

Comments on some of the work of Martha C. Nussbaum
Nussbaum on Plato's Symposium

The primary text is Nussbaum's "The speech of Alcibiades: a reading of the Symposium", chapter 6, of her *The Fragility of Goodness*, Cambridge University Press Cambridge, 1986, pp.165-199.

There is much to admire here. Nussbaum's spirited defense of Alcibiades is original, thought-provoking, and often insightful. By contrast, her attack on Socrates seems to me uncharitable and unjustified.

The basic idea for this chapter seems to have been prompted by G. Vlastos' paper "The individual as object of love in Plato's dialogues" (*Platonic Studies*, Princeton, 1978). There, Vlastos had argued that, the real object of love, according to Plato, is not a particular individual person, but that person's real, or apparent, admirable properties: virtue, beauty, or whatever. Vlastos regarded this as a serious defect in Plato's theory of love.

Nussbaum defends Plato against this charge. She does not deny that Diotima and Socrates advocate erotic attachment to impersonal forms rather than to particular people. In fact, she insists upon it. But she points out that Alcibiades is depicted as having been, and perhaps still being, half mad with love for one particular person - namely Socrates. On her reading, Plato in the Symposium offers us a terrifying, and in some sense impossible, choice between two sets of values, two ways of life: Socrates vs. Alcibiades:

And now, all at once, exaiphnes, there dawns on us the full light of Plato's design, his comic tragedy of choice and practical wisdom. We see two kinds of value, two kinds of knowledge; and we see that we must choose. One sort of understanding blocks out the other. The pure light of the eternal form eclipses, or is eclipsed by, the flickering lightning of the opened and unstably moving body. You think, says Plato, that we can have this love and goodness too, the knowledge of and by flesh and good-knowledge too. Well, says Plato, you can't. You have to blind yourself to something, give up some beauty. 'The sight of reason begins to see clearly when the sight of the eyes begins to grow dim' ~ whether from age or because you are learning to be good. [*The Fragility of Goodness* p. 198]

It's an interesting suggestion; but I do not see this in Plato's Symposium. On the contrary, I take the text to say that Alcibiades is not living as he should - has gone badly astray - whereas Socrates is an example of human beings at their best.

In addition, it seems fairly clear that Socrates does love Alcibiades. (See, e.g. 213D "I beg you, Agathon, ... protect me from this man! You can't imagine what it's like to be in love with him: from the very first moment he realized how I felt about

him, he hasn't allowed me to say two words to anybody else " (etc). Where is the evidence that Socrates is, in effect, telling a lie? Where is the evidence that Socrates doesn't really love Alcibiades? I will return to this topic in a moment.

□ Socrates clearly represents a follower of Eros, someone who has made a good start on the way outlined by Diotima. If he loves Alcibiades, then, somehow, this love must be compatible with his stage on that path.

Why didn't Socrates make love to Alcibiades?

□ Nussbaum's theory is that Socrates refuses to make love to Alcibiades because he (Socrates) has turned himself into 'stone' in his progress towards the pure light of the Good (the 'eternal form,' p.198). In plain English, the suggestion seems to be that he has given up all interest in sex.

His [Alcibiades'] attempt to know the other encounters an obstacle in the stone of Socratic virtue. It is not without reason that Alcibiades compares Socratic virtues to statues of the gods. For, as we have seen, Socrates, in his ascent towards the form, has become, himself, very like a form - hard, indivisible, unchanging. His virtue, in search of science and of assimilation of the good itself, turns away from the responsive intercourse with particular earthly goods that is Alcibiades' knowledge.

□ It is not only Socrates' dissociation from his body. It is not only that he sleeps all night with the naked Alcibiades without arousal. There is, along with this remoteness, a deeper impenetrability of spirit. Words launched 'like bolts' have no effect. Socrates might conceivably have abstained from sexual relations while remaining attentive to the lover in his particularity. He might also have had a sexual relationship with Alcibiades while remaining inwardly aloof. But Socrates refuses in every way to be affected. He is stone; and he also turns others to stone. Alcibiades is to his sight just one more of the beautifuls, a piece of the form, a pure thing like a jewel. [The Fragility of Goodness p. 195]

□ Nussbaum doesn't like Socrates, that much is clear. But what about her theory? Is that how we should interpret the refusal?

□ Let me offer an alternative view. Socrates refuses to make love to Alcibiades because he (Socrates) loves Alcibiades and doesn't want to harm him. He is trying to do what is best for both of them. How could this be so? There are various possible lines of thought here.

□ (1) Alcibiades has been thinking of the relationship as a sort of trade, or exchange. Alcibiades will give himself - his physical splendor - to Socrates in exchange for Socrates' wisdom and virtue. Socrates sees that this is how Alcibiades thinks of it, and tells him (a) that he (Alcibiades) might be wrong in believing that Socrates has the power to confer wisdom and virtue on others, and (b) even if he does have this power, the exchange would be monstrously unfair. Virtue and wisdom are worth much more than physical beauty. [218E -219A]

□ Is this just boasting? What's the point? Socrates holds that wisdom and virtue are a great deal more valuable, more desirable, more worth having, than physical beauty. Suppose he is right. If that's how things are, then it's important to see them that way. One could go badly astray at some of the important cross-roads in life if one thought otherwise. Thus, as Socrates sees it, Alcibiades may be in serious danger. By refusing the 'exchange' Socrates reinforces an accurate evaluation of these things.

□ (2) It is fairly clear that Alcibiades (a great strategist in war) is thinking of the situation as a sort of battle, or contest. (E.g. "His (Socrates') words made me (Alcibiades) think my own had finally hit their mark, that he was smitten by my arrows." [219B]) If Socrates had made love to Alcibiades, then almost inevitably, Alcibiades would have thought "I've won!" What's wrong with that? How might that harm him?

□ The 'contest,' as Alcibiades seems to see it, is between virtue - goodness - on the one side, and beauty, plus clever strategy, on the other. If Alcibiades 'wins', he may well think "Nobody's perfect. Even the greatest 'saint' can be led astray by someone who is smart enough and good-looking enough. Nobody's perfect." This thought might seem to give one permission to be less good than one should be. In that way too, Alcibiades might be damaged.

□ (3) Plato is opposed to homosexual intercourse. He thinks it's 'contrary to nature,' and, presumably, harmful to the soul. [Phaedrus 250E-251A, Laws, 636C. See Santas, Plato and Freud, p. 80.] Given this view, it would make sense for Socrates to abstain, for the sake of both of them.

□ So far as I can see, Socrates might have refused Alcibiades' invitation for any, or all, of these reasons.

□ In a way, I have been unfair to Nussbaum. The ultimate goal of the quest Diotima describes is looking at, and 'being with,' Beauty itself "... not polluted by human flesh or colors or any other great nonsense of mortality." [211E] Thus, it would seem, if Socrates had achieved that goal he would love only Beauty, and not Alcibiades. That's the picture the Symposium seems to present. (The Phaedrus tells a different story. See Santas, Plato and Freud pp. 69-72.) So, if I am right in thinking that Socrates loves Alcibiades, it is only because he has not yet reached the erotic goal as defined by the Symposium.

What motivates the 'assent' Diotima recommends?

□ Nussbaum's interpretation is that the 'assent' is motivated by prudence, and, in fact, by a desire to escape the riskiness of earthly, Aristophanic, love. As one goes up Diotima's staircase, one becomes 'self-absorbed,' 'self-sufficient,' and invulnerable (like a rock). It is, allegedly, the desire to achieve this state that motivates the assent.

□ A central feature of the ascent is that the lover escapes, gradually, from his bondage to luck. The Aristophanic lover loved in a chancy way. He or she might never meet the right other in the first place; if he did, the other might not love him, or might die, or leave him. Or he might cease to love; or leave; or retreat; or be tormented by jealousy. Often his passions will distract him from his other plans, and from the good. Often at the best of times he would be trying to do something both impossible and self-defeating. The philosopher is free of all this. His or her contemplative love for all beauty carries no risk of loss, rejection, even frustration. Speeches and thoughts are always in our power to a degree that emotional and physical intercourse with loved individuals is not. And if one instance of worldly beauty fades away or proves recalcitrant, there remains a boundless sea: he will feel the loss of the droplet hardly at all. (Ibid. p. 181)

□ Of course it is possible for someone to try to make the ascent for the reasons Nussbaum mentions. The same reasons, or much the same, could lead one to try to love God, or to seek Nirvana. My guess is that Nussbaum would agree. She may hold that all religious, or quasi-religious, quests of this sort are motivated by a desire to escape the risks of the real world and relationships with real people. But this is not a charitable view of such quests.

□ The motivation Nussbaum describes allegedly leads one to strive towards a 'contemplative love for all beauty' - contemplation of the 'boundless sea' of beauty. But this, of course, is not the complete, or final, erotic goal. The goal, as Diotima describes it, is to see Beauty itself - the platonic form - make love to it, and, as a result, give birth to true virtue.[211E-212A] And the motive, she suggests, is, in part, our desire for offspring (as a second choice substitute for immortality).

□ That goal is not risk-free. For one thing, it is not perfectly clear that 'Beauty itself' actually exists. Perhaps, then, the attempt to 'see' it, and so forth, is a wild goose chase.

□ But suppose Diotima is right. By her own account, it is extremely difficult to reach the goal. There's a good chance one won't get there. [How many people have achieved Nirvana?] So that's another risk in the erotic quest.

Other Issues and Objections

Socrates' alleged 'self-absorption'

□ Nussbaum makes this accusation over and over again. For instance: "Inside the funny, fat, snub-nosed shell, the soul, self-absorbed, pursues its self-sufficient contemplation. We see him, at the beginning of the walk to the party, 'turning his attention in some way in upon himself' (174D, cf. 220C-D)" (Ibid. p. 183)

□ This alleged 'self-absorption' is linked to a kind of voluntary deafness. Speaking of a refusal to 'hear' Alcibiades, to 'enter his world,' Nussbaum says, "It is a refusal to investigate and to be affected, where the strangeness of the material

calls, above all, for questioning and humble exploration. It is Socrates' response." (p. 187) Socrates is weird - "excellent and deaf." (p. 184)

□ Why should we grant that Socrates is 'deaf' to Alcibiades in this way? Where is the evidence for it?

□ Given that the platonic forms actually exist, contemplation of them is not 'self-absorption.' It is, or would be, contemplation of something that exists independently of one's own mind. Similarly, given that God actually exists, contemplation of Him is not 'self-absorption' - quite the contrary. My guess is that Nussbaum thinks it is obvious that the forms are pure fantasy - hence, if Socrates' is 'looking at' some such thing (in his mind) he is 'self-absorbed.'

□ Suppose, on the other hand, that when Socrates is in his withdrawn state he is simply engaged in difficult intellectual work - struggling with some particularly tough philosophical problem. Is that 'self-absorption'? Well, maybe. But it need not be selfish, nor need it be an escape.

□ Incidentally, Nehamas and Woodruff translate the 174D passage as "...Socrates began to think about something, lost himself in thought, and kept lagging behind."

The 'only speech that claims to tell the truth'

□ Nussbaum says, of the Symposium, "Its only speech that claims to 'tell the truth' is a story of complex passion, both sexual and intellectual, for a particular individual." (Ibid. p. 167) She is referring to Alcibiades' speech. Before launching into it, Alcibiades had said to Socrates "I'll only tell the truth - please let me!" (Nehamas and Woodruff) Or "I'm going to tell the truth. Do you think you'll allow that?" (Nussbaum, Ibid. p. 165)

□ But surely Socrates too claimed that he would tell the truth? At 199B he says, "...if you wish, I'd like to tell the truth my way. I want to avoid any comparison with your speeches, so as not to give you a reason to laugh at me. So look, Phaedrus, would a speech like this satisfy your requirement? You will hear the truth about Love, and the words and phrasing will take care of themselves."