of their desire to love someone, but do not explicitly know the reason why they love that person. One possible explanation for this phenomenon is that the "matching half" (*Symposium* 191d) is in himself/herself the ultimate good which people are pursuing. At the moment when they have found their "matching half", they also have grasped the ultimate good.

Moreover, the idea of the soul mate and faithfulness implied in Aristophanes' story also supports the opinion that love is good in itself. Although we may fall in love with different people, there is one and only one person in the world whom we are originally split from, namely the soul

[3] Because of their different original anatomical structures, people have different sexual orientations--those who are split from the androgynous become heterosexual, while the others split from the male or female become homosexual.

mate. Thus we can never recover our original nature and become a full human without faithfulness to our soul mate. This uniqueness of our matching half also implies that our love is good in itself rather than in its instrumentality. If we used our love for someone as a means to seek some further good, anyone through whom we could obtain the good would become our potential lover or beloved and there would be no necessity for us to find our soul mate. But as we claimed earlier, we are able to complete our wholeness only with our soul mate. In other words, our soul mate is our wholeness. Thus our love for our matching half is good in and of itself.

Up to now, all speakers praise love indirectly by praising the good which love brings to human beings or the larger universe. As Agathon observes, "who it is who gave these gifts, what he is like--no one has spoken about that" (*Symposium* 194e-195a), the former speakers talk about the good given by love without explaining the reason why it is possible for us to obtain the good from and only from love. Aristophanes' story suggests a plausible answer but in a vague sense since although it implies that the wholeness is good in and of itself, based on his speech we cannot fully derive the conclusion that the wholeness is the ultimate good for us. Agathon then explains the essence of love in his speech more explicitly.

According to Agathon, love is a god who himself owns all kinds of good including beauty, morality and togetherness and is even superior to other gods in these kinds of good. Thus love is capable of granting us good. Agathon interprets love in a poetic and comprehensive way, but in addition to pointing out that love itself owns good, his understanding of love does not go beyond that of the former speakers.

First, love is beautiful since he is "youngest, and most delicate; in addition, he has a fluid, supple shape" (*Symposium* 196a). In contrast to Phaedrus, Agathon doubts the way in which Hesiod and Parmenides describes love as one of the most ancient gods (*Symposium* 195c), since if

love had been born first, there would not have been any conflict among the gods who were born later. In addition, we often find that young people are more easily captured by the power of love than the older ones, as Agathon says that "Love always lives with young people" (*Symposium* 195b). Hence love is the youngest god. Love is also the most delicate. When people are falling in love, they treat their lovers or beloved in a rather "soft and gentle" manner (*Symposium* 195e). Staying away from harsh minds, love only dwells on the places which are soft.

Second, love has moral characters including justice, temperance, bravery and wisdom. Agathon claims that "the effects he has on others are not forced, for every service we give to love we give willingly" (*Symposium* 196c). By saying so, he probably implies that love is a sacrifice rather than possession. When people come into conflict, some of them will behave aggressively and by all means force their opponents to totally agree with them. Nonetheless, if a dispute happens between a couple, each of them, even the most suborned and despotic one, would like to make some concessions in order to reconcile the dispute. Thus, lovers arrive at an agreement by giving and taking proportionally and justly rather than having one side completely dominant. Since love can even win over those domineering ones and make them kind and considerate, he is temperate, bravery and just. In addition to the interpersonal love, love for things leads people to be skillful. People who love poems become poets. People who love medicine become physicians. Those who love laws and justice become politicians. Hence, love is also skillful and wise.

Furthermore, love is a relationship among different parties and through this relationship all the meanings come into being. Agathon claims that "love fills us with togetherness and drains all of our divisiveness away" (*Symposium* 197d). Nothing in the world can exist by itself. It is the relationship between us that brings all kinds of meanings to us. A teacher is no longer a teacher without students. A book loses its existential value for people if it is not available for us to read.

A country will not come into being if it is not run by a group of citizens who are willing to be constrained by laws for their common interests. Thus, the world is a system of relations which are caused and maintained by love.

Among the five speeches that we have discussed, Agathon's speech praises love to the greatest extent. He summarizes all the benefits that love can grant us from the aesthetical to ethical the level. He also explains love as a relationship from interpersonal to cosmic altitude. Thus, his speech is like a summary of all the previous speeches. The most important breakthrough he makes is that, in addition to the benefits that love brings to human beings, he first leads us to consider what love itself is.

Socrates approves of Agathon's idea that by logical necessity we should first explore the essence of love, but he argues that love is not a god but a spirit who desires to possess good eternally.[4] People in love can fulfill this desire by reproducing virtues among which the most valuable one is wisdom. It is interesting that love for Socrates is both a desire for virtues and a means to obtain virtues.

Socrates claims that "love is wanting to possess the good forever" (*Symposium* 206a). People who are in love have a desire of owning something. The best thing we can think of is the ultimate good, namely happiness. Moreover, we find that even those who seem to be happy are

[4] Socrates tells a story heard from Diotima that love who was born on the birthday of Aphrodite is the child of Penia (poverty) and Poros (resource). Sharing Penia's nature, love is always in want and thus he is a born lover. Due to the influence of Poros and Aphrodite, he is a lover of beauty and wisdom. Thus, love who has inherited both poverty and resourcefulness from his parents is a spirit living between immortality and mortality, wisdom and ignorance, beauty and ugliness.

still in want of happiness because they are not satisfied with temporary good but eternal good. Hence, love is the desire for eternal possession of good.

Furthermore, love for Socrates is not only a desire but also a means to fulfill the desire. He states that people in love can pursue eternal good successfully by "giving birth in beauty, whether in body or in soul" (*Symposium* 206b).[5] The former is easier to achieve--by giving birth to the next generation, a loving couple realizes immortality in the sense that they pass on their lineage. As for the latter kind, only those who are particularly enlightened can give birth to virtues in soul. After spending some time with beautiful boys, some lovers are able to grasp the beauty of virtues which is more valuable than the bodily beauty. These people can realize immortality by delivering their understanding of virtues to their beloved. In this sense, the virtues taught by the lovers become their immortal children.

By Socrates' idea of immortality, we find that there are two key steps in producing virtues--first is conceiving and the second is giving birth. When a lover grasps a more general concept of beauty by looking at a beautiful body, he is experiencing the process of pregnancy. Or we can call it the process of thinking. Then he transfers his ideas into languages and actions by which he teaches his beloved virtues--this is the process of giving birth or the process of doing.

One problem with Socrates' interpretation is that he seems to take it for granted that people will naturally complete both steps. In other words, he implies that people who think well will also do well. However, this may not be the case. To illustrate this point, we can imagine a group of people who successfully understand the concept of beauty but never produce any concrete product

[5] In order to understand Socrates' argument, we should accept the premise that good things are always beautiful.

by using their understanding of the abstract concept. There is a big difference between those of them who are able to but are reluctant to create works and those who are not capable of turning their ideas into concrete works. It seems that Socrates negates the possibility of the latter kind. Then it is an interesting question whether we are what we think or we are what we do. If we are what we think, as Socrates implies, a wise man may be satisfied with the process of "pregnancy"; if we are what we do, then a person cannot be considered wise until he successfully creates a product which can manifest his wisdom.

After discussing the possible ways to pursue the good through love, Socrates points out that some sorts of love are superior to others and thus comes up with the ladder of love. People first fall in love with a beautiful body and then beautiful customs. When they understand beauty in a broader sense, they will love all beautiful things in the world. Those who are extremely wise may even learn the very form of Beauty when they grasp the essence of all beautiful things.

The idea of the ladder of love is very problematic in the sense that it completely overthrows our previous view of love as a means to pursue virtues. Intellectual intuition is essential for people to climb up the ladder. Only those people who are wise or exceptionally talented are capable of reaching the climax while those vulgar men are determined to stay at the lower level. Thus, people can pursue the good through love successfully because they have good talents by nature, while for those who have no talent, they can never go beyond the love aiming at the bodily pleasure. In this regard, love can only lead people who are originally intelligent to ultimately become wise but is not a feasible means by which an ignorant person can pursue wisdom. Love for Socrates is far from a universal force which is able to bring good to everyone. The benefits which people can get from love are quite limited. It is no so much that love leads us to wisdom, but rather that wise

people manifest their wisdom through love. *Therefore, love brings people neither advantages nor disadvantages, just as love itself is neither good nor bad.*

In conclusion, I do not think that love can be understood in a completely ethical and rational way. In Plato's view, Socrates probably is the only person who correctly understands the essence of love and is able to climb up to the top of the ladder of love. The difficulty of finding a universal method to climb up the ladder may suggest that understanding love is like the gods' project which is far beyond human reach. It is interesting that Socrates attributes his speech about love to Diotima, a priestess whose name means honoring Zeus. Plato may shape Diotima as a messenger from the gods, by which it is suggested that only those who are most blessed by the gods are allowed to know the truth of love. Plato seems to imply his worries also in Alcibiades' speech where he suggests that even though Socrates himself grasps the essence of love, it is still hard for him to teach the youth what the truth of love is. We can see in the dialogue that people sometimes find Socrates mad when he is intrigued by the beauty of a thing and stares at that thing for a long time. No one can understand him. In other words, his understanding is already beyond the rational scope of the crowd.

Socrates' position on love reminds us of Kierkegaard's idea of the knight of faith[6]. The lover who grasps the form of beauty and the knight of faith both go beyond traditional ethics and put themselves above the whole universe. But Socrates' interpretation of love not only consists of a religious element in the Kierkegaardian sense but also has aesthetic and ethical significance. In fact, if we reflect on all the speeches in *Symposium*, we find love presented by each speaker more

[6] Kierkegaard raises up the idea of three stages of human life—the aesthetic stage, ethical stage and religious stage. The knight of faith reaches the religious stage by achieving the leap of faith, considering that his personal faith is more important than universal ethics.

or less corresponds to Kierkegaard's three stages. Thus, it is interesting to have a Kierkegaardian reading of Plato's *Symposium*. I will first explore the way in which Kierkegaard thinks about love relative with three stages and then interpret Plato's *Symposium* in the Kierkegaardian sense.

Part 2: Kierkegaard's Aesthetic, Ethical and Religious Love

According to Kierkegaard's three stages of human life, love can also be divided into three categories—aesthetic love, ethical love and religious love. Aesthetic love exists in immediacy and infinitude, ethical love is revealed in people's desire for eternity, and religious love is manifested by one's absolute and eternal faith. Kierkegaard particularly talks about Greek love which, he indicates, is rather ethical; nevertheless, I think Greek love is far more complicated than he suggests, especially when we think about love in the *Symposium*. In the first three sections, I explain aesthetic, ethical and religious love respectively. In section IV, I introduce Kierkegaard's view of Greek love. In section V, I give my own reflections on Greek love.

I. Aesthetic Love

Aesthetic love appears in infinite moments. Due to its infinitude, aesthetic love as an abstract sentimental experience can only be fully presented by the means of music. Mozart's Don Giovanni, Kierkegaard suggests, could be a representative of people who immerse themselves in such kind of love.

Music is the best way to express aesthetic love because this sort of love is as fluid as music. Kierkegaard sometimes calls aesthetic love sensual love which presents "elementally in the beautiful individual" (*Either/Or* 73). Thus we can tell by the name that people under the guide of sensual love are merely attracted by their lovers' external characters such as their beautiful

appearances; but such enchantment will diminish quickly as exterior beauty fades. Thus, aesthetic love is never stable. People who are courting their lovers vehemently at this moment might completely lose their passion the next minute. There are infinite possibilities for them to act in every moment. This is the reason why aesthetic love is fluid and unpredictable.

Because of its fluidity, aesthetic love cannot be shown well by static arts, including painting, and literature. All these kinds of arts are merely able to depict a fixed scene in a single moment. For example, when we appreciate some pastoral paintings, we can only feel an atmosphere of serenity and solace lingering there. Though some works may initiate our resonance and imagination, they cannot express more than a few moments. Even those paintings, by which we can tell that their authors have strong willingness to tell stories, imply limited possible causes and effects. So is literature. One can imagine that we randomly choose a chapter of a book to read. We find this chapter is so interesting that we spontaneously start to deduct what happened and what will happen. However, all our deduction should be based on what we have already read. When we later read the whole book, the plots beyond our original expectation may amaze us, but they should always fall into the category of reason, that is, either painting or literature should be understood within the scope of logic. Therefore, the static arts which can merely demonstrate things in a single moment and extend the same moment infinitely long cannot depict inconstant affection. Furthermore, even if the works of static arts may render things more than what are written or drawn on paper due to its viewers' imagination, the moments that can be depicted are still finite since our imagination is confined by logic.

In contrast to written words and visual scenes that are concrete and fixed for us, music, that is the art of flowing sound, becomes the best vehicle for people to depict aesthetic love. Although it is not unusual for people to say that the development of certain melody is predictable, such a

phenomenon is mostly caused by the fact that the listeners figure out the composer of this melody by its familiar style and then extrapolate possible progressions of the melody according to its composer's customary patterns of creation. Excluding the disturbance of the composer's style, by listening to a short piece of music, it's hard to tell what the melody was like before this piece and what it will be after, especially when we divide the music into countless separate notes.

Some may argue that if we assign each note to a single moment, there is no difference between a note and a chapter of a book. However, while a chapter of a book is static and enduring, a note as a small part of the music exists only in its immediacy. Kierkegaard claims that "in language there is reflection and therefore language cannot express the immediate. Reflection kills the immediate and that is why it is impossible to express the musical in language" (*Either/Or* 80). When we turn over a page and read the next chapter, the previous one always exists and its impact on the following chapters will never vanish. Our reading of later chapters is always based on the memory and understanding of the preceding ones. For instance, when we encounter a character whose name looks quite familiar but reminds us of nothing about him, we often pause reading and attempt to recall or even reread previous descriptions about him; otherwise, the actions of this character in the current plot will appear abrupt and incomprehensible to us.

But a note is different in the sense that people usually do not have to remember the former note in order to enjoy the following melody. Or we may say that most people do not care about the logic of music so much. The admirers of Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier may strongly oppose and disprove the view by interpreting the inner mathematical logic of this masterpiece; but the mathematical logic of music is not even a concern for ordinary listeners. Mostly we hear a short melody that lasts no more than a few seconds, and it arouses our sadness and melancholy, but the next few moments, a few cheerful notes attract all our attention. Thus with no time to reflect on

the previous plaintive tone, we immediately turn to immerse ourselves into the music of this second. Our fluctuation of mood involuntarily follow the change of the music, rising and falling. Thus, as Kierkegaard claims, reasoning is not a matter of concern to music while the expression of mood is beyond the power of words (*Either/Or* 87).

Hence, one major trait shared by aesthetic love and music is that both lead people to indulge themselves in immediate conditions. In Kierkegaard's view, Mozart's Don Giovanni is a good representative of the group of people who are fully absorbed in aesthetic love. Rioting in debauchery, Don Giovanni flirts with every woman he meets. At the moment when he earns the attention of the woman, he accomplishes his task and turns to the next aim. What makes him particularly notorious is that he never chooses his lover but every woman in the world is already his potential lover. Kierkegaard suggests that "if I could imagine him making such a speech about himself, perhaps he'd say 'You are wrong, I am no husband who needs an ordinary girl for my happiness; every girl has what makes me happy, and so I take them all.' … For Don Giovanni every girl is an ordinary girl, every love affair an everyday story" (*Either/Or* 103). In this way, his life is like an infinite loop which strictly implements the process of courting the woman, his own desire being fulfilled, abandoning her, looking for a new one, and repeating. Consequently, Don Giovanni leads a life which is the sum of endless repetitive moments.

Don Giovanni's mode of love is an extreme form of aesthetic love. Very few people can infer the characters and behaviors of a person merely by looking at the person's portrait, because as we have discussed before, a portrait is not able to depict more than a fixed moment yet a person is a multi-dimensional existence and it is usually hard to tell one's inwardness by looking at his appearance. However, in Don Giovanni's view, no woman should be appreciated in the way more than as a flat image. He condensed every woman into a single identity, namely the female. Thus

for him there is no difference between people who are beautiful or ugly, intelligent or foolish, urban or rural. This unselective mode of love makes Don Giovanni a "seducer" for Kierkegaard (*Either/Or* 100).

As a seducer, Don Giovanni does not seduce in order to seduce. He, consciously or unconsciously, takes the method of seduction to enjoy idling. Pursuing love is never his ultimate goal but merely a means which makes his life less tedious. As a person living in the moment, time is meaningless for him. It is doubtful that he feels fear in the face of death. We can see that at the end of the opera Don Giovanni refuses to repent even when confronting the final trial of the statue, which highlights his inborn arrogance and licentiousness. Although the actor who plays Don Giovanni eventually cries out on the stage when he realizes that he will be brought to the hell by a group of devils, I doubt the real Don Giovanni will fear death. Mozart was just a poor composer at the time. Having experienced disappointments in Vienna, he became popular in Prague unexpectedly. It is yet unknown how much of the arousing finale he arranged for Don Giovanni is due to the pressure that he has to meet the moral requirements and expectations of the mainstream audience. If we agree with Kierkegaard that Don Giovanni's life is a sum of repetitive moments, there is no reason for him to dread the end of such life. Experiencing more or less the same moments does not have much significance for him.

Don Giovanni is the character whom people love as much as hate. We hate his lasciviousness and irresponsibility, but we also love him being unconventional and uninhibited. It is always hard for people to get rid of the weary toil of oscillating between worldly desires and moral rules. While people are exhausted of reconciling the conflicts, Don Giovanni does not even care about such struggles. Although his licentiousness finally leads him to eternal destruction, it is possible for some to see him as an aesthetic hero. He could be considered as an aesthetic hero, not

because he does something morally good and is worth admiring, but because he owns the boldness to completely resist morality. If, as we said before, he is not even afraid of death, his audacity against secular morality that has reached the point of fearlessness even crowns him as a true hero.

Don Giovanni is and can only be a modern character. Such a man would never have been found in ancient Greek literature. According to Kierkegaard, the identity of a seducer comes into being only after Christianity excludes sensuality as an evil power. But if we look back at ancient Greece, sensuality harmonizes well with one's soul. In Greek consciousness, sensuality is spontaneously aroused when one is filled with love and beauty. One cannot separate sensuality from one's soul; in other words, one always pursues what he truly desires, yet Don Giovanni who eternally desires what he does not desire can never be a Greek character.

In contrast to sensual love, Kierkegaard calls Greek love the love of soul— "the aspect of soul is thus predominant or always in harmony with the sensual. Greek love, therefore, was of the soul, not sensual, and it is this that inspires the modesty which rests over all Greek love" (*Either/Or* 100). One question worth discussing is that whether Greek love or the love of soul falls perfectly under the category of aesthetic, ethical or religious love. For Kierkegaard, Greek love seems to belong to the ethical stage while I have a different opinion. At least, it is not the case if we take Platonic love into account. But Let me right now suspend this question and discuss it more in detail later after I finish explaining ethical love and religious love.

II. Ethical Love

Ethical love is not satisfied with momentary eternity but intends to pursue a faithful union. The love aiming at marriage is a typical example of ethical love. According to Kierkegaard, the essence of ethics relies on choices.

We find that a variety of romantic novels share a common characteristic—if they have a good ending, they usually end with the hero and heroine entering the wedding hall. We seem to take it for granted that the marriage of a couple hints at their bright and happy future. Nevertheless, at least two interesting questions contained in our assumptions are worth one thinking about. First: why do people think that an ideal love relationship should go towards marriage? Second: why are a great number of romantic stories brought to an abrupt end with the marriage of their protagonists?

Since Kierkegaard considers Greek love ethical and Longus' novel *Daphnis and Chloe* is a good representative of ancient Greek novel depicting a love relationship that finally goes to marriage, it should a good guide for us to understand the ethical significance of marriage. It tells a story of a pair of childhood friends who gradually explore sex in their adolescence. After a series of disturbances, the couple finally get married in the end. In this story, there is a point worth noticing—at first Daphnis does not want to have sex with Chloe because he has been told that it will hurt her so that she will bleed. But at their wedding night, the previous concern does not affect Daphnis any more. Although the narrator of the story does not give us a clear explanation of this change, we at least get the implication that marriage is a watershed of a loving relationship. Longus even makes the marriage a sign of his protagonists developing into adults. Daphnis' and Chloe's ignorance, curiosity and fear of sex during their adolescence disappears naturally when they get married and enter the adult world.

First, the transformation of Daphnis and Chloe from adolescents to adults has exemplified the function of marriage as leading people towards their intellectual maturity from immaturity. Daphnis' previous excessive cautiousness of sex seems a little bit ridiculous for our readers and Longus might deliberately use such a setting to highlight the pastoral innocence of his protagonists. Nevertheless, Daphnis' anxiety reflects a message that lovers need to carefully deal with their

sensual appetite. Though we cannot simply use whether a person wants to marry his lover as an absolute criterion to judge whether he treat his love relationship sincerely, the willingness to marry at least indicates that he does not trifle with his lover's affections in order to satisfy his own sensual desire. For most people, love, sex, and reproduction are closely related. The very first feeling of attraction may be a purely emotional issue, but sex and reproduction following love will involve more people and things, such as the possibility of forming a new family. The consideration of marriage suggests that one is thinking about the more possibilities coming with love. In this regard, compared to those who are occupied by immediate love and never take the future into account, people who direct their love relationship towards marriage are more mature intellectually.

Second, marriage as a contract between a couple requires people to sacrifice a certain degree of freedom, which contradicts the romantic nature of love. Many romantic novels do not continue to describe the hero and heroine's married life. One important reason is that the life after marriage comes into conflict with the novel's pursuit of romantic spirit. Love before marriage can be a violent and magnificent epic. Even if a couple may be laid with heaven burden caused by the uncertainty and pressure for the future, in real life one's lover is still the only focus of his life—imagine two penniless young people who cannot even afford a gift for each other on Valentine's Day, but as long as they walk hand in hand, they still feel sweet and satisfied. However, living a life after marriage, they will face more practical problems. In order to afford the family expenses on their shoulders, they have to work hard during the day but they cannot rest even after going back home, since they still need to spend a lot of energy taking care of their children. Upon entering the married life, people suddenly find that they are unable to focus all their attention on their lover as they previously did before marriage.

One reason for this difference is that people have different feelings of love with regard to time. Love before marriage, more or less, contains a degree of uncertainty. No matter how deeply a pair of lovers are attached to each other, there will always be a voice in their heart, telling them that no one knows what will happen next second. Every moment they are experiencing the concern and possibility of losing their love. Enduring insecurity intensifies the romantic feather of love, because filled with tension we always want to stay closer to each other so that we can temporarily alleviate the sense of insecurity. In order to grasp the temporary and precarious love, we infinitely magnify our lovers and are occupied less and less with anything other than them. When the lovers are tired of such anxiety, marriage then becomes a good way to eternalize their love and assuage their insecurity. Once by marriage we make sure that every moment of our life will be filled with love, we begin to pay attention to those things that we have ignored before while the pursuit of love is weakened, because we know that even if I do not treat our love with much care this moment, it is still there the next moment. In such a process, the proportion of our energy attributed to love began to shrink. This kind of love which people do not fully devote themselves to does not meet the romantic spirit of love.

Although marriage makes our love less simple, we still believe that bringing our initial love into marriage is a positive development of our life, because during this process, while the aesthetic love is gradually weakened, the ethical love yet at the same time increases. Certainly, not all marriages can be classified as ethical love. For example, some people use marriage as a means solely for the sake of begetting offspring. Such a calculated marriage does not contain any ethical significance. Nonetheless, next I will mainly discuss the kind of marriage inspired by love.

Marriage inspired by love is a moral choice which reflects lovers' recognition of their responsibility. Choice is a key word for Kierkegaard. The behavior of choosing manifests one's

determination to take responsibility. Don Giovanni flirts with countless women but never attempts to maintain a longtime relationship with any of them. He never refuses anyone nor gives any promise, but always ends his relationship by an escape. Thus he keeps flinching from choices. Some may suggest that his escape more or less shows his attitude and we may call it an aesthetic choice, but "an aesthetic choice is no choice" (Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* 485), since such a choice of immediacy does not relate to responsibility.

The action of choosing is by itself moral. The morality does not depend on whether the object we choose is good or not. We call marriage a moral choice not because the marriage itself is morally right or wrong. As we discussed earlier, people have various reasons for getting married, and for many couples, their union aims only at practical needs instead of love. In addition, even those marriages inspired by love do not necessarily promise a romantic and ideal future. With the romantic aspect of love being eroded by all sorts of practical problems after marriage, divorce has become an everyday affair. So it is hard to make moral judgments on the marriage itself. But regardless of whether a marriage turns out to be good or bad, the choice of marriage is ethical and conversely, refusal of marriage is also a moral choice, since the choice itself requires great consideration and courage.

When people make a choice, consciously or unconsciously, they are already prepared to take the consequences of the choice. The courage to take responsibility is worth praising and it can be a manifestation of leadership. It is found that when the number of people in a group increases, the individuals in the group tend to be less likely to give their opinions. One reason is that with many other people who can possibly make a decision, one does not feel the necessity to give advice. Another possible explanation is that once someone's advice is adopted, he suddenly becomes the decision-maker who should be bound to the consequences of his decision and take

the responsibility on behalf of the whole group. In order to circumvent any potential risks, many people give up making choices. Under this circumstance, a leader of the group who dare to make choices becomes particularly important.

Our life is a journey of continuing choice-making and we gradually form our own identity in the course of making choices. Assume we agree with Kant's view that people are born with good prepositions and evil propensities simultaneously. Then a person is in the very middle of his ethical life at the moment when he is born. Imagine that as little infants we stand at the coordinate origin of our life, and then whenever we make a choice, we move a bit left or right, up or down. The more choices we make, the more complex our life track will be. As we know in scientific experiments, with more complex and larger data, the experimental errors will have less impact so that it becomes easier for us to obtain accurate results and find out laws. Hence, by accumulating enough choices in this experiment throughout our life, we can finally construct our real self.

In this regard, Don Giovanni is one of the simplest but also the most complex characters. His simplicity is revealed in his single and repetitive way of loving while his complexity lies in the fact that we are not able to learn what his true self is because he never makes any choice. Or we can say that Don Giovanni is a person without self. For those who do not make choices, their life never extends beyond the origin, and there is no difference between them and a newborn infant except the physiological growth. In other words, they do not form their own unique identities which can distinguish themselves from others. In order to construct what we are, we need to make choices as long as we are still alive. At the moment when we stop choosing, our world is done.

Not only should we make choices, but also need to make choices in time. We ought to grasp every moment to make choices, because with the situation changing the next second, no one

knows if we still have the ability to choose what we want. Regardless of we are willing or not, as time goes by, every person and thing keeps changing, because all people and things are relative to each other and we are easily affected by others. Imagine without making a choice, we do not move within our own reference at this moment; nevertheless, being a part of a larger universe, our position relative to others is involuntarily moved because of others' change. So, every moment we miss our own choice we will be moved and shaped by the choices of others. If we do not want our life to be the incidental result formed by other's choices, make choice by ourselves in time.

III. Religious Love

Until now I have discussed aesthetic love and ethical love, but Kierkegaard tells us that there is still a third kind of love called religious love. While it is not hard to find a libertine or prig in our real life, a person immersed in religious love is extremely rare to find. For Kierkegaard, the single knight of faith in the world is Abraham in the Holy Scripture.

Religious love is eternal and unconditional. Abraham's religious love is the love for God. With infinite trust in God, Abraham chooses to kill Isaac while at the same time convinced that God will somewhat make Isaac survive. Although not everyone is a believer in God, it is possible for each of us to approach religious love which we may call as love for the Absolute. The Absolute refers to the highest principle in our life towards which all our actions are directed. But it is different from Kant's categorical imperative, because Kant's moral principle can be applied universally while the Absolute that each one believes in is unique.

We can call religious love faith, and faith itself is contradictory in terms of ethics. If we confirm that certain choice or behavior is indisputably correct, we will not say that we believe it is right but instead we will say we know it is right. Ethically speaking, the correctness of an act

will not be shaken by a belief or disbelief since its correctness exists in itself. On the contrary, if we believe an act is worth doing, this belief itself implies a message, that is, we cannot precisely determine whether the behavior is right or wrong. In other words, we simultaneously trust it and question it. But faith cannot be fully interpreted in ethical sense. Sometimes being morally right or wrong is not the absolute criterion for them to judge whether or not something is worth doing. In many cases, even though we know that our choice may cause us to be accused, we still adhere to it, because we feel that there is something more important than complying with morality.

Kierkegaard calls Abraham the knight of faith, and the knight of faith is lonely. In order to let other people understand us, we always need to use external expressions to translate our inner thoughts. But the thoughts which can be delivered by external expressions are limited, because external expressions are established on the premise that they are recognized and accepted by the public. A speech tool that is invented and used by a single person in the world can hardly be defined as an official language, since it loses the function of communicating as long as there is no second person who understands it. Love for the Absolute is so private that one cannot explain it to the public who judge things based on values applicable to the universal. Just as it is hard for atheists to understand Christians' faith in God, the knight of faith cannot be understood by the public. With his belief being too personal, a knight of faith lives as if he were the only believer in a world full of atheists.

Both religious love and aesthetic love are quite egocentric. The difference between these two is revealed in the sense that the latter ignores the existence of moral choices while people who are filled with religious love have taken all ethical factors into account but still chooses to follow the Absolute rather than universal morality, as Kierkegaard claims that “the knight of faith renounces the universal in order to be the particular (*Fear and Trembling* 103). The knight of faith

fully understand that his choice will be considered absurd by the public but his faith is so determined that he prefers not to be comprehended by anyone and to keep his personal communication with the Absolute. Thus, Kierkegaard says that "it is great to grasp hold of the eternal but greater to stick to the temporal after having given it up" (*Fear and Trembling* 52). For example, during Euclidean era, if someone had claimed that two parallel lines were likely to intersect at some point, people would only have considered that his argument was ridiculous. It is not that he does not understand the fact that two parallel lines cannot intersect on a two-dimensional plane, but rather he chooses to believe the existence of infinite space which allows the possibility of parallel lines intersecting at somewhere infinitely far away. The knight of faith does not intend to overthrow the secular moral principles; he just puts his faith above the universal standard.

IV. Kierkegaard's View of Greek Love

We have briefly discussed three different kinds of love—aesthetic, moral, and religious love. Now we can attempt to answer the question raised before—does Greek love belong to any of those categories? In Kierkegaard's view, Greek love is rather ethical. Even though Greek love is also involved with sensuality, the sensual element of Greek love always conforms with the soul. And the fact that there is no phenomenon of seduction in ancient Greece proves that Greek love is the love of soul.

According to Kierkegaard, sensuality is never independent of the soul in Greek consciousness. He claims that "sensuality…has existed under the category of soul…that is how it existed in Greece. But under the category of soul, sensuality is not opposition, exclusion, but harmony and accord (*Either/Or* 73). The soul of people controls their bodies and actions. Their

reason never makes a concession to their sensual desires. In other words, sensuality is the result instead of the purpose of love.

A piece of evidence shown by Kierkegaard is that there is no "seduction" in a love relationship in ancient Greece. He claims that we call Don Giovanni a seducer because he is faithless in love, but for Greek love, although it is possible for one to love many, one never thinks of the next possible lover when he enters a love relationship (*Either/Or* 100). This might be true, since we hardly find the element of seduction in ancient Greek novels which should, to a certain extent, reflect the social phenomena of that time. David Konstan in *Sexual Symmetry* claims that if we define seduction as a practice which deceives others by promising a long-term relationship in order to achieve the deceiver's sensual desire, it is difficult for us to find seduction in ancient Greek novels where sex as a natural result of love not only fulfills the lovers' momentary desire, but also inspire people's longing for enduring relationship (43). In this regard, Greek love is faithful and ethical.

V. My Ideas on Greek Love

I claim that Greek love has its ethical significance but it is not simply ethical, since in Greek consciousness love is intimately related to beauty, which makes it also aesthetic. For many people, their first love is usually aroused by the beauty of their lovers. Take *Daphnis and Chloe* as an example again. Chloe is first attracted by Daphnis when she saw him bathing and was stunned by his beauty. Such beauty is not necessarily an absolute beauty in an objective sense, such as the golden ratio. In Longus' novel, Eros once said that everything in Philetas' garden was so beautiful because they were all watered by his bath, from which we find that the feeling of beauty may also be caused by love. Therefore, it is difficult to tell the causal relationship between beauty and

attraction—whether we are attracted by someone because of his beauty, or we consider him beautiful because we are attracted.

One possible reason for the ambiguity of Greek love is that people treat Eros as a god. In a variety of ancient Greek stories, we often see the characters attribute their burst of love to Eros. People who are shot by the arrows of the god fall in love involuntarily, incapable of resisting the divine power. In this way, each love relationship in a Greek sense is divine and every person under the guidance of Eros is spontaneously faithful to his lover, devoting himself fully to the relationship. Thus, such love has an ethical element. But it also has aesthetic significance, since affected by Eros who himself is young and beautiful, love is by nature always beautiful. Moreover, *eros* as a word which expresses the meaning of favor differs from *philia* and *agape* in the sense that *eros* is usually involved with sensual desire. Hence, love is also by nature aesthetic. However, one may raise an objection that Platonic love is not necessarily related to sensuality; nevertheless, it does not map on exactly with Kierkegaard's view of Greek love either.

It seems that Greek love is such a broad concept that even though I have lumped so many things altogether, it is still hard to find a satisfying answer. But one thing is clear that Greek love does not merely belong to ethical stage as Kierkegaard suggests. Since my major purpose is to interpret love in the *Symposium* in terms of Kierkegaard's three stages, I will then concentrate on Platonic love and attempt to figure out the way in which we can understand love in the *Symposium* in a Kierkegaardian sense.

Part 3: A Kierkegaardian Reading of the *Symposium*

Love interpreted by Phaedrus falls into the category of aesthetic love. As we discussed before, Phaedrus suggests that the necessity and benefits of love are reflected in two aspects. First, love guides people to have a sense of shame and pride. Second, love grants people such great courage that they are even willing to die for their lovers. However, the problem with these two arguments is that they are not built on a basis stronger than passion.

Phaedrus asks us to imagine that one is found doing something bad. He will feel much more ashamed if he is seen by his lover than by anyone else in the world, including his parents and friends. We can speculate on the implication behind such a claim. Parents watch us grow up from childhood, and none of things we have done in the course of our growth, either good or bad, can escape their notice. In many cases, the things which we are ashamed of showing to unfamiliar people are nothing new for our parents, so our sense of shame will not be enlarged in front of them who know us so well. As for friends, we can simply divide them into two kinds—some are truly good friends while others are merely slightly acquainted with us. The former are similar to our parents in our hypothetical situation, because they have a good understanding of who we are, while the latter can only have a limited impact on us since they are far away from close friendships with us. In this case, the sense of shame will not be overly enlarged either.

It is interesting to see the difference between our lovers and our parents or friends, and why the fact that we are found doing shameful things by our lovers has a particularly serious impact on us. First of all, from the description of Phaedrus we learn that we hope to be seen as more perfect by our lovers so that sometimes we have to disguise our true selves. Once the lover recognizes a flawed aspect of us, we feel ashamed. Such logic is easy to follow but it does nothing advantageous to a long-lasting love relationship. If we agree with Phaedrus' interpretation that we need to disguise our real self in order to keep a seemingly good image before our lovers, we have to pretend

to be what we are not forever so as to maintain an abiding love relationship. Such camouflage-based love is not healthy.

However, Phaedrus does not seem to care how a relationship can sustainably develop. He readily claims that it is better to "die a thousand times" rather than showing our cowardly side to our lovers (*Symposium* 179a). Phaedrus expresses great esteem for dying for love, and cites the stories of Alcestis and Achilles as examples. We have analyzed both stories before and conclude that there is no convincing moral significance embodied in sacrifice for love. Although such sacrifice sounds fairly romantic—death could make love immortal, practically it is hard to call the sacrifice ethical since people guided by such love are even reluctant to make more efforts in order to maintain their relationship. Hence love described by Phaedrus does not aim at lasting to the end of time, but is more like a cluster of fireworks which pursues splendor to the most extant by blazing intensely within a short time. People immersed in such love let their life be completely dominated by emotions. Based on a momentary enthusiasm, this love lacks of long-term moral foundation, and thus corresponds to aesthetic love defined by Kierkegaard.

In contrast to Phaedrus' passionate love, Pausanias' understanding of love is more conventional and seems to consist of more ethical values. Nevertheless, Pausanias throws down traditional social conventions and instead sets up his own convention, which could be a defense of his own relationship with Agathon. Such a defense indicates that he does not allow traditional ethics to orient his own life and desire, which contradicts the universal Law which Kierkegaard's ethical stage requires and thus let love defined by him stay at the aesthetic stage.

For Pausanias, the greatest significance of love lies in education. He believes that a good relationship is based on mutual choices for the purpose of education—a beloved who is beautiful,

young but lack of wisdom and a lover who is older but wise chooses each other. Their coupling aims to spread wisdom rather than the simple pursuit of sexual satisfaction. But as we have discussed before, such mutual choices are theoretically difficult to be achieved. Pausanias argues that a young man needs to dedicate his love to a honored man, but it is difficult for an ignorant person to rightly choose a wise man among the crowd; in turn, if a person can penetrate others' soul through their flesh and recognize their wisdom, he will not be defined as ignorant or inexperienced. Therefore, it is doubtful that a young beloved is able to his lover properly simply relying on his own judgment.

As for the lovers, it is also hard to call them ethical in consideration of their criteria of choosing the beloved. Pausanias suggests that "we consider it more honorable to declare your love than to keep it a secret, especially if you are in love with a youth of good family and accomplishment, even if he is not all that beautiful" (*Symposium* 182d). It can be told that noble origins, personal achievements and beauty are important measures of choosing one's beloved. However, it is doubtful that these standards can provide appropriate references in respect of whether a young man has the potential of obtaining wisdom. Therefore, although love aiming at education reveals moral value to certain degree, we cannot simply assign this kind of love to ethical stage, since the means by which one can realize such a love relationship still cannot get rid of aesthetic restrictions.

Interestingly, both Pausanias and Kierkegaard argue that being deceived in love is never shameful. Kierkegaard believes that love has moral significance in and of itself, because it has the connotation of pursuing an eternal relationship. Thus, even if one once has a bad romance, he should not lose confidence in love. Here we refer in particular to true love, but unfortunately there are various external forms of love, and not everyone is able to walk on the right track which leads

to true love. Some in the name of a lover or beloved are actually immersed in the "self-deceived love" (Kierkegaard, *Works of Love* 6). Don Giovanni is a good representative of such fake love. People submerged in self-deceived love are not immune from shame.

Compared to Kierkegaard, Pausanias excessively magnifies the justice of love. According to him, it won't hurt if a young man does not choose the correct lover because of his ignorance, as long as the purpose of entering the love relationship for him is to pursue morality. However, there are many other possible ways for him to achieve the same goal, if the person simply wants to learn morality; for example, he can attempt to find a prestigious teacher or to make friends with virtuous people. It makes no sense that he has to risk being taken advantage of and losing his innocence when there are other safer choices available. In this regard, love is not justified by education. The fact that Pausanias amplifies the justice of love is also manifested in his description of how we should treat a lover. He states that people detest flattery but rarely feel an aversion to a lover who courts his beloved by all kinds of means. The gods will forgive a lover even if he does not abide his oath (*Symposium* 183b). Although Pausanias does not give more explanations of this point, it is clear that he has no doubt as to the justice and correctness of love and affirms a lover's unlimited freedom.

Pausanias's idea of infinite freedom comes into conflict with Kierkegaard's conception of ethical love. Kierkegaard argues that "how romantic love was based on an illusion, and how its eternity was based on temporality, and that regardless of the knight's remaining fervently convinced its absolute durability, there was still no assurance of this inasmuch as love's trials and temptations had hitherto been in an inherent external medium " (*Either/Or*, 397). For him, marital love is a typical example of ethical love. It has a profound moral sense, because a couple guided by marital love is bound by the means of marriage with God as their witness, so the marriage to

some extent like a shackle restrains their freedom but reinforces their love which was unguarded before. Romantic love is very intense but is simultaneously fragile like a bubble surrounding a couple. If one of them wavers in their love, the bubble will easily burst to disappear. On the contrary, because of its long duration, marital love appears rather tepid and sometimes even insipid, but it firmly sustains a world of two with divine support. It does not necessarily mean that we must believe the existence of the Absolute who is the mandatory guardian of marriage, but it means that the moral value of ethical love is often reflected in our adherence to our faith. Whatever faith it is, it is very different from Pausanias' infinite freedom.

In short, love defined by Pausanias has a certain moral significance, because it pursues a long-term relationship which does not aim at sensual pleasure, but in practice this love can only be realized by aesthetic means. In addition, the fact that Pausanias amplifies the correctness of love, whether for self-defense or not, prevents such love being assigned to the ethical stage.

While both Phaedrus and Pausanias treat love as a means which directs people towards specific ends, Eryximachus understands love as a general driving source by which all kinds of desires are aroused. In this regard, Eryximachus' love is close to Kierkegaardian ethical stage or Kant's moral view—just as all the actions are instructed by the universal moral law, all the conflicts in the world can be reconciled by love. But, as we have discussed previously, love depicted by Eryximachus is different from the categorical imperative in the sense that it is not an absolute indicator, but instead it is more like the hypothetical imperative which can be adjusted according to specific situations in order to harmonize different kinds of conflicts. Therefore, Eryximachus' love does not perfectly fit Kierkegaard's ethical stage. And an even greater disagreement between these two lies in the fact that Eryximachus highlights the concept of harmony which is so dialectic

that is very much different from Kierkegaard's emphasis on individual choice in terms of ethical love.

Eryximachus takes music as an example of how love creates harmony while coincidentally Kierkegaard also talks much about music but for the purpose of explaining his understanding of aesthetic love. Thus, it is interesting to explore how their views conflict based on the instance of music. Eryximachus thinks that "music, like medicine, creates agreement by producing concord and love between these various opposites. Music is therefore simply the science of the effects of Love on rhythm and harmony" (*Symposium* 187c). He treats each note as an independent existence and considers there are conflicts among different notes. Love as a third party can resolve their conflicts and unite all these different notes so as to sublimate them into a harmonious melody. This upward spiral is similar to Hegelian dialectic, but contradicts Kierkegaard's idea of ethical stage.

As we mentioned before, the individual choice is the key to the ethical stage. Attempting to mediate the contradiction between two ends by a third party is an escape from choice. Therefore, according to Kierkegaard's point of view, the harmony of music pursued by Eryximachus may confirm that music can only be a tool for expressing aesthetic love instead of ethical love. Kierkegaard maintains that "the musical situation lies in a unity of mood in the distinct voices" (*Either/Or*, 121). He also treats each note as independent, but different notes do not conflict with each other. Music chords are generally fixed. Harmonious chords are not simply produced by three notes picked randomly, but follow certain rules. In this sense, some notes can form a sweet melody only on the premise that they themselves share similar mood which allows them to construct a larger individual, but this individual is not superior to a single note; instead it just echoes and repeats the same single note.

It is worth noting that Eryximachus is the first speaker who explicitly speaks of love of God. "Divination, therefore, is the practice that produces loving affection between gods and men" (*Symposium* 188c-d). Though he does not give an adequate explanation of this statement, we can tell that such love still differs from Kierkegaard's religious love. Eryximachus' position on the Greek gods is not detached from the whole universe. Divination serves as a manifestation of the harmony between men and gods, which reinforces the claim that love is a force harmonizing all things in the world including mortals and immortals. It is suggested that the gods are also a part of the larger universe.

However, as for Kierkegaard's religious stage, God symbolizes the absolute existence which transcends the universe. Once a person achieves the leap of faith, he places himself above the whole universe. In this case, he can no longer live in harmony with the rest of people, since by choosing religious love, he at the same time chooses to fight against the universal ethical standards. Therefore, love of God expressed by Eryximachus does not fit Kierkegaard's religious love.

In summary, Eryximachus' understanding of love does not conform to the Kierkegaardian three stages. One important reason is that love pursued by the former is a synthesis while for the latter, love should be based on individual.

Aristophanes' interpretation of love is also ambiguous in Kierkegaardian sense. First, love for Aristophanes is not able to be explained by reason; thus it is not at the ethical stage. Second, it may fit the aesthetic stage to some extent since love for him is a kind of irresistible desire, but the pleasure fulfilled by finding one's matching half is different from all other pleasures which we can understand such as sensual pleasure. In addition, it is not religious love because it is not individual enough.

According to the story of Aristophanes, we learn that love is our inborn desire of finding our other half. When we meet the other half, sometimes we are not capable of telling an objective cause of such attraction so we simply attribute it to instinct. One who only acts by following his or her instinct cannot be called morally good or bad. As we mentioned before, instinct is a middle state, neither good nor bad. Only when a person chooses to leave the middle state going towards left or right under the guidance of free will, will we have criteria to judge him in respect of morality. Hence, Aristophanes' love is not ethical love. Notice that he mentions if we lose the other half, we will actively look for the next partner in order to make up for our sense of loss (*Symposium* 191b). Such love is certainly different from Don Giovanni's, because the former still contains the fear and anxiety of losing love while the latter has no concern since Don Giovanni never treats each lover as a unique individual (Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* 101); nevertheless, love depicted by Aristophanes still falls into the category of aesthetic love since it purely pursues satisfaction of temporary pleasure.

However, we should not ignore the fact that in Aristophanes' story, love itself has a certain moral significance. Because we and our matching half are cut from one, we are destined to have a most suitable half, our soul mate, in the world. Once we meet this person, whether through marriage or other forms, we are willing to integrate with him and never to be separated. Aristophanes claims that "then the two of you would share one life, as long as you lived, because you would be one being, and by the same token, when you died, you would one one and not two in Hades, having died a single death" (*Symposium* 192e). This can be understood to mean that once a person encounters his soul mate, the soul of the couple will be fully restored. Even if one of them first passes away, leaving their physical body uncompleted, the one left will never feel empty because of the integrity of the soul. The same is true of the one who goes to Hades. Such love of

soul is faithful, but the problem is that it cannot be manifested by objective criteria. If two people can be called soulmates, their affinity should be deeper than any third party can imagine. They create a world which excludes the rest of the world and thus their faithfulness can only be revealed to themselves.

Since love between soulmates is individual, it seems to be somewhat close to Kierkegaard's religious love. However, although it is hard to understand the love specifically between a couple of soulmates by reason since there is no objective criteria that can be applied universally, we won't call such love absurd. Unlike Abraham who is the only knight of faith for Kierkegaard, according to Aristophanes, the desire to look for our soul mate is innate for everyone in the world. Although we cannot explain this love with reason, each of us has the potential for empathy which is intersubjective understanding. Therefore, according to Aristophanes, love as a pursuit of wholeness does not put oneself above the universe and thus does match Kierkegaard's religious love.

Agathon's depiction of love is both aesthetic and ethical. While all the former speakers analyze love indirectly—they build up the character of love by interpreting its recipients' images, Agathon directly explains why love benefits by introducing Eros' own qualities so as to express that love is worth following.

Agathon first points out that Eros is always young, beautiful and soft. We can understand this statement from two perspectives. First, Agathon believes that true love can only occur among beautiful young people. Such explanation will align Agathon's view with Phaedrus' in the sense that both suggest the source of love is temporary passion and cannot last long. After all, human beings are not the gods who can keep themselves young and beautiful forever. A similar image of

Eros can be seen in many ancient Greek literatures. Again take *Daphnis and Chloe* as our example. In the novel an old man named Philetas has once met Eros in his garden. He asked Eros to give him a kiss, but Eros advised him that the kiss was not appropriate for a man at his age, because he was very likely to be enchanted by Eros' kiss but will not be able to chase Eros. This love is undoubtedly aesthetic; it can only exist in a brief moment.

Second interpretation could be that state of being beautiful and young refers to people's soul instead of their bodies. It is difficult for a person to keep young and beautiful with regard to physical appearance, but it is possible for him to be energetic and beautiful in soul. If a person loses his curiosity and enthusiasm for life, reluctant to communicate with others, even though he is physically attractive, love for him is out of reach. On the contrary, for those who are older but still enthusiastic, the occurrence of love is not impossible. Detached from restrictions of age, such love can possibly lead people to a long-term relationship, and thus it gets rid of immediacy of aesthetic love; nevertheless, it does not completely leave the aesthetic stage, because such love is still built on passion.

However, Agathon then points out that Eros is not only beautiful and young but also quite virtuous. He is brave, just, temperate and intelligent, so everyone ought to be Eros' followers. Agathon does not provide further explanation on what people will be under the influence of Eros. Thus, we can make two assumptions. First, assume that people falling into love will spontaneously absorb the virtues of Eros. In this case, people do not voluntarily seek virtues through love but automatically obtain a series of good qualities in the course of love. In other words, harvesting virtues is a passive act for people in love. Such love deviates from Kierkegaardian ethical love which is based on independent choices. Yet some will argue that the act of entering a love relationship itself is an individual choice made for sake of pursuing virtues. But If we agree with

it, such love will be the same as that of Pausanias and we have already discussed the reasons why Pausanias' love is not purely ethical.

The second assumption is that people in love are not necessarily capable of absorbing virtues. This assumption fundamentally overthrows Agathon's statement that people should pursue love. Although he considers that "Love is our best guide" (Symposium 197e), he does not actually provide enough objective evidence to support his view. In real life we find that love does not always have positive impact on us. Some may insist that the love shown in negative examples is not true love but more like self-deceived love, but the problem is that Agathon does not distinguish any particular kind of love from others. Consequently, neither of the assumptions helps us to ascribe Agathon's love to ethical stage.

It is interesting to see that Agathon is the only speaker who claims that love is a god, so it is worth exploring whether there is any overlap between this love and Kierkegaardian religious love. Agathon depicts Eros as a highest model that "every man should follow Love, sing beautifully his hymns, and join with him in the song he sings that charms the mind of god or man" (*Symposium* 197e). In view of the unconditional belief in Eros, Agathon's love has at least one thing in common with religious love—they are both supervised by an Absolute. But the reason why Agathon's love yet does not reach the religious level is similar to that of Aristophanes—love depicted by Agathon is not individual enough. According to Agathon's speech, the image of Eros as a guide leading people towards virtues perfectly fits the universal expectation of what a moral model should be. The communication between an individual and Eros is an experience that can be shared and resonated by everyone. From this perspective, Agathon's love should not be regarded as Kierkegaard's religious love.

Socrates defines love as the desire to possess good forever and provides a possible means to fulfill such a desire—the ladder of love. I argue that Socrates' understanding of love consists of aesthetic, moral and religious elements, since for him the concepts of beauty and good are not independent of each other, and the person who is able to climb the top of the ladder is as lonely as the knight of faith.

According to Socrates' story, born on the day of Aphrodite's birthday, Eros is by nature a lover of beauty. The close relation between love and beauty is in fact consistent with our common sense of life. It is hard to imagine that the moment we feel an immediate attraction to someone is accompanied with disgust for his appearance. Of course, this does not mean that good impression is equal with physical beauty in an objective sense, because people do not have a uniform standard for beauty. So the inherent connection between love and beauty is not reflected in the sense that love pursues an absolute objective beauty whose existence in the world is actually doubtful, but is reflected in the phenomenon that sometimes love beautifies our lovers. Even if our lovers are not considered beautiful by the public, we still think them the most adorable ones in the world. Thus, beauty lies in the eyes of a lover. But love based on the subjective recognition of beauty is not stable. Once the affection fades, it is very possible that our lover no longer appears to be beautiful in our sight. Therefore, with beauty as a subjective perception, the uncertainty and immediacy of love is revealed. In this regard, Socrates' understanding of love is similar to Kierkegaard's aesthetic love.

Furthermore, the fact that Socrates weakens the individuality of the beloved in a love relationship makes a small overlap between his depiction of love and Don Giovanni's love. According to Socrates, in a love relationship the beloved's uniqueness as an individual is highly compressed and he is treated simply as a symbol of beauty. No matter whom a lover chooses to be

his beloved, as long as the beloved is beautiful, there will be no effect on the lover's future performance on the ladder of love. In this regard, both Socrates' and Don Giovanni's love can be called unselective love. The differences caused by individuality of potential beloved ones have little significance for the lover who merely cares about the common feature shared by the beloved—for Socrates beauty is most important, and for Don Juan any female possibly can become his beloved. Therefore, Socrates attaches much aesthetic significance to love.

However, love as a suitor of beauty is not purely aesthetic, because according to Socrates, beauty and the good are not separable. In fact, the inherent connection between beauty and the good is the foundation of his entire speech. Without such a connection, it would not be valid to claim that the eternal possession of good could be achieved by understanding the form of beauty. Socrates suggests that we call a person happy only if he owns beautiful and good things (*Symposium* 202c). Here he makes the concepts of beauty and the good parallel to one another. We can find the uniformity and agreement between these two concepts everywhere in the speech. Such consistency becomes particularly evident in Socrates' elaboration of how to achieve immortality through love. When a person is pregnant in soul, he is filled with all kinds of virtues such as wisdom, but he is not able to create simply by himself fruits of morality which can manifest his virtues. Thus, he needs to find his beloved and by educating the beloved he will receive his own inspiration for producing works of virtues. As for the criteria by which a lover can find an ideal beloved, Socrates uses the words "beautiful" and "well-formed" to describe (*Symposium* 209b). He makes it clear that only beautiful people can inspire lovers to deepen their understanding of virtues. In consideration of the inner uniformity between beauty and the good, Socrates' depiction of love is both aesthetic and ethical.

Furthermore, we find that Socrates like Pausanias treats education as an expression of love; nevertheless, by suspending the discussion of reciprocal love, Socrates makes up for the loopholes of logic in Pausanias' speech. Socrates' definition of love as a desire to pursue eternal good emphasizes the fact that Eros himself is not good enough or that he is not worthy of being loved. Thus, Eros is a lover instead of a beloved. While it is possible for a lover to obtain the truth of beauty and good by climbing the ladder of love, Socrates never makes it clear whether a beloved is capable of understanding the form of beauty.

Therefore, our first doubt about Pausanias' speech whether a beloved is able to find a right lover dissipates. According to Socrates' description of a love relationship, a beloved who is beautiful and worth pursuing plays a rather passive role in the relationship and does not have to make a choice voluntarily. And the second doubt that a lover lacks motivation to enter a love relationship also clears away. While Pausanias thinks a lover should have a complete grasp of morality, the lover defined by Socrates is not as intellectually mature as Pausanias describes but is between the state of ignorance and of thorough acquaintance of virtues. A lover does not fully understand virtues, so he attempts to acquire virtues through the pursuit of love, but at the same time he also has a vague comprehension of what virtues are and thus he is able to correctly recognize those people who, with a beautiful soul, can help him achieve further understanding of virtues.

While making up for the logical flaws of Pausanias' speech, Socrates' interpretation of love even blurs more the distinctions between aesthetic and ethical elements of love. First of all, the fact that he places Eros in the middle state encourages us to ascribe love to Kierkegaard's ethical stage. Such kind of love is a choice, hoping to extricate itself from the ambiguous situation, so as to realize a self-improvement. The ladder of love goes from the appreciation of external and

momentary beauty towards the understanding of intrinsic and universal beauty. People who can successfully climb to the top of the ladder achieve the transition from love of immediacy to love of eternity.

Finally, I think that Socrates' love also contains religious significance. Although theoretically the form of beauty he pursues should be revealed in everything beautiful and thus is a universal concept, in practice a lover who well understands the form of beauty is no less lonely than a knight of faith. It is possible to say that at any moment when we experience beautiful things, we are in touch with the form of beauty. However, the problem is that even if the form of beauty is within our reach, we can never truly grasp it since we cannot recognize it. Though Socrates provides us the ladder of love as a way to learn the abstract nature of beauty from the concrete things in our life, this method makes extremely high demands on the talent and intellect of people, and thus its feasibility is doubtful.

As we said earlier, Plato attributes Socrates' speech to Diotima, who seems to be a messenger sent by the gods. In this act there might be a note of uncertainty that Plato himself lacks confidence in the feasibility of the ladder of love for the public. After all, even Socrates, the wisest in the world, is not able to correctly understand love by himself but needs hints from a divine messenger. The discussion of love between Diotima and Socrates is similar to a private dialogue between God and an individual. Even if Socrates reports what he learns to the rest of the world, it is still hard for us to grasp the form of beauty. As we can see, by the end of the banquet, all other participants fall into sleep in the course of Socrates' speech, which suggests that no one is able to keep up with his reasoning to the end. Furthermore, because of our limited intellect, Socrates' behaviors could seem to us weird, as Alcibiades says, "this man here is so bizarre, his ways and his ideas are so unusual, that, search as you mighty, you'll never find anyone else, alive or dead,

who's even remotely like him" (*Symposium* 221d). It is not rare to see in Plato's works that while walking on the street, Socrates suddenly stops, staring at somewhere and being completely immersed in his own world. No one knows what he is thinking about and hardly does anyone intend to learn his thoughts. Under this circumstance, Socrates creates a world where he communicates with himself or with certain divine voice unknown to others. Such a world does not allow anyone else to enter.

Consequently, Socrates' situation is similar to that of Abraham—they communicate directly with a divine voice and they own wisdom or faith that can never be understood by the rest of the world. Kierkegaard's knight of faith chooses to remain silent since he knows that it is impossible for others to understand him while Socrates tries to deliver to others what he comprehends—the ladder of love—but the attempt turns out to be futile in the sense that no one else other than himself can really reach the top of the ladder. Although it is not explicitly said in the Symposium that Socrates truly understands the form of beauty, I think Plato does imply it based on Socrates' speech. Socrates' inability to prove his understanding to us is due to the uncommunicable characteristic of the religious stage. Therefore, Socrates' love has religious significance in the Kierkegaardian sense.

Ultimately, love for all the speakers in the *Symposium* except Socrates moves back and forth between the aesthetic and ethical stages while Socrates even elevates love to the religious stage. In order to fully grasp the image of love, it is not necessary to distinguish one kind of love from the other, just as ethical love may also consist of aesthetic significance. The value of love is not merely manifested in its moral good. Whether in our real life or in various works of art, love is rarely portrayed as a completely positive experience. The pleasure brought by love is always accompanied with strife. Yet people still cannot resist love and are often drawn to each other by a

natural impulse. In this project, I explore the speeches about love in Plato's *Symposium* and compare them with Kierkegaard's ideas on love corresponding to his three stages in order to have a broader understanding of love. The aesthetic aspect of love reflects people's innate passion of beauty, the ethical aspect provides possible mental trajectories for human growth, and the religious aspect shows us a world of doubt and uncertainty. Through our previous analysis of love in the *Symposium*, we can see that neither of the three elements stands out prominently in love but are firmly intertwined. It is better to appreciate all three aspects of love than to treat one as superior to the other.

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