# *Introduction*
## *Platonic Love*

*Carl Séan O'Brien and John Dillon*

Platonic love is one of those concepts which has had such a major impact on the development of Western thought and culture, in both philosophy and literature and even beyond, that it has captured the popular imagination. The term would appear to be so ubiquitous that it would not seem to require a definition or explanation. And yet it does! Popularly conceived of as a type of relationship which is simply non-sexual or non-romantic, Plato himself would not recognize his concept of *eros* in the doctrine that has been transmitted under his name, at least in the popular usage of the term. Love is a vital feature of Plato's thought, relating as it does to his views on ethics, metaphysics, psychology, and due to its influence upon the later European tradition. The topic can be regarded as programmatic for medieval religious discussions (illustrated by figures such as Pseudo-Dionysius and Aquinas) and in the Renaissance the Platonic concept of Love formed the basis not only of philosophical-theological speculations (most notably demonstrated by the work of Marsilio Ficino), but also of guides to the etiquette of courtly relations conducted on a philosophical basis (as we see in both Castiglione and the *contra amorem* tradition).

The multifaceted nature of the contributions which follow can be regarded as part of a unitary and coherent concept (rather than just simply general discussions about love that are typical of any society). This leads us back to our original point: what exactly is Platonic love? We see it as containing the following features: Firstly, a distinction between 'higher' love (*ouranic eros*), mythologized in Pausanias' speech (*Symp.* 180c–185c) as being the sphere of Aphrodite, daughter of Ouranos (Heaven), and 'lower' (pandemic) love, represented as the sphere of Aphrodite, daughter of Zeus and Dione (*Symp.* 180d). Pausanias, for his own nefarious purposes, as becomes apparent from the *Symposium*, attempts to present actions (such as loving) as morally neutral; what carries moral weight, according to him, is

the manner in which they are conducted (*Symp.* 181a).[1] Although it has not been transmitted as a typical characteristic of Platonic love, one might note that the concept of romantic love as a search for the missing half owes its origin to Aristophanes' speech (at *Symp.* 189c2–193d5) and indeed the myth's characters, best described by the German term *Kugelmenschen* (globular humans), captured the imagination of Renaissance thinkers.

A second core feature is the use of love as a mechanism for striving after the divine and the capacity of 'higher' or ouranic love to lead the soul of the lover upwards towards the Good, via the ladder of Diotima. This aspect underpins the significance of the doctrine for theology and metaphysics from Plato himself right up to Ficino (and even beyond), particularly with regard to discussions regarding the (in)comprehensibility of God. A third aspect which can be identified as Platonic is the love of higher entities for lower ones (providential love); in the subsequent tradition, this feature is perhaps most clearly identifiable in the writings of Aquinas. This is often echoed by the structure of the idealized Platonic relationship, where the philosophical lover (enjoying a higher level of knowledge than the beloved) engages in an educational relationship with the *eromenos*. To be sure, Socrates' responses to Agathon (*Symp.* 175c–d) and Alcibiades (*Symp.* 218c–219d) clearly reject the exchange of sexual favours for knowledge, yet this aspect can be glimpsed behind numerous Platonizing discussions of friendship during both antiquity and the Renaissance.

This volume organizes the development of Platonic love as it unfolds chronologically over the course of the four key periods which we have identified: Plato himself, antiquity after Plato, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. However, here in the introduction we wish to take the opportunity to concentrate also upon the thematic resonances which surface again and again in the course of the centuries, demonstrating both the coherence and continuing actuality of Platonic love. This is initially illustrated by Vasilis Politis' programmatic essay, which introduces the collection as a whole. Focusing on the two main treatments of *eros* in Plato, the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*, he argues that, despite apparent inconsistencies, a coherent theory emerges from both works, of a lower and a higher love, in either case a form of 'madness' (*mania*), but in the latter case of a most productive and exalting sort. By contrast, non-sexual affection between two individuals (which would generally be understood as Platonic love today) only plays a minor role, both in antiquity and in this collection, being completely overshadowed by the metaphysical

[1] To a modern reader, Pausanias comes across as something of a sexual predator.

dimension of love. The *Lysis* dialogue, where Plato develops a positive concept of *philia* which ties in very well with his theory of *eros*, has not achieved the same influence as the two major dialogues, *Symposium* or *Phaedrus*. While Aristotle did discuss the role of *philia*, in his case it was more from the perspective of a social phenomenon and as a type of horizontal connection, lacking the transcendent dimension which characterizes Platonic love. This aspect of non-sexual affection is then picked up again in the Renaissance (and treated here in Marc D. Schachter's examination of Ficino's *Lysis* commentary and his *De amore* within the context of Renaissance discussions of friendship).

## Love in Plato and its Reception in Antiquity: The Transcendental Aspect of Love

The dominant theme of the collection, though, is the consideration of love from a metaphysical aspect; the extent to which love can enable us to encounter the transcendental and serves our aspirations to do so. While Anders Nygren in *Agape and Eros* tried to polarize both, unfavourably contrasting Platonic *eros* with the ultimate selflessness of Christian *agape*, the narrative of Platonic love's development, as illustrated by this collection, demonstrates the error of such a polarization and the extent to which Platonic love forms such a perennial undercurrent to Christian thought. This transcendental aspect forms a vital through-line from pagan antiquity to its Christianization in late antiquity by Augustine and via the Middle Ages to the Italian Renaissance. Several aspects of Platonic love are examined against the background of this transcendental aspect. In significant ways those contributions treating the etiquette of conducting a Platonic relationship in antiquity are echoed by the later chapters grappling with the manner of conducting similar relationships at the Renaissance princely courts.

Diotima's description in the *Symposium* of the process of ascent from the love of an individual to a series of higher objects, on the way to the Beautiful Itself, raises an important question about the nature of Platonic love and one that has bothered a number of readers down the ages: what is in it for the beloved, who seems to be exploited as merely a means to this ascent? Plato thematizes this issue in the *Lysis* in his examination of whether Lysis' parents actually love him or only appreciate him in so far as he is useful and two contributions grapple with this problem. Carl O'Brien ('The Selfishness of Platonic Love?') discusses the issue of whether the ascent inherent in Platonic love, involving seeing the beauty of the

beloved as the same as the beauty of all beautiful bodies, would seem to run counter to our fundamental understanding of love which is for a specific individual. Plato had surely no intention of downgrading the status of the love of individuals, but rather assumed that this would be enhanced by the addition of 'higher', or more abstract, objects of love. The extent to which the Platonic lover can orient the beloved towards these 'higher' objects is treated by Marina McCoy ('Love and Rhetoric as Types of *Psychagōgia*'), who gives us a detailed analysis of Socratic *eros* in the *Phaedrus*, in the process linking the earlier and later parts of the dialogue together, in a badly needed way, by showing how Socrates' teaching on rhetoric in the second half is also motivated by *eros*.

Towards the end of her essay, she makes the following important point:

> Both philosophy and rhetoric are at work in Socratic *psychagōgia*. Indeed, it would be a mistake to identify the philosophical as rhetoric-free or only concerned with logical or dialectical divisions. Socrates treats the pursuit of truth itself as erotic, that is, as a longing for truth and not only an intellectual capacity to know. Because philosophy concerns a desire for the forms, we cannot separate philosophy as instructive while rhetoric attends to persuasion by means of desire. Instead, Socrates' philosophical soul-leading is integrative, seeking to order and harmonize the whole of Phaedrus' soul.[2]

This essay, like O'Brien's contribution which precedes it, treats the etiquette of Platonic relationships, which forms a particularly significant line running through the volume, focusing as it does on the pedagogical aspect and drawing a distinction between rhetoric, which leads the soul where it wishes to go, and *eros*, which leads the soul towards truth.

Just as McCoy examines the parallels (and differences) between *eros* and rhetoric, so too Elizabeth S. Belfiore ('Plato on the Love of Wisdom') focuses on the significance of the actual term *philosophia*, meaning as it does 'love of wisdom' and its erotic dimension. She examines the nature of Platonic love across a broader canvas by tracing Socrates' own linking of *eros* with philosophical enquiry in a number of key dialogues (*Apology*, *Republic*, *Alcibiades I*, alongside the *Symposium* itself), culminating in his assertion, just before drinking the hemlock in the *Phaedo*, that, despite what this lifelong practice of his has led to, he would not have it any other way. Despite the transcendental aspect of love, which comes across very clearly in McCoy's and Belfiore's treatments, Plato was not unaware of the attractions of interpersonal love and presents philosophy as an enterprise

[2] McCoy, this volume, 62–63.

shared by both lover and beloved; this Platonic structuring of relationships would later be translated to a Christian heteroerotic context during the Renaissance.

Moving on from Plato himself, we turn first to the most interesting and prolific figure from among the Platonists of the so-called 'Middle-Platonic' period, Plutarch of Chaeronea. Frederick E. Brenk surveys Plutarch's three principal treatments of the theme of love (both *eros* and *philia*), *Advice to a Bride and Groom*, *On Isis and Osiris* and the *Dialogue on Love*, the last of which is much the most extensive. Brenk emphasizes Plutarch's comprehensive treatment of heterosexual, married love, as well as homosexual or pederastic love, which makes him of special interest to Renaissance theorists. In re-examining the manner in which the homoerotic aspect is reconceived in heterosexual terms, Brenk's treatment marks the beginning of another significant strand which regularly resurfaces in the development of Platonic love (particularly during the Renaissance), even if it always remains significantly overshadowed by the transcendent dimension.

This transcendent dimension is once again addressed by Dominic J. O'Meara's treatment of the greatest Platonist philosopher of later antiquity, Plotinus, in 'Love in Plotinus' Thought', in which he surveys different aspects of *eros* in Plotinus' philosophy, starting from his view of the human experience of love, but rising then to a consideration also of the cosmic dimensions of *eros*, and especially the love of the soul for both the realm of Intellect and even that of the One/Good, while the remarkable concept of the 'love' of the One/Good for itself is also explored. Like Belfiore's contribution, O'Meara's also highlights the centrality of the human experience of love to the life of philosophy, outlining the echoes of Plato's *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* in Plotinus' oeuvre.

Next, by way of rounding off the antique (and late antique) interpretation of Platonic Love, we return to the strand, first picked up by Brenk, of presenting the originally homoerotic Platonic relationship in heterosexual terms. John Dillon devotes an essay to enquiring whether we can recover at least the outlines of a Platonist *ars amatoria*, or set of prescriptions for successful loving, in a high-minded, Platonic mode, to be derived from such dialogues as *Lysis*, *Symposium*, *Phaedrus*, and, not least, *Alcibiades I*, based on Socrates' claim, at the end of the *Phaedrus*, that he possessed an *erōtikē tekhnē.* Such a *tekhnē* would have *theōrēmata*, and these were listed as (1) selecting a suitable love-object, or *axierasto*s; (2) commending oneself to him and (3) guiding him to moral and intellectual self-improvement. Dillon focuses on the exposition of this in the *Didaskalikos* of the second-century CE Platonist Alcinous, but speculates

that theorizing on this topic may go back as far as Polemon, in the Old Academy.

Moving on to the interface between antiquity and the Middle Ages, Jan-Ivar Lindén addresses the topic of love and desire in the works of St Augustine, through whom much of Platonist philosophy was incorporated into a Christian religious context. The emphasis in Augustine is very much on the love of God, rather than on varieties of human love, but here too he is able to draw fruitfully on the Platonic tradition (mediated via Plotinus and Porphyry). Lindén demonstrates that the Platonic understanding of philosophy as love of wisdom, as we find it outlined by Belfiore, becomes Christianized by Augustine, and that the true sense of love of wisdom is understood by Augustine as love of God.

## Love and Metaphysics during the Middle Ages

For all its significance throughout antiquity and despite the extent to which the concept of Platonic love can be regarded as programmatic for the theological debates of the Middle Ages, it played only a relatively limited role in the medieval period after Aquinas. That the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* were unknown in the Latin West is largely responsible for this, just as their significance in Italian (and French) Renaissance thought is closely tied to Marsilio Ficino's Latin translation, which rendered them accessible once again. During the medieval period, Platonic love becomes particularly significant to the Greek Christian tradition in the person of the remarkable figure of (pseudo-)Dionysius the Areopagite, who has creatively appropriated the Platonist tradition of the fifth-century CE Athenian School, and specifically Proclus, to expound the doctrines of Christianity. Andrew Louth focuses on Dionysius' adoption of the Platonist position that love is a human response to beauty, beauty being understood less in terms of symmetry and more in terms of transparency to higher realities. There is much of Plotinus here, of course, as well as Plato himself, but that is what one would expect. Dionysius also, however, places much emphasis on God's love for his creation, as one would expect from a thinker in the Christian tradition.

John Scotus Eriugena's concept of love, as outlined in his *Periphyseon*, rests upon a Christian and Neoplatonic admixture, heavily influenced by (pseudo-)Dionysius, and forms the bedrock of his metaphysics. Max Rohstock examines two interpretations of love in Eriugena: as a *genitivus subiectivus* (i.e. the love that belongs to God) and as a *genitivus obiectivus* (i.e. the Platonic understanding of love as a striving to God). Eriugena's

concept of love is intrinsically bound to his views on the (in)comprehensibility of God, which for Eriugena is only possible by means of negation. Rohstock demonstrates that God's negative self-referentiality is divine love. For Eriugena, love is not only a means of ascent, but divine immanent love in us allows us to turn inwards and therefore makes our thinking possible.

Several disparate strands combine with the Bible to influence Thomas Aquinas' concept of love: Aristotle, Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, and through these, Plato, Plotinus and Proclus. Thomas perceives a separation between two types of love he posits – natural love and intellectual love – in a manner reminiscent of Plato's higher and lower forms of love. Thomas' doctrine of charity exhibits another Platonic aspect: the love of higher entities for lower ones (providential love). Kevin J. Flannery S.J. also examines the Christian aspect of Thomist providential love, along with Thomas' understanding of *delectatio* (ἡδονή, pleasure/delight) and its relationship to the Good, although Thomas reacts to Plato via the prism of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Thomas' understanding of Plato is also motivated by his understanding of the concept of charity. Just as Thomas distinguishes human delight and goodness from the essence of delight and the essence of goodness, he also distinguishes human charity from divine charity (i.e. the Holy Spirit) in contrast to contrary formulations in Augustine and Dionysius.

## Platonic Love in the Renaissance

The work of Georgios Gemistos Plethon and Cardinal Basil Bessarion brought Platonism, and its concept of love, back to the forefront in the Latin West. Yet Platonic love during the Renaissance is inextricably linked with the name of Ficino. The Renaissance section commences with three contributions which examine the transcendental aspect of Platonic love, illustrated both by Ficino's own writings and the response to them, and by three further contributions which focus on the more practical aspects of conducting a Platonic relationship (again revealing the influence of Ficino), thereby picking up this strand already identified in antiquity by the contributions of O'Brien, Brenk and Dillon (although here too the transcendental or aspirational aspect is also at play). Paul Richard Blum examines Ficino's significance as a commentator of the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* and on Plotinus and Dionysius the Areopagite. It is Ficino who most characterizes our understanding of Platonic and Socratic love (*amor*

*platonicus et socraticus*).[3] Although the Renaissance transformation of the *Lysis* informed the notion of 'Platonic friendship', as outlined by Schachter, Ficino himself was opposed to a separation between love and friendship. The *Symposium*'s Aristophanic myth is reinterpreted by Ficino in terms of a struggle to regain the divine light; a reinterpretation that would itself stimulate a further reaction in the French Renaissance as subsequently illustrated by Schachter. Ficino justifies love for earthly things, provided that it is exercised with moderation, although love for the divine should be infinite. Blum demonstrates the manner in which Ficino transforms the process of living (Platonically) into an act of Christian worship, which is simultaneously compatible with his understanding of Plotinian metaphysics.

The relationship between love and beauty was significant for Plato's Renaissance disciples, just as it has been for the Master himself. Maryanne Cline Horowitz compares Ficino's speculations on beauty in *De amore* with those of Leone Ebreo (Judah Abravenel), as outlined in his *Dialoghi d'amore*. In contrast to the homoerotic nature of love in Ficino, Leone's dialogue is conducted between a male teacher (Philo) and a female student (Sophia). As is typical of the Renaissance thinkers, Leone reinterprets the *Symposium*'s Aristophanic myth, and also quite typically focuses only on the androgyne, rather than the other *Kugelmenschen*. In his case, this may be an allusion to the Talmudic tradition of Adam as a hermaphrodite (before Eve's separation); Horowitz demonstrates here the malleability of the *Symposium*, which Leone brings into dialogue with the Hebraic tradition, just as Ficino Christianizes it. Horowitz examines the various influences upon Ficino's doctrine of beauty: Plotinus, Proclus and Alberti. Both Ficino and Leone present beauty as spiritual and ultimately incorporeal. The connection we repeatedly find in Platonic sources between the Beautiful and the Good is found in the Renaissance thinkers in terms of a connection between external female beauty and internal virtue.

[3] Quite possibly the earliest mention of 'Platonic love' is in fact Ficino's reference to the 'purity (or chastity) of Platonic and Socratic love' (*amoris platonici et socratici castitatem*; Ficino, *In Phaedrum* 2. I.2). Ficino's next reference a couple of sentences later (*amoris socratici pudicitiam*; *In Phaedrum* 2. I.3) mentions the 'virtue of Socratic love' only. These references in the *Phaedrus* commentary probably predate the references to Platonic love in Ficino's *De amore*: although Ficino mentions both the *Platonic Theology* (completed 1474) and *De amore* (completed 1469, published 1484) in his *Phaedrus* commentary, Allen 2008, xxv makes a convincing argument for regarding these (three) mentions of later works to be subsequent insertions (probably in the 1480s) and for dating Ficino's *Phaedrus* commentary to the period from April 1466 to November 1468, when Ficino produced his Latin translation of the *Phaedrus* dialogue.

The response to Ficino's commentary within Florentine circles is treated in Dillon's analysis of Pico della Mirandola's commentary on a poem by Girolamo Benivieni. Pico's commentary demonstrates the importance of the Neoplatonic tradition for the Florentines, drawing both on Plotinus' treatment of *eros* (*Enn.* III 5) and on Hermeias' *Commentary on Plato's Phaedrus*.[4] The cosmic dimension is clearly at play here, since Pico allocates the first book to outlining Platonic cosmology to the degree necessary for understanding the theory of love reflected by Benivieni's poem. Ficino comes under fire from Pico for an interpretation that does well enough in traditional Christian terms, but which is not Neoplatonic enough for his tastes. Since love, for a Platonist, implies deficiency, God does not love his creatures according to our understanding of the term. (That the first principle has no need of the things which come after it, but that they strive towards it, is a characteristic of Neoplatonism.) Pico is not in dispute with Ficino as regards the different levels of love; both postulate three forms (heavenly, human and bestial), instead of the higher and lower form which we find in Pausanias' speech. In the light of the subsequent contributions on the relationship between Platonic theorizing and Renaissance praxis, one might note that Pico does not seem to have been influenced by his own attack on bestial love, given his amorous adventures with the wife of Lorenzo de' Medici's cousin six months before. This incident almost cost him his life, but as Dillon sagely reminds us, he was only twenty-three at the time.

The final three chapters in the volume leave the realm of philosophy, narrowly understood, and by examining the influence of Platonic love on Renaissance Italian and French discussions of etiquette, illustrate the significance of this concept upon both literature and social history. W. R. Albury's contribution focuses on the *contra amorem* tradition – a corpus of writings in a range of genres which present love as a disease, concentrating on the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Albury considers the transformation of Platonic love within the framework of heteroerotic relationships (rather than in Athenian homoerotic terms) against the background of the higher social status of elite women in Renaissance Italy compared to classical Athens. Albury compares Bartolomeo Sacci's[5] *De Amore* and Giovanni Battista Fregosa's *Anteros* to illustrate the interplay between the *contra amorem* tradition and Ficino's treatment of Platonic love. Platina's distinction between honourable and dishonourable love

[4] For a detailed study on Hermeias' commentary, see Finamore, Manolea and Klitenic Wear 2020.
[5] Known as Platina from the Latin name of his birthplace (Piadena).

clearly demonstrates a typical characteristic of Platonic love. The Platonic connection between rhetoric and love is also apparent in Platina's diatribe against women, intended as an efficacious means of treating the lovesickness of his interlocutor, Lodovico. By contrast, the goal of Platonic love as an ascent to the divine is missing in Fregosa's *Anteros*. Although the suffering lover can devote himself to prayer, a further recommendation is that he devote himself to as many women as possible, which undermines the importance of the transcendent dimension. Instead, the image of the beloved becomes ingrained in the lover's imagination as a phantasm. Fregosa's *Anteros* criticizes typical aspects of the Ficinian presentation of Platonic love (such as the role of beauty), yet even the positive reception of Platonic love to be found in Castiglione's *Courtier* can be directly traced to *Anteros*, as Albury demonstrates.

Reinier Leushuis connects the aspects of philosophy and amorous praxis in his examination of Pietro Bembo's speech on Platonic love in Castiglione's *Courtier*. The classic Platonic element of an ascent to the divine is present, alongside a more practical attempt at amorous permissiveness more suited to the reality of courtly life, demonstrated by the elevation of the act of kissing to the status of a spiritual act. (The motivation here recalls perhaps the self-serving speech of Pausanias in the *Symposium*, but Bembo presents the kiss as pivotal in the ascent to the divine.) The old would seem to have a greater capacity to love Platonically since their enjoyment of beauty can be more thoroughly regulated by reason than that of the young. The interlocutor Gasparo's comments on the fury of sensual love are invoked by Leushuis to demonstrate Castiglione's awareness of that great countercurrent to Platonic love, the *contra amorem* tradition.

We end with Marc D. Schachter's treatment of the influence of both Ficino's *Lysis* commentary and his *De amore* on Renaissance discussions of friendship. Both the Platonic distinction between higher and lower love are found in Ficino' s claim that friends should not be selected due to their bodily appearance, but rather due to the beauty of their souls. A pedagogical orientation is found in Ficino's understanding that friendship is born from the desire to teach and to learn. Schachter moves beyond the Italian Renaissance to consider Héroët's adaptation of the Aristophanic myth in the *Symposium*, *The Androgyne of Plato*, which both responds to the Ficinian view of Platonic love, as outlined in *De amore*, as well as his presentation of this type of love/friendship within a heteroerotic context. Schachter turns to Des Périers' French translation of the *Lysis* (*Le Discours de la queste d'amytié*), pointing to the transformation of Platonic love in the