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Edited by

MAURO TULLI AND MICHAEL ERLER

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List of contributors

Olga Alieva, National Research University Higher School of Economics, Moscow
Carolina Araújo, Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro
Francesco Aronadio, Università di Roma Tor Vergata
Ruby Blondell, University of Washington
Sandra Boehringer, Université de Strasbourg
Marcelo D. Boeri, Universidad Alberto Hurtado, Chile
Beatriz Bossi, Universidad Complutense de Madrid
Francisco Bravo, Universidad Central de Venezuela
Luc Brisson, CNRS, Villejuif
Giuseppe Cambiano, Scuola Normale Superiore, Pisa
Andrea Capra, Università degli Studi di Milano
Giovanni Casertano, Università degli Studi di Napoli “Federico II”
Gabriele Cornelli, Universidade de Brasília
Michele Corradi, Aix-Marseille Université
Ivana Costa, Universidad de Buenos Aires
Gabriel Danzig, Bar-Ilan University
Piera De Piano, Università degli Studi di Napoli “Federico II”
Dino De Sanctis, Università di Pisa
Margherita Erbi, Università di Pisa
Mehmet M. Erginel, Eastern Mediterranean University
Rafael Ferber, Universität Luzern / Universität Zürich
Arianna Fermani, Università di Macerata
Giovanni R.F. Ferrari, University of California, Berkeley
Lloyd P. Gerson, University of Toronto
Christopher Gill, University of Exeter
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Chad Jorgenson, Université de Fribourg
Yahei Kanayama, Nagoya University
Filip Karfik, Université de Fribourg
Christian Keime, Université Paris IV-Sorbonne / University of Cambridge
Manfred Kraus, Eberhard-Karls-Universität Tübingen
Yuji Kurihara, Tokyo Gakugei University
Annie Larivée, Carleton University
Aikaterini Lefka, Université de Liège
Francisco L. Lisi, Instituto Lucio Anneo Séneca / Universidad Carlos III de Madrid
Arnaud Macé, Université de Franche-Comté
Graciela E. Marcos de Pinotti, Universidad de Buenos Aires – CONICET
Silvio Marino, Università degli Studi di Napoli “Federico II”
Giusy Maria Margagliotta, Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg
Irmgard Männlein-Robert, Eberhard-Karls-Universität Tübingen

Mariella Menchelli, Università di Pisa
Maurizio Migliori, Università di Macerata
Gerard Naddaf, York University
Hugues-Olivier Ney, Aix-Marseille Université
Noburu Notomi, Keio University, Tokyo
Lidia Palumbo, Università degli Studi di Napoli “Federico II”
Richard D. Parry, Agnes Scott College
Richard Patterson, Emory University
Federico M. Petrucci, Scuola Normale Superiore / Università di Pisa
Mario Regali, Università degli Studi di Bari “Aldo Moro”
Olivier Renaut, Université Paris Ouest – Nanterre La Défense
Nicholas P. Riegel, University of Toronto
Cristina Rossitto, Università di Padova
Christopher Rowe, Durham University
David T. Runia, Queen’s College, The University of Melbourne
† *Samuel Scolnicov*, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem
Richard Stalley, University of Glasgow
Alessandro Stavru, Freie Universität Berlin
Thomas Alexander Szlezák, Eberhard-Karls-Universität Tübingen
Ikko Tanaka, Kyoto University
Harold Tarrant, University of Newcastle, Australia
Alonso Tordesillas, Aix-Marseille Université
Álvaro Vallejo Campos, Universidad de Granada
Mario Vegetti, Università degli Studi di Pavia
Matthew D. Walker, Yale-NUS College
Roslyn Weiss, Lehigh University

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Plato on the Pangs of Love

Mehmet M. Erginel
Eastern Mediterranean University

At the heart of Plato's theory of *eros* is his "ladder of love", which describes the "ascent" from the love of an individual body, through several stages, to love of Beauty itself (*Symp.* 210a-212b).¹ The ladder of love is crucial for the proper practice of *eros*, and as it turns out, also for achieving the best kind of life.²

But the psychology of this transformation is hard to spell out since the text is very terse on the subject. In particular, Plato provides very little information regarding the pleasure involved in the ascent, and nothing at all regarding the pain involved in the process. This is disappointing not only in itself but also because the pain involved in *eros* has been pointed out in previous speeches, such as that of Aristophanes. Various aspects of the "ascent" have been discussed in the literature,³ and illuminating parallels between the moral psychologies of the *Symposium* and the *Republic* have been noted.⁴ Yet the relevance of Plato's views on pleasure and pain to his account of *eros* has not been sufficiently appreciated.

I believe that our understanding of Plato's conception of *eros* would benefit especially from bringing in Plato's views on pain from elsewhere. Indeed, a difficult question about the psychology of the ascent arises once we consider it in the light of what learn in *Republic IX*.

I.

The basic problem is that sexual desire is painful, but love of wisdom is painless, according to *Republic IX*.⁵ Briefly, the account of pleasure offered in the "third proof" of the greater happiness of the just man involves two criteria, a psychological and a metaphysical one. The psychological criterion yields the result that the just man, who is identical to the philosopher, is happier because only the philosopher's pleasures are pure, *i.e.*, unmixed with pain (583c-584b). Those pleasures are identified as the pleasures of the rational part of the soul (580-583), and compared with the pleasures of the spirited and appetitive parts. Both the spirited and appetitive parts' pleasures are, accordingly, pleasures that are mixed with pain.

There is, however, an interpretive question about the precise nature of this mixture. It is generally supposed that this is a sequential mixture, pleasure being preceded and followed by pain, but I have argued that the mixture is not only sequential but also simultaneous, which means that there is pain during the pleasure itself. Given Plato's account of pleasure and pain in terms of restoration towards, and deterioration away from, a harmonious condition, respec-

¹ I will use "love" for *eros* for the sake of simplicity, even though there are many good reasons to resist this translation.

² In this paper I leave aside many important questions about the *Symposium*, including what the relationship between generic and specific (proper) *eros* is.

³ Sheffield (2006).

⁴ Irwin (1995); Moravcsik (1971); Price (1989); Reeve (2013); Santas (1979); Santas (1988).

⁵ See Erginel (2011b).

tively, my view (*bidirectional* view of pain) holds that pain exists during both the deterioration and the restoration, whereas the standard view (*unidirectional* view of pain) holds that pain exists only during deterioration. The *bidirectional* view is, I argue,⁶ not only the more plausible view but also far better supported by the textual evidence. Whether *unidirectional* or *bidirectional*, it is clear that sexual pleasures belong to the appetitive part of the soul, and are mixed with pain in a way that makes them incomparably less pleasant than philosophical pleasures. But the *bidirectionality* matters here because it clarifies that, in all non-rational desires, it is not the deterioration process (as the *unidirectional* view holds) but rather *the desire itself* that is painful. Thus comparing sexual desire and love of wisdom, we are comparing a desiderative condition that is painful and one that is not.⁷

II.

The problem for the *Symposium* is *not* that human beings can have an *eros* for both a body and the Form of Beauty, one of these being a painful desire and the other not. That would not be inconsistent with the *Republic*, nor implausible in itself. The problem is the notion that one can morph into the other as one climbs up the ladder of love. In other words, the same motivational force can change not only in the sense of altering its object (body to the Form of Beauty) but also in the sense that it can become a psychologically very different kind of motivation, turning from a painful form of desire (the satisfaction of which produces a mixture of pleasure and pain according to my reading), to a painless form of desire (the satisfaction of which produces pure pleasure). The difficult question, then, is whether this transformation is psychologically plausible, and whether Plato has a convincing story to tell about it.

We may begin with a closely related question about what range of desires are covered by the ladder of love. Do we find, at the bottom of the ladder, the desire to have sexual intercourse – the desire that Plato classifies in *Republic* IX as belonging to the lowest kind, a paradigmatic painful desire? Plato's discussion of the ladder of love begins at 210a4:

A lover who goes about this matter correctly must begin in his youth to devote himself to beautiful bodies. First, if the leader leads aright, he should love one body and beget beautiful ideas there; then he should realize that the beauty of any one body is brother to the beauty of any other...

This passage is naturally read as identifying a form of *paederastic* love as the first step on the ladder, the starting point of the ascent towards the Form of Beauty.⁸ One may note, however, that this passage follows a discussion of the desire for biological reproduction in animals and humans (207a-208b) and a comparative evaluation of giving birth to human children *vs.* giving birth to intellectual offspring (209c). One might think, then, that the ladder of love starts its evaluative ranking from the third lowest, these two “having been ranked earlier”.⁹ On this reading, the ladder of love begins with such desires for biological reproduction. But I think this is a misunderstanding of what the ladder of love represents.

Given that the steps on the ladder of love are ranked, each step having a higher status than the preceding one, one might suppose that the ladder is an evaluative ranking of various forms of *eros*. But this cannot be right, and there is good reason why Plato identifies the cor-

⁶ See Erginel (2011b), 295-299.

⁷ Nussbaum (1986), 181, goes farthest towards recognizing the hedonic transformation involved in the ascent, but she compares the consequences of higher and lower forms of love, failing to note the contrast between the psychology of higher and lower forms of love themselves.

⁸ See, for example, Reeve (2011).

⁹ Santas (1979), 73.

rect way of loving bodies as the first step on the ladder: the ladder is not merely a ranking of all forms of love, but rather a path that one may embark upon if one is “going about this matter correctly”, a path consisting of stages of better and better love leading up towards perfect love. It is not an accident or error on Plato’s part that the ladder does not include an unrestrained desire to have sexual intercourse: one who aspires to love in the best way neither begins with this form of love nor visits this stage along the way.

It seems, therefore, that the ladder indeed begins the way it appears at 210a4-b3, with the form of love that aims not at sexual intercourse with a beautiful body, but rather at begetting beautiful ideas through a beautiful body. The question for us is the psychology of this kind of love, and whether this kind of love differs from the desire for sexual intercourse or reproduction with respect to being a painful form of desire. The difficulty concerning the transformation of love from the bottom to the top of the ladder would be resolved if this kind of love were painless too (as well as love of wisdom), yet the *Symposium* itself contains no evidence to that effect. Moreover, this solution to the problem seems implausible because this first stage of correct love has, after all, a beautiful body as its object (which is what the beginning climber must “devote himself to”: 210a5-6). As it has often been noted, Plato here appears to refer to the traditional Athenian *paederastic* love, with the qualification that the desire for sexual intercourse is never satisfied, the lover contenting himself with the production of beautiful ideas. The love here is “aim-inhibited”,¹⁰ such that the lover restrains himself from pursuing the natural object of the desire. The uninhibited form of the desire, in other words, pursues sexual union with the beloved no less than in the case of the desire to reproduce.

Plato is unlikely to accept this kind of love as painless also because *Republic* IX is unambiguous that only the desires of the rational part of the soul are painless. These painless lacks are lacks of “true belief, knowledge, intelligence, and, collectively, all of virtue”. It is clear, however, that the *paederastic* love at the beginning of the ladder is not such a lack, having a beautiful body as its proper object. Furthermore, it would be inconsistent with the gradual intellectualization of the object of *eros* in the ascent passage to claim that already at the beginning of the path to perfect love the desire has such an intellectual and non-physical object. We find in *Republic* 585a-d that the status of a pleasure depends on the kind desire of which it is the satisfaction, and the status of the desire depends on the status of (a) that which is empty / lacking, and (b) that which fills this emptiness. Given that the first step of the ladder neither constitutes a lack of the rational part of the soul nor aims at an intellectual object, it fails to satisfy the criteria for belonging in the superior class of painless desires.¹¹

III.

One approach to tackling this problem would be to say that Plato simply changed his mind between the *Symposium* and the *Republic*, and that at the time of writing the *Symposium*, he did not think that love of body and philosophical love have such a different nature. But this way of dealing with our problem strikes me as uncharitable towards Plato. Another option is to claim that philosophical love is painful too. Obdrzalek has argued that there are two kinds of *eros* in the *Republic*, the tyrannical *eros*, which is a key feature of the tyrannical soul (572b-576c), and *orthos eros*, which a guardian feels for a beautiful boy.¹² Tyrannical *eros* “rules the soul in a state of anarchy and lawlessness”, whereas *orthos eros* is tame and unlike tyrannical *eros*, does not threaten “to divert a man’s attention towards a particular be-

¹⁰ Reeve (2011).

¹¹ Cf. Erginel (2011a), 501 ff.

¹² Obdrzalek (2013), 216.

loved and away from the collective good".¹³ She argues that, contrary to what one might expect, the *eros* that philosophers are filled with towards the Forms seems to belong not to the *orthos* kind but rather to tyrannical *eros*. As such, love of wisdom contains both pleasure and pain, whereas *orthos eros* avoids both. Obdrzalek argues that this reveals certain difficulties within Platonic moral psychology, but for our present purposes the crucial conclusion is that the love of wisdom is a painful kind of desire: if this is correct, then both the beginning and the ending of the ladder is painful, and we would avoid our puzzle concerning the psychology of climbing the ladder of love.

I do not think this approach can provide a solution, as the text does not, in my view, support the claim that philosophical love is painful. This would be plainly inconsistent with the "third proof" in *Republic IX*, where Plato aims to show that the philosopher's pleasures are superior because only they are pure (painless). Is there, then, sufficient evidence elsewhere in the *Republic* to cast doubt on the lesson of *Republic IX*? Let us consider the passages raised by Obdrzalek:

- (i) the most important piece of evidence comes from 490b, where Plato describes the real lover of learning:

He does not linger over each of the many things that are believed to be, but keeps on going, without losing or lessening his passion, until he grasps what the nature of each thing itself is with the part of his soul that is fitted to grasp a thing of that sort because of its kinship with it. Once he has drawn near to it, has intercourse with what really is, and has begotten understanding and truth, he knows, truly lives, is nourished, and – at that point, but not before – is relieved from his *odinos*.

This passage appears to provide clear evidence that the philosopher's love is painful, the key word here being *odinos*, derived from *odis*, which usually means pangs of birth.¹⁴ As the *LSJ* indicates, however, *odis* can also mean that which is born amid pains, and sometimes simply that which is born, a child. In contexts where the word is used metaphorically – which is surely what we have here – *odis* can refer physical or mental exertion, or the fruits thereof, not necessarily involving any pain. This painless reading of the philosopher's *eros* would be consistent with the passage, as a philosopher's hard work will not stop until it reaches the culmination of philosophical activity, at which point the pursued knowledge – the fruit of all those efforts – is begotten. While it is possible to read this passage as attributing pain to the philosopher's *eros*, it is also possible to read it without doing so, which we should prefer in order to preserve consistency with *Republic IX*.

Other than the above passage, Obdrzalek offers evidence that she believes classifies philosophical *eros* together with tyrannical *eros* rather than *orthos eros*.

- (ii) According to Obdrzalek, a difference between tyrannical *eros* and *orthos eros* is that tyrannical *eros* involves intense pleasure whereas *orthos eros* does not. She points out that in *Republic IX*, Plato declares the philosophical pleasures to be the greatest, which "suggests that it is directly opposed to *orthos eros*".¹⁵ But it is essential here to see the distinction between the intensity and pleasantness of a pleasure, since it is pivotal for Plato's argument in *Republic IX* that, although the pleasures of the appetitive part of the soul are the most intense, the pleasures of the rational part of the soul are in fact the most pleasant. The intensity of those lower kinds of pleasure is explained by their juxtaposition with pain, and their being mistakenly regarded as most pleasant is due to the inexperi-

¹³ Obdrzalek (2013), 216.

¹⁴ Obdrzalek (2013), 217.

¹⁵ Obdrzalek (2013), 217.

ence of non-philosophers with pure pleasure.¹⁶ On Plato's view, the intense tyrannical pleasures are in fact so thoroughly mixed with pain that they are incomparably inferior in pleasantness to philosophical pleasures. The similarity between the tyrannical and philosophical pleasures turns out to be, therefore, a superficial one, the two kinds of pleasure actually being very much unlike.

- (iii) Obdrzalek argues that, like tyrannical *eros*, philosophical *eros* involves a narrowing of focus: philosophers are single-minded in their pursuit of knowledge, unlike *hoi polloi*, who have "an array of desires".¹⁷ But, first, is there any evidence that *orthos eros* is not "unidirectional" in a similar fashion? It may be argued, for instance, that *orthos eros* is dedicated to the good of the city and does not diverge from this goal. (Indeed, it would be odd if there could be *orthos eros* aiming at objects that are harmful to the city.) The contrast between philosophical *eros* and the scatterbrained *eros* of *hoi polloi* is irrelevant to whether we assign philosophical *eros* to the category of tyrannical *eros* or *orthos eros*.
- (iv) Obdrzalek points out that *orthos eros* is stable and not overwhelming, whereas tyrannical *eros* is "characterized by its overriding power".¹⁸ She writes "That philosophic *eros* is closer to tyrannical than to *orthos eros* is suggested by parallels between the *Republic* and *Symposium*". In Book V, Plato likens the philosopher to a boy-lover with respect to their desires being insatiable, focuses on Beauty in particular among all the Forms, and describes the philosopher's grasp of the Forms in language that is reminiscent of the ascent of the *Symposium*. I agree that the *Republic* passage seems to allude to the *Symposium*'s ascent, but I do not see anything in these parallels to suggest that the philosopher's *eros* is "overriding" in the way that tyrannical *eros* is.

Obdrzalek is right, I believe, to point out that like tyrannical *eros*, philosophical *eros* is a strong, insatiable, and particularly focused species of desire. But these do not constitute sufficient evidence to attribute the negative aspects of tyrannical *eros* – its painful and lawless nature – to philosophical *eros*, especially in the light of *Republic IX*.¹⁹ It turns out, then, that we are stuck with the difficulty of explaining the transformation of a painful desire into a painless one.

IV.

Given the above conclusion, is it possible to tell a plausible psychological story of how someone who loves a beautiful body (in the correct way) can be transformed into a lover of the Form of Beauty? The ascent passage itself tells an intellectual story of how the lover comes to "realize (*katanoesai*) that the beauty of any one body is brother to the beauty of another" (210a8-b1), then:

think (*hegesasthai*) that the beauty of people's souls is more valuable than the beauty of their bodies (210b6-7) and proceed in this way, finally achieving learning (*mathema*) of Beauty itself (211c7-8).

There is no mention, however, of the desiderative transformation involved in this ascent, apart from identifying the shift in the *object* of the desire. The *Republic*, I believe, provides

¹⁶ Cf. Erginel (2011b).

¹⁷ Obdrzalek (2013), 217.

¹⁸ Obdrzalek (2013), 217.

¹⁹ One might take as evidence for painful philosophical *eros* Plato's description in the *Phaedrus* of the painful experience of a recent initiate on the path from being struck by bodily beauty to grasping the Forms (251a). But this description is of one who is still at the early stages of the ascent and provides no evidence regarding the pain-content of philosophical *eros* at the top of the ladder, which is what concerns us here. I thank Suzanne Obdrzalek for alerting me to this passage.

more information on this matter, unsurprisingly because it is the *Republic's* tripartition of the soul that alerts us to the problem. For the problem is essentially that a desire of the appetitive part gives way to a desire of the rational part of the soul, the former being painful and the latter not. In the *Republic*, Plato explains this transformation in terms of the rechanneling of desire, which he considers to be essential in the development of a philosopher. As many scholars have noted, a key feature in the development of a philosopher is that the desires of the non-rational parts of the soul dwindle as the rational part is nourished and its desires get strengthened.

This, I believe, is where we must focus in examining the psychological plausibility of the *Symposium's* ascent. Whether the *Republic's* account of the rechanneling of desire is itself plausible, and whether it can be successfully applied to the *Symposium's* account of how one climbs the ladder of love are questions that will have to be addressed elsewhere.

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