

Banned from Campus: The Pedagogical Importance of Plato's *Symposium*

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Brief Overview of Plato's *Symposium*

Dialogue by Plato about a roughly historical event from Socrates' life (corroborated by Xenophon's *Symposium*). Written c. 384-379BCE; set in 416BCE. "Symposium": dinner part where wealthy young men would drink, listen to music, play games, including rhetorical competitions and discussions. Agathon won a prize and tonight is night two of the festivities. Speech-making competition ensues. Subject matter: "What is Love?" 7 speeches total

I. Structure: Teaches Philosophical Argumentation

The structure of the main sections of the *Symposium*: Speech—Rebuttal—Speech. Each one of those rebuttals and the speeches that come from them teaches students another unique way of making a philosophical argument. For students coming from STEM backgrounds or even other humanity areas such as literary criticism, the *Symposium* is a helpful tool in demonstrating what philosophical arguments look like

Discussion: Are there better ways to teach philosophical argumentation? Surely more straightforward ways—but perhaps not as memorable? Using the *Symposium* is a "show, don't tell" method. Bad? Problem of knowledge-transfer: skills are very hard for students to transfer between contexts. Learning some types of philosophical argumentation from *Symposium* rebuttals may not translate at all to making philosophical arguments themselves?

II. Topic: What is Love?

"What is love?" is a question that, with a little coaxing, can launch an extensive class discussion. Expanding the idea out from merely romantic or erotic love, every student should have an experience with or example of love. More so than "Justice" or "Virtue" or "Piety" (which students often don't know the meaning of to begin with!), "Love" is grounded in the experiences of students' lives. The issues of lust versus virtuous love, of physical versus emotional and intellectual connection, is one any college student has a personal stake in.

Discussion: Is "Love" really a worthy philosophical subject? "Justice" has real world police, government, moral, interpersonal, &c. implications. Is "Love" quite as pervasive? As noble? Undergraduates are generally 18-22 years old—are the erotic aspects of sexual love appropriate topics of philosophical conversation for them? What about asexual or aromantic students? Neurodivergent students? Is the subject matter of any use or interest to them? Might they simply disengage?

III. Metaphysics

The *Symposium* remains one of the clearest descriptions Plato ever gives of his Forms. It's essential reading on the subject. Top three places to learn about the Forms: Book 6 of *Republic*, *Parmenides*, and *Symposium* (with apologies to the *Timaeus*). Book 6 of *Republic* focuses on the epistemology of the Forms. The *Parmenides* presents a demarcation problem with the Forms which the young Socrates manages to affirmatively settle; but when Parmenides poses more metaphysical questions about the Forms to him, cannot. Ends aporetically.

Discussion: How many undergraduate students really care about Platonic metaphysics? Is it worth it to read the entire *Symposium*, with all its controversial elements, just for that? Why not excerpt that section and leave out the controversial bits? Plato himself even argues we shouldn't allow the youth to touch metaphysics until they reach middle age—or even later. Perhaps he's right?

IV. Representation Part I: Women

Diotima credited in this dialogue with a) Socrates' philosophical description of love, and b) teaching Socrates the Socratic method. Phaedrus gives a positive description of a woman being virtuous and god-honored: Alcestis. Aristophanes presents sapphic relationships neutrally, as god-ordained as homosexual relationships (contrast this with Pausanias relegating women to "common love"). Diotima presents philosophy as midwifery and women as subject-matter experts in reproduction, pregnancy, and birth. If philosophy is conceiving in Beauty and giving birth to virtue, then women are the natural philosophers.

Discussion: There is a movement to shift philosophy away from "dead white European men"—or at least, add some additional voices into our syllabi. Does the inclusion of Diotima in the *Symposium*—a woman who is not even first-personally present in the dialogue and we're merely told about via Socrates—count towards this goal? Would it not be better to simply read things by women and other under-represented philosophers (Julia Annas, Helen North, Sappho, &c.) rather than settling for this?

V. Representation Part II: LGBTQ+

Many undergraduate students are shockingly ignorant about the history of the existence of LGBTQ+ people—and in general ignorant of the variance of sexual and romantic attraction. It is ahistorical to pretend these sexualities or non-binary representations of gender have not existed until recently. It gives students a greater depth of understanding from which to approach debates about policy surrounding LGBTQ+ issues. Representation is important for LGBTQ+ students.

Discussion: Is there something inappropriate about including LGBTQ+ relationships in a discussion about love? To understand many of the speeches—especially Pausanias'—requires an understanding of the Athenian *paiderastia* system. Is this appropriate material for discussion? Does a discussion of love that includes the Athenian *paiderastia* system harm the LGBTQ+ community, by perpetuating a harmful association of queer love with pedophilia and/or pederasty?

VI. Radical Gender Ideology

Actually: the *Symposium* does contain a lot of radical gender ideology. It's just not the kind Texas A&M was probably thinking of. Conventions of the Athenian *paiderastia* are undermined throughout the dialogue: Achilles and Patroclus, Socrates and Alcibiades, Aristophanes' etiological myth. Conventions of standard gender roles are also undermined throughout: Diotima, Socrates the midwife, Alcestis.

Discussion: Begs the question of the entire purpose of the liberal arts, doesn't it? Are we supposed to expose our students to controversial books? Or are we a Great Books program, meant to feed our students whatever the establishment deems appropriate literature of a classical education? Are there better ways to do this than the *Symposium*, and is this banning—though something that should be fought against—not really about the *Symposium*? Should we dump the *Symposium* for even more subversive texts? Is there anything the *Symposium* does uniquely that can't be done—perhaps better! By some other text?