

## Chapter 9

# Love and Death

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It is commonly thought that there is a connection between love and death. But what can be said *philosophically* about the nature of that connection (if indeed it exists)? This is an imposing question, and only a particularly daring soul (much more so than myself) would attempt to offer any sort of “grand theory” of the matter. Accordingly, my aim in this chapter is more modest: to survey some of the ways in which philosophers have linked love and death, and to suggest how many of those approaches are inadequate.

As a scholar of ancient philosophy, I will take my cue from—and structure my chapter around—some key moments in Plato’s *Symposium*, a text in which *eros* and *thanatos* are both central.<sup>1</sup> The *Symposium* suggests at least three possible ways in which love and death might be connected: first, that love entails (or ought to entail) a willingness to die for one’s beloved; second, that love is a desire for (or perhaps itself is) a kind of death; and third, that love is linked to human mortality and the desire for immortality.<sup>2</sup> I will argue, however, that each of these three suggestions is problematic, and should not be accepted at face value. I am ultimately skeptical as to whether any one, overriding connection—be it moral or causal or metaphysical—between love and death exists. At the very least, the matter deserves more nuanced and multifaceted reflection than what we find in the *Symposium*.

### LOVE AND THE WILLINGNESS TO DIE (PHAEDRUS’ SPEECH)

The *Symposium* consists—rather uncharacteristically for Plato—of a series of speeches. The characters in the dialogue are gathered at the house of Agathon, who are celebrating his victory in a tragedy-writing competition. They decide to spend their evening offering speeches in honor of Eros, rather than getting

drunk again. Socrates readily agrees to this plan, claiming (rather cryptically) that “the only thing I say I understand is the art of love [*ta erotica*]” (177e).<sup>3</sup> All told there are seven featured speakers in the dialogue, though three of these—Phaedrus, Aristophanes, and Socrates—are most relevant in terms of the love-death question.

Phaedrus gives the first and shortest of the speeches of the *Symposium*. He regards Eros as one of the most ancient gods, and praises him as providing humans with “the greatest goods” (178c). Specifically, Phaedrus claims that we all need a certain “guidance” in order to lead successful, flourishing lives, and that love provides precisely this guidance. It does so by implanting an appropriate sense of shame and pride in us, such that we want to do everything possible to act virtuously—and to avoid getting caught acting viciously—in the presence of our beloveds. This sense of shame and pride manifests itself most dramatically in the willingness of a lover to die for the sake of his/her beloved.

There is much of interest in Phaedrus’ speech, but for present purposes two of his claims are salient: first, that love makes us more virtuous, that is, morally better (180b); and second, that all lovers—and indeed, *only* lovers—are willing to die for one another (179b). The first claim raises a number of issues that are beyond the scope of this chapter, so I will observe simply that Phaedrus offers no real argument in support of it, and in fact there are reasons to be skeptical of such a conclusion. For one thing, the moral point of view—as assumed, for instance, in both utilitarian and Kantian frameworks—has often been seen as requiring some degree of *impartiality*, such that we consider all other persons equally. Yet love entails a powerful kind of partiality toward particular persons, to the degree that many of us would be inclined to give special favoritism toward our loved ones, even in cases where doing so might require disregarding (or acting against) the interests of others in a morally problematic way.<sup>4</sup> Now this apparent conflict (between love’s partiality and morality’s impartiality) may be surmountable; perhaps, for instance, partiality can be reconciled with (or incorporated into) morality, or perhaps there is an overemphasis on impartiality that needs to be modified.<sup>5</sup> At the very least, however, it is too facile to claim (as Phaedrus does) that there is something *inherent* in love that *necessarily* or *always* makes us morally better—we would need a clear argument to support such a claim.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, it is not obvious that love itself *is* a moral virtue: for if the virtues (as Aristotle puts it) are acquired through habituation—and are something that we can actively “work on” over time—then that does not seem to be true of love. Most people experience romantic love, for instance, as something involuntary, and not the sort of thing that can be developed simply through practice.<sup>7</sup> Here again, then, the connection between love and morality/virtue cannot amount to a simple statement of identity.

It is Phaedrus' second claim that offers us a way of conceptualizing the connection between love and death: viz., that love causes or enables us to be willing to die for the sake of our loved ones. Phaedrus' formulation of the claim is slightly unclear, and could be taken to mean one (or both) of two things: (a) *only* lovers are willing to die for one another and (b) *all* lovers are willing to die for one another.<sup>8</sup> How plausible are these claims? Clearly (a) is false: troops in a military platoon are normally willing to die for one another; and in other scenarios a person might be perfectly willing to risk his or her life for a stranger (such as moving a child away from oncoming traffic). In neither of these cases do the individuals love each other. But (b) also seems to be false: young children love their parents but might not be willing to die for them; likewise, someone might be unwilling (if pressed) to die for the sake of a beloved but elderly relative.<sup>9</sup>

At this point a Phaedrus-sympathizer might respond as follows: regardless of whether (as an empirical matter) all lovers *would* be willing to die for one another, surely it must be the case that all lovers *should* (morally speaking) be willing to die for one another. In other words, it is a *moral failing* if someone is *unwilling* to die for the sake of his/her loved ones.<sup>10</sup> Yet even this modified moral claim, I believe, is too strong. Suppose that a kidnapper abducts a married couple, and sadistically permits only one of the spouses to live. What does morality demand in this situation? Most of us probably like to think that, if placed in this situation, we would take the bullet for our loved one. Yet in the heat of the moment, one of the spouses might be too overcome by fear or shock to offer to die (or even to contemplate the situation). It strikes me as implausible to claim that such paralysis is a moral failing, or that such overwhelming fear is morally blameworthy.<sup>11</sup> In other situations, a person might have good or compelling reasons not to give up his or her life for a loved one: for instance, a single parent with young children who, despite having recently fallen in love with a new romantic partner, would be disinclined to die for the sake of that partner.

Part of what makes it difficult to assess Phaedrus' claim is that he treats "willingness to die" as if it were an all-or-nothing, binary property—you either are or are not willing to die for your loved ones. In reality, however, such willingness is more a matter of *degree*, which then compels us to ask *how much* willingness one must possess in order to be considered a "good" or "virtuous" lover. Must a person be *completely and wholeheartedly* willing to die? I doubt that such single mindedness ever occurs; it seems more plausible to say that some degree of inner conflict about the matter is always present in these sorts of cases (perhaps one is *partly willing* and *partly unwilling* to die). But how much willingness is "enough"? I would agree that someone who experiences *no* willingness to die—someone who sits idly by while the kidnapper kills his/her spouse—is morally suspect. Yet this end of the spectrum (complete unwillingness) is as unrealistic as the other end (complete

willingness). We are thus left with the gray “middle” area of inner conflict. And for the reasons noted above, I don’t think that someone who experiences such conflict but ultimately decides not to die for a loved one is *necessarily* a moral failure; moral evaluation would need to take account of specific contextual factors.

The last resort of a Phaedrus supporter is to say something like the following (a return to (b) from above): even if we can’t say unequivocally that all lovers *should* be willing to die for one another, nonetheless we can say that all lovers *would* be willing to do so; and if we find cases of apparent lovers who are *unwilling* to do so, then *they are not really lovers at all*. At this point, however, we reach the limits of actual argument.<sup>12</sup> For someone who offers this sort of reply is basically stipulating a *definition* of love, which of course begs the question—one can’t justify a claim about lovers’ willingness to die for one another by asserting that love simply *means* having such a willingness.

In short: Phaedrus has greatly overstated his case, and the connection between love and death is to be sought elsewhere.

### LOVE AS (DESIRE FOR) A KIND OF DEATH (ARISTOPHANES’ SPEECH)

Let us now turn to Aristophanes’ speech, which is probably (and with some justification) the most famous and popular part of the *Symposium*. Aristophanes first tells of the history of the human race: originally, human beings were “double” in form, that is, possessed of a single body with two completely integrated and coordinated halves (two faces on a single head, four legs, four arms, two sets of genitals). As such, these creatures were exceedingly powerful and strong, and posed a threat to the gods. So in response, the gods cut humans in half, fashioning us into our present form (with one face, two arms, two legs, and so on). This in turn accounts for the origins and nature of love: humans today are incomplete, and spend much of their lives searching and yearning for their missing half. Love, on this view, is a desire for wholeness or completeness; love promises to heal our broken and divided nature. Aristophanes thinks that each of us does in fact have a “matching half” (191d, 192b), and if we are lucky enough to find him/her, then we have an immediate sense of belonging, and a strong desire never to be apart.

Aristophanes’ speech is a classic statement of the union theory of love—the notion that love either *is* a merging with another person and/or is *caused by* (or *constituted by*) a desire to do so. It is a theory that has had many adherents since the *Symposium*. Montaigne, for instance, voices powerful support for this view of love (at least as it pertains to the love of friends).<sup>13</sup> Montaigne

claims that in true friendship “our souls mingle and blend with each other so completely that they efface the seam that joined them, and cannot find it again,” and that such friendship involves a “complete fusion of wills.” On his view, true friends have everything in common between them—their “wills, thoughts, judgments, goods, wives, children, honor, and life”—and their relationship is that of “one soul in two bodies . . . they can neither lend nor give anything to each other.”<sup>14</sup> More recently, Robert Nozick and a number of other philosophers have endorsed some version of the union theory as well.<sup>15</sup>

It is central to Aristophanes’ account that separation (into our current, isolated half) is what causes us to love, and that union with our beloved—the removal of the separation—is the ultimate *telos* which all lovers desire or seek. This is why he thinks that any of us, if given the opportunity, would readily consent to being “re-fused” with our missing half, and restored to our original nature:

Suppose two lovers are lying together and Hephaestus stands over them with his mending tools, asking, “What is it you human beings really want from each other?” And suppose they’re perplexed, and he asks them again, “Is this your heart’s desire, then—for the two of you to become parts of the same whole, as near as can be, and never to separate, day or night? Because if that’s your desire, I’d like to weld you together and join you into something that is naturally whole, so that the two of you are made into one. Then the two of you would share one life, as long as you lived, because you would be one being, and by the same token, when you died, you would be one and not two in Hades, having died a single death. Look at your love, and see if this is what you desire: wouldn’t this be all the good fortune you could want?” Surely you can see that no one who received such an offer would turn it down, no one would find anything else that he wanted. Instead, everyone would think he’d found out at last what he had always wanted: to come together and melt together with the one he loves, so that one person emerged from two. Why should this be so? It’s because, as I said, we used to be complete wholes in our original nature, and now “Love” is the name for our pursuit of wholeness, for our desire to be complete. (192d-e)

Notice here that the goal of Hephaestus’ work is to make two distinct creatures literally into *one*: they are to become “parts of the same whole” that “melt together,” “naturally whole,” and “made into one”; they would be *one* being with *one* life and *one* death. This implies that the re-fused being has a single soul—a point consistent with the way in which Aristophanes characterizes the original beings that existed prior to Zeus’ cutting of them in half. Those original beings had a single head, and moved themselves in a completely organic and integrated way; there is no hint whatsoever of two separate personalities that vie for dominance or experience any kind of conflict with one another.<sup>16</sup>

But there is something odd and unsettling about this idea of complete union. If a genuine “we” is to come into existence—a thoroughly organic whole that transcends the two original halves—then the “I” of those halves must go out of existence. In other words, Aristophanic union, were it actually achieved, would *be* a kind of death. The case is essentially one of metaphysical *fusion*. Writing about the fusion of single-celled green algae, Fred Feldman rightly notes that if two such cells (say X and Y) unite to form a new, single diploid cell or zygote (Z), then there is no living part of Z that can be identified as *the* part that X or Y turned into; rather, the stuff from which X and Y were made is thoroughly blended in Z.<sup>17</sup> The same is true of Aristophanes’ re-fused creature: there would seem to be a complete loss of personal identity of the original partners, such that their individual selves would no longer remain.<sup>18</sup>

Aristophanes’ claim thus amounts to the following: that love itself is a *desire for* a certain kind of death (and ideally *culminates in* that death). But is this right? Is fusion with another person the actual or ultimate *telos* of love—that which all lovers *do* in fact desire? I find such a view to be quite implausible, and I suspect that most people would find it to be very much at odds with their own experiences and observations (at least sufficiently so to refute the claim as an overly broad empirical generalization<sup>19</sup>). If union or fusion really *were* the ultimate goal of love, then lovers would be actively striving to align all of their interests, values, and life-goals with those of their beloveds, and to eliminate those that cannot be aligned—and yet that is not what normally happens. Loving partners certainly enjoy spending time together and share a great many things in their lives; yet they also enjoy spending time apart, and consciously maintain separate interests and life-goals which do not (and cannot) merge with one another. In short (and *contra* Montaigne), their wills are *not* one, and it would perhaps be only a die-hard mystic who might *want* them to be one.<sup>20</sup>

A supporter of Aristophanes might respond here that even if not all lovers *do* desire union, they *should* desire it as the most choice worthy or optimal end point of a relationship.<sup>21</sup> But I believe that such a view is mistaken, and that union is not desirable at all. We can understand why it is not desirable in at least two ways (both of which have been noted by Alan Soble<sup>22</sup>). The first concerns the moral dimension of human relationships. As Aristotle has noted, true friendship involves a concern for the moral development and well-being of the other person; at the same time, a good friend should serve in some way as “another self,” reflecting us back to ourselves and goading us toward self-improvement (and away from personal and moral corruption).<sup>23</sup> Aristotle’s point seems to be applicable to all types of loving relationships: in love we both exhibit and expect to receive benevolence; likewise we offer and expect to receive honest evaluation, criticism, and praise (as opposed to dishonest flattery or gratuitous criticism). Yet the union theory of love is incompatible

with this moral dimension of relationships. For example, union would make benevolence impossible: if two souls are fused into one, then there can be no such thing as concern for an “other” for his or her own sake, since there *is* no “other!” In this case, “selfishness is logically eliminated, because a single entity cannot be selfish toward itself or treat itself selfishly,” and hence that “if union of two people into a single entity eliminates their being selfish toward each other, it also eliminates their having robust concern for each other.”<sup>24</sup> Similarly, union would make self-sacrifice impossible: there can be no such thing as making a sacrifice for an “other” if the other does not exist; a person no longer has any good of his or her own that could be sacrificed for an other.<sup>25</sup>

The second problem with union is that it is too high a price to pay for the complete loss of one’s autonomy. Kant’s notion of enlightenment—thinking for oneself—is a pretty basic feature of adulthood, not to mention the entire enterprise of philosophy. Yet such enlightenment would be an impossibility were union a reality. Again Soble makes the point well:

We desire to join our life with the life of another person, to mingle or merge our selves with others’ selves . . . Yet, we also require a sense of ourself as a distinct individual, which depends on maintaining separateness from the other. We need to glory in the exercise of our own abilities and to be responsible in our own right for acting in the world in accordance with our natures . . . We undergo the strenuous process of separating ourselves from parents and other powerful significant others precisely to become our own authentic persons. Why forsake the fruit of that onerous and exhausting labor by establishing ourselves once again within a union? Why give up that hard-gained autonomy for a union-love, abandoning our prize? If women in our culture have more difficulty than men individuating themselves from others and achieve whatever autonomy they do achieve more precariously and painfully, why should they be willing to throw it away?<sup>26</sup>

This last point about the gendered dimension of relationships receives powerful expression in Beauvoir’s account of “the woman in love.”<sup>27</sup> Traditionally, as a subordinated group, women have been unable to attain full autonomy on their own, and (on Beauvoir’s account) as a result have turned toward love as a way of raising themselves up—merging with an all-powerful, male other. Union, on this view, represents the hope of salvation, a way of transcending one’s contingency, of becoming more than *just that* (i.e., *just female*). Of course this is a false and self-deceptive hope, and nowadays we would rightly conclude with Beauvoir that such an attempt to use romantic union as a path toward self-realization is pitiable and destructive. Yet if Beauvoir’s woman in love is to be criticized for mistakenly seeking fulfillment via union, then doesn’t that point apply more generally? I have a hard time seeing how

union can ever be a rational or desirable goal, regardless of the gender of the individuals involved.

Lest I seem too unsentimental here, let me make it clear that I find Aristophanes's speech to be deeply powerful, and to contain some degree of truth. Most people probably feel some degree of existential aloneness at various points in their lives, and seek to lessen it in love (or at least hope to do so). And I agree with Soble that in love there can and should be a *mingling* of selves—that love enables us to *enlarge* ourselves, and to transcend *some* of the boundaries of ourselves (and perhaps even rework some of those boundaries). But I think there are very few people (if any) who actually wish to *eliminate* all of the boundaries of the self via love; that doing so is likely impossible anyway; and even if it were possible, it would not be desirable.<sup>28</sup> So I conclude that the Aristophanic vision of love and death is problematic, and we should once again consider other alternatives.

### LOVE AND IMMORTALITY (DIOTIMA'S SPEECH)

Socrates' speech in the *Symposium* is in many ways the philosophical climax of the dialogue, or at least the most philosophically complex part of it. Socrates in fact reports a speech that he allegedly heard from Diotima, a "wise woman" whom we know nothing about. According to Diotima, Eros (the god) is the child of Poros (Resource) and Penia (Poverty), and as a result has a dual nature: he is always lacking something, and yet also has a clever nature that enables him to procure what he needs. Neither ignorant nor wise, neither beautiful nor ugly, neither mortal nor immortal, Eros is an intermediate figure (203b-204b). This duality expresses itself in the love that humans experience. All humans naturally desire what is good and beautiful; but not only that, we desire to possess good and beautiful things *forever* (205a). Thus, whether we realize it or not, we all have an innate desire for *immortality*—the only condition under which we could actually achieve the good and the beautiful forever (207a). It is this desire for immortality, according to Diotima, that ultimately drives the experience of love. For as incarnate creatures we cannot obtain *actual* immortality; rather, the closest we can get to immortality is via *reproduction*, giving birth to something new in place of something old. And reproduction in turn can take place only in the presence of what is beautiful and harmonious (206c-d). For Diotima there are many different kinds of reproduction, ranging from the physical begetting of children, the doing of heroic deeds and leaving a legacy, and the creation of artistic works. (On her view, *all* of us are pregnant, in both body and soul [206c].) Unsurprisingly, it turns out that the best kind of reproduction occurs via philosophy, as we "ascend" from physical instances of beauty to the Form

of Beauty itself, thereby “giving birth” to virtue and knowledge in the soul (210a-212b).

At the heart of Diotima’s speech is thus the following claim: that we love *because* we are mortal, and that we are seeking immortality (or at least something approaching immortality) via love.<sup>29</sup> Yet the “because” in this claim is ambiguous between two possible meanings. On the one hand, the “because” might indicate that human mortality and the desire for immortality are what *explain* love or are the *cause* of love or are the *reason why* we do in fact love (and fall in love). On the other hand, the “because” might refer to an alleged *justification* for love: that what makes it reasonable or worthwhile or rational to love others is that we achieve a kind of immortality through it (such that the *value* of love is to be found through that achievement).<sup>30</sup> Plato’s text can be interpreted, I think, as meaning either or both of these.<sup>31</sup> In both senses, however, I believe that the underlying claim is incorrect. In the remainder of this chapter I will try to show why this is the case.

### Immortality and Explanation

On the first construal, Diotima is asserting that human mortality and the drive toward immortality provide an explanation for love. There are a number of possible ways of developing this idea. One might say, for instance, that we love because of a *conscious* desire to transcend our mortality; that it is something we are aware of and are actively trying to remedy. Sartre appears to hold something like such a view: he claims that love is a kind of project, in which we engage so as to transcend our facticity and contingency and become God.<sup>32</sup> Alternatively, one might say that we love because of an *unconscious* drive toward immortality; that we think we love for one set of reasons, when in actuality we love because of another set of reasons or factor. Such is Schopenhauer’s view, who claims that it is the metaphysical Will—the blind, irrational urge underlying all existing things—that pushes us toward love and sexual relationships, as a way of perpetuating itself.<sup>33</sup>

Although there are problems endemic to each of these particular formulations,<sup>34</sup> for the time being I wish to focus on the main claim underlying all of them: that it is our mortality—the fact that we will die—that is the ultimate cause of all love. If this is correct, then it follows that if the ultimate cause of love (human mortality) were removed, then love too would disappear. In other words, *if we were immortal, then we would no longer love one another.*

But this last statement is incorrect. It seems to me that an immortal person—at least if s/he were embodied—*could* and likely *would* still love, and that there is absolutely nothing about the added years of life which precludes this possibility. An immortal person would still experience loneliness and lust; would still have emotional needs; would still want to be known,

valued, and prized by at least someone; and would still have a desire to form connections with others and move beyond the narrow limits of the self.<sup>35</sup> The fact that this person has a much *longer* life than the rest of us does nothing to dissolve these needs and emotions.

This is not to say that an immortal person's experience of love would be "just like" that of a mortal person. If confronted with an infinite future—in which we have ever-new chances to try again to get things right, and no risk of losing our loved ones to death—we might take our relationships far less seriously than we do now.<sup>36</sup> There might also be an upper limit to *how many* times an immortal person would fall in love or experience love. According to some recent surveys, most adults report having fallen in love a fairly small number of times, and predominantly in their younger years.<sup>37</sup> Given an infinite future, then, it might turn out that a person's odds of falling in love would decrease over time—though that would depend on a variety of factors like the persistence (or lack thereof) of memory and the particular age (if any) at which one attains immortality.<sup>38</sup> Finally, it is unclear whether an immortal person could experience an *eternal* love, that is, whether it would be possible to love *one and the same person* for all of eternity (as opposed to loving multiple persons sequentially over the course of eternity). Bernard Williams has famously argued that immortality would be boring, and I am sympathetic to his claim; at the very least, I think that if we are to stave off boredom in an immortal life, we would need to fill our lives with a constant succession of new activities—and, along the same lines, a constant succession of new relationships.<sup>39</sup>

Yet even if there are limits on how many times an immortal person might love, and how seriously and how long such a person might love any one individual, it seems clear *that* love is still possible (and likely) in the context of an eternal life—at least so long as that eternal life takes an *embodied* form. With a disembodied life (whether immortal or not) things are different, and indeed I think that it is *impossible* for a disembodied mind or soul—assuming that such a thing could very well exist—to experience love (at least any sort of love that remotely resembles the earthly kind<sup>40</sup>). On one understanding, love involves (at least in part) a response to certain valuable properties or qualities in a beloved. But it is unclear how that kind of response would occur in the case of two disembodied minds or souls: How could two souls ever meet? Or learn about one another? Or communicate with one another? Or share common experiences with one another? What could possibly be said to be the triggering cause(s) of love in a disembodied state? What would be the possible object of one's love?<sup>41</sup> I see no way in which these questions can be answered; in fact our entire vocabulary for talking about love—and the reasons why we love the particular persons that we do—makes unavoidable reference to bodily characteristics.<sup>42</sup> We do indeed love people for their characters, personalities, and minds, but we love those things precisely insofar as

they are expressed *in embodied form*. Even if we could somehow make sense of the concept of a disembodied soul experiencing love, we would still have to confront some of the other notorious problems with disembodiment—most notably the problem of individuation. Here again, I have a hard time conceiving how disembodied existence could possibly admit of plurality.<sup>43</sup> And without plurality, of course, it makes no sense to speak of “one” soul loving “another.”

The above analysis suggests that it is not our *mortality* which explains the existence of love, but rather our *embodiment* (granting that, as things now stand, human embodiment *entails* mortality). This in fact seems to be precisely Plato’s own view. In the *Timaeus* Plato gives an account of the origins of the cosmos, including the origins of human beings. The Demiurge (Craftsman) creates human souls prior to human bodies, in order that our souls can receive knowledge of the Forms and the cosmos as a whole (41d-e). It is only *after* souls are implanted in bodies that they experience—for the first time—sense-perception, love, pleasure, pain, and other emotions (41e-42a). (By contrast, although there are several dialogues where Plato gives an account of discarnate existence—including the *Republic*, *Phaedrus*, *Phaedo*, and *Gorgias*—love is never mentioned as a feature of that existence.)

Now I am not claiming that embodiment is the “ultimate” or “complete” explanation of love; I hardly have grounds for making such a grandiose pronouncement (and I am also skeptical as to whether any such “complete explanation” for love exists). Embodiment is no doubt a key explanatory factor, but there undoubtedly other factors as well.<sup>44</sup> At the very least, I hope to have said enough to show that human mortality is not a plausible candidate for “explaining love,” and that we do not love because of a desire for immortality.

Having said all of this, let me add that an awareness of mortality and death is certainly *connected* to love in a very basic way, for it lends *urgency* and *intensity* to our loves. We know that both we and our loved ones will die, and that fact can push us to *work on* and *shape* our relationships, and make us less likely to take them for granted. (By contrast, as I noted above, an immortal person—faced with an infinite future—might take a more cavalier attitude toward his/her relationships.) Indeed, as Lenman has well noted, much of the meaning of human (mortal) relationships comes from the fact that they are a kind of “travelling companionship on a structured and . . . predictable journey,” as we move through life’s various stages (including old age and death). As with everything else in life that is scarce, we value and prize our loved ones in large part because we know that they cannot be with us forever.<sup>45</sup> An immortal life would lack this dimension. Diotima’s claim would thus be more plausible if it were reformulated as a statement about what causes us to love as deeply as we do, as opposed to a statement about what causes us to love at all.

## Immortality and Justification

Let us turn now to consider the second construal of Diotima's claim—namely, that love is *justified* through the fact that it leads to a kind of immortality (or that the importance or value of love is to be found in this fact). As with the first construal, however, this claim is simply not plausible. For one thing, any effort to use love as a “pathway to immortality” will fail, since there is no reasonable sense in which love actually allows us to become immortal.<sup>46</sup> A number of studies do suggest that individuals with supporting, loving relationships have greater emotional and physical well-being, and tend to have increased longevity.<sup>47</sup> But even if love helps us to live *longer* lives, it certainly does not enable us to live (literally) *forever*.<sup>48</sup> Diotima herself fully acknowledges this point, when she notes that reproduction—leaving behind something new in place of something old—is what humans have *in place of* literal immortality (207a), and is what enables us to become immortal *as far as is possible* (207d). The great benefit of *eros*, on her view, is that it can (if pursued appropriately) draw our attention “upwards” toward philosophy and the contemplation of the Forms, which will in turn enable us to live the most virtuous and blessed life.<sup>49</sup> We need not accept Platonic metaphysics to appreciate the point. Perhaps, then, it would be more plausible to say that love gives us a powerful way of *coping with* (and not overcoming) our mortality and finitude.<sup>50</sup>

Moreover, even if love somehow *could* enable us to achieve immortality that would hardly provide a morally sound *justification* for pursuing it. The problem here is that, if our primary goal is achieving immortality, then we risk treating our loved ones as a mere means to that goal; all human relationships would become mere instrumental goods. Simply consider: suppose that you are in a relationship with someone, and discover that s/he is (for whatever reason) unable to help you achieve immortality. (Even if love in general is capable of making us immortal, it does not follow that every particular instantiation of it is capable of doing so.) It would then follow that you should end the relationship with this particular person, regardless of how fulfilling it might have been in other respects. Likewise, when seeking a potential romantic partner, it would be prudent to determine—as far in advance as possible—how much potential s/he has to foster your own immortality; and if another person comes along who has better potential in this regard, then you should pursue him/her instead. Now does any of this seem like a morally sound (not to mention *loving*) way of fostering human relationships?<sup>51</sup> Granted that people enter and exit relationships for all sorts of reasons, and employ various kinds of criteria in the process. In this case, however, one is pursuing a relationship primarily for the sake of a goal—personal immortality—that is entirely *self-centered*: that is, a goal that does not seem to have any potential

benefit to one's partner or to the relationship.<sup>52</sup> I conclude, then, that there is a great danger in "justifying" love in terms of the pursuit of immortality, for it leads us to treat our partner as a mere stepping stone or means toward our ultimate, higher goal.

This does not mean that love can't be justified at all, but rather that we must seek its justification somewhere other than immortality. I think that it is perfectly reasonable to ask "What is the value of love?" (or "Why should anyone want to love?"), and that we can find a range of plausible answers in other ways. Hugh LaFollette has offered a very clear and sensible account of some of the values that loving relationships promote: they increase happiness; they help to elevate a person's sense of self-worth and self-esteem; they promote a person's self-knowledge; and they promote character development and moral development.<sup>53</sup> What this shows is that the justification of love is best sought in *this* life, and not in some future (eternal) life.

## CONCLUSION

My aim in this chapter has primarily been a negative one, as I have wished to demonstrate that several ways of conceptualizing the connection between love and death are inadequate. However rich and important the *Symposium* is as a philosophical text, we should not accept its pronouncements on this matter at face value. Phaedrus claims that all and only lovers are willing to die for one another. But I believe that this is false: some nonlovers are willing to die for one another, and some lovers might reasonably lack such willingness (and ought not be criticized as moral failures as a result). Aristophanes regards love as a desire for union, and hence as a desire for a kind of death. But this too is implausible, since death-by-fusion is neither that which lovers *do* desire nor is it something that they *should* desire (or find *desirable*). Finally, Diotima connected love to the human desire for immortality. But, again, this view proved to be insufficient: the desire for immortality fails to provide either an explanation for love or a justification for love.

In the course of examining these views, however, I have noted some more plausible and modest directions in which they might be developed. With respect to Phaedrus, we can surely say that most forms of love involve *some* willingness to die for the other, while also recognizing that such willingness is a matter of degree and can (and does) coexist with mental conflict. With respect to Aristophanes, it is more reasonable to say that love involves a desire to *enlarge* the boundaries of the self and to *minge* oneself with another, while simultaneously maintaining something of one's personal identity. And with respect to Diotima, we should think that love is best explained by human embodiment and finitude, and is best justified by reference to a number of

personal and interpersonal values (greater self-knowledge, self-esteem, character development, and happiness among them). Taken together, these more modest claims might not amount to a “grand theory” of love or death. But perhaps the desire for such an overarching theory is itself misplaced, and is something we are best disabused of.

## NOTES

1. The *Symposium* is an incredibly rich and complex dialogue, and interweaves literature and philosophy more than any other of Plato’s dialogues (with the exception of the *Phaedrus*). I do not pretend here to offer a complete exegesis of or commentary on the text (of which there are many already in print). My aim, rather, is to use a few pithy ideas in the dialogue as a catalyst for reflecting on broader issues.

2. In presenting these claims, Plato focuses exclusively on *eros*, that is, sexual or romantic love. In this paper I wish to broaden the inquiry, and consider how love—not only in its erotic/romantic variety but also in regard to friendship and familial love—relates to death. Obviously there are major differences among these kinds of love, but I will assume here that there is at least something (however fuzzy) that they share, and in virtue of which we call all of them “love.”

3. All translations are taken from Plato 1989.

4. Examples can be readily supplied here: Would you steal needed medicine if your spouse’s life depended on it? Would you help your bank-robbing sibling or parent escape the country?

5. See, e.g., LaFollette 1996 (Chapter 13) and Friedman 1993 (Chapters 1 and 2). In another context, Plato himself presents such a view: in *Republic I* Polemarchus claims that justice involves doing good to one’s friends and harm to one’s enemies (a view that implies that partiality makes us more just and virtuous).

6. A more sensible and modest approach—and one with which I am inclined to agree—is that of LaFollette 1996 (Chapter 13). LaFollette regards morality as a network of habits, and argues that it is generally through close, personal relationships that we develop those habits, both in terms of moral knowledge (an awareness of what others’ interests are and how to promote them) and moral motivation (concern about others’ interests). As such, morally good individuals are much more likely to have had loving relationships in their life than not (granting that the presence of such relationships is no *guarantee* of moral character).

7. Also cf. Pettit 1997, 154–56, who notes the structural differences between love on the one hand and virtues such as fairness and kindness on the other hand.

8. He says that “no one will die for you but a lover, and a lover will do this even if she’s a woman” (179b). The first part of the statement implies (a), while the second part implies (b).

9. The example need not depend on the fact that the relative is elderly; anyone whose life is judged to be (overall) qualitatively bad—for example, a relative or spouse with a terminal and extremely painful disease—would fall into the same category.

10. We can exclude the case of young children from consideration here, since they are unable to fully conceptualize death, and so are unable to possess a willingness to die for the sake of someone.

11. Cf. Aristotle's discussion of courage in *Nicomachean Ethics* III.6–7. He notes—appropriately—that not all kinds of fear make one a coward, and that some things are “too frightening for a human being to resist . . . at least for everyone with any sense” (1115b; in Aristotle 1999). Granted that the courageous person *overcomes* his/her fear in the appropriate situation; nonetheless, there must be some distinction between situations in which such overcoming is supererogatory, and other situations in which it is morally required or expected.

12. Or at least, we have reached the limits of philosophical argument. Claims of the sort “All lovers would do X” are ultimately empirical, and I am unsure of how (using, e.g., methods of modern psychology) one would go about verifying or falsifying them.

13. Montaigne, “Of Friendship” (in Frame 1958).

14. *Ibid.*, 139, 141. Montaigne wrote the essay for his friend Étienne de la Boétie, of whom he writes, “It is not in the power of all the arguments in the world to dislodge me from the certainty I have of the intentions and judgments of my friend. Not one of his actions could be presented to me, whatever appearance it might have, that I could not immediately find the motive for it. Our souls pulled together in such unison, they regarded each other with such ardent affection, and with a like affection revealed themselves to each other to the very depths of our hearts, that not only did I know his soul as well as mine, but I should certainly have trusted myself to him more readily than to myself” (140). And again, that the friendship “seized my whole will, led it to plunge and lose itself in his; which, having seized his whole will, let it to plunge and lose itself in mine, with equal hunger, equal rivalry. I say lose, in truth, for neither of us reserved anything for himself, nor was anything either his or mine” (139).

15. Nozick 1989. Helm 2013 discusses a number of other contemporary proponents of the union theory, including Solomon 1981, Solomon 1988a, Scruton 1986, Fisher 1990, and Delaney 1996.

16. 189d-190a. E.g., Aristophanes notes that when these creatures wished to move, they *thrust out all eight limbs* at once (190a)—implying a single commanding faculty or soul.

17. Feldman 1992, 67–68. Feldman himself hesitates to say that either X or Y “died,” preferring instead to say that they *ceased to exist* (or underwent a “deathless exit” from life). But I see no good reason to adopt that view.

18. Rowe 1998, 158. Contemporary proponents of the union theory (see note 15) do not always go as far as Aristophanes in advocating literal fusion. In that case, though, they are not suggesting union so much as a partial blending or overlapping.

19. The claim takes the form “All lovers (ultimately) desire X,” which, as I noted in note 12, is inherently difficult to verify or falsify.

20. Rowe 1998, 158.

21. I suppose that one could also respond by claiming that even if not all lovers *think* that they desire union, they nonetheless do, perhaps on a subconscious level. Yet this again runs into the unfalsifiability problem.

22. Soble 2008, 156–60.

23. *Nicomachean Ethics* Books VIII-IX. Aristotle distinguishes several different kinds of friendship, but places particular importance on what he calls “friendship for virtue.”

24. Soble 2008, 158.

25. *Ibid.*

26. Soble 2008, 159.

27. Beauvoir 2011, Chapter 12.

28. At the same time, I am not claiming that complete autonomy is either desirable or possible, any more than complete union is; some mixture of autonomy and mingling is optimal.

29. Cf. esp. 206e-207a. Diotima is of course not alone in holding this view. We find the same claim, for example, in Unamuno’s *Tragic Sense of Life*, where the author writes that “the thirst for eternity is what is called, among men, love, and whoever loves another desires to become eternal in this other . . . The sense of the vanity of the passing world leads us into love, the only feeling which triumphs over the vain and the transitory and which fulfills and eternalizes life—at least apparently, if not in all reality. Love, especially when it struggles against destiny, overwhelms us with a sense of the vanity of this world of appearances and allows us a glimpse of another world where destiny is overcome and liberty is law” (Unamuno 1972, 44–45).

30. On the distinction between explanation and justification as it applies to love, see Thomas 1991. In what follows I will be considering the explanation and justification of love as a *general* phenomenon (that is, why we love or should love *at all*), as opposed to considering the issue in *particular* cases (why we love or should love the *particular persons* that we do).

31. For instance, a statement like “love must desire immortality” (207a) could suggest that Diotima is offering an explanation for love (that a thirst for immortality is what ultimately *motivates* all love). Alternatively, if Diotima is aiming to answer Socrates’ question—“What use is Love to human beings?” (204c)—then she might be offering a justification of love.

32. Sartre 1956, 471–93.

33. Schopenhauer 1958, 531–60 (“The Metaphysics of Sexual Love”). An ardent supporter of an evolutionary account of love might also fall into this category (that we are driven by our biological natures to replicate our DNA); so too might proponents of the “terror management theory” in psychology.

34. For instance, the Sartre view implies that falling in love is voluntary, which is certainly at odds with most people’s experience. The Schopenhauerian view, on the other hand, is unfalsifiable.

35. Cf. Fischer 2014: “If [I] am separated from someone I love or care about, or if I am just lonely now, I have reason to seek to reunite with the person or to find friendship, love, and companionship. The mere fact that I know that I have *forever* does not alleviate the suffering of loneliness *now*.” Sartre’s account of love—according to which we are seeking to overcome the gaze of the Other by absorbing that Other—would also be applicable in an immortal life (since an immortal person would still be subject to the gaze of the Other).

36. Cf. May 2009, 63; he well notes that “the bonds between parents and children would probably slacken if children were no longer dependent on their parents for

survival.” (This point can be generalized: immortality would make us less vulnerable, and thus—perhaps—less lovable.) Lenman 1995 rightly wonders whether an endless sequence of relationships would come to seem “hopelessly insipid” and a “mere servicing of an instinct” (167).

37. One such survey was reported in the *Daily Mail* (27 April 2012); another in the *Huffington Post* (28 August 2013).

38. If, in the course of an immortal life, one does not age at all, then one’s number of beloveds could potentially be limitless (though whether that’s a good thing is another question). But it might matter whether one would be eternally in the mind/body of a twenty-five-year-old or that of an eighty-five-year-old.

39. Williams 1973. The issue here is at least twofold. First, is an eternal *relationship* possible and/or desirable? Here Williams’ framing of the matter is relevant: in order for an eternal relationship to be desirable, we would need to imagine some one person who would make eternal boredom unthinkable in the context of that relationship. But I have a hard time imagining any one person being so utterly absorbing that I would *never* want to start a new relationship with someone else (no matter how many new activities I engaged in with the initial person). Second, is an eternal *love* possible and/or desirable? Again, I have a hard time imagining how an eternal love could be sustained over time, unless one or both partners become so thoroughly transformed in their characters that they eventually become entirely new people; in that case, however, personal identity would be lost, and so too would the love that existed among the earlier partners.

40. A Christian theist would say, for instance, that God experiences and expresses love—not of the *eros* variety (a love that responds to value) but of the *agape* variety (a love that creates value). (See, e.g., Nygren 1953.) Since my concern in this paper is to explore the love-death connection on wholly non-theological (or naturalistic) grounds, I will not address this view here. I will note, however, that believing in a divine love is quite different from showing that it is possible and conceivable.

41. As Broad has noted, disembodied existence—if it is to be intelligible at all—would require clairvoyance (perceiving without sense-perception), telekinesis (acting without limbs), and telepathy (communicating without a voice or external signs). (See Broad 1992, 277–78.) But it is hard to make sense of any of these. For instance, how can telepathy be possible? How could disembodied person A ever *know* that disembodied person B was communicating with him/her? Without the normal means of verifying communications, it is not clear how A could tell which of his/her mental concepts came from B and which concepts came from A’s own imagination (Flew 1976, 111–13).

42. Cf. Flew 1976, 110–11. Also Hospers, who notes that in the very attempt to imagine ourselves in a disembodied form we end up making reference to the very bodily characteristics that we are trying to do without (Hospers 1992, 279–81). (We can see this clearly, e.g., by trying to imagine ourselves present at our own funeral.)

43. We assume that a disembodied soul is *thinking*—but *whose* thinking is it? Is there any way to tell whether one mind or a plurality of minds are thinking a particular thought? What exactly would constitute the difference between two disembodied minds—can I have any clear notion of how something happening to *me* in the afterlife would differ from something happening to *someone else*? (On this issue cf. Geach

1992, 229; Flew 1976, 114–18; and Williams in Lewis 1978, 57–59.) We can't individuate disembodied minds based on position; and it is problematic to individuate them based on their respective memories. (As Flew notes, memory can't constitute personal identity if it also presupposes personal identity—isn't what I remember the fact that I *am* the very person who did certain things in the past?) So there seems to be no clear way to individuate them at all.

44. It is worth considering whether human *finitude*, in general, explains why we love. By this I do not mean our temporal finitude or mortality (which I have already discussed above), but our epistemic, physical, emotional, and moral finitude. In addition, I think there may be a connection between love and the human quest or desire for *meaning*. (Cf. Unamuno 1972, 44, who thinks that it is our sense of the *vanity* of the world that leads us to seek love. Also Sartre 1956, 347, who connects love to the desire to transcend our facticity and have our existence *justified*.) A Christian will, of course, have a ready answer as to the explanation (and justification) of love: "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19); and "Let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love" (1 John 4:7–8).

45. Lenman 1995, 168. Also cf. Kass 2001.

46. At least, not unless one buys into certain theological assumptions. A Christian might say, for instance, that it is by practicing *agape*—loving God, loving one's neighbors as oneself, loving one's enemies—that one is able to acquire eternal life in God. But strictly speaking this claim is not accurate: one will have an eternal afterlife *regardless* of whether one practices *agape*; the only thing that the practice of *agape* is supposed to guarantee is a *good* afterlife.

47. A number of the relevant studies are cited in Seppälä 2013.

48. If the claim is that love enables us to achieve immortality on earth, then that is empirically false (since there is no evidence of anyone ever having achieved such an immortality). If the claim is that love enables us to achieve immortality in some sort of afterlife, then it is incumbent upon the proponent of such a claim to explain why and how immortality is "rationed" in this way—a case that will be impossible to make without some prior theological or other metaphysical assumptions.

49. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato also claims that the appropriate practice of *eros* can help us to free ourselves from the cycle of reincarnation, and achieve a more choice worthy form of existence (disembodied immortality). Yet, as with the Christian view noted above (n. 46), the *fact* of eternal existence is already a given in Plato—all of us have an incorporeal soul that is eternal—and so is not something that we need to work to achieve. It is thus false that love allows us to *achieve* immortality (since immortality is not an "achievement" at all).

50. There are different ways of cashing this out. Perhaps love offers us a *hint* or *insight* into something more-than-human. (Cf. Unamuno 1972, 45: love "gives us a glimpse of another world where destiny is overcome and liberty is law.") Another possibility is that loving relationships offer a kind of *salve* for one's finitude—a soothing agent that falls short of cure. Or perhaps, à la Camus, love offers a way of *revolting* (without soothing) against the absurdity of existence. Either way, I think that Beauvoir had it right: that true love is "not a salvation but an inter-human relation" (Beauvoir

2011, 694). (It would be going too far, I think, to claim that love uniquely allows us to confront our mortality with “honesty” or “authenticity,” or that it provides us with an “answer” to the problem of finitude. On this point I fully agree with Wisniewski 2008 that there is no such answer available, and that all talk of “authenticity” in this context betrays an elitist self-deception.)

51. A more realistic analogy can be found in couples’ attempts to have children. Take a couple that has been happily married for ten years, only to discover that one of the spouses is infertile. Does that fact constitute a morally sound reason for divorce? If the answer is “yes,” then would it be equally appropriate to insist that new romantic partners provide—at the outset of a relationship—the positive results of a fertility test?

52. After all, it’s not as if being immortal would make you a *better* romantic partner or friend. In fact it is more likely that being immortal could be downright detrimental to the other person and to the relationship. For example, suppose that you successfully achieved immortality but your partner failed to do so. Would you have any reason to care? Wouldn’t it be in your own interest to maintain the relationship, even at the expense of the other person’s immortality? At the very least, this kind of “immortality asymmetry” would be toxic to the relationship.

53. LaFollette 1996, 81–92. The connection between love and self-knowledge is also taken up in Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics* 9.4) and Badhwar 2003. The connection between love and moral development is discussed by Friedman 1993 and Solomon 1988b.

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