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The three types of erotic otherness in Plato's *Phaedrus*

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Abstract

In the erotic experience as presented by Plato, the concept of otherness develops within the philosophical construction in different ways. In the *Phaedrus*, eros is experienced bipolarly, because it is personified and expressed differently and not equally in each member of the erotic pair. The depiction of the lover depends partly on that of the beloved, as the erotic experience itself is built upon the idea of ἔρωτος τινός. But beyond the presence of the beloved, the lover meets two more types of otherness. On the one hand, after seeing the beauty of the beloved, he notices the similarity within the notion of otherness and diversity, and understands that there is another world, purely conceivable with which he tries to come in contact. On the other hand, during the ascent to the world of Forms, he is confronted with his personal otherness, which is the struggle among the parts of the soul. Through the topic of otherness in Platonic eros, we find the critical points of sexual expression, the response of the beloved, the character and behavior of the lover, and the perception of and contact with the world of Forms.

The three types of erotic otherness in Plato's *Phaedrus*

The erotic experience, as presented by Plato in the *Phaedrus*, strongly contains the concept of otherness, which is constructed, philosophically, in different ways. This dialogue of Plato, together with the *Symposium*, is the basis for those who want to think philosophically about eros.¹ In the middle of the dialogue, there is a divinely inspired speech by Socrates, which presents a fascinating story about the nature of the soul, the beauty, and the erotic experience. In this paper, I will focus on the second speech of Socrates in the *Phaedrus* and I will try to examine the positions expressed in this speech under the common prism of the issue of otherness.

Kastely in an article published in 2019, entitled 'The Eros of Sameness and the Rhetoric of Difference in Plato's *Phaedrus*',² suggests that, in the *Phaedrus*, Plato offers a revolutionary theory based on the inseparable connection between sameness and otherness in erotic affairs,³ arguing that this inevitable connection manifests itself in at least three different ways: the nature of the soul, the dialectical relationship between the concepts of sameness and otherness, and the very erotic relationship between two persons.⁴ However, as it appears from the title of his article, Kastely attempts to connect these concepts with the rhetoric of the dialogue presenting the 'otherness' as an essential feature of discourse and without specifying exclusively the concept of otherness within the erotic experience. This paper will limit the concept of otherness within the erotic experience and focus on three types of otherness that I find in the *Phaedrus* which are not related to the rhetorical dimension of the dialogue.

¹ Donald Levy makes this statement referring to the *Symposium* (Levy 1979, 285) but I extend this perspective to the *Phaedrus* as well. The *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus* are not the only dialogues in which Plato referred to eros but they are by far the most resonant about what we call 'Platonic eros' because eros constitutes a thematic core.

² With this article, James Kastely responds to Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips (Bersani and Phillips 2008) who through psychoanalysis and literary criticism present the problems and possibilities of human intimacy.

³ Kastely 2019: 90-91.

⁴ Kastely 2019: 97.

The concept of otherness is seen in contrast to the concept of identity.⁵ The notion of the 'other' is enclosed within the notion of the 'ego' because the one presupposes the other, and thus otherness is a necessary component of identity.⁶ At the same time, by its nature, otherness is seductive due to its vague and unexplored divergence, which means that its very diversity makes it attractive. These preliminary thoughts show that it is necessary to encounter the concept of otherness during the erotic experience but at the same time, it is interesting to decode its form and role.

Otherness in Platonic eros has a vital role because the beloved himself is a requirement for the erotic experience of the lover. This constitutes the first of three kinds of otherness that this paper will present. But in Plato, and especially in the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*, the study of eros also presupposes the search for the structure of reality itself since it is connected to the world of Forms, and so, as we shall see, the object of our desire may be at last a mental, perfect, transcendental being, the Platonic Form, which I will call the second type of otherness. However, the very complexity of the composition of the human soul makes the erotic experience difficult. The soul, as Sophocles says, looks like it lives somewhere in the depths of our organism and from these depths it can speak to its owner with its own voice (Sophocles *Antigone*: 227). The complexity of the soul, which I claim to be the third type of otherness, is vividly reflected in the *Phaedrus* through the allegory with the charioteer and the two horses,⁷ which seems to refer to the division of the soul in the

⁵ In classical studies, the concept of otherness has been studied diligently since the early 1970s, with the work of Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 1972. Since then, many important studies followed, such as Hall 1989; Zeitlin 1996; Cartledge 1993; Cohen 2000.

⁶ Cummins 1996: iii.

⁷ For a discussion of the allegory of the charioteer and its relationship to eros see Werner 2012.

fourth book of the *Republic*.⁸ This threefold division into rational, spirited, and appetitive parts can explain why people react so differently to their erotic desire.⁹

The aim of this paper, then, is to highlight that through the subject of otherness in Platonic eros we find the critical points of the voluptuous expression and response of the beloved (first type of otherness), the perception and contact with the mental world of Forms (second type of otherness), and the character and behavior of the lover (third type of otherness). These three types of otherness are interconnected within the erotic experience, but the order in which they will be presented does not signal any kind of hierarchical classification.

The otherness through the beloved

The erotic experience is built on the idea of *ἔρωτος τινός*, that is eros for the beloved (*τινός*), and on the occasion and view of the beloved, it evolves into a psychological ascent experience because it has the potential to transcend the physical realm and become a means for spiritual and intellectual growth (Plato *Phaedrus*: 249c-e). Therefore, the presence of the beloved has a catalytic role in the erotic experience of the lover. For Carson, the erotic experience ‘is always a story in which lover, beloved and the difference between them interact’.¹⁰ In this context, the realization of the transcendental goal of the soul of the lover, as well as the beloved, to contact the Form is achieved in the *Phaedrus* through the mutual contribution between the lover and the beloved.¹¹

⁸ The complexity of the soul represented by the allegory of the charioteer and the two horses in the *Phaedrus* corresponds in many details to the tripartition of the soul in the fourth book of the *Republic*, where the parts of the soul may give commands (Plato *Republic*: 439c) or stay obedient (Plato *Republic*: 441e) or agree and interfere with each other (Plato *Republic*: 442c, 443d). Both in the *Republic* and the *Phaedrus*, with the one part humans learn, with the other they feel anger, and with the third they desire pleasures.

⁹ Nehamas and Woodruff 1995: xxiv.

¹⁰ Carson 1988: 219.

¹¹ In the *Phaedrus*, Plato uses his concept of the Forms, which are the eternal and unchanging essences of things. These Forms represent the ultimate reality behind the imperfect and transient

In the second speech of Socrates (Plato *Phaedrus*: 244a-257b), the role of the beloved seems to be upgraded in relation to what Diotima tells at the *Symposium*,¹² as the beloved is not only the cause for the erotic experience or the first stage in the soul's pursuit to unite with the Form but at the same time emerges as an extension of the lover throughout the erotic experience (Plato *Phaedrus*: 253a-b, 256d-e). In the *Phaedrus*, the beloved himself is perceived as a separate being with his own self-propelled soul and his own prospect of connection with the Form and not as something trapped by the lover's erotic pursuit (Plato *Phaedrus*: 253c, 254e, 256a-b).

In Platonic eros, as presented in the *Phaedrus*, the 'ego' is not suppressed but extends to the lover, fueled by the elements of similarity that govern the lover and the beloved (Plato *Phaedrus*: 253c-e). This view is accepted by Kastely, who believes that lust is not fueled by the uniqueness of the beloved, which could be accidental, but because the lover sees a version of himself in the beloved and thus, remembers 'who he really is and, even more, who he can become'.¹³ Consequently, through the erotic contact with the otherness of the beloved, the lover comes to know himself, being reflected in the beloved. This is why Socrates says in this Platonic dialogue that the lover loves, but he does not know exactly what he loves because he does not realize that through the otherness of the beloved, he sees himself reflected (Plato *Phaedrus*: 255d). In this context, the otherness of the beloved is not

physical world. In the dialogue, Plato suggests that the lover and the beloved can establish a connection with the Forms by engaging in philosophical inquiry and contemplation through the process of eros (Plato *Phaedrus*: 256a-b).

¹² This paper does not focus on the comparison between the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus* but only on eros in the dialogue *Phaedrus*. However, I would like to mention that at the *Symposium*, attraction to the erotic partner (beloved) is an initial impression of uniqueness (Plato *Symposium*: 210a) which, as the soul progresses to the next stages of the erotic experience, changes into a perception of the diversity of all beautiful bodies (Plato *Symposium*: 210a-b), and then, it again results in an experience of uniqueness for the Form that brings together all those beautiful features (Plato *Symposium*: 211a). The way Diotima presents the ascent of the soul to the Form adopts a much more self-referential approach to the lover, who is not so much hetero-determined by the beloved or at least to the extent that this happens in the *Phaedrus*, where the relationship with the beloved is more intricate.

¹³ Kastely 2019: 95.

perceived as something alarmingly different, but as something in which similar elements can develop with the lover because the beloved himself dances the same dance with his lover following the chariot of the same god (Plato *Phaedrus*: 252d-e).¹⁴ The lover draws inspiration from a god he follows in the chariot race and seeks a beloved according to the god he 'serves', and when he finds him, he tries to persuade him to follow the same god and to educate him in the way and nature of this god. That being the case, the lover seeks to create in the beloved the greatest possible resemblance between himself and the god he honors (Plato *Phaedrus*: 253a-b).¹⁵ Therefore, the desire of the soul functions as an impulse that seeks to free the beloved (that is, the first type of otherness) from his divergence.¹⁶

In the *Phaedrus*, Plato develops the personalized presence of the beloved, attributing more elements of interaction with the lover and giving him a perspective of moral and philosophical development. In the second speech of Socrates in this dialogue, we see, then, that by loving a man you also inseparably love the prospect of his idealization (Plato *Phaedrus*: 253b), that is, the prospect of his transcendental movement which is an idea that we do not encounter earlier in the *Symposium*.¹⁷ So,

¹⁴ In the *Phaedrus*, Plato employs the metaphor of dance as a way to illustrate the process of philosophical ascent. The metaphor of dance is used to convey the idea that the souls of the lover and the beloved engage in a harmonious and coordinated movement towards the contemplation of higher realities, the Forms, following the souls of the gods in celestial procession (Plato *Phaedrus*: 252d-253c, cf. 246a-247a). The celestial procession metaphor in the *Phaedrus* underscores Plato's view of the soul as an eternal entity on a transformative journey. It symbolizes the soul's longing for higher truths, its progression through various stages of existence, and its aspiration to transcend the limitations of the physical world.

¹⁵ Wolz 1965: 166.

¹⁶ Kastely, however, considers that the erotic affair as outlined by Socrates is based on similarity but is also structured in the sense of differentiation (Kastely 2019: 97) and this is reflected even in the typical characteristics of the erotic couple, where the relationship is built on the common element of gender and varies in age difference.

¹⁷ In the *Symposium* the otherness of the beloved enables the lover to move beyond the personalization of the beloved and to come in contact with the beautiful in itself, that is, the Form of Beauty, emphasizing that the contact with the otherness of the beloved does not lead by definition to a kind of universal knowledge but that the beloved can be a medium of contact with the timeless and unchanging Form (Hindin 2008: 19). Besides, for Diotima the search for the perfect, i.e. the Form,

it seems that Plato at this stage gives common goals for the lover and the beloved. The beloved in Platonic eros has a complementary role in the erotic experience of the lover but with a dual existence, that, on the one hand, is subjectivized during the reception by the lover of the physical beauty of the beloved, and, on the other hand, has an unchanging value in its complementary role for the knowledge and understanding of eros.

So far, we have seen the first kind of otherness, the otherness through the beloved. Eros presupposes an 'ego' that self-identifies or hetero-determines itself in relation to another person and stimulates the soul of the lover so that the depiction of the lover also depends on that of the beloved. In this context, this otherness appears as a state, that is, the very presence of the beloved. But we have seen that this otherness appears at the same time as the formation and evolution of the beloved himself, who combines elements different and similar to his lover.

The otherness of the Form

In the diversity of the otherness of the beauty of each beloved, we find the element of similarity that all beautiful bodies have, which signifies that there is a common element shared by different beings, which derives from their celestial origin (Plato *Phaedrus*: 251a). The hypothesis of Plato's theory of Forms explains how it is possible to have similarity within difference and multiplicity, such as between the beauty of a person and a beautiful act or condition. Plato argues that all the particular instances or objects we encounter in the physical world are imperfect and transient reflections or imitations of the corresponding Forms (Plato *Phaedrus*: 250b). For example, a beautiful object in the physical world is merely a flawed copy of the perfect and eternal Form of Beauty. The shared characteristics or similarities among different objects are derived from their participation in the same universal Form. Within this framework, the concept of similarity within difference and multiplicity arises. Despite the diversity and multiplicity of objects in the physical

happens independently of the partner that the lover will have next to him (Plato *Symposium*: 210a-b). cf. note 12.

world, they all participate in or share some degree of resemblance to the universal Forms they imperfectly represent. By observing the similarity in the otherness, the lover understands that there is another world, purely conceivable, but which he can perceive because he has common elements with it. Eros is a desire for physical immediacy but with a metaphysical origin, as the object of desire is a partial reflection of the higher, ideal Beauty. This view, according to Price, serves two purposes: on the one hand, it consolidates the superiority of mental beauty over natural beauty, and on the other hand, it proves that this superiority consists in the fact that all beautiful things participate in the Form of Beauty and take from its essence so that they can have the property of beauty.¹⁸

In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates tells us that the lover sees in the beloved the divine reflection of beauty in imitation of Beauty (*κάλλος εἴ μμιμημένον*; Plato *Phaedrus*: 251a), and so, through this reflection of the true beauty of the beloved, the soul feels the awe he felt before incarnation when the soul saw and felt the presence of the Form of Beauty itself. The result of this is that when the lover sees his beloved, he treats and worships him as if he were a god (Plato *Phaedrus*: 251a) and feels respect for the beloved as in him the divine beauty is reflected so that he regains in his memory the true knowledge of beauty (Plato *Phaedrus*: 254b). This beauty of the beloved brings to the lover a kind of divine *mania* (Plato *Phaedrus*: 244a).

The Form in Platonic eros is existentially superior to the coveted person. According to Vlastos, this superiority is reflected in various fields, such as Platonic epistemology, cosmology, and ontology.¹⁹ Vlastos' view is that the Form is presented as something worth loving in itself (*καθ' αὐτὸ*), while the person is lovable only to the extent that in him or through him the lover comes in contact with the perfection of the Form.²⁰ However, some views contradict the position of Vlastos and argue that it is not right to believe that for Plato the love of an individual serves only an instrumental

¹⁸ Price 1989: 38-42.

¹⁹ Vlastos 1981: 33-4.

²⁰ Vlastos 1981: 34. cf. note 12 and 17.

role to achieve the ultimate goal of the lover's contact with absolute beauty, the Form.²¹

Santas' position on this issue is that the lover is primarily in love with the divine Beauty itself and secondarily with the beloved himself, as the latter is a reflection of the divine Beauty, while he separates the passion for the beloved as earthly and the passion for Beauty as divine.²² This double passion makes his eros *mania*, a rational madness in which both the rational and the passionate part of the soul are motivated as a result of the eros for both the beloved himself and the Form of Beauty itself. Santas, at first glance, could be close to Vlastos' view as far as he distinguishes the divine passion for the Form as the primary one and the earthly passion for the beloved as the secondary one, subjacent to the divine passion. However, he still acknowledges that even in a secondary layer the lover covets the beloved *per se*, although the ultimate goal is to contact the Form.

White believes that this approach makes Platonic eros quite unfamiliar as it shows that the individual is not coveted *per se* but as a way of a metaphysical erotic pursuit.²³ White attempts to show that the eros of an individual, as an image of the Form, and therefore, for the sake of the Form, does not negate the eros for the sake of the individual himself.²⁴ To substantiate this position he argues that when the lover falls in love with a person for the sake of that person, he does not fall in love with him exclusively. This means that the lover does not love only him nor that he loves him better than anything else, while respectively if this person is replaced by another it does not mean that the eros that the lover had previously felt for the first person was not genuine. In other words, if X, who had initially fallen in love with Y, falls in love with the Form of Beauty or Z through the eros of Y, does not mean that his eros for Y was illusory. In this plausible claim, White adds a second argument, which is that

²¹ In the two following paragraphs, I summarize two indicative views which I found responding critically to Vlastos' claim.

²² Santas 1982: 112.

²³ White 1990: 397.

²⁴ White 1990: 399.

there are no clear references to argue that when the soul reconnects erotically with the absolute good it loses its ability to desire anything else imperfect.²⁵

By addressing the question of whether the lover desires the beloved *per se* and how this has been commented on by two scholars, we see that the double nature of the eros, which is the desire of the Form and the desire of the individual, is not a field of controversy because the one kind of desire does not displace or outplace the other. I believe that even though the main aim of the lover is to reconnect with the Form for his own benefit, this does not negate that his eros for the beloved is sincere and genuine, seeking to educate him and extend the knowledge of the Form to him for the good of the beloved himself (Plato *Phaedrus*: 252d-e, 253b-c, 256d).

Therefore, in this kind of otherness, we encounter the perception and contact with the transcendental Form, which is the ultimate goal of the lover according to Plato. In the first kind of otherness, we see the relationship between lover and beloved and through it, we understand the relationship of the lover with the Form which is the second kind of otherness. However, it seems that the relationship between these two types of otherness is going both ways because also through the relationship between the lover and the Form we see the relationship between the lover and beloved to the extent that the lover seeks to make the beloved shareholder of the Form.

The inner otherness in our soul

The inner otherness of our soul, which could otherwise be called our personal otherness, has to do with our very nature, and specifically with the anatomy of our soul. According to Plato, the soul is a complex unit, in which the element of otherness and divergence is inherent, as it is structured by different parts and different impulses (Plato *Phaedrus*: 246b). Thus, the very nature of the soul is divided, making it difficult for its cohesion, with the result that there is an innate otherness within it, as it consists of different parts which are intersecting. This third type of otherness is presented in the *Phaedrus*, where we see that the soul is a

²⁵ White 1990: 403-4.

battlefield with forces motivated by different parts of the self, and more specifically, a battle between reason and desire (Plato *Phaedrus*: 256a). The virtue of the rational part is an innate ability of the self and the desire, aroused by external factors and stimuli, is the sexual attraction for bodily beauty. Therefore, the soul is not a homogeneous whole.

The similarity and the difference exist in a constant dialectical relationship between the parts of the soul as on the one hand, the parts coexist within a common character, but on the other hand, they are the ones that differentiate the character in its manifestations (Plato *Phaedrus*: 253d-254e). The three-part structure of the soul shows how difference is inherent in the soul and how the parts of the soul are not in complete harmony. The opposition between the parts of the soul is more important than the opposition between body and soul because the struggle during the erotic experience is essentially between the opposing forces of the soul and not between the soul and the body.²⁶ The parts of the soul interact in such a way that they can hardly be detached or separated clearly. Of course, there is a single composition between the three parts insofar as they constitute a whole, that is, the soul itself, and this is depicted by the developing wings belonging to the whole soul (Plato *Phaedrus*: 246c, 246e, 248b, 251b-d, 255d) and not in the specific parts.²⁷ This single composition combines reason and passion in a common personality, ensuring the absence of a gap between the mental and non-mental parts of the soul.

Plato's contrast between wisdom and madness is a contrast between the mental and non-mental parts of the soul. The non-mental parts are attracted by the beauty that is felt mainly through eyesight (Plato *Phaedrus*: 250d), and at the same time, they motivate the mental part to seek through the intellect the real source of beauty, i.e. the Form of Beauty. The man who manages to harmonize the three parts of his soul

²⁶ Κάλφας and Ζωγραφίδης 2011: 124.

²⁷ Plato uses the metaphor of developing wings to describe the ascent of the whole soul towards the realm of the Forms. The process of developing wings symbolizes the soul's capacity to rise above the earthly realm and access higher realms of knowledge and understanding. As Nussbaum (1986: 217) points out, the fact that the image of the growth of wings uses sexual metaphors demonstrates that this evolution characterizes the development of the whole soul and that there is receptivity in all its parts.

and calm his passions 'has paved the way for the communication of the immortal part of his soul with the Forms'.²⁸ Nevertheless, the non-mental elements of the soul also serve an important role as they constitute the motivating energy. Even in the psychic depiction of the chariots of the gods, horses are looking for their food (Plato *Phaedrus*: 247e).²⁹ Thus, the idea of nourishing the non-mental parts of the soul seems to have a fundamental role in Plato's philosophical construction. Through the myth of the chariots, Plato emphasizes the importance of cultivating the rational and intellectual aspects of the soul in order to achieve a state of harmony and alignment, and to reach closer to the divine realm.

In this type of otherness, we see that Platonic eros concerns the evolution of the self through the otherness of the same self. The nature of the soul, as presented in the *Phaedrus*, shows that human life is unstable and prone to internal conflict, as the lover must constantly struggle against the improper momentum of the soul (Plato *Phaedrus*: 254d). The tripartite definition of the soul shows how madness, which in the two speeches before the palinode had been criticized,³⁰ can become a rational madness if the rational part prevails and can contribute to the moral and philosophical development of the soul.

²⁸ Κάλφας and Ζωγραφίδης 2011: 125.

²⁹ In the *Phaedrus*, the depiction of the souls of the gods is part of the myth of the human soul. The souls of the gods are portrayed as having well-aligned and harmonious chariots, with charioteers who effortlessly guide their horses (Plato *Phaedrus*: 247b). The depiction of the souls of the gods serves as an ideal to which human souls should aspire (Plato *Phaedrus*: 248a). It represents the highest potential of the human soul, where reason governs passion and the pursuit of truth becomes the primary goal.

³⁰ The speech of Lysias (Plato *Phaedrus*: 231a) and the first speech of Socrates (Plato *Phaedrus*: 241c) claim, among other things, that it is better for the beloved to be with a non-lover than a lover, based on the assumption that the passionate madness of the lover undoubtedly provokes misfortune for the beloved.

Conclusions

We see that in Platonic eros, the 'ego' and the 'other', whether this is the beloved, the Form, or the divergent composition of the human soul, are not two divergent categories but the depiction of one is interconnected with the depiction of the other. It seems, therefore, that if eros were deprived of otherness, it would probably not be a pleasant experience, as erotic desire 'is based on otherness'.³¹ I think it has become clear that the way I define otherness in this paper is not limited to the notion of another being but adopts the broad notion of the differentiated other.

First, the impression is given, according to Plato's theory, that the reason we fall in love is to 'cure' human inadequacy and to regain our soul's relationship with true knowledge, reconnecting it with Forms. In this context, we find the elements of a kind of selfish eros since the desire of a certain beautiful person is just the first step or the means to fulfill the desire which is the contact with the Form. But this is not enough to reject the position that the lover can be in love with the beloved for this person and not just because the beloved contributes to his effort to get in touch with the world of Forms. However, beyond the presence of the beloved, the lover knows two more types of otherness. On the one hand, after seeing the beauty of the beloved, he observes the similarity in the otherness and understands that there is another world, purely conceivable, with which he tries to come in contact. On the other hand, during the ascent to the transcendental world, he is confronted with his personal otherness, which is the struggle between the parts of his soul.

Plato places the completion of eros in the context of his metaphysics, that is, the immortality of the soul, the theory of Forms, and the reconnection with the transcendental world. At the same time, in the *Phaedrus* he recognizes passionate sexuality as an integral element of the soul during the erotic experience, something he had failed to emphasize in Diotima's speech at the *Symposium*, thus giving a more realistic record of passionate love.³² Plato presents an ideal eros with strong elements of metaphysics that hardly manages to be fully realized with the terms and

³¹ Phillips 1996: 82.

³² Santas 1982: 112.

symbolism that define it. But summarizing this perspective of Plato's offer on eros, we can say that Plato gives us a diagnosis of the various 'othernesses' during the erotic experience; a diagnosis of human inner conflict, and perhaps therefore of our inner distress, that explains what we really want and how we can seek it.

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