Eros Dikaios. De praktijk en de verbeelding van homoseksualiteit bij de Grieken (deel 1). Plato en Sokrates: de Ware Eros. Een analyse van het 'symposium' van Plato (deel 2)
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SUMMARY

Generally speaking, our analysis of the Symposium by Plato tries to combine the two main themes of the dialogue: eros and Socrates. There is not one leading thought, as is often argued, but there are two, which, in my view, together form its scope. Eros is the central issue of all speeches. Every speaker analyses in his own way the concept or the essence of the god/daimon and contributes to the understanding of him. Eros means in particular homosexual love and Plato wants to stimulate his reader to reflect on the place and function of eros in human life. He faces his reader with issues such as:

- Which form of sexuality is preferred?
- What explanation can be given for sexual identity?
- What is the ideal of a sexual or erotic relationship?
- In what way can eros contribute to human happiness?
- Is sexuality a threat for human happiness?
- Is promiscuity acceptable?
- Is sexuality necessary for the fulfilling of eros?

But the Symposium also wants to characterize the personality of Socrates. He is very much present in the dialogue. The Symposium shows three aspects of the philosopher:

- Some peculiarities of his behaviour and character, for example his habit to wash seldom and not to wear sandals, his self-control and the magical power of his words.
- His typical companionship with young men. We learn from Apollodorus about his contact with Socrates and during the symposion the philosopher pays a lot of attention to Agathon. Impressive is the erotic confrontation between Socrates and Alcibiades.
- His philosophical approach. In his conversation with Agathon he practises the elenchus. Moreover, he is a pupil of Diotima who initiates him in the secrets of eros.

The first five speeches also prepare the reader for understanding the erotic attitude of Socrates and thus form a contribution to Plato's integration of both themes: eros and Socrates.

The first speech, by Phaedrus, has a double function. It is an introduction to the subject of Eros by touching upon several issues that are elaborated in the other speeches. At the same time Phaedrus takes a strong position: he puts forward a rather elitist form of eros. In his view eros is closely connected to morality and will lead to aretè. Eros is combined with a pedagogical element. Besides, it is remarkable that his contribution, the first speech of the Symposium, is an ode to homoerotic love. He speaks of the problem of the right relation between an erastes and an eromenos. In his view, Achilles is the ideal eromenos, because he has chosen to die for his friend. Pausanias, the second speaker, distinguishes two kinds of eros, one bad, the Pandemic eros, and the other one good, the Ouranic eros. The bad lover is more concerned with the body of his friend than with his soul, the good lover the other way around. The good lovers therefore fall for the good character of their sweethearts, who in their turn will put themselves at their lover's disposal, as pupils of aretè. It looks as if Pausanias' story about the morals of the good lover and the reservation of the eromenos to offer his body to his friend is a true account of the homosexual practice in Athens. But as I show the contrary is true: Plato composes Pausanias' speech to break with the sexual practice of his own time. With the concept of the Ouranic eros he wants to criticize the Athenian way of homosexual love in order to show his readers other possibilities of homosexual eros, as partly practiced in the past.
by the aristocratic circle around Socrates. At the same time Pausanias' speech offers a framework for the interpretation of the erotic encounter between Socrates and Alcibiades.

Next, Eryximachus, the doctor, announces that he will bring to completion Pausanias' contrast between the good and the bad eros, and he does this by describing eros as a cosmic principle of balance and imbalance in everything: medicine, music, meteorology and religion. In spite of the wide range of his concept, there is in fact no place for human eros. Moreover, his notion of harmonia lacks cohesion. We think that the function of his contribution is analogous to that of the so-called autobiographical passage about Socrates in Phaedo. Plato uses the speech of Eryximachus in order to show that the traditional approach of natural philosophy is unable to give a satisfactory explanation of the phenomenon of eros in all its forms.

The speech of Aristophanes forms a break in several ways with Pausanias' and Eryximachus' scheme of things. He tells a tale in which love is a search for wholeness, for our other half. Eros means the healing of the wound of being incomplete. His myth is an explanation for the three kinds of sexual identity, but also for things like promiscuity, the function of sexuality, the feeling that eros is more than just sex, and the feeling of attraction from equal to equal. Aristophanes also talks about eros as a force regulating human life. He differs from his predecessors in considering Eros a single aspiration: there is no good or bad love. Aristophanes' speech is, in agreement with Phaedrus and Pausanias, in the first place a defense of homosexual love; a rather strange position for someone who usually gives a very negative picture of homosexuality in his comedies. We make clear that in the Symposium Aristophanes is ridiculing himself. The things he says in the Symposium are the opposite of his own ideas. In fact Plato treats Aristophanes in the same way as Aristophanes treats Socrates in the Clouds.

The speech of Agathon, the tragedian, forms a vital link between Aristophanes' and Socrates' contribution. Eros is a single power and, without any restriction, a good one. So we are prepared for the view that there is a close connection between Eros and the good (Diotima). Agathon provides Eros with a paradoxical character. The reason is that Eros can play both the role of the erastes and of the eromenos. Eros himself is beautiful and at the same time he is directed towards the beautiful, he is in love with the beautiful. Eros can practise the active as well as the passive sexual role. Agathon provides eros with feminine features. These are also characteristic of the person that is overcome by eros. Eros seems to be a mirror image of Agathon himself.

Before we discuss the contribution of Socrates/Diotima, we study, in chapter 7, the picture of Socrates' erotic interest in boys, as given in those dialogues that Plato wrote before the Symposium, especially in Charmides, Lysis and Euthydemus. He describes Socrates as a man who is erotic with heart and soul. He is attracted by beautiful young boys and enjoys their company. He has no feeling of embarrassment whatsoever. Homosexuality is never repudiated by him, only the kinaidos.

Socrates' attitude towards beautiful boys is paradoxical. They have power over him, he is not able to offer any resistance to them, and he behaves more like an eromenos than an erastes. This is true for the erotic side of his contact with them. But at the same time he points the way in his discussions with them, and keeps his independence as a thinker.

Socrates is in love with philosophy and for him the activity of philosophizing is a form of eroticism. On the other hand philosophy is a remedy for the physical attraction he experiences when talking with beautiful youths. Philosophy makes him concentrate on an intellectual activity. Yet, there is more to it. While philosophizing, he tries to impress the boys and to win their favor. Eros serves philia. In Charmides Socrates uses the elenchus in order to make the boy dependent on him. Lysis shows that the philosophical discussion aims at intensifying the intimacy with the boy. The
homoeroticism of Socrates is connected with education. The boy has to acquire knowledge, because knowledge is a sufficient condition to improve his behaviour. The philosophical erastes is also an educator and Socrates embodies both.

It is striking that both Plato and Xenophon describe Socrates' homoerotic attitude in ideal terms, and that this aspect of Socrates' appearance is greatly emphasised in the works of both authors. The *Memorabilia* of Xenophon show that contemporaries of Socrates have interpreted the words διαφθείρειν νούς νέονς (one of the charges at his trial) in the sense that Socrates seduced the boys in his company and led them astray. It is obvious that Plato and Xenophon want to clear his name.

Chapter 8 is concerned with the contribution of Socrates and Diotima in the *Symposium*. We discuss extensively and step by step the chain of thoughts and have tried to elucidate the complicated text. One of the main conclusions is that Socrates is not portrayed by Diotima/Plato as an ideal philosopher who had reached the highest level of intellectual spirit. By criticizing his erotic attitude she criticizes his intellectual attitude. Socrates' eros is still dependent on individuals. He is still in the grip of beautiful boys. Therefore, his philosophical activity is still depending on his companionship with them. In terms of Diotima, Socrates has not freed himself from the particular and has not moved to the study of science and knowledge itself. He has not seen the Form of Beauty, the Beautiful itself, because he has not broken definitely with the 'beautiful' surrounding him. So the description of the *scala amoris* also aims at making explicit the position of Socrates and at explaining why he has not reached the level of contemplating the Beautiful.

Plato chooses to use the mask of Diotima to criticize his master; she is an outsider who speaks from a higher level. She is an expert in erotics and in this role accepted by Socrates. As a woman she is able to define Socrates' position without prejudice. Diotima's revelation is at the same time a sort of farewell to the Socrates we know from Plato's early dialogues. She has revealed possibilities of eros that go beyond the eros practised by Socrates.

The passionate confrontation between Alcibiades and Socrates is very complicated and it is not easy to give a simple answer to the question what went wrong between these two Athenians. Plato had given himself in the *Symposium* two frameworks for the interpretation of this erotic conflict: the speech of Pausianias (and in some respects also those of Phaedrus, Aristophanes and Agathon), and the words of Diotima. They give a completely different perspective from which we have to face the problems of this confrontation.

Alcibiades is an true-born Athenian youth and consequently acts according to the current norms for the right form of pederasty, as Pausianias had made clear. He is willing to offer his body in exchange of the *kalon* of Socrates. But Socrates refuses. This means for the youth that he is not able to build up a relationship as a basis for his development.

Neither of them conforms to the traditional sex roles. Socrates should have taken the initiative, not Alcibiades. He should not yield too eagerly to the advances of the erastes. Socrates' behaviour is very paradoxical: he gives the impression of being really interested in Alcibiades' beauty, but on the other hand he is not a real erastes. He does not act as vigorously as an eromenos would expect, and in fact he behaves rather like an eromenos. This paradoxical attitude is prepared by the speech of Agathon. It was the *elenchus* of Socrates that made Alcibiades realize that his lifestyle is wrong and that he has to change his ways, but in order to do this he is dependent on Socrates. The philosopher suggests he can offer a beauty of much more value than Alcibiades could offer Socrates. This attitude of Socrates explains why the youth takes the role of erastes.

Socrates failed in his role of tutor. Alcibiades needed him for his development, but Socrates had told him that he, Socrates, might be worth nothing. Alcibiades is
confused and does not get what he wants. It is as if Socrates is withholding something and does not give what he possesses. But Alcibiades is blind: he sees what is not and does not see what is there. He does not see what Socrates has already given him: the awareness that he does not pay enough attention to himself and that he has to change his moral attitude. This insight is fundamental from Socrates' point of view and in this respect Socrates does not deceive the youth, although the latter thinks so. It is his ignorance that is to blame, not Socrates, who is no οφριος.

Diotima teaches Socrates that the contact with the eromenos is only a means to develop the erastes. Socrates has a philosophical nature that links eros and philosophical activity. Alcibiades does not understand this: in his mind Socrates thinks and acts according to the χαριτεοθαι-code. Besides, as an erastes in the sense of Diotima, Socrates shows more interest in the conversations with the youth than in the youth himself. In this line Socrates tries to make an erastes of Alcibiades, meaning that the youth should become independent of him and should fix his attention more on the outcome of their contact.

The remark by Socrates that he is ignorant in everything and perhaps worth nothing, loses its irony from Diotima's point of view. In her opinion Socrates does not have real knowledge at his disposal. In this respect he is honest, because he does not want to sell pseudo-knowledge. Diotima is very clear about the role of the erastes and that of the eromenos. There is a sharp distinction between them. They cannot, in her view, coincide. Socrates, on the other hand, confuses both roles. Towards Alcibiades the philosopher behaves like an erastes and an eromenos at the same time. Plato wants to criticize this duality in Socrates' character. He should have turned his back on Alcibiades and exchange him for the καλων of the sciences. Socrates repudiates his body, but not his person. On the contrary, he has made Alcibiades dependent on him. Because Socrates did not give up the particular, the particular did not give him up.

With the Alcibiades-passage Plato also sharply wants to criticise the sexual morals in Athens. In the first place, Athenian boys were unable to understand the eros of Socrates, in the sense that he did not follow the χαριτεοθαι-code. Besides, the ideal of the Ouranic eros of Pausanias has been unmasked by the example of Alcibiades. This eros is based upon a double standard: the noble motives are not realised by those who have the pretension to follow its rules.

Finally, in chapter 10, we discuss Socrates' erotic play with Agathon, as depicted in the Symposium. We see that he has not changed in his erotic attitude towards the poet. He makes the same mistake as he had done with Alcibiades. He has not learnt anything from Diotima's wise lessons. There is nothing that proves he has seen the Form of Beauty itself. In his conversation with Agathon and Aristophanes at the end of the Symposium we recognise the Socrates we know. He has not changed. But the view of the reader has changed. Diotima has taught us the weak and the strong sides of Socratic eros. Nevertheless, we have to imitate him in his erotic disposition, for then we know, for sure, that we are on the right track.