Lacan's Psychoanalysis and Plato's Symposium: Desire and the (In) Efficacy of the Signifying Order

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Preview

The paper presents a suggestive interpretation of Lacan's interest in the relationship between Socrates and Alcibiades, insofar as this relationship makes a certain common understanding of love in Plato and psychoanalysis emerge. The author contends that Lacan's interpretation makes it possible to understand how, in the ancient text, desire is already understood as an unconscious motivation, not only in terms of its inexorable power to determine a person's aims, but also in its ability to subsist between and beyond the rules of conscious discourse.

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There are very real limitations to any discussion of Jacques Lacan's complex and voluminous commentary on Plato's *Symposium*, not least in a paper of this length. The sheer number of connections that Lacan makes cannot be fully dealt with, nor can any particular point of interest be exhaustively discovered without drawing other issues into the fold. Nevertheless, what I have presented in this discussion is a suggestive interpretation of Lacan's interest in the relationship between Socrates and Alcibiades, insofar as this relationship makes a certain common understanding of love in Plato and psychoanalysis emerge. What I suggest is that Lacan's interpretation makes it possible to understand how, in the ancient text, desire is already understood as an unconscious motivation, not only in terms of its inexorable power to determine a person's aims, but also in its ability to subsist between and beyond the rules of conscious discourse.

Lacan highlights the particular point at which, within his speech on love, Socrates must hand over his explanation to the priestess Diotima, who as a functionary between the gods and human beings is in a unique position to give a description of desire's metaxological status in the form of a myth. It remains a point of interest why Plato, who specifically disdains the status of myth as a form of true discourse, nonetheless includes them at certain points. In relation to the *Symposium*, it is precisely because desire subsists beyond or between the "activities of love" in the Socratic sense that an explanation must be sought beyond the efficacy of what Lacan understands as Socrates's otherwise unanswerable interrogations of the signifying order.

Lacan begins his psychoanalytic interpretation of Plato's *Symposium* in the second session of the seminar on transference, where he initiates his audience with a discussion of the dialogue's somewhat scandalous and unexpected

character; it is perhaps even a special kind of literature that "could be considered a statutory offence by a police inquiry."[1] The dialogue itself has a transgressive quality for Lacan, and he maintains that we can hardly fail to be struck by what happens in the second part, namely, the disturbing entrance of the young rogue Alcibiades.[2] Despite the fact that the rules for the party are laid out explicitly, and everyone agrees to follow them, this uninvited and unruly guest disturbs everything and everyone, not least Socrates himself.

Lacan makes a point to familiarize his audience with the particularly powerful and controversial figure of Alcibiades, calling him a kind of "pre-Alexander," who has a certain defiance about him. The young man shows no allegiances, "making victory pass from one camp to another wherever he goes, but everywhere hunted, exiled and, it must be said, because of his misdeeds."[3] This young man has no respect for laws, traditions or even religion itself, and yet everywhere he goes, Lacan emphasizes, "he carries with him just as much a very singular seduction,"[4] attributed as much to his beauty as to his exceptional intelligence.[5] The implication is that Alcibiades's seductive power is part and parcel with the power of his contempt for order, making him simultaneously an attractive and repulsive figure in the Athenian socio-political scene.

This makes for an interesting juxtaposition in relation to Socrates, his most famous lover, who was a controversial social figure in his own right, though for utterly different reasons. Within the *Symposium,* Alcibiades himself compares Socrates to the satyr Marsyas,[6] describing how this ugly man bewitches everyone with his words, for as he says, "whether it's a woman listening, a man, or a lad, we are astounded and possessed."[7] Even without Alcibiades's testimony, which we have reason to suspect, Socrates's conduct in the *Symposium* shows an

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[1] Jacques Lacan, *Le Transfert: Livre VII (1960–1961),* ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Éditions Du Seuil, 2001). No standard English translation of this text is currently published. I will be relying on the "bootleg" translation of Gallagher Cormac (2002), including the French as a footnote and with re-translation as necessary. The French text is hereafter cited as *Le Transfert* with pagination.
"celle qui peut tomber sous le coup des perquisitions de la police" (30, translation mine).

[2] Lacan, *Le Transfert*, 31.

[3] "Faisant passer la victoire d'un camp à l'autre partout où il se promène, mais partout pourchassé, exile, et il faut bien le dire, en raison de ses méfaits" (32, translation altered).

[4] "Il ne traîne pas moins, partout où il passe, une seduction très singulière." Lacan, *Le Transfert,* 32.

[5] Lacan, *Le Transfert*, 34.

[6] Plato, *The Symposium*, in *Plato's Erotic Dialogues*, ed.William S. Cobb (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), 215b.

[7] Ibid., 215d.

aloofness right from the beginning, when he arrives late to dinner because he is preoccupied with some philosophical question.[8] Despite the eminence of the company, Socrates is not chastised for his tardiness, and is offered the seat next to the host. Though his particular status as a political and social outsider would catch up with him in the end, it is nonetheless interesting to note that the figure of Socrates still attracts considerable attention even several millennia after his untimely death.

It is thus that we can observe a certain mirroring of character in the two figures of Socrates and Alcibiades, though with an important difference. While Alcibiades is portrayed to be a precocious rogue who leaves nothing but destruction in the wake of his seductions and conquests, Socrates dedicates himself to the cultivation of wisdom in himself and in those with whom he dialogues. This difference can be noted in the way Alcibiades expresses contempt for Socrates's influence, especially in the story he tells about his failed attempts to seduce Socrates into making a sexual pass at him. Attendant to his failure, the young man feels trapped by what he perceives to be Socrates's disingenuous virtuosity. "I believed I had been dishonored, but I also admired his nature–his judiciousness and his courage … As a result, while I could never get angry enough to deny myself his company, I was never able to find a way to win him over either … So, I was destitute, enslaved by this man as no one has been by anyone else."[9]

The two men, with their formal similarity as extraordinary socio-political figures, are paired inextricably by the important difference in their characters, namely, that Alcibiades's love seeks to conquer and possess, whereas Socrates seeks to build something on the basis of the love relationship. Socrates's evasion of Alcibiades's seductive power is seductive in itself. Alcibiades is caught in a kind of double-bind. On the one hand, he wants to overcome Socrates's virtue, bringing him down to the level of Alcibiades's other conquests, and on the other, he wants to maintain a proximity with Socrates's admirable nature. It is this quality of fascination in the midst of frustration that Lacan highlights in relation to the Greek term *agalma*.

Lacan connects the sense of *agalma* as ornament or adornment with Alcibiades's vituperative comparison of Socrates with Silenus, a character described in mythology as a fat, drunken follower of Dionysus, who has moreover the power of prophecy. More importantly, for Lacan, Alcibiades asserts that

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[8] Ibid., 174d–175c.

[9] Ibid., 219d–e.

Socrates's arguments "are most like those Sileni that can be opened up."[10] These figures of the mythical character, by the time of the *Symposium,* were being marketed as a kind of gift wrapping, an ugly packaging for something precious and beautiful. At least, this is the use with which Lacan would like to associate the figure of the Sileni*,* which he maintains has a double import. "I mean first of all that this is the appearance of Socrates, which has nothing beautiful about it. But on the other hand, this Silenus is not simply the image that is designated by the name, it is also a packaging, which is the usual aspect of a Silenus, a container, a way of presenting something. These things must have existed as tiny instruments of the industry of the time, these little *silenoi* that served as jewel boxes, as a wrapping with which to offer gifts. This is precisely the issue."[11]

The *agalma*, as something precious, is a jewel inside a casing. Alcibiades's comparison of Socrates with these objects has the double sense of something outwardly repulsive that nonetheless has a compelling force due to what it contains, or rather, what it is supposed to contain. This supposition has an important connotation for the love relationship as Lacan sees it, and is connected to the sense in which the lover is drawn to the beloved by some hidden attribute which neither the lover nor the beloved is entirely sure of, given that it does not match the exterior, the "packaging" as it were.

It is the dissonance presented at the level of the lover's perception of the beloved that Lacan emphasizes as both the starting point and the whole problem of love. What is important to understand, according to Lacan, is that the lover looks to the beloved for something that he or she lacks, and that this beloved cannot ever be truly aware of what it is he or she has; it is radically hidden from them. There can be no coincidence between what the lover wants from the beloved and what the beloved has to offer. "What is lacking to the one is not there, hidden in the other. This is the whole problem of love."[12]

This can be seen in the relationship between Socrates and Alcibiades in a double way, according to the doubling of their images as simultaneously

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[10] Ibid., 221d.

[11] "D'abord, c'est là l'apparence de Socrate, qui est rien moins que belle. Mais d'autre part, ce silène n'est pas simplement l'image que l'on désigne de ce nom, c'est aussi un emballage qui a l'aspect usual d'un silène, un contenant, une façon de presenter quelque chose. Cela devait être de menus instruments de l'industrie du temps, des petits silènes qui servaient de boîte à bijoux, ou d'emballage pour offrir des cadeaux. C'est justement de cela qu'il s'agit." Lacan, *Le Transfert*, 170. Translation altered.

[12] "Ce qui manque à l'un n'est pas de ce qu'il y a, caché, dans l'autre. C'est là tout le problème de l'amour" Lacan, *Le Transfert,* 53. Translation altered.

repulsive and seductive. As lover and beloved, the two men's positions are utterly reversible. Socrates pursues Alcibiades for the sake of cultivating the young man's considerable power and intelligence toward a higher virtue, whereas Alcibiades pursues Socrates for the sake of an erotic conquest made all the more appealing by its hidden and apparently unattainable quality. Ostensibly, by the time of the *Symposium*, Socrates and Alcibiades are veritably torturing each other. According to Socrates, Alcibiades is a jealous and even violent beloved who, whenever he is around, forces Socrates to forestall all communication with anyone else. At the party, Socrates entreats Agathon to be an arbiter between them, keeping him from Alcibiades's dangerous jealousy, "as I am frightened by this fellow's madness and loving friendship."[13]

Alcibiades, on the other hand, relates to the other guests how Socrates has bewitched him with his beautiful words: "when I hear them, my heart pounds and the tears flow."[14] Alcibiades resents the influence of this enchantment, describing his state as "servile" insofar as Socrates forces him to agree that he is neglecting his self-cultivation in favor of the affairs of Athenian governance. "So," he says, "I forcibly stop up my ears and run away, as from the Sirens, so that I won't grow old just sitting there beside him."[15] The implication is that for Alcibiades, this self-cultivation that Socrates is advocating will lead the young man away from what he truly values (the life of war, politics and glory) to a more or less passive state of contemplation, utterly bound in servitude to this "Siren" of reflection.

It is nevertheless true that Alcibiades views Socrates's knowledge as something desirable, insofar as he relates how he had attempted to seduce the older man with his "youthful good looks": "since by gratifying Socrates I would provide myself with the opportunity to hear everything he knew."[16] But Socrates thwarts this attempt, and in his reply we have an articulation of the concept of *agalma* very clearly laid out, and also the sense in which for a philosopher of Socrates's inclination, a hidden treasure cannot be exchanged for a more ready value:

> Alcibiades, my friend, you may not in fact be so stupid, if what you claim about me turns out to be true and there is *some power in me by means of which you could become better*. You must see in me a beauty that is

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[13] Plato, *Symposium,* 213d.

[14] Ibid., 215d.

[15] Ibid., 216a.

[16] Ibid., 217a.

> extraordinary, and quite different from your own good looks. If, having detected this, you're trying to partake of it with me and to offer beauty for beauty, you shouldn't think you can obtain more from me in return for less. You're attempting to acquire true beauty in exchange for apparent beauty, 'gold for bronze.' Well, you blessed fellow, look closer lest you fail to notice that I am not what you think. The vision of the mind begins to see keenly when that of the eyes starts to lose its edge, but you are still a long way from that.[17]

The extent to which Alcibiades and Socrates perceive love's efficacy differently is readily apparent. While the young man seeks to possess all the good he sees in the elder, Socrates is pressing for Alcibiades to understand that whatever power or good the latter sees in him must be used as a means toward self-improvement, and that this power or good is not located within *him*, Socrates, but rather is indirectly indicated by what Alcibiades perceives as his hidden knowledge. This attempted redirection of Alcibiades's desire can be understood not only through the content of Socrates's speech on love, but also in its form, insofar as Socrates defers beyond his own authority to the priestess Diotima. Socrates explicitly states that this priestess has corrected him in the view that Agathon had expressed in his preceding speech, namely that love is a "great god and is beautiful."[18] In contrast, the love of Diotima's perspective is not a god, but a daimon, a spiritual being that goes between humans and the divine: "Since it is in the middle it fills in between the two so that the whole is bound together by it. All prophecy comes through a daimon, and the arts of the priests and of those concerned with sacrifices, rituals, spells, divinations and magic."[19] It is precisely this understanding of love as metaxological that for Lacan places Diotima's discourse on love outside the purview of Socrates's traditional methodology, and it is at this point that we come to some of Lacan's most illuminating and difficult psychoanalytic interpretations of the *Symposium*.

Lacan's interpretation of Socrates's "speech" on love is particularly informative, given what has been said about the function of the lack in the love relationship. The sense of the *agalma*, the jewel hidden within the ugly packaging, is how Alcibiades had characterized Socrates, and by implication, his hold on him. Before Alcibiades arrives, Lacan points out the interesting fact that

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[17] Ibid., 218d–219a. Emphasis mine.

[18] Ibid., 201e.

[19] Ibid., 202e.

there is an initial part of Socrates's discourse that he does not hand over to the priestess Diotima, and Lacan highlights this for the sake of pointing out that this initial dialogue with Agathon[20] serves the purpose of introducing the notion of a lack inherent to love. As he says, with the method proper to the Socratic interrogation, "one theme leaps out which, since the beginning of my commentary, I have announced several times, namely, the function of a lack."[21]

At this point we get into Lacan's more detailed psychoanalytic interpretation of the relation between Socrates and Diotima, and the interpretation rests on a particular understanding of Socrates's method, which Lacan identifies as an interrogation of the signifier. In the sense in which the symbolic is for Lacan a certain kind of system in and of itself, one that has its own order and structure, certain meanings are possible on the level of a given chain of signifiers (such as a sentence or a question) and certain meanings are excluded. It is impossible to proceed without a brief clarification of Lacan's appropriation of Saussure's structural linguistics and its significance for what the interpolation of Diotima's voice indicates in Lacan's analysis.

In Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*, published posthumously from student notes taken during a course of lectures given in Geneva, the linguist distinguishes three aspects of language: *langue, langage* and *parole*. *Langue* is the homogeneous and traditional system of linguistic signs which subsists within a community and only changes slowly over time. This macro level of language, which can be codified in dictionaries and the like, is comprised of linguistic units that are commonly accessible to all members of a language community. What Saussure identifies as *langage* is then *langue* as spoken by a subject in any given speech act, the particular vocabulary of an existing individual, their particular appropriation of their linguistic tradition and environment. Finally, we can describe Saussure's sense of *parole* as the individual *speech act*, a particular instantiation of a speaker's *langage* in a specific time and place.

Common to all these levels of language is the linguistic sign [*signe*], which has a relation with its referent that for Saussure has a dual structure with two aspects: the signifier [*signifiant*] and the signified [*signifié*]. These two aspects have a mutual relation as parts of a whole (the sign) and while this

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[20] Ibid., 199c–201d.

[21] "Avec l'interrogation socratique, avec ce qui s'articule comme étant proprement la méthode de Socrate … l'interrogé, jaillit un theme que depuis le début de mon commentaire j'ai plusieurs fois annoncé, à savoir la function du manqué." Lacan, *Le Transfert*, 141.

relation is subject to change in the individual *langage*, it is concretized in the homogeneous system of a community's *langue*.[22] In English, the signifier can be designated as an "acoustic image" that is recognized as evoking the "concept" of the signified. Saussure famously compares these two sides of a linguistic sign to the two sides of a piece of paper: "One cannot cut the front without cutting the back at the same time; likewise in language, one can neither divide sound from thought nor thought from sound."[23] The interrelation between the signifier and the signified can thus be conceptualized as one of opposition, and this alternation of meant and meaning, which is susceptible to shifts on the level of *langage* and *parole,* can never be totally separated from each other.

As Dor notes, this interrelation of the signifier and the signified "reveals a property of the sign that Lacan puts to use–*the autonomy of the signifier in relation to the signified.*"[24] In general terms, the signifier is conceived as indicating the signified, and in the practice of speaking, Lacan argues that this relationship of indication actually *constitutes* the signified in an important sense. This places the relation between the individual and the words and sentences the individual uses to speak about him or herself beyond the individual's control. "What defines any element whatsoever of a language [*langue*] as belonging to language is that, for all the users of the language [*langue*], this element is distinguished as such in the supposedly constituted set of homologous elements. Thus, the particular effects of this element of language are linked to the existence of this set, prior to any possible link with any of the subject's particular experiences."[25] Language subsists beyond any particularization of itself in speech, and as such constitutes a field already constituted apart from any given "expression" of a person's perspective. The primacy of the signifier displaces expression. It is rather a question of negotiation with an existing field that operates according to its own rules of combination. As Lacan says, "Man thus speaks, but it is because the symbol has made him man."[26]

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[22] Cf. Joël Dor. *Introduction to the Reading of Lacan,* trans. Susan Fairfield. (Northval, N.J.: Jason Aronson Inc., 1997).

[23] Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics,* trans. Roy Harris. (Chicago: Open Court, 2005), 113.

[24] Dor, *Introduction to the Reading of Lacan*, 25.

[25] Jacques Lacan, "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis," in idem, *Écrits: The Complete Text,* trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), 227.

[26] Ibid., 229.

Given this brief explanation, we can understand this about Lacan's interpretation of the Socratic method: what Socrates is doing, when he is interrogating an interlocutor, is not so much interrogating the person's experience, but interrogating the "consistency of the signifier." "It is a question of knowing, on the plane of the interrogation of the signifier, of what, as signifier, love is the correlative."[27] Thus Socrates interrogates Agathon with a series of yes or no questions that by their sheer consistency limit Agathon within the possible range of "yes" or "no". Within the structure of Socrates's discourse, there is no room for a disagreement or a change of register. He is asking Agathon to follow the particular logic inherent to the chain of signification. Agathon's answers are rote and almost inconsequential; it is his assent to the logical chain that is important. Agathon, as is true of so many of Socrates's interlocutors, is carried along in this interrogation by the primacy of the signifier, in Lacan's sense, which only admits those possibilities that Socrates makes possible through the structure of his discourse. It is to this part of his speech, which introduces the function of the lack, that Socrates attaches his name, and it is significant for Lacan insofar as he believes that "if he hands the speech over to Diotima, why should it not be because, concerning love, things could not go any further with the properly Socratic method?"[28]

The limit of the Socratic method is thus inscribed for Lacan by what cannot be brought to presentation by the transparent rule of the signifier: "We can easily conceive that there is a limit in so far as on the plane of knowledge there is only what is accessible to the pure and simple operation of the law of the signifier."[29] What is called for, at the limit of knowledge, is the plane of myth, which Socrates will not give voice to himself, but will pass on to the priestess, who Lacan notes is a person who is associated with divination and magic.[30] In the register of mythology, what will be introduced is the interstice between the either/or, yes/no alteration of the primacy of the signifier. This myth of Love as

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[27] "Il s'agit de savoir, sur le plan de l'interrogation du signifiant, de quoi, comme signifiant, l'amour est le correlative." Lacan, *Le Transfert*, 144.

[28] "S'il passé la parole à Diotime, pourquoi ne serait-ce pas parce que, concernant l'amour, les choses ne sauraient aller plus loin avec la méthode proprement socratique?" Lacan, *Le Transfert,* 144. Translation slightly altered.

[29] "Il nous est bien concevable qu'il y ait une limite au plan du savoir, sit tant est que celui-ci est uniquement ce qui est accessible à faire jouer purement et simplement la loi du signifiant." Lacan,

[30] Lacan, *Le Transfert*, 148.

a daimon introduces the order of the metaxological, the neither/nor, into the otherwise dual alteration of mortal and immortal that characterizes the operation of the signifier.

Despite the fact that Lacan thematizes Diotima's perspective as a split in Socrates's authority,[31] it is not so easy to see at first why this discourse of Diotima's is a break with the order of the signifier. She is, after all, still speaking. The difference is rather that the logical order of the Socratic method must be abandoned in order to give a description of *eros* that cannot depend on logical coherence for its meaning. Simply put, love is not logical. This speech of Diotima's will make claims on the audience's credulity with bare assertions, which the Socratic method, with its dependence on the transparent consistency of the signifier, could never put forward. The entire mythical account of Eros's being descended from Penia and Poros is rather an explanation of love's in-between status as a force that goes beyond the conscious level of the signifier to the level of an unconscious motivation. In fact, there is a point in the dialogue when Diotima explicitly calls into question the ability of words and names to account for the holistic nature of love. At this point Socrates reports that Diotima asks him:

> "Do you think that this yearning, this love, is common to all human beings, and that everyone wants good things to be their own forever? What would you say?"
>
> "As you say," I replied, "it's common to all."
>
> "Then why is it, Socrates," she asked, "that we don't speak of everyone as loving, if in fact everyone does always love these very things? Why do we speak instead of some people as loving and others as not?"
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> "I wonder about that myself," I replied.
>
> "But you shouldn't wonder," she said. "We separate off one particular form of love and call it 'love,' giving it the name of the whole. We also misuse other names in such ways."[32]

Diotima seems to be saying that there is something missing from the manner in which people generally speak about love, something important for an

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[31]"N'est-ce pas dans la mesure où quelque chose, quand il s'agit du discours de l'amour, èchappe au savoir de Socrate, que celui-ci s'efface, *se dioecise*, et fait à sa place parler une femme?" Lacan, *Le Transfert,* 147.

[32] Plato, *Symposium*, 205a–b.

understanding of the way love, as a daimon, functions in the world. When Diotima finally tells Socrates what the function of love is, namely "giving birth in beauty both in body and in soul," Socrates is flummoxed, admitting that "the services of a prophet are needed" to sort out what she means.[33] The priestess explains that love is not really the love of beauty, but of "procreation and giving birth in beauty," such that one may possess the good forever: "Because procreation is eternal and immortal, insofar as anything can be such in a mortal being, and, given what we've agreed, one necessarily desires immortality along with the good, since love is of the good's being one's own forever."[34]

What follows is the famous description of the *scala amoris*, wherein a lover gradually ascends from the triviality of any single beautiful thing[35] to the ultimate love of beauty in its nature.[36] The circumspect lover, according to Diotima, ascends in stages from the love of a beautiful body to beautiful bodies, from beautiful bodies to beautiful souls, from beautiful souls to beautiful laws and traditions, and from thence to beautiful knowledge, this last love opening upon "the great sea of beauty" that, when carefully studied, gives access to that eternal and uniform beauty which is the form of all other beautiful things.[37] "In the activities of Love," as Diotima says, "this is what it is to proceed correctly, or be led by another,"[38] and these are the activities that Socrates uncharacteristically claims he has a knowledge of at the beginning of the dialogue.[39]

I would argue at this point, given Lacan's analysis, that this correct proceeding on behalf of the universal desire to give birth in beauty and thus possess the good forever is the practice that Socrates himself carries out in the symbolic register. His interrogations of others constitute the activities through which he seeks to give birth in beauty and to gain immortality. This can be seen in the way Socrates's love of philosophical dialogue and questioning is portrayed almost as a mania, even a nuisance in the *Symposium*'s party setting. His meditation on some point of interest makes him late for dinner;[40] his diverting

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[33] Ibid., 206b.
[34] Ibid., 206e–207a.
[35] Ibid., 210b.
[36] Ibid., 210e.
[37] Ibid., 210a–211b.
[38] Ibid., 211b.
[39] Ibid., 177d.
[40] Ibid., 175c.

questions to Agathon warrant a reproach from Phaedrus;[41] and moreover, he keeps the two playwrights up until dawn.[42] It's almost as though Socrates is forcibly suspended by the format of the proceedings and is simply waiting for the speeches to end so he can get back to doing what he loves best.

Yet the more germane point is that this power of desire that motivates him to dialogue endlessly with his interlocutors is not subject to the kind of dialogical arguments that Socrates brings to bear on so many other things. Love is the motivating force that evades a dialogical description, and with Lacan's analysis, we can say that desire, in itself, is sustained in the gaps constituted by the primacy of the signifier. This is precisely what Lacan views as the novelty of Freud's discovery of the unconscious.

> The novelty of the analysis, if what I am teaching you about the Freudian revolution is correct, is precisely the fact that something can be sustained in the law of the signifier, not simply without this involving a knowledge but by expressly excluding it, namely by constituting itself as unconscious, namely as necessitating at its level the eclipsing of the subject in order to subsist as unconscious chain, as constituting what is fundamentally irreducible in the relationship of the subject to the signifier.[43]

Throughout the *Symposium* the speeches of the guests have accredited love with bestowal of great blessings, whether for the sake of a love relationship between two persons, the balance of forces or the attainment of a lost wholeness. But in Socrates's speech, the inspiration given by Love as a being between two worlds has a cosmological aspect that binds the terrestrial world with the divine in such a way that human beings can, in a sense, harness the power of *eros* toward an understanding of what "exists as itself in accordance with itself, eternal and

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[41] Ibid., 194d.

[42] Ibid., 223c.

[43] "Mais la nouveauté de l'analyse, si tant est que ce que je vous enseigne concernant la revolution freudienne soit correct, c'est justement ceci, que quelque chose peut se sustenter dans la loi du signifiant, non seulement sans que cela comporte un savoir, mais en l'excluant expressément, en se constituent comme inconscient, c'est-à-dire comme nécessitant à son niveau l'éclipse du sujet, pour subsister comme chaîne inconsciente, comme constituant ce qu'il y a d'irréductible, en son fond, dans le rapport du sujet au signifiant." Lacan, *Le Transfert*, 145. Translation slightly altered.

uniform."[44] Such an understanding would make all the "mortal silliness"[45] of the terrestrial world seem trivial, and such a person would be able to give birth to true virtue. "By giving birth to true virtue and nourishing it, he would be able to become a friend of the gods, and if any human being could become immortal, he would."[46]

This particular promise of a kind of apotheosis stands by far as the highest reward Love has to offer among the speeches given during the *Symposium*, but also as the most abstract, requiring an ascent from the concrete to the impassable, available only in the nature of beauty itself. The *askesis* required to attain this ultimate reward is substantial, and anyone who overly values the terrestrial and particular will be caught at one of the intermediate rungs of the ladder. Such a one, as we have seen, is Alcibiades, who not only admits having valued his own youthful good looks, but also seeks after that beauty and power that he perceives in Socrates alone, such that Socrates himself must deny being the true vessel of what it is he desires. The drive is there, but it is misdirected, and given the jealousy with which Alcibiades pursues Socrates (and others), it seems unlikely that he will ever acquire the correct circumspection to look past the singular instantiations of beauty, in whatever form he finds them. His aim is simply to conquer and possess the beauty he finds in the world.

Charles H. Kahn provides a valuable link between a psychoanalytic discussion of love in the *Symposium* and Plato's philosophical metaphysics, arguing that "Plato's theory of *eros* provides an essential link between his moral psychology and his metaphysical doctrine of the Forms."[47] First of all, the idea that Socrates's view of love is propaedeutic to a greater purpose is reinforced by Kahn's assertion that "Plato's account of *eros* is developed less for its own sake than for further philosophical purposes, which are moral and metaphysical."[48] He clarifies that for Plato *eros* is the strongest form of desire and that it comes about when human interest is directed toward something beautiful.[49] Further, the fact that this desire is so often described as base sexual passion does not mean that such passion cannot be redirected to higher aims. It only indicates a failure or

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[44] Plato, Symposium, 211b.
[45] Ibid., 211e.
[46] Ibid., 212a.
[47] Charles H. Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue: The Philosophical Use of a Literary Form* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 258.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid., 259.

corruption of the rational aspect of the human soul, the *logistikon*, and its power to check and redirect the power of *eros*.[50] For the sake of this discussion, Kahn succinctly highlights the most important point: "Plato's use of the term *eros* to designate the dominant passion in the tyrannical psyche is a reminder that the same psychic principle which, when properly guided, can lead one to philosophy can also, when totally misguided, direct a life of plunder and brutality."[51]

The difference Kahn highlights is the most important difference between Socrates and Alcibiades. In his speech, Socrates describes the way a properly directed erotic love of beautiful things leads to the highest blessing attainable for human beings: to become like the gods. Whereas Alcibiades, in his "praise" of Socrates, makes it apparent that while Socrates is eminently desirable, he is also a cruel lover, because he refuses to give himself over to being loved and to loving. He refuses to give up the goods, as it were, and this is a source of frustration for Alcibiades because he really believes that Socrates is withholding them from him, whereas Socrates understands that what he has is only the relatively good and beautiful, and that in desiring him so fiercely, Alcibiades is giving in to his baser appetites. Alcibiades is not interested in philosophy, perceiving it as a kind of entrapping bewitchment, a "madness and Bacchanalian frenzy,"[52] whereas his desire aims more toward the exercise of his power and thus the life of plunder and brutality that is unchecked by the moderation of rational reflection.

This point has two connections with Lacan's psychoanalytic reading. The first is related to the sense of the *agalma*, the hidden jewel inside the ugly casing. The fact that Alcibiades perceives Socrates as such a "packaging," and the fact that Socrates denies it, gives concrete expression to the sense in which Lacan believes that the magnetic force of the adornment is more or less imaginary and fetishistic. It is precisely because Socrates knows nothing *but* the activities of love "that he sets his face against having been, in any justified or justifiable way whatsoever, *eromenos*, the desirable, what is worthy of being loved."[53] Whatever jewels of knowledge Alcibiades believes he has, Socrates can only offer him the exemplary act of loving, which is a teaching that when followed correctly, will not only give rise to an understanding of desire itself, but will also eventually lead beyond Socrates as an object of desire. In brief, if Alcibiades were not fixated on

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[50] Ibid., 260.

[51] Ibid.

[52] Plato, *Symposium*, 218b.

[53] "Mais c'est justement parce que Socrate sait, qu'il se refuse à avoir été à quelque titre que ce soit, justifié ou justifiable *érômênos*, le desirable, ce qui est digne d'être aimé." Lacan, *Le Transfert,* 189.

Socrates as the object of desire, as the *agalma*, he could begin to channel his desire in appropriate ways. Rather than rejecting the power of Socrates's discourse, he could understand that this *activity* of love is the real prize to be won.

This is precisely why Lacan is interested in the *Symposium* as a text uniquely suited to showcase what he wants to say about transference in psychoanalysis. With the entrance of Alcibiades, Socrates is shown to be a cause of desire for the young man, precisely by virtue of a lack, this withholding that Alcibiades identifies with the *agalma* inside the *silenus*. Alcibiades wants to know everything that Socrates knows, and thinks that by gratifying the older man with his good looks he will be able to procure rewards. But Socrates, as a cause of desire, wants only to point the power of Alcibiades's desire beyond himself and to guide Alcibiades on the correct path. Socrates is thus in the position of the analyst, who must use the force of desire directed at him or herself to keep the analysand interested and participating in the analysis, all the while redirecting that desire to the accomplishment of aims within analysis.

In a very important sense, the redirection or sublimation of erotic love is at the very heart of the psychoanalytic understanding. Freud conceived erotic love at the basis of libido, a motivating force in nearly every human endeavor. Further, as Ernest Wallwork points out, Freud believed that "genuine morality is instinctually grounded in natural desires springing from *eros*, whereas inauthentic morality consists in narcissistic and egoistic obedience to moral principles in order to avoid punishments or to gain rewards."[54] The trick, as in Plato, is to combine the unconscious force of erotic desire with the moderating influence of consciously chosen aims other than possession. Among the many ways in which one might direct *eros*, Freud held that the erotic drive aimed naturally toward union and identification with other persons as objects of desire, in addition to the erotic drive of possession, which is not so centrally located as critics of Freud continue to maintain.[55]

What is remarkable about this coalescence between Plato's *Symposium* and psychoanalytic theory is that even in Plato's ancient text we see an explanation of how and why *eros* eludes the Socratic discourse. By handing over the explanation to a priestess, Socrates avoids making the kind of claims that have their truth value beyond the efficacy of rational discourse. It is thus that we can understand the use of myth in Plato's works in a new way, such that the powers and limitations of the Socratic method become manifest. The presentation of

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[54] Ernest Wallwork, *Psychoanalysis and Ethics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 188.

[55] Ibid., 182.

philosophical thought in myth, while not retaining the powerful irrefutability of Socratic interrogation, can fill the gaps in that discourse by presenting explanations that support and expand the metaphysical and ethical claims of the discourse through placing them in a cosmological or mythical framework.

Despite the many possible ways in which Lacan's appropriation of the *Symposium* could be taken up and interpreted, the fundamental element that emerges in this discussion is the sense in which Plato's theory of *eros* has a commonality with that of psychoanalysis. As a force that permeates the entirety of human experience in a way that subsists beyond or below conscious activity, *eros* or desire cannot be excluded from an ethical consideration of human potentiality. What Alcibiades's transgressive presence within the *Symposium* demonstrates, from a psychoanalytic point of view, is the way in which *eros* has the power to overwhelm even the most thorough sublimations of its power, as is symbolized in the person of Socrates, who avows only a knowledge of such sublimating activities. Ultimately, there is nothing that Socrates can do to improve Alcibiades's character if the young man cannot understand that the force of his desire *should* be sublimated to higher aims. So long as Alcibiades is focused on the possession of his love object as a source of satisfaction, he will continue to disdain the Socratic method that would lead him away from that object, further up the ladder of love to that ultimate apotheosis Diotima had described.