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An Unconventional Symposium on Love

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In Plato's *Symposium*, Socrates and some of his companions congregate to discuss the nature of Love. Although each speaker's individual interpretation of the meaning and origin of true love differs, all of their ideas are built upon similar philosophical principles. If a similar conversation was conducted between philosophers of different time periods and backgrounds, however, the ideas presented about love would become tremendously more diverse. In addition to debating the actual definition of love, the question of how it is expressed would arise. Is love defined through the pursuit of wisdom, the connection of two souls, beauty and sexual desire, or perhaps by some bio-psychological instinct? Interpretation of love fluctuates greatly between individuals, depending on their religious, philosophical, or personal views on the subject. Experience and social influence effect how individuals perceive this topic, and throughout the years authors, poets, scientists, and philosophers have expressed opinions that reflect their varied backgrounds.

For instance, in Plato's *Symposium*, Ovid's *Amores*, Dante's *Vita Nuova*, and Freud's copious collection of relevant works, the meaning of love is questioned, examined, and rationalized; and in each work, a unique perspective is conceived. With such different views on the subject, an assembly identical to the one in Plato's *Symposium* involving these four famous figures would undoubtedly ignite conversation diverse in themes, ideals, and beliefs according to the participants' time periods and personal philosophies. Despite their obvious differences, however, would

there be a common ground to which all three could relate? Could some connection be made in their conversation in spite of their cultural and idealistic differences? Although it is impossible to predict what this conversation would actually entail, these authors' works, written about love, assist in forming a conjecture about how they would approach their speeches. The following speeches are the ones that would occur in my creative rendering of a symposium involving Ovid, Dante, Freud and Plato, who will express their theories on the characteristics and meaning of true love.

As it will be portrayed, the first to give his speech would probably be Ovid. In the *Symposium*, the speeches are given in a meaningful order, beginning with the speeches that are the most materialistic, tangible, and simple-minded and ending with the most complex, logical, and profound. As the speeches progress, they also begin to build off of one another, using former ideas and improving or disproving them. Compared with the other writers, Ovid's perspective on love is the most superficial because he focuses more on physical beauty and sexual desire. Following his speech would probably be Dante's, whose personal insight on love concentrates on the spiritual connection of the lovers, and on its control over a lover's soul. Although Freud's ideas may not be considered by most readers to be deeper conceptually, he was late to the party, so he had to follow rather than precede Dante. Placing Freud after Dante provides the perfect opportunity for him to attack religion. He rejects Dante's focus on spirituality as an unnecessary, imaginary aspect of love and is also less superficial than Ovid because he incorporates the importance of the actual *purpose* of sex (survival and satisfying the *id*). The last speaker would most appropriately be Plato, who would be able to unify the previous ideas with his own theories about true love. He would connect the ideas of the spiritual bond of lovers and the manifestation of physical love through its reproduction in beauty; in addition to these ideas, he would offer a new dimension to the subject by emphasizing the necessity of pursuing knowledge and a higher truth in one's search for true love.

Though these four thinkers have significantly different views on the topic of love, some connections can be made in their opposing concepts. The conversation escalates in substance of argument, becoming deeper as the speeches progress. Their discussion's focus begins with the physical, then continues to the

spiritual and the natural, and then finally transcends these topics while simultaneously incorporating them in an explanation of a higher pursuit of truth. In this particular party of men, the topic of love is discussed in such breadth that almost anyone could identify their own opinions on true love with one of the speeches or a combination of them.

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Prior to the event of speech-giving, Ovid, probably the most cheerfully enthusiastic of the group, was designated to begin the discussion; he accepted the position quite affably. Freud had not yet arrived, so Dante would follow Ovid. Since Plato suggested the discussion in the first place and introduced the topic being discussed, it seemed most logical that he would be the last to speak.

Ovid:

“So I am to be first, am I? I rise to the occasion—love is a feeling I have come to express so strongly and deeply, and tonight it is ripe in my memory from a night spent with my heavenly Corinna. The verses pour out of me since I have become the prey of that boy whose arrows never stray, and the overwhelming beauty of that girl I love. Cupid has shot his subtle dart; love’s in possession, tossing my poor heart. I’ll yield, but not out of cowardice. No, not at all. To love my Corinna is a noble calling, for love is like war:

Be somewhere ahead, and the lover too
Will trudge on for ever, scale mountains, ford swollen rivers,
Thrust his way through deep snow.
Come embarkation-time *he* won’t talk of ‘strong north-easters’,
Or say it’s ‘too late in the season’ to put to sea.
(Ovid 1. 9.9-13)

Although the dangers are clear to us both, we persevere since we know the cause—our love—is one which is worth any peril we may meet. This is how love can be understood, you see, for when lovers are so passionately committed to one another, even the most precarious situation cannot deter their devotion.

“Take for instance this love affair of which I have been speaking, with the beautiful angel who moves me from idleness to

bravery, from dull indifference to a fiery passion! By day I send her secret letters which convey my love and desire to see her again, and I wait for her reply with desperate hope of seeing her that night. The daytime has become wretched and vile to me since I have discovered that true happiness exists only in her angelic presence in the secrecy of nighttime. Though it is forbidden, my love for her cannot be contained; it is bursting from my body in perpetual anticipation of the moment when I will next be able to touch her. Her visage is forever impressed in my mind, her voice ringing in my memory. She frustrates me when she dwells on the appearance of her dress or the color of her hair; her self-consciousness is ridiculous — every part of her radiates beauty, every inch of her body perfected by my loving gaze.

I couldn't fault her body at any point.
 Smooth shoulders, delectable arms (I saw, I touched them),
 Nipples inviting caresses, the flat
 Belly outlined beneath that flawless bosom,
 Exquisite curve of a hip, firm youthful thighs.
 But why catalogue details? Nothing came short of perfection,
 And I clasped her naked body close to mine.
 Fill in the rest for yourselves! Tired at last, we lay sleeping.
 May my sestias often turn out that way!
 (1.5.18-26)

“But to love her by worldly means does not do her beauty justice, so as you can see I have made my love for her immortal through the art of poetry. Her beauty will live forever within my words so that my love can eternally endure and grow. What more could one offer than everlasting love? This is true love — love that will never die, even when the lover is no longer living. ‘So when the final flames have devoured my body, I shall / Survive, and my better part live on’ (1.15.41-42). Love is not corporeal...you must see that true love stretches beyond our bodily realm, indestructible in its immortality. I bestow this upon my fair Corinna, our love undying within the illustrious words that I create, for ‘My gift is poetry, the praise / Of beautiful girls. I can make them immortal. Fine dresses, / Jewelry, gold, all perish. But the fame / Bestowed by my verse is perennial’” (1.10.59-63).

Dante:

“Well done, Ovid. You have proclaimed your feelings of love quite clearly and eloquently, as would be expected from such a distinguished poet...”

Dante is momentarily interrupted as Sigmund Freud makes a fashionably late appearance, rolling in his famous couch behind him.

Freud:

“Apologies for the late arrival! Who would have thought these ancient Greek doorways were so narrow! Haha!”

Plato:

“Sigmund, welcome! You’ve just missed Ovid’s very...*poetic* speech, but you’re just in time to hear our friend Dante! Please Dante, proceed.”

Freud settles on his couch. Dante is annoyed but continues.

Dante:

“Yes, well as I was saying...Ovid, your passion for the one you love has become eminent through your manner of speech, but my love is a different love. It is a love that burns within my soul and by the will of God. Love is a subject to which I am very well acquainted from the experience of loving another with unrelenting devotion. Since the moment I first saw my gracious and virtuous Beatrice, Love began to take control of my life and my soul. This is what causes love to be so unpredictable – we have no power to determine our souls’ desires or who we love because when it is present, love determines our actions and how we feel. For my Beatrice, beauty has no end, much like your Corinna. However, my love for Beatrice extends far beyond the softness of her skin, the perfection of her form, or the light within her bright eyes; her beauty emanates so indefinitely that it has breached the obstruction of my body and penetrated into my soul. From that immortal beauty and graciousness, my soul was immediately captured and my bodily function became not of my own free will,

but of God's.

"The love of which you speak is merely the expression of physical desire. What you do not realize is that true love exists beyond sexual pleasure or physical contact – it exists in a spiritual form, mystical and intangible, captivating the souls of lovers. *My feelings of true love weaken me almost to the point of death; the only life remains in hope of seeing my gracious lady again and in my poetry. All of my hopes and desires lied in her mere greeting, a gracious gesture to acknowledge her awareness of my existence. When her sweet greeting enters my ears, I become so overcome with ecstasy that I must depart from everyone as if intoxicated. Allow me to quote from a sonnet written about my unremitting love for my Beatrice which describes the merciless hold my god and master, Love, has upon my heart:*

Often it is brought home to my mind
the dark quality that Love gives me,
and pity moves me, so that frequently
I say: 'Alas! is anyone so afflicted?':
since Amor assails me suddenly,
so that life almost abandons me:
only a single spirit stays with me,
and that remains because it speaks of you.
I renew my strength, because I wish for help,
and pale like this, all my courage drained,
come to you, believing it will save me:
and if I lift my eyes to gaze at you
my heart begins to tremble so,
that from my pulse the soul departs.
(Dante Sc. 16, Sonnet 1)

"Love revealed himself to me through many visions. In my first vision of Love, he held my heart in his hand, my lady wrapped in the other, and obediently she ate it in front of me; Love began to weep and drifted away from me with my lady still in his arms.

Joyfully Amor seemed to me to hold
my heart in his hand, and held in his arms
my lady wrapped in a cloth sleeping.
Then he woke her, and that burning heart
he fed to her reverently, she fearing,
afterwards he went not to be seen weeping.
(Sc. 3, Sonnet 1)

Now it is obvious even to the basest of fools what this vision implied, but at the time I was shaken and bewildered. Eventually I came to realize that through my love for Beatrice, I became closer to God. I saw that my love, which was virtuous, passionate, and true, was God. Then an even further comprehension dawned on me – Beatrice, who inspired all of these virtuous feelings, was not merely a woman or an object of licentious desire, but God. Like Christ, her person was the manifestation of God in human flesh, and she became my savior. Now we can see that true Love will control our actions, our words, our souls. It becomes our master, our god, and our only will to live. ”

Freud, who may or may not have been rolling his eyes throughout the last speech, took his turn next...

Freud:

“Though Dante’s speech was full of passion for the subject, I must say that if we all had such feelings about love, then mankind would be doomed. How could we ever reproduce and survive as a species? Dante, I wonder if you ever even *touched*...but never mind, among the many problems I found with your definition of love was your dependency on religion. Unfortunately, this dependency is all too common among humans, but if you were truly honest with yourself you would realize that religion is a fabrication of your own fantasy. In the search for the meaning of life mankind created religion, and though it provides momentary happiness, in the long run it merely becomes an obstacle to human intelligence. ‘To anyone with a friendly attitude to humanity it is painful to think that the great majority of mortals will never be able to rise above this view of life’ (Freud 22).

“In reality, purpose in our lives as humans is achieved when we satisfy our pleasure principle. As I explained in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, one of the main factors that threaten our happiness is our relationship with other humans. So man tries to avoid unpleasure to gain happiness; I am, of course, speaking of the way of life which makes love the center of everything, which looks for all satisfaction in loving and being loved. One of the forms in which love manifests itself – sexual love – has given us our most intense experience of an overwhelming sensation of

pleasure and has thus furnished us with a pattern for our search for happiness. So there you are – it all comes down to sex, really. Sex is natural, instinctual, for sexuality exists within us even as infants and allows us to survive as a species. It also satisfies the pleasure principle, and all of this leads to becoming happier, leads to what we call “love.” Let me take a moment to recall a later passage from *Civilization and Its Discontents* to elaborate further on this topic:

People give the name ‘love’ to the relation between a man and a woman whose genital needs have led them to found a family; but they also give the name ‘love’ to the positive feeling between parents and children, and between the brothers and sisters of a family, although we are obliged to describe this as ‘aim-inhibited love’ or ‘affection’. Love with an inhibited aim was in fact originally fully sensual love, and it is so still in man’s unconscious. Both – fully sensual love and aim-inhibited love extend outside the family and create new bonds with people who before were strangers. Genital love leads to the formation of new families, and aim-inhibited love to ‘friendships’... (91)

This passage pertains, of course, to the most natural forms of love or sexuality, though much more about this subject can be understood by reading my *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. Back to our topic of love, though...even love of beauty is sexual since ‘beauty’ and sexual ‘attraction’ were once the original characteristics of an object of sexual desire. Although I regretfully missed Ovid’s speech, I am sure that he spoke of beauty as he does in his poetry, and this would be the perfect example of sexual attraction being referred to as beauty, and also an example of ‘genital love’. The only problem with the way love is perceived is that humans often try to romanticize it or glorify it into some higher, even *religious*, experience. Although I have only touched upon a mere *fraction* of what love really is, it should be clear now that love is something that is instinctual, which can be explained scientifically and logically. Thus love is no mystery; it is inherent.”

Plato:

“I would like to thank you all for your contribution to our discussion tonight, as all of you have introduced stimulating ideas.

True love, however, lies outside the descriptions of the presentations tonight. The love that each of you has described, though each quite distinct from one another, is not love in its *true* form. Your love is merely the *reflection* of real love. It is true that beauty and a bonding of spirit are needed in love, as you have argued. For example, contemplate what Diotima said on this subject: love is created through reproduction of and through beauty, which is achieved by the continuation of life and ideas. I am reminded of what was said in Ovid's and Sigmund's speeches when I recall this quote by Diotima: 'Reproduction goes on forever; it is what mortals have in place of immortality. A lover must desire immortality along with the good, [since] Love wants to possess the good forever' (Plato 207a). Dante is also correct in saying that a bond between the souls of lovers is necessary, but love is found even further beyond these two elements. True love (the real love that has only a reflection in our world) can only be achieved through the pursuit of knowledge and higher truth. Though you *do* seek this higher truth through God, Dante, you fail to understand that the true form can never actually be reached. To identify true love with a worldly being such as your beloved Beatrice is ridiculous, for she is not love herself, but instead the channel through which you become *closer* to the truth.

"When we also consider what Socrates said about this topic, we can see that love is something that is desired because it is something we do not have. Only through this search of knowledge of a higher form of love, beyond our material comprehension of the universe, will we ever find what we have decided to call 'true love.' Worldly pleasures and superficial beauty taints your vision of love, Ovid, but in some ways your intentions to express love are in the right mind. You say that your poetry makes your love immortal. In this way, you are becoming closer to the true idea of love because your physical love becomes the reflection of the true love that exists in some higher place – your poetry. True love cannot be found through poetry, however, unless this poetry seeks out the real love through pursuit of wisdom and knowledge. In conclusion, I must emphasize that it is highly impossible that true love can actually ever be reached through our mortal comprehension. In our discussion of the meaning of true love, the meaning is unfathomable; it is almost a trick question. As humans, we may only become *close* to the real form of love; while we are living, our understanding of love is merely the *pursuit* of true

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