

## *Koinōnia* in the *Symposium*: from community to communion?

Zdenek Lenner

École Pratique des Hautes Études, France

[zdenek.lenner@ephe.psl.eu](mailto:zdenek.lenner@ephe.psl.eu)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1860-6372>

**Resumen:** El *Banquete* de Platón escenifica una subversión lúdica de la *paiderastía* por parte de la *philosophía* a través de sucesivos discursos interconectados. Fedro y Agatón elogian a *Érōs* como un dios que preside las relaciones homoeróticas, ya sea en la guerra o en la paz. Pausanias y Erixímaco distinguen entre dos *Érōtes*, ansiosos por supervisar estas comunidades *pederásticas* e incluso la armonía cósmica. Pero Aristófanes subvierte su perspectiva al introducir al Andrógino, una combinación de hombre y mujer, el cual, siendo expuesto por Sócrates-Diotima, dará finalmente a luz al *Érōs-Daímōn*. Solo él nos asegurará una verdadera comunidad humana al permitirnos una verdadera comunión con lo divino, como atestigua el elogio final de Alcibiades a Sócrates.

**Palabras clave:** *érōs*; *phília*; *koinōnia*; *paiderastía*; *philosophía*

**Abstract:** Plato's *Symposium* stages a playful subversion of *paiderastia* by *philosophía* through successive interconnected speeches. Phaedrus and Agathon praise *Erōs* as a god presiding over homoerotic relationships, be it at war or at peace. Pausanias and Eryximachus distinguish between two *Erōtes*, being eager to supervise these *paiderastic* communities or even the cosmic harmony. But Aristophanes subverts their perspective by introducing the Androgyne, a combination of male and female, which being displayed by Socrates-Diotima will finally give birth to the *Erōs-Daimōn*. Only he ensures us real human community by enabling true communion with the divine, witness Alcibiades' final praise of Socrates.

**Keywords:** *erōs*; *phília*; *koinōnia*; *paiderastia*; *philosophía*

In his *Lexicon of Plato's philosophical and religious language*, Édouard Des Places<sup>1</sup> distinguished four main meanings of the word *koinōnia* in Plato's dialogues: (1) participation, in general or in an Idea, as the participation of beautiful things in Beauty itself in the *Phaedo* (ἡ ἐκείνου τοῦ καλοῦ εἶτε παρουσία εἶτε κοινωνία, 100d6); (2) community (of), as the common possession of women and children in the *Republic* (κοινωνίαν γυναικῶν τε καὶ παιδῶν, V 449d4); (3) community (between), as the association of sky and earth, gods and men in the *Gorgias* (καὶ οὐρανὸν καὶ γῆν καὶ θεοὺς καὶ ἀνθρώπους τὴν κοινωνίαν, 508a1); but also as the combination of the opposites in the *Philebus* (ἡ τούτων (sc. τῶν ἐναντίων) ὁρθὴ κοινωνία, 25e7); (4) and finally concord, as the political friendship and community stimulated by Darius among the Persians in the *Laws* (φιλίαν πορίζων καὶ κοινωνίαν πᾶσιν Πέρσας, III, 695d3). Now, even if the sense of *koinōnia* may thus seem very loose, be it a sharing of sensible things or a participation in the intelligible, a kind of harmony of contrary things or the communication between them, we can still find this very polysemy in the *Symposium*, because of the great polyphony of this dialogue constantly interweaving all these possible meanings.

This polyphony manifests at two different levels: the narrators of the *Symposium* and the speakers during the *Symposium*. Concerning the narrators, Apollodorus is recalling the report Aristodemus gave him to satisfy Glaucon's demand. This Aristodemus is the same person who told also Phoenix, who himself told an anonymous person, whose report to Glaucon was unfortunately not clear (οὐδὲν εἶχε σαφὲς λέγειν, 172b4-5). We, the readers, just as the anonymous listeners, are then left with half the story, or half the truth so to say, and are from the outset invited to complete it the best we can. As regards the speakers, the very unusual succession of monologues has greatly puzzled the commentators. Luc Brisson<sup>2</sup> has shown that the six speeches can be read as three couples: (1) Phaedrus and Agathon praising *Erōs* as a god, be it the oldest or the youngest of all the gods; (2) Pausanias and Eryximachus distinguishing two *Erōtes*, the Vulgar and the Celestial, the latter extending to a cosmic level what the former had restricted to the human one; (3) and Aristophanes and

<sup>1</sup> Des Places, É., *Platon. Œuvres Complètes, Lexique de la langue philosophique et religieuse de Platon*. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, v. XIV, 2018 [1964], pp. 292-293.

<sup>2</sup> Brisson, L., *Platon. Le Banquet*, Paris: Flammarion, 2018 [1998], pp. 38-40.

Socrates-Diotima who reconsider the problem at another level, that of the power driving us towards the reunion with our other half, or the *daimōn* ensuring us the eternal possession of the Good<sup>3</sup>. In both cases, *Erōs* seems to us a kind of lack, be it of unity or of the good.

Textual evidence for this interpretative framework is provided by the last and most truthful, or rather truthlike speech, that of the drunk Alcibiades who significantly reorganises the order of the previous speakers: “Also I can see here people like Phaedrus, Agathon, Eryximachus, Pausanias, Aristodemus and Aristophanes– I don’t need to mention Socrates himself– and the rest of you. You’ve all shared the madness and Bacchic frenzy of philosophy (πάντες γὰρ κεκοινωνήκατε τῆς φιλοσόφου μανίας τε καὶ βακχείας), and so you will all hear what I have to say” (218a7-b4)<sup>4</sup>. How exactly are we to understand this participation in philosophical madness? As a matter of fact, those speakers are also lovers as we shall see. Phaedrus is the close friend and patient of Eryximachus the physician; Agathon is the well-known and mocked *erōmenos* of Pausanias; Aristodemus is one of Socrates’ most zealous *erastēs*; and Aristophanes is entirely occupied by Dionysus and Aphrodite (177d-e). Therefore, all speakers participate –though in their own ways– in *Erōs*.

Bearing in mind this structural interpretation of Plato’s most complex erotic dialogue, we should examine the role of *koinōnia* within it. Our aim is to show that *koinōnia* and its cognates have different meanings according to the different conceptions of *Erōs* they convey. Thus, they serve, among many others (such as *synousia* and *syngeneia*), as literary devices of lexical and thematic communication between the successive speeches, which thence connect and correct one another in the dialogue.

### *1. An unconventional drinking-party*

*Symposia* were in Antiquity fundamental social institutions, not only strengthening the social bonds between citizens through commensality<sup>5</sup>, but

---

<sup>3</sup> For some textual evidence of these connections and corrections see notably: 195b6 (Phaedrus and Agathon); 185e7-186a1 (Pausanias and Eryximachus); 205d10-e1 and 212c5-6 (Aristophanes and Socrates-Diotima).

<sup>4</sup> Translation is taken from Gill, C., *Plato. The Symposium*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1999.

<sup>5</sup> Schmitt-Pantel, P., *La Cité au banquet. Histoire des repas publics dans les cités grecques*, Paris: Publication de la Sorbonne, 2011 [1992]. For Plato, see pp. 233-237 where she argues that Plato hesitated in the *Laws* between the Cretan and Spartan model of the public *syssitia* and the Athenian model of the *symposium* between friends, and suggests that he finally preferred

also promoting education and social integration of young people through *paiderastia*<sup>6</sup>, and even establishing a temporary communication with the gods through ritual sacrifices and the sharing of animal parts<sup>7</sup>.

Now what Plato's *Symposium* does is to shift from this traditional paradigm to a philosophic one, through the unconventional frugality of the participants, and notably of Socrates; the playful satire of the masculine model of sexual and epistemic transmission leading to the substitution of *paiderastia* by *philosophia*<sup>8</sup>; and a sharp criticism of ancient poets and theogonies definitively separating men from gods, which are replaced by the possibility of real communion with the divine through reversion towards intelligible Beauty described in the language of the Mysteries<sup>9</sup>.

### 1.1. Agathon: the art of receiving

The scene takes place in the magnificent house of Agathon, the day after the sacrificial feast (τὰ ἐπινίκια ἔθουεν, 173a6-7) to celebrate his victory at the poetic contest. Whilst Aristodemus, though uninvited, arrives just in time for the *syndeipnon* according to Agathon, Socrates arrives later and is urged by the young poet to lie down beside him in order to receive a piece of his wisdom. Socrates obeys but ironically replies: "How splendid it would be, Agathon, if wisdom (σοφία) was the sort of thing that could flow from the fuller (πληρῶστερον) to the emptier (κενώτερον) of us when we touch each other, like water, which

---

the second one because of its educative value, transforming it into a place for philosophical discussion as a response to the quest for wisdom.

<sup>6</sup> Dover, K. J., *Greek Homosexuality*, London: Duckworth, 1978. For Plato, see chapter III section D "Philosophical Exploitation" where he shows at the same time Plato's philosophical use of *paiderastia* and his condemnation of it at a physical level.

<sup>7</sup> Detienne, M. & Vernant, J.-P., *La Cuisine du sacrifice en pays grec*, Paris: Gallimard, 1979. See notably M. Detienne's first chapter "Pratiques culinaires et esprit de sacrifice" (pp. 7-35) in which he demonstrates how the Orphic myth of Dionysus and the Titans subverts the usual animal sacrifice and convey thus a mystical critique of the traditional Hesiodic theogony based on the share at Mekone, definitively separating men from gods.

<sup>8</sup> Brisson, L., "Agathon, Pausanias, and Diotima in Plato's *Symposium: Paiderastia and Philosophia*", in: Leshner, J., Nails, D., Sheffield, F. (eds.), *Plato's Symposium. Issues in Interpretation and Reception*, Cambridge / Massachusetts / London: Harvard University Press, 2006, pp. 229-251. He argues that Socrates' speech is precisely turned against Pausanias' attempt to associate *paiderastia* with *philosophia*, and finally that Socrates-Diotima's speech completely reverts Pausanias-Agathon's perspective on the level of education, sexuality and reality.

<sup>9</sup> Brisson, L., *Platon. Le Banquet*, 2018 [1998]. See p. 40 where he separates the first two pairs of speeches (Phaedrus-Agathon and Pausanias-Eryximachus), referring to the traditional theogony transmitted by Hesiod and poets in general, from the third pair of speeches (Aristophanes-Socrates), alluding to more atypical religious movements, such as Orphism in the case of Aristophanes and the Eleusinian Mysteries for Diotima.

flows through a piece of wool from a fuller cup (πληρεστέρας) to an emptier one (κενωτέραν)” (175d3-7)<sup>10</sup>.

The *erōmenos* of Pausanias is significantly conceiving *sophia* as some kind of food or drink we receive one from another, while Socrates’ liquid metaphor may also convey sexual connotation referring to the poet’s presumed passive role in his *paiderastic* relationship. The master of the house, who is hardly able to rule his own slaves (175b5-c1), is paradoxically only mastering the art of receiving, mostly preoccupied about eating and behaving with exquisite politeness to everyone else<sup>11</sup>.

But he did not pay too much attention to Socrates’ warning, as he will be praising *Erōs* as the youngest and most beautiful god, not only possessing justice, moderation and courage but most of all *sophia*. That’s why he is the true leader of every human common event: “Love drains us of estrangement (ἀλλοτριότητος μὲν κενοῖ) and fills us with familiarity (οἰκειότητος δὲ πληροῖ), causing us to come together (συνιέναι) in all shared gatherings (συνόδους) like this, and acting as our leader in festival, chorus and sacrifice” (197d1-3)<sup>12</sup>.

So, for a successful *Symposium* you just have to be filled with *Erōs* and let the things evolve<sup>13</sup>.

### *1.2. Phaedrus: the desire of hearing praises*

Since Agathon is unwilling to take his responsibility, Pausanias takes the initiative to organise the drinking session which leads Eryximachus to become a kind of symposiarch supervising drinking and proposing to praise *Erōs* in order to satisfy Phaedrus’ desire: “I think Phaedrus is quite right on this point. I’d like (ἐπιθυμῶ) to please him (χαρίσασθαι) by making a contribution (ἔθρανος) to this project; also this seems a good occasion for those of us here to celebrate the god” (177c4-7)<sup>14</sup>.

Eryximachus appears as the friend and the physician of Phaedrus, who usually obeys him (πειθεσθαι, 176d6-7)<sup>15</sup>, but he behaves here as if he were the *erōmenos* of Phaedrus wanting to grant him favours (χαρίσασθαι). Some have

---

<sup>10</sup> Translation is taken from Gill, C., *Plato. The Symposium*, 1999.

<sup>11</sup> On Agathon’s character, and notably his softness and sociability, see Lévêque, P., *Agathon*, Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1955, pp. 19-79.

<sup>12</sup> Translation is taken from Gill, C., *Plato. The Symposium*, 1999.

<sup>13</sup> This liquid metaphor of emptying and filling significantly enough connects Agathon’s speech with those of Pausanias and Eryximachus.

<sup>14</sup> Translation is taken from Gill, C., *Plato. The Symposium*, 1999.

<sup>15</sup> For the relationship between Phaedrus and Eryximachus, see *Phdr.* 227a4-6, 268a8-9 and *Prt.* 315c.

argued reversely that Eryximachus was the *erastēs* of Phaedrus<sup>16</sup>. Whatever may be the case, they seem to be related by some strong erotic bond as those soldiers depicted in Phaedrus' speech: "If there was any mechanism for producing a city or army consisting of lovers and boyfriends (ἐραστῶν τε καὶ παιδικῶν), there could be no better form of social organisation than this: they would hold back from anything disgraceful and compete for honour (φιλοτιμούμενοι) in each other's eyes. If even small numbers of such men fought side by side, they could defeat virtually the whole human race" (178e3-179a2)<sup>17</sup>. Because he is the most ancient and most honourable god (τιμιώτατον, 180b7), *Erōs* ensures also the greatest honours to men, witness the Sacred Band of Thebes exclusively composed of *erastai* and *erōmenoi* or the erotic couple formed by Patroclus and Achilles, which is maybe the very image of the relation between the physician and his patient.

Though they don't use explicitly the language of *koinōnia*, Agathon's and Phaedrus' speeches have not only in common to confound the cause and its effect, but also to discreetly praise a *paidierastic* community, be it a festive or a military one, and are therefore the counterparts –from the side of the *erōmenoi* so to speak– to the speeches delivered by Pausanias and Eryximachus, whose use of *koinōnia* will appear to be crucial.

## 2. From *paidierastic* community to cosmic harmony

*Koinōnia* and its cognates first appear in Pausanias' speech, which is an attempt to reform *paidierastia*, and in Eryximachus' one, which tries to supervise the cosmic harmony. Both indeed, through the distinction between a Vulgar *Erōs* and a Celestial *Erōs*, are eager to prescribe the normative conditions in which it is correct to grant a favour (possibly sexual) to someone else (χαρίζεσθαι). Especially since they are thus preserving closer erotic relationships with Agathon and Phaedrus, to whom they are symbolically connected by diagonals running over the tables to their opposite couches<sup>18</sup>.

<sup>16</sup> Goodman, B., *A Reading of Phaedrus's Eulogy in Plato's Symposium*, 52p., Senior Thesis, California: Claremont Collages, 2019. The presumed small age difference between Eryximachus and Phaedrus seems nevertheless to exclude at least a conventional *paidierastic* relationship. Note also that they will depart first and together from the *Symposium* when suddenly arrives the *kōmos* (223b).

<sup>17</sup> Translation is taken from Gill, C., *Plato. The Symposium*, 1999.

<sup>18</sup> See Brisson, L., *Platon. Le Banquet*, 2018 [1998], p. 280 for the diagram. Note that Eryximachus' virtual exchange of place with Aristophanes achieves perfect symmetry between the two diagonals. Cf. Brisson, L., *Platon. Le Banquet*, 2018, p. 280.

### 2.1. Pausanias: the reform of *paiderastia*

Whilst the conventional *paiderastic* relationship was temporary, until the arrival of the first beard of the *erōmenos*, Pausanias is very significantly trying to overcome this limit, by arguing that the celestial *erastai* are attracted by boys only when they show some intelligence, and that is precisely when their first beard appears: “I think that those who begin love-affairs at this point show their readiness to spend their whole lives together and to lead a fully shared life (τὸν βίον ἅπαντα συνεσόμενοι καὶ κοινῇ συμβιωσόμενοι)” (181d3-5)<sup>19</sup>. The yearning for a homoerotic shared life, which should be unconventionally lasting and exclusive, is stressed by the stylistic chiasmus *bion...syn...syn...biōs*, revolving around the central word: *koinē*. Now this masculine common life was notably exemplified by Pausanias and Agathon, who have probably lived together in Agathon’s house in Athens before departing for Pella in Macedonia<sup>20</sup>.

Being at pains to reform Athenian complex customs, Agathon’s *erastēs* contrasts them with simpler ones, like in Boeotia and Sparta where it is always good to *charizesthai* contrary to Ionia and the Barbarians where it is always shameful because: “No doubt, it doesn’t suit their government that their subjects should have big ideas or develop strong friendships and personal bonds (φιλίας ἰσχυρὰς καὶ κοινωνίας), which are promoted by all these activities, especially by love (ἔρωτος). In Athens the tyrants found this out by their own experience: it was Aristogiton’s love (ἔρωτος) and the strength of Harmodius’ reciprocal affection (φιλία) that brought their dominance to an end” (182c1-7)<sup>21</sup>. Opposing strategically Persian tyrants’ lust for power and Athenian citizens’ freeing erotic power, Pausanias argues for the capacity of *paiderastic erōs* to produce many strong friendships (*philiai*) and communities (*koinōniai*) between citizens, whereas the Athenian Stranger will argue in the *Laws* (III, 695d3) that Darius had precisely stimulated a feeling of friendship (*philia*) and community (*koinōnia*) among all the Persians.

Having thus praised *paiderastic* community on a political level, where *erōs* is meant to foster civic concord, Pausanias’ distinction will be extended to a cosmic level by Eryximachus.

---

<sup>19</sup> Translation is taken from Gill, C., *Plato. The Symposium*, 1999.

<sup>20</sup> This is at least Brisson’s (2006) hypothesis in “Agathon, Pausanias, and Diotima in Plato’s *Symposium: Paignerastia and Philosophy*”, 2006, p. 240. For Pausanias and Agathon’s life in Pella, see L  v  que, P., *Agathon*, 1955, pp. 67-73. According to him, they should have departed from Athens around 407 B.C.

<sup>21</sup> Translation is taken from Gill, C., *Plato. The Symposium*, 1999.

## 2.2. Eryximachus: the supervision of harmonia

As a good physician, Eryximachus is eager to have a whole picture of the body, that is to say an understanding not only of the human body but also of the body of the world to which it belongs. For this reason, he appears to take both the role of the leader of the *Symposium* (*symposiarchos*) and that of the supervisor (φύλαξ, 189a8)<sup>22</sup> of the cosmic harmony. At the end of his speech, he authoritatively declares: “Also, all types of sacrifice and the whole sphere of divination (these are the ways in which gods and humans communicate with each other (ἡ περὶ θεοῦς τε καὶ ἀνθρώπους πρὸς ἀλλήλους κοινωνία)) are wholly directed at maintaining one kind of love and curing the other. Every kind of impiety towards one’s parents (living or dead) or the gods tends to occur when people fail to gratify (χαρίζηται), respect or give pride of place in every action to the well-ordered Love (τῷ κοσμίῳ Ἐρῶτι), but do so to the other one. Prophecy has been given the job of keeping an eye (ἐπισκοπεῖν) on those whose love is the wrong kind and curing this. It also has the job of producing friendship between gods and humans (φιλίας θεῶν καὶ ἀνθρώπων δημιουργός) by understanding how the operations of love in human life affect right behaviour and piety” (188b6-d3)<sup>23</sup>.

Transposing Pausanias’ axiological distinction to the whole universe, the physician similarly argues that piety consists in gratifying (χαρίζηται) only the Celestial *Erōs*, and that this role is devoted to traditional religion, which through sacrifices and divination both preserves this good *Erōs* and cures the bad one. It is only by doing so, that friendship (*philia*) and community (*koinōnia*) between gods and humans is preserved.

Now this is exactly the kind of friendship (*philia*) and community (*koinōnia*) to which Socrates was referring in the *Gorgias* (508a1) in order to cure so to say Callicles from his intemperance. Yet, this praise of a moderate and well-ordered desire (*kosmios erōs*) tends to conflate it with mere friendship and community which supposes an irreducible distance separating definitively humans from gods.

Both Pausanias the *erastēs* and Eryximachus the physician are then praising *Erōs* as a kind of friendship and community between dissimilar and

<sup>22</sup> Eryximachus’ vexed reaction to Aristophanes’ jest is particularly echoing the authoritative tone of his speech in which he is constantly eager to watch over the different *Erōtes* of the universe (187d6, 187e8, 188c2...).

<sup>23</sup> Translation is taken from Gill, C., *Plato. The Symposium*, 1999.



unequal beings<sup>24</sup>: be they the older lover and his younger beloved, or the celestial gods and the earthly humans<sup>25</sup>. For this reason, this *paiderastic* and medical account will be overcome by the shift of perspective initiated by Aristophanes and achieved by Diotima.

### 3. From sexual union to philosophical communion

As soon as his hiccup has stopped, thanks to a sneeze ironically expelling the sophistic moderation of the physician's speech, Aristophanes explicitly opposes to both Pausanias and Eryximachus (189c2-3). For him, *Erōs* is a god whose mighty power (δύναμις) enables us to become one and whole again, which is symbolised by the third kind of human original nature: the Androgyne combining male and female. Yet, Socrates-Diotima, the true psychic Androgyne so to say, will go beyond this still corporeal and sensible account, by giving birth to the *Erōs-Daimōn*, thanks to whom we can ascent to the intelligible and achieve true happiness.

#### 3.1. Aristophanes: the unsatisfying sexual union

Aristophanes completely departs from the previous speeches, by giving an anthropological account in order to explain all human possible sexual behaviours: "For one thing, there were three human genders, not just the present two, male and female. There was also a third one, a combination of these two (κοινὸν ὃν ἀμφοτέρων τούτων); now its name survives, although the gender has vanished. Then "androgynous" was a distinct gender as well as a name, combining male and female (ἐξ ἀμφοτέρων κοινὸν τοῦ τε ἄρρενος καὶ θήλεος); now nothing is left but the name, which is used as an insult" (189d7-e5)<sup>26</sup>.

This mysterious third human gender is said to be a combination (*koinon*) of the first human anthropological opposites, that is male and female, just as health was said to be a right combination (*koinōnia*) of the bodily opposites, that is hot and cold, in the *Philebus* (25e7). Then the Androgyne is a kind of mean term participating in both male and female (ἀμφοτέρων μετέχον, 190b2) just as the Moon, by which it has been begotten, is participating in both Earth and Sun (ἀμφοτέρων μετέχει, 190b3). Thus, *koinōnia* is here equated with participation in anthropological or cosmological opposites.

---

<sup>24</sup> See *Lg.* VIII, 836e5-837e1 where *erōs* is not only a mere *philia* but an intensified *philia* (σφοδρόν, 827a9), that is an intense desire either between similar beings or between dissimilar beings.

<sup>25</sup> See notably *Smp.* 186b-d and 188d9: καὶ φίλους εἶναι καὶ τοῖς κρείττοσιν ἡμῶν θεοῖς.

<sup>26</sup> Translation is taken from Gill, C., *Plato. The Symposium*, 1999.

But because of its too great perfection and ambition, along with the two other primary beings made respectively of male and male and female and female, the Androgyne was finally cut in two by Zeus and the genitals of its male and female halves were moved to the front, in order to avoid their extinction by sexual reproduction. Nevertheless, this triggered the risk of adultery for those issued from the Androgyne: “Those men who are cut from the combined gender (τοῦ κοινοῦ τμημά) (the androgynous, as it was called then) are attracted to women, and many adulterers are from this group. Similarly, the women who are attracted to men and become adulteresses come from this group” (191d6-e2)<sup>27</sup>. The chance to find exactly the one and only person who is our very other half appears so small, while the desire is at the same time growing so strong, that the risk of adultery seems always very near, though it was always harshly condemned because it blurred the transmission of male patrimony.

Now this risk comes precisely from the fact that sexual union in general (συνουσία, 192d5)<sup>28</sup> is temporary and then unsatisfying; yet our soul is yearning for something other she cannot fully express but what is revealed to her by Hephaistos: “If this is what you desire, I’m prepared to fuse and weld you together (συντήξαι καὶ συμφυσῆσαι), so that the two of you become one. Then the two of you would live a shared life (κοινῆ ἀμφοτέρους ζῆν), as long as you live, since you are one person; and when you died, you would have a shared death (κοινῆ τεθνεῶτε) in Hades, as one person instead of two. But see if this is what you long for, and if achieving this state satisfies you” (192d8-e5)<sup>29</sup>. What all the lovers really want indeed is to be made one again and enjoy then an absolute community of life and death. Is this not precisely what Pausanias was trying to achieve by reforming *paiderastia* in order to share Agathon’s life if not death?

We might think so if Aristophanes was not willing to defend himself from exclusive comic purposes at the end of his speech, by advocating for the universal scope of his mythical account (193b6-c5). Although this was a really beautiful and powerful explanation, especially for our imagination, Socrates will take it even to another level, under the guidance of Diotima.

<sup>27</sup> Translation is taken from Gill, C., *Plato. The Symposium*, 1999.

<sup>28</sup> ἡ τῶν ἀφροδισίων συνουσία. Interestingly enough, Aristophanes uses *synousia* exclusively for sexual intercourse in the context of *paiderastia*, while he describes the sexual union between a man and a woman as an intertwining (*symplokē*; 191c). Diotima will on the contrary use *synousia* for heterosexual intercourse (206c6) before elevating it to the union of the soul with Beauty itself as we shall see (212a2).

<sup>29</sup> Translation is taken from Gill, C., *Plato. The Symposium*, 1999.

### 3.2. Socrates-Diotima: the philosophical communion

With Socrates, the dialogue really begins, not only because he is eager to *dialegethai* with Agathon (194d-e), that is to say to question (*erōtaō*) and to answer in order to find the truth (199b-e)<sup>30</sup>, but also because to achieve this refutation of Agathon's most sophistic speech he finally stages his younger self discussing with Diotima, a female prophetess. By doing this he proves to be the true Androgyne of Aristophanes' myth, combining in himself the male and the female, and giving thus birth to the *Erōs-Daimōn*<sup>31</sup>.

Because he desires and lacks beauty, *Erōs* cannot be a god contrary to what all previous speeches have said but is rather a Great Spirit (*Daimōn megas*), whose power (*δύναμις*) is to be a mean term and a messenger (*metaxu*) between men and gods, filling all the space in between (*en mesō*). This intermediary nature is explained by its origin, since he comes both from Poverty (*Penia*) and Resource (*Poros*) and share therefore in both. That is also why he is assimilated to the philosopher, constantly in need and yet in search of the truth.

Still, what is then his use or advantage (*χρεία*, 204c8) for us asks Socrates? And after having substituted the good to the beautiful as the proper object of love, Diotima asks him back: "Do you think that this wish and this form of love are common (*κοινόν*) to all human beings, and that everyone wants good things to be his own forever, or what is your view?", "Just that, I said; it's common (*κοινόν*) to everyone" (205a5-8)<sup>32</sup>.

Thus, *Erōs* reveals itself to be the very power in us, which by constant striving towards the good, promises us its eternal possession, that is, happiness. In this context, the repetition of *koinon* seems to be a direct echo to Aristophanes' Androgyne, all the more as Diotima will further explicitly transform desire for wholeness into desire for goodness<sup>33</sup>.

---

<sup>30</sup> This common search for the truth is characteristic of *philosophia* and notably depicted in the *First Alcibiades* (Ὅρα και σὺ κοινῇ, 117c2; κοινῇ βουλή, 119b1 and 124b10; σκεπτέον κοινῇ, 124d9...). See also the famous passage from the *Meno* about the right way of *dialegethai* between friends (75d and further κοινῇ ζητεῖν, 86c5). That is the reason why the interlude between Agathon and Socrates represents an important shift in the *dialogue*, even if it will be achieved, due to Agathon's reluctance to pursue, only by Socrates-Diotima.

<sup>31</sup> Socrates stages himself as more on the side of *Penia* whose *aporia* is filled by Diotima's wisdom as if she were *Poros*. This has at least two advantages: to preserve Socrates' claim that he knows nothing, save about love thanks to Diotima, and to show to Agathon that when you don't have knowledge and pursue it, the best thing to do is to search for a teacher who will guide you through true discussion.

<sup>32</sup> Translation is taken from Gill, C., *Plato. The Symposium*, 1999.

<sup>33</sup> 205e1-3: ὁ δ' ἐμὸς λόγος οὔτε ἡμίσεός φησιν εἶναι τὸν ἔρωτα οὔτε ὅλου, εἰ μὴ τυγχάνῃ γέ πού, ὦ ἔταίρε, ἀγαθὸν ὄν. Referring notably to 192e10-193a1: τοῦ ὅλου οὖν τῇ ἐπιθυμίᾳ καὶ διώξει ἔρωτος

But if love is the desire to have the good forever, how are we to achieve this goal and by what kind of activity (πρᾶξις, 206b2) asks this time Diotima? Facing the *aporia* of Socrates, she finally reveals to him that love's function is "giving birth in beauty both in body and in soul"<sup>34</sup>. Whilst a man and a woman can enjoy sexual intercourse (συνουσία, 206c6) in order to procreate, have children in common, and thence satisfy to a certain extent their desire for immortality; the relationship between two men, both being pregnant in their souls, is paradoxically much more fecund because: "It is, I think, when someone has made contact and formed a relationship with beauty of this sort that he gives birth to, and reproduces, the child with which he has long been pregnant. He thinks about the other's beauty, whether they are in each other's company or not, and together with him he shares in bringing up the child reproduced in this way (τὸ γεννηθὲν συνεκτρέφει κοινῇ μετ' ἐκείνου). People like that have a much closer partnership (πολὺ μείζω κοινωνίαν) with each other and a stronger bond of friendship (φιλίαν βεβαιοτέραν) than parents have, because the children of their partnership (παίδων κεκοινωνηκότεσ) are more beautiful and more immortal" (209c2-7)<sup>35</sup>.

What are those more beautiful and more immortal children these men have in common? Certainly not the children shared by the guardians of the *Republic* (V, 449d4). These are fine speeches and fine actions, first engendered in the soul of the lover and then nourished in common by the beloved, whose beauty has fostered them<sup>36</sup>. This philosophical *koinōnia* between two men whose souls are ascending to and revolving around intelligible Beauty, giving thus birth to beauty in actions and speeches, is explicitly opposed to the *paiderastic koinōnia* which has been praised by Pausanias. The best proof of its greater communion and fecundity is this very speech of Socrates-Diotima, which is way more thought-provoking and everlasting than Agathon's one.

ὄνομα. Note that Diotima tackles the conception of *erōs* as desire of (corporeal) wholeness not of unity...

<sup>34</sup> 206b7-8: ἔστι γὰρ τοῦτο τόκος ἐν καλῷ καὶ κατὰ τὸ σῶμα καὶ κατὰ τὴν ψυχὴν. Brisson notes in *Platon. Le Banquet*, 2018 [1998], *ad locum* that Diotima is playing on the ambiguity of ἐν καλῷ, which could mean either "at the right time" or "in the beautiful".

<sup>35</sup> Translation is taken from Gill, C., *Plato. The Symposium*, 1999.

<sup>36</sup> For this paradoxical image of pregnancy see Brisson, L., "Agathon, Pausanias, and Diotima in Plato's *Symposium: Paignerastia and Philosophia*", in: Leshner, J., Nails, D. & Sheffield, F. (eds.), *Plato's Symposium. Issues in Interpretation and Reception*, Cambridge/Massachusetts/London: Harvard University Press, 2006, pp. 248-251 who connects it with the central myth of the *Phaedrus*. See also Hobbs, A., "Female Imagery in Plato", *ibid.*, pp. 252-271.

Both Aristophanes and Socrates have therefore praised *Erōs* as a kind of desire and lack of something which was originally consubstantial (*syngenēs*) to us<sup>37</sup>, but that we have lost and need to recover. While Aristophanes' myth describes it as desire for wholeness and unity, Socrates-Diotima's dialogue conceptualises it as desire for the Beautiful and the Good. In doing so, we philosophically perceive the passage from the corporeal to the psychic, from the sensible to the intelligible, and thus the possibility for real communion with the divine.

#### *4. Human communion reflecting philosophical union*

At the very moment Aristophanes was eager to answer to Socrates-Diotima, suddenly (ἐξαίφνης, 212c6) arrived a completely drunk Alcibiades, proclaimed himself to be the leader of the drinking-party (ἄρχων τῆς πόσεως, 213e9-10), and began a praise of Socrates rather than of *Erōs* promising to say the truth (τὰληθῆ ἐρῶ, 214e6). Thus, Plato achieves not only a lively and moving apology of his beloved master, but also gives us a truthful image of what philosophical life aspiring towards communion with the divine means. For just as Alcibiades would do absolutely anything to benefit from Socrates, so too Socrates is mostly, if not only, concerned with the Good.

##### *4.1. Alcibiades' impossible communion with Socrates*

Similarly to Agathon, yearning at the outset for physical contact with Socrates in order to benefit from his wisdom, Alcibiades depicts himself even more explicitly as prepared to grant his favours to Socrates (χαρίζεσθαι, 218c10 and 218d4), in order to become the best possible (βέλτιστον, 218d2). But this erotic temptation is immediately reverted towards its true object by Socrates' ironic answer: "You must be seeing in me a beauty beyond comparison and one that's far superior to your own good looks. If you've seen this and are trying to strike a deal (κοινώσασθαί) with me in which we exchange one type of beauty for another, you're planning to make a good profit from me. You're trying to get true beauty in return for its appearance, and so to make an exchange that is really 'gold for bronze'. But look more closely, my good friend, and make sure you're not making a mistake in thinking I'm of value to you (οὐδὲν ὄν)" (218e2-219a2)<sup>38</sup>.

83

---

<sup>37</sup> 192b5: ἀεὶ τὸ συγγενὲς ἀσπαζόμενος (Aristophanes on *paidierastia*); 195b5: ὡς ὁμοιον ὁμοίῳ ἀεὶ πελάζει (Agathon on *Erōs*); 210c5 (Diotima on beauty of actions and laws); see again *Lg.* VIII, 836e5-837e1, *supra*.

<sup>38</sup> Translation is taken from Gill, C., *Plato. The Symposium*, 1999.

This appears to be an ultimate criticism of the relationship implied by *paiderastia*, since Alcibiades firmly believes that Socrates possesses something which he can share (κοινώσασθαι) simply by sexual contact with him. Yet Socrates warns again about the impossibility of such an exchange, for the very reason that the two things at stake are of absolutely distinct nature: sensible beauty on the one hand and intelligible Beauty on the other.

Then the only real communion that Alcibiades achieved with Socrates, consisted merely in fighting and eating together: “It was after these events had occurred that we served together in the Athenian campaign against Potidaea and shared the same mess there (στρατεία ἡμῖν εἰς Ποτειδαίαν ἐγένετο κοινὴ καὶ συνεσιτοῦμεν ἐκεῖ)” (219e5-7)<sup>39</sup>. Failing to have real philosophical communion, they shared at least a military campaign where Socrates proved to be exceptionally courageous, enduring significantly enough both starvation and drinking. But how are we to reconcile this exceptionally gifted human nature with Socrates’ previous answer to Alcibiades that *he is nothing* (οὐδὲν ὄν)?

#### 4.2. Socrates’ true union with the Beautiful and the Good

At the beginning of the *syndeipnon*, Socrates was missing. He was not here, eating with all the others while reclining on soft couches; but there, in the porch of the neighbours (ἐν τῷ τῶν γειτόνων προθύρῳ, 175a8), standing still and reflecting about something<sup>40</sup>. This mysterious silence will be echoed in Alcibiades’ picture of Socrates reflecting upright all day long at the military expedition before addressing a final prayer to the sun of the new day. What was he precisely doing during these moments? Entering the porch of the real Agathon maybe, as is said in the *Philebus* (τοῖς τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ προθύροις, 64c1) and finally communing with it as the eye with the sun. Isn’t there Beauty indeed, shining forth the Good, to which the philosopher strives most of all to unite himself in order to live the best possible life, as had concluded Diotima: “Do you think”, she said, “that would be a poor life for a human being, looking in that direction and gazing at that object with the right part of himself and sharing its company (συνόντος αὐτῷ)?” (211e4-212a2)<sup>41</sup>.

Actually, Plato gives us an ultimate dramatic clue suggesting such a communion of the philosopher with the Good, since Agathon finally changes positions and lies down beside Socrates in order to be praised by him. Lying

---

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> Note the significant parallel with Penia begging at the doors of the gods after their feast (203b3-5).

<sup>41</sup> Translation is taken from Gill, C., *Plato. The Symposium*, 1999.

thus between Alcibiades and Agathon, Socrates appears to be the true third (τρίτος), just as the Androgyne<sup>42</sup>, and then the true mediator by being in between (ἐν μέσῳ), just as the *Erōs-Daimōn* constantly striving towards the Good<sup>43</sup>.

Then, it is ultimately thanks to this very philosophical *erōs* yearning towards psychic union (*synousia*) with the Principle, that something like a true “philosophical community” (*koinōnia*)<sup>44</sup> between embodied humans can ever appear, witness the Socratic one.

Let us conclude by gathering the sixteen occurrences of *koinōnia* and its cognates present in Plato’s *Symposium* in a synopsis. We can thus observe what seems to be a very meaningful progression connecting and correcting the successive speeches.

Although Phaedrus and Agathon do not use the word, they nonetheless refer to social and military phenomena which may imply it, notably the army made exclusively of *erastai* and *erōmenoi* and all other types of shared gatherings in which *paiderastia* could easily have flourished. Yet, it is precisely their respective lovers, that is Pausanias and Eryximachus, that will first make a very significant use of *koinōnia*, since for the former *Erōs* fosters great community between an *erastēs* and his *erōmenos* (κοινωνία, 182c3), witness Aristogiton and Harmodius, while for the latter we should gratify the well-ordered *Erōs* thanks to sacrifices and divination in order to maintain the community between men and gods (κοινωνία, 188c1).

Now this erotic quartet, so to speak, is symbolically separated by Aristophanes who makes a very different voice heard<sup>45</sup>. In order to explain all the sexual behaviours, he imagines three kinds of original human beings, whose third is the combination of male and female (κοινόν, 189e1-3 and 191d6). *Erōs* is then the intense human desire for complete re-union, the lovers aspiring not only to shared life (κοινῆ, 192e2) as Pausanias and Agathon (κοινῆ, 181d5), but also to shared death (κοινῆ, 192e4). This still corporeal and sensible account will be

---

<sup>42</sup> For the Androgyne see 189e quoted *supra* (τρίτον) and for Socrates becoming the third, instead of Alcibiades, on Agathon’s couch see 213b (τρίτος).

<sup>43</sup> For the *Erōs-Daimōn* see 202e quoted *supra* (ἐν μέσῳ) and for Socrates lying in between the two others, instead of Alcibiades, see 222e (ἐν μέσῳ). For this change of places on the last couch, see Brisson, L., *Platon. Le Banquet*, 2018 [1998], p. 280.

<sup>44</sup> Araújo, C., “*Erōs* and communitarianism in Plato’s *Symposium*”, in: Brisson, L. & Renaut, O. (eds.), *Érotique et politique chez Platon. Êrōs, genre et sexualité dans la cité platonicienne*. Sankt Augustin: Academia Verlag, 2017, pp. 231-241.

<sup>45</sup> Note that this separation is similar to that of the Arcadians by the Spartans to which alludes Aristophanes himself (193a), and which might be another clue, if still needed, of the intimate connection between Aristophanes and Diotima from Mantinea, since Mantineans were Arcadians.

overcome by Socrates-Diotima –the true psychic Androgyne–, by acknowledging that the most common desire of all human beings is the desire for the good (here the repetition of κοινόν seems directly to refer to Aristophanes’ speech, 205a6 and 209c4). Assuming plainly this philosophical path, Socrates-Diotima then opposes explicitly to Pausanias’ attempt to reform *paiderastia*, arguing that psychic communion in shared speeches and actions is a much more intimate one (κοινῆ...κοινωνία...κοινωνέω, 209c4-7).

Finally, arriving suddenly among all these lovers participating each in his own way and voice in erotic madness (κοινωνέω, 218b3)<sup>46</sup>, the drunk Alcibiades portrays himself as striving towards communion with Socrates, but being unable to participate in Beauty with him (κοινώσασθαί, 218e4) he had only the chance to share in a military campaign (κοινή, 219e6) and a common meal, though witnessing the extraordinary nature of this very unique being.

Has Socrates communed with the Good in his moments of seeming absence? We can assume that Plato did the best he can in order that we, following in his footsteps, could discover it...

### *Bibliography*

- Araújo, C., “Erôs and communitarianism in Plato’s *Symposium*”, in: Brisson, L. & Renaut, O. (eds.), *Érotique et politique chez Platon. Éros, genre et sexualité dans la cité platonicienne*. Sankt Augustin: Academia Verlag, 2017, pp. 231-241.
- Brisson, L., “Agathon, Pausanias, and Diotima in Plato’s *Symposium: Paidierastia and Philosophia*”, in: Leshner, J., Nails, D., Sheffield, F. (eds.), *Plato’s Symposium. Issues in Interpretation and Reception*, Cambridge/Massachusetts/London: Harvard University Press, 2006, pp. 229-251.
- Brisson, L., *Platon. Le Banquet*, Paris: Flammarion, 2018 [1998].
- Des Places, É., *Platon. Œuvres Complètes, Lexique de la langue philosophique et religieuse de Platon*. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, v. XIV, 2018 [1964].
- Detienne, M. & Vernant, J.-P., *La Cuisine du sacrifice en pays grec*, Paris: Gallimard, 1979.
- Dover, K. J., *Greek Homosexuality*, London: Duckworth, 1978.
- Gill, C., *Plato. The Symposium*, Hardmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1999.
- Goodman, B., *A Reading of Phaedrus’s Eulogy in Plato’s Symposium*, 52p., Senior Thesis, California: Claremont Collages, 2019. Available at [https://scholarship.claremont.edu/cmc\\_theses/2315/](https://scholarship.claremont.edu/cmc_theses/2315/). Accessed in 5/7/2021.

---

<sup>46</sup> See *Phdr.* 249e where *divine* erotic madness, the best of all kinds of divine possessions, is said to benefit both the inspired lover and the beloved sharing in his madness (τῷ τε ἔχοντι καὶ τῷ κοινωνοῦντι), becoming thence a lover himself by participating to this very madness (ταύτης μετέχων τῆς μανίας).



- Hobbs, A., “Female Imagery in Plato”, in: Leshner, J., Nails, D. & Sheffield, F. (eds.), *Plato’s Symposium. Issues in Interpretation and Reception*, Cambridge / Massachusetts / London: Harvard University Press, 2006, pp. 252-271.
- Lévêque, P., *Agathon*, Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1955.
- Schmitt-Pantel, P., *La Cité au banquet. Histoire des repas publics dans les cités grecques*, Paris: Publication de la Sorbonne, 2011 [1992].