

4-1-2016

On the Relationship of Alcibiades' Speech to the Rest of the Speeches in Plato's Symposium[1]

Andy Davis

Belmont University, Andrew.davis@belmont.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.belmont.edu/sph>



Part of the [Ancient History, Greek and Roman through Late Antiquity Commons](#), [German Language and Literature Commons](#), [History of Philosophy Commons](#), [Logic and Foundations of Mathematics Commons](#), and the [Metaphysics Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Davis, Andy (2016) "On the Relationship of Alcibiades' Speech to the Rest of the Speeches in Plato's Symposium[1]," *Sophia and Philosophia*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://repository.belmont.edu/sph/vol1/iss1/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Belmont Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Sophia and Philosophia* by an authorized editor of Belmont Digital Repository. For more information, please contact repository@belmont.edu.

On the Relationship of Alcibiades' Speech to the Rest of the Speeches in Plato's *Symposium*¹

Friedrich Nietzsche (1864), tr. Andy Davis

To get to the point immediately concerning how I think about the relationship between the first five speeches and Socrates' speech: it seems to me the claim that Plato has only brought together inadequate perspectives on Eros in order to present Socrates' speech over and against them as the only correct one is completely in error. Socrates himself does not deny these speeches their accolades, he comes back to many things in them as he assigns each single perspective its own due place. Much more, I believe that from the first speech to the last a decisive progress takes place, insofar as each successive perspective increases and broadens the previous perspective in some essential aspect; the individual speakers see the concept of Eros emerge with growing clarity: until, in the end, Socrates takes the cumulatively developed building and only rounds it off with a dome; he does not destroy it. Naturally, this is valid only with respect to the fundamental perspective of each speaker: whatever was added as ornament to their developments is rejected by Socrates in many ways as unjustified.

Phaedrus' speech sketches only the area in which the question moves: he describes Eros as the oldest God and as the author of the greatest Goods. Naturally, I pass over the meaning of the individual speeches for the personality of the speakers and emphasize the fundamental thought. Pausanias explains Eros, the heavenly goddess, as Love, which has as its purpose the active and passive refinement of human beings. Whereas the first [two] speakers present Love only in its effect on human beings, Eryximachus broadens the meaning of Eros to [include] the universal life of nature. Aristophanes says that a natural necessity lies at the root of Eros, the law of attraction [*Wahlverwandschaft*]. Agathon finally calls Eros the love of the beautiful, which brings forth everything good and great, in nature, in art, everywhere. The concept of Eros is brought together out of all these speeches: Eros is the bringing forth of the love of the beautiful as natural law directed toward the good. Socrates's determination does not sound essentially different: Eros is the love directed toward conceiving and giving birth in beauty, which he then designates as the indwelling immortality in spiritual and physical nature. In this ladder to the highest Eros proposed by Socrates, I notice the peculiarity that the various standpoints of the other speakers can be found again.

Phaedrus is, as elsewhere, only the “midwife” of the successive speeches. But Pausanias, in whose speech one should never let his love for Agathon out of one’s sight, shows the human standpoint, as long as one loves something beautiful, be it something corporeal or spiritual. Eryximachus is the lover of everything beautiful, as it reveals itself in the whole of nature. Aristophanes stands already on the higher rung of the love of art and science, just as Agathon does, who, it appears to me, receives his higher place from Plato by being a tragic poet: a judgment which we would no longer agree with: the spiritually greater person by far is Aristophanes. Finally, Socrates himself reaches the rung that Diotima designates as the highest, love of the beautiful itself [*Urschöne*]; we do not doubt that he has reached it, but Socrates himself does not say this to us and it may not fit with his character. Indeed, Socrates describes how he was once caught in the same error as Agathon is; until he acquired this great insight. The reader of the dialogue must remain uncertain of the degree to which this love of the beautiful itself has been carried over into Socrates’ everyday life. At this point, Alcibiades appears in order to portray the effect of the love of the beautiful itself on human practical life. His appearance presents this love [of the beautiful itself] discussed by Socrates at work in an individual and also presents the reciprocal effect [*Rückwirkung*] that the love-filled person [Alcibiades] has on others, which mirrors the effect that Socrates has on Alcibiades. Here is the reason, then, why Plato chooses Alcibiades in order to describe these effects: if some other one of Socrates’ youths had appeared, in order to glorify Socrates, the effect would be incomparably weaker. Alcibiades, compared to Socrates, is a complete apostate. He is the young man entirely alienated from philosophy. Socrates’ influence on such a person, on, as it were, such a brilliant person, is the most wonderful effect that Plato could have given as a proof of the aforementioned reciprocal effect. So then, Alcibiades knows nothing of the past speeches: to the surprise of the listeners he traces the practical side of the person under the influence of the beautiful itself, while Socrates traces the theoretical side. Plato presents Alcibiades as drunk to allow him to express himself more freely about things, things that must be avoided in serious, measured conversation; mentioning them was necessary, for they were historical facts. Thus the opposition between Socrates speech and Alcibiades speech is noteworthy, like the opposition of their two natures, because both express their deepest feelings, the one through the mouth of a divinely inspired Prophetess, the other under the inspiration of wine. Their deepest feelings, which are the same, are for the beautiful itself, one through the idea, the other pointing toward actuality: Socrates is the lover of the beautiful itself, but Alcibiades is also a lover of the

beautiful itself. At the same time, what a difference there is in their natures: the one is as ethically sublime as the other is ethically fallen; the one as physically ugly as the other is physically beautiful, the one as sober and self-controlled as the other is drunk and excited.

It is clear that these points apply as much to the philosophy as to the artistic form of the dialogue. At this point we should notice that a shift in tone occurs with Alcibiades' entrance: it shows the most daring artistic grasp that in the moment when Socrates has led his listeners to the highest ocean of the beautiful, the reef of drunkenness and enthusiasm bursts upon them, and, indeed, does not negate the effect of Socrates' speech, but heightens it. Alcibiades' speech is the work of Eros, just as the Socrates' speech is. But Alcibiades' speech works through facts and Socrates' speech works through ideas; and the facts work more powerfully and persuasively than the expressed ideas. Socrates' and Alcibiades' speeches are related as are those of Agathon and Aristophanes and those of Eryximachus and Pausanias, but in a higher sphere. Socrates, Agathon and Eryximachus are the great thinkers, Alcibiades, Aristophanes and Pausanias work through facts and myths: with Pausanias, we should notice that it is always his own love of Agathon that he has in sight. The three thinkers lift up Eros into the widest circle of their particular arts and sciences, Eryximachus sees Eros as a doctor, Agathon sees Eros as a poet and Socrates sees Eros as a philosopher.

Through the opposition of Socrates and Alcibiades, the daimonic double nature of Eros itself finally comes into view, this being-in-between divine and human, spiritual and sensuous; just as on the other side, through Alcibiades' entrance, the dialogue itself is marvelously colored, swaying between opposed tonal colors which follow from the individual parts of the dialogue and stretch out into the speeches. The wondrous union of philosophical speeches with the pleasures of wine reminds us of this as well.

Thus Alcibiades' entrance appears as the turning point in an artful drama and at the same time points philosophy toward the side of actuality; and, if I may be indulged in risking a comparison, in this way Plato has bound up all the parts of the dialogue in a knot, just as Zeus bound together the various human sides and skins with the umbilical cord and unified them with a knot.

Andy Davis
Belmont University
Andrew.davis@belmont.edu

Notes

¹ 'Ueber das Verhältniß der Rede des Alcibiades zu den übrigen Reden des platonischen Symposions.' (KGW I/3, 384-88)