Introduction

Most people, if they know anything about Socrates, know about his claims to ignorance. The claims to ignorance are widely understood to capture something of the essence of Socrates, as well as the very essence of the human condition and the type of life that Plato exhorts us to live through his dialogues. Socrates is not, however, popularly recognized for his claim of erotic expertise,[1] and this claim is little explored by scholars beyond discussions of the so-called erotic dialogues. This book is based on the premises that Socrates' expertise in erotics also reflects the human condition, that properly guided eros is the essence of a life well lived, and that the fundamental role of eros in human life is portrayed broadly throughout the corpus, well beyond the "erotic dialogues."

Symposium, *Phaedrus*, *Charmides*, *Lysis*, *Alcibiades I,* and perhaps *Republic* are considered Plato's "erotic dialogues" because interlocutors discuss eros, and erotic relations among the interlocutors are dramatically portrayed. These dialogues, of course, shape scholars' investigations of erotic desire in Plato's work. But they also circumscribe those investigations. In actuality, Plato's entire world is permeated with eros.

A close examination of a surprising array of dialogues reveals that the dramatic world Plato creates includes eros among the best-known metaphysical, epistemological, and cosmological conversations. By

[1] *Symposium* 177d–e.

exploring dialogues not traditionally considered erotic – *Timaeus, Cratylus, Parmenides, Theaetetus, Phaedo,* and others – I demonstrate the crucial philosophical presence of eros in each of them. The organization of the book reflects a holistic vision of eros and its pervasive role in the dialogues' dramatic world: a journey from the origin of the cosmos and human origins, through various types of human self-cultivation, concluding with human destiny as a return to our origins. Each chapter contributes individually and then cumulatively to an integrated presentation of eros, showing that from beginning to end, the human soul is erotic, and if cultivated correctly in its embodied life, it aims to return to its noetic origins, which is its lifelong desire.

Though I shall provide a chapter-by-chapter account later, here briefly is the picture of eros that emerges from these dialogues. In Plato's world, eros has divine cosmological origins and is part of the original divine human soul. Eros is coextensive with the individuation of souls and thus with their alienation from divine being. Alienation entails a forgetting of our origins, but recollection tethers the forgetful human soul to its origins. With eros residing in the human soul, we are driven to a noetic understanding of first causes nonetheless, as recollection shares with eros the same objects. Eros shapes what we pursue and how we pursue it. It directs the activities of *psuchê* that are rooted in its alienated origins, namely, questioning, hypothetical reasoning, and the creation of metaphysical theories that take us beyond human experience and direct us back to those divine origins. A life engaged in these activities requires a particular type of courage and rigorous psychic exercise or training, both of which arise through proper guidance. Good guidance comes from true lovers in erotic relations, and from an expert in matchmaking, joining *erômenos* to suitable *erastês*. Leading and guiding by a true lover are of particular importance in the case of cultivating self-knowledge. All these activities of self-cultivation – questioning, gaining courage, engaging in rigorous philosophical gymnastics, being matched to a true lover, and gaining self-knowledge through a good erotic relation – are carried out with an awareness of and an openness to our mortal limitations. In fact, human mortality looms over these erotic practices of self-cultivation. Bodily death signals the *nostos*, or return home, for which self-cultivation has been preparation. Under good guidance, both human and divine, the

well-prepared erotic soul returns to the objects of lifelong desire and achieves noetic disalienation.

All chapters refer back to traditional "erotic dialogues" as touchstones that ground and then expand this understanding of Plato's erotic world. Insofar as the arguments about eros are constructed from readings of dialogues not traditionally considered to be erotic, the project also makes a case for understanding eros as fundamental to other philosophical concerns in the dialogues. Metaphysical, epistemological, and cosmological issues are greatly enriched by seeing their rootedness in eros. By entering conversations with scholars on seemingly non-erotic dialogues, as well as those working on the "erotic dialogues," the project crosses borders that carve out the existing conceptual landscape in Platonic studies. The project challenges the conventional wisdom regarding, for example, what is an ontological problem and what is an erotic problem, or what is metaphysical and what is erotic. The project also throws into question which dialogues are to be considered the "erotic dialogues."

APPROACH

Plato does not, to my mind, have an overarching theory or doctrine of eros that is consistent across dialogues or that emerges in any single dialogue. I would say the same, in fact, of all philosophical concepts that are given importance in Plato's corpus. There is, however, an abiding interest in eros across seemingly non-erotic dialogues, which is consistent with ideas expressed in the "erotic dialogues" in crucial ways. By revealing that consistency, and framing it within the book's structure, I argue for eros's importance to human life and death, self-cultivation, and philosophy.

When I speak of "Plato's world," I refer to a fictive creation made by Plato, populated with characters of his making, who believe and say things of Plato's making, who act in ways of Plato's making, and who do so in places and situations also of Plato's making. I distinguish, however, Plato's own views from what I mean by "Plato's world." Even recognizing that Plato creates different characters, different topics, different narrative structures, and even different styles within dialogues, it is clear nevertheless that he also successfully creates a world. That world is coherent enough that we are drawn into it, participate

in it, critique it, stand apart from it, and feel compelled by it – and it is that world on which I should like to pull back the curtain. This is an erotic world, through and through.

Although each chapter focuses on a single, or perhaps a few dialogues, no chapter is intended to be a complete interpretation of a single dialogue. No chapter will tell the reader what any particular dialogue is "about." Rather, by attending to their details, as well as their larger social, cultural, and literary contexts, I sketch out the manner in which these dialogues tell us something about eros. Each dialogue provides a glimpse of eros perhaps not before seen, and each is in deep conversation with the traditional erotic dialogues. There are very real differences among the dialogues, and there are good reasons to proceed cautiously when reading across dialogues, so I have attempted to do so with an awareness of the individual philosophical and literary integrity of each.

Because no chapter is a complete reading of any single dialogue (though Chapter 5 comes perhaps closest to that), I proceed as though readers are already familiar with the basic dramatic and argumentative outlines of each dialogue. I attempt to explain eros as it is situated in each dialogue in relation to that dialogue's more explicit meaning and what scholars have traditionally taken it to mean. Nor is the project in any way aimed at providing an overall interpretation of the "erotic dialogues"; they are, again, points of reference and sounding boards. I endeavor to produce close and attentive readings, often in conjunction with broader explorations of eros in the cultural milieu of Classical Athens. These readings are aimed at exposing and reconstructing the erotic world of Plato's making.

EROS

The discussion here of human erotics takes place against the backdrop of Greek practices of pederasty. Dover's scholarship on "Greek homosexuality" serves as a touchstone for my understanding of these practices, and it provides a context for much of what takes place in Plato's dialogues.[2] More recent work done by Henderson, Keuls, Halperin, and others contributes further to our understanding of eros and sex

[2] Dover (1989).

in the Classical period.[3] The last couple of decades have seen extensive work on various aspects of sexual practices in the ancient world, on which I also rely and which the interested reader will find in my bibliography. By way of introduction, I provide here only the basic outlines of the dynamic between pederastic partners.

Mature men courted or pursued adolescents and young men, beginning around the age of the younger men's first facial hair and attainment of full height. The partners in these couples are typically referred to as *erastês* and *erômenos*, respectively, terms that in their linguistic form reflect the active and passive roles of each. Reciprocal love between those of the same age category was virtually unknown,[4] and the distinction between activity and passivity was highly important. Acceptable sexual activities comprise a complicated and nuanced mix that fosters these active/passive roles of the partners while avoiding domination/submission. So, for example, intercrural sex is most typically acceptable, while anal penetration garnered disapprobation and was the object of comic ridicule.[5] There was a gift economy between an *erastês* and his *erômenos,* though it is carefully distinguished from prostitution in law and literature.[6] A young *erômenos*, even one with several *erastai*, could still fall in love with a girl, and was expected to marry.[7] Socially, these pederastic relationships served as entrées into the larger Greek homosocial world of politics, economics, education, cultural production, war, and physical competition. Plato's erotic world is drawn against this background.

One of the misfortunes for the English language is that there is no real equivalent for eros and its cognates, especially when it comes to creating an English verb equivalent to *erasthai.* (I ero, you ero, she

[3] Henderson (1991), Keuls (1985), and Halperin (1985, 1990a, 1990b).

[4] Dover (1989, 16, see also 86 for a discussion of possible exceptions in vase paintings).

[5] Dover (1989, 66–68, 81–91, 100 ff., 140 ff.). In intercrural sex, the younger *erômenos* stood upright while the older *erastês*, facing him, bowed his head and shoulders as he held fast to his chest or torso, stimulating himself between the thighs of the young man while often also fondling the younger man's genitals. As with all sexual taboos across cultures, such as being the submissive partner in anal sex, it was practiced nonetheless, as evidence from Classical artwork clearly shows. Dover also discusses the association of submissive roles with feminine roles, both socially and sexually.

[6] Ibid., 92–93.

[7] Ibid., 66.

eros . . . . Worse perhaps: I erate, you erate, she erates . . . It just does not work.) In addition to the linguistic issues, there are conceptual ones as well. Eros is most often translated as "love," but this does not truly capture what Plato has in mind, and it can be misleading in some instances, especially because eros is not an emotion, but love is, or at least it is commonly taken to be by most English speakers. Nor is eros one of the appetites in Plato's psychology, so it must be treated distinctly from *epithumia*. In short, eros signals the divine, *epithumia* does not. I make a case against identifying eros with either of these in the course of the book's argument. The closest term to Plato's broad use of eros is "desire," though it is a particular kind of desire.

The account of eros that emerges here, albeit gradually, is that eros is a desire for being and wholeness, from which the human soul has been alienated from the beginning. Eros signals both our connection to and our alienation from an original condition among noetic objects. Eros is a desire for reunification that can show itself in a variety of ways. We desire immortality, we desire unity, we desire to experience what lies beyond our experience, we desire knowledge we cannot have. In our embodied state, erotic desire can take many forms, and we pursue them to the extent that we are able. When our eros is well guided, we create works of art, we act courageously, we "love," and we pursue philosophy with those whom we love; when we are poorly guided, we are tyrants, we ambitiously pursue power, and we destroy things and people. Eros is the engine of what we call philosophy, and philosophy is a coping mechanism for the human condition in which we find ourselves suspended between divine origins and a mortal fate, always mediating between the two. Philosophy is a human activity that externalizes the erotic in us, the erotic that yearns for its original cosmic connection and wholeness.

I do not, however, believe that Plato has an ascetic or de-sexualized view of erotic interactions, even though he does frequently use sexual imagery to point beyond itself. Lyric and other poetry, Attic comedy, and even early philosophical work provide overtly sexual language and a store of images on which Plato draws in his depiction of erotic desire. Human sexuality is one outlet for humans in their embodied state to express primordial erotic desire insofar as they are able. I explore several instances in the dialogues under consideration in which bawdy, sexual jokes make serious points about eros, and it is quite clear that

the sexualized and homosocial settings of several dialogues contribute to Plato's vision of eros. Plato's deft use of these shows that human sexuality shares in similar types of mediation between polar phenomena ascribed to eros: the union of individuated beings; ecstatic feelings while profoundly bound to one's body (literally standing beside oneself when profoundly attached to one's body); and momentary (that is, temporally bound) escape from the temporal.

ARGUMENT

The shape of the argument begins as an arc of human life that becomes a circle as it returns to its origins. The first and last chapters, therefore, have a special connection that is forged and sustained through the intervening four chapters. I begin with Plato's account of cosmic origins in *Timaeus* and end with his vision of the afterlife for humans in *Phaedo*, which I argue is a vision of our return to our disalienated, pre-individuated origins as described in *Timaeus*. The four middle chapters take up four means of human self-cultivation that Plato's world urges for beings with the kind of origin described in *Timaeus* and the kind of fate described in *Phaedo*. Each of the dialogues I focus on in the middle chapters depicts or discusses one type of human cultivation in a context that is not typically thought of as erotic, and in each instance I make the case that it is erotic and that it is part of a unified story about the erotic soul. Specifically, the dialogues in these middle chapters exhort human beings to cultivate the psychic disposition of questioning; we are challenged to have courage in the face of human limitation and the demands of inquiry; we can best meet the rigorous demands of inquiry if we are matched with and guided by someone who is a genuine *erastês* and who knows our soul; and we must strive for self-knowledge, which can only happen if we associate with proper erotic guides, whether human or divine. All of these practices cultivate and prepare a soul for its return to its origins. Eros is the thread that stitches together all of these ideas in Plato's world, and hence eros unifies all six of the chapters. The human soul is originally and primordially erotic, and the well-cultivated erotic soul can best remember and return to its origins.

Chapter 1 is an exploration of eros in *Timaeus*, with particular focus on its relationship to *nous* and its distinction from *epithumia*. *Timaeus*

indicates that eros is an original part of the disembodied soul as created by the demiurge and, as such, is part of the noetic or intelligent design of the cosmos. *Timaeus* reveals, furthermore, that eros is the moving force behind our desire to know first causes and the noetic world; that human eros, like the senses and emotions, needs to be trained and guided toward its proper objects; and that eros is distinct from the appetitive desires in the mortal soul, which appear in *Timaeus*'s account of disease and decay. *Epithumia* is described, moreover, as passive, while at the same time the dialogue makes it clear that erotic pursuit of noetic first causes is active.

Chapter 2 links the erotic human soul, described in *Timaeus*, with the interrogative psychic state. This chapter takes *Cratylus* as a starting point, both its opening conversation that emphasizes the role of the dialectician who asks and answers questions, and its etymology of "hero," which explicitly links eros and questioning. Asking and answering questions are the most fundamental aspects of Socratic practice, and they constitute, as well, a fundamental psychic disposition toward the world. Plato provides explicit evidence in *Cratylus* and *Symposium* that he consciously plays on the homophonic or acoustic resonance between things asked (*to erôtêma*) and erotic things (*ta erôtika*) to establish philosophical links between them. Both grow out of a lack, both require resourcefulness to satisfy that lack, and both reflect our desire to transcend human finitude. Furthermore, discursive practices portrayed as antithetical to questioning, for example, sophistic speeches, are presented as fundamentally anti-erotic discursive practices. Finally, Plato links eros to heroic action in *Cratylus*, and my discussion of that link here establishes a connection between questioning and courage, to which I turn in the next chapter.

Plato's *Parmenides* gives significant attention to eros, establishing its association with manly courage (*andreia*), and Chapter 3 explores its erotic content. Through its erotic setting and poetic references, *Parmenides* depicts giving birth to *logoi* amidst beauty in a highly erotically charged environment. This includes the erotic relationship between Parmenides and Zeno, as well as references that liken gymnastics to philosophy through phallic images in erotic poetry. It shows that philosophy is an erotic endeavor, akin to naked exercise in the gymnasium, that hypothetical reasoning emerges from lack and desire, and that metaphysical questioning is erotic longing for

what lies beyond human experience. The hypothetical deductions themselves are linked to eros as depicted in *Symposium*. The strange (*atopos*) third thing, which disrupts the ordered deductions, and which confounds ontological pairings, parallels erotic mediation. It is neither temporal nor atemporal, neither in motion nor at rest, neither becoming nor being, but it mediates between the temporal, moving, and becoming learner and the atemporal, static, noetic object in a sudden flash of insight, *exaiphnês*, mimicking the type of mediation that eros carries out.

Chapter 4 is an extension of the previous chapter, bringing the themes of courage and gymnastics into an exploration of *Theaetetus*. Like *Parmenides*, *Theaetetus* also foregrounds the homosocial activity of wrestling to characterize philosophical activity, and it adds wartime battle into the mix. *Theaetetus* celebrates a war hero, and its inner drama takes place in the palaestra, making convenient use of the metaphor of naked wrestling as a means of revealing the erotic vulnerability inherent in dialectic practice. *Theaetetus*'s best-known metaphor, Socrates as midwife, includes as part of the midwife's job the little discussed task of matchmaking, which extends our understanding of eros further. Socrates matches souls to each other as beloved to lover, and Plato's[8] descriptions of Socrates' matchmaking – and even pimping and procuring – conjure up their linguistic cousins that denote seeking and calling to mind; the art of matchmaking thus provides an erotic understanding of, respectively, Socratic inquiry and recollection. As both matchmaker and midwife, Socrates guides Theaetetus, if not to a definition of knowledge, then toward the erotic pursuit of knowledge and toward accepting vulnerabilities common to dialectic and erotic love.

Where the previous two chapters focus in part on the courage necessary to engage in the philosophical enterprise, Chapter 5 shows that one cannot successfully engage in philosophy, or cultivate the soul, without proper guidance. Plato draws from the Greek traditions of guidance, pertaining to the role of guides in human life and in the afterlife; this chapter addresses guides in human life, and Chapter 6 addresses guides in the afterlife. Unlike the other chapters, Chapter 5 focuses exclusively on "erotic dialogues," *Alcibiades I* and *Phaedrus*, due

[8] And Xenophon's.

to the fact that self-knowledge is a crucial type of self-cultivation, but is only addressed in Plato's explicitly erotic dialogues. *Alcibiades I* establishes the connection between guidance and self-knowledge, making the point that being guided by a true lover is the only way toward self-knowledge. Moreover, just as Socrates uses his power to guide (*agein*) Alcibiades, and presumably others, toward a life of philosophy, so is he guided by the gods to pursue the philosophical life. *Alcibiades I* is a philosophical seduction. Seduction is a kind of leading, and *Phaedrus* thematizes leading and being led by the proper guides as a way to self-knowledge. The significant attention to leading and guiding in these dialogues resonates with Socrates' matchmaking ability, described in *Theaetetus*. *Alcibiades I* and *Phaedrus* provide detailed accounts of erotic guidance and explain its importance to self-knowledge and all other forms of human self-cultivation.

Just as we need guides during our embodied existence, so we also need guides in the afterlife, and what we are being guided toward is the same thing from which we originally came. Chapter 6 explores *Phaedo*'s accounts of recollection, the practice of philosophy as preparation for death, and nostalgia for our origins. While many scholars look exclusively to *Phaedo*'s treatment of the afterlife, the dialogue focuses equally, if not more, on our pre-embodied life, and it presents an image of a cyclical human journey. Recollection, introduced in decidedly erotic terms in *Phaedo*, is emblematic of that cycle: It is a recall of things from our forgotten past, as well as a prophetic look forward beyond our bodily existence. Eros mediates between these two. Philosophy is the practice of embodied beings who are attempting, in the limited manner available to them, to reconnect to originary objects of knowledge and desire from which they are alienated, and to prepare for reunification after death. *Phaedrus*'s explicitly erotic myth is mirrored in the language, images, and topography of *Phaedo*'s myth, and so gives us a glimpse into the erotic aspects of the eschatology of the latter. Finally, *Phaedo* is a dialogue about Socrates' *nostos*, his return home. Every return home necessarily entails that we have been shaped both by our origins and our journey. We do not return the same, and yet home is home because of the enduring ties and some vestige of untainted connection. Plato's construction of *Phaedo*, with its nautical themes, recollection, and discussion of the reiterative cycle of the human soul, plays on traditions of *nostos*