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# Love of God and Unity of Wisdom in Plato and Leibniz

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IN what follows I wish to consider the following question, the relevance of which should be fairly obvious for a discussion on the love of God: does love flow from wisdom or wisdom flow from love?<sup>1</sup> The question is at the heart of much Christian reflection on the nature of the love of God and how it is to be known. Augustine famously reflects on the source of his knowledge and love of God in book X of his *Confessions* where he concludes that God is truly within him and has always been so.<sup>2</sup> Only in and after *recognition* of this fact is love engendered. In a different vein, Ignatius of Antioch wrote to the Ephesian church that their faith “was the means by which [they] ascended, and [their] love the way which led up to God,”<sup>3</sup> and Ambrose, in his *Letter to Simplician*, suggests that the love of God in Christ is reflected in the sacrifice of Christ for the inchoate body, that is the Church. The wise, he goes on, are thus not afraid to be under bondage to Christ through service in the church, since this bondage is in reality freedom and service the gateway to making real the love of God. So Ambrose and Ignatius, contrary to Augustine, appear to privilege faithful commitment and unity (love) over knowledge (wisdom). But again the contrary side reappears with Pope Benedict in his first Christmas Encyclical, where he wrote that the union of God and human beings, “... is no mere fusion, a sinking in the nameless ocean of the Divine; it is a unity which creates love, a unity in which both God and man remain themselves and yet become

fully one. As Saint Paul says: ‘He who is united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him.’” (1 Cor 6:17)<sup>4</sup> Suffice it to say that the issue is by no means settled.

Some light might be shed on the question through considering two philosophers: the first thoroughly Christianised, the second (at least nominally) Christian.<sup>5</sup> The relationship between love and wisdom is key for both Plato and Leibniz as each eventually arrives at a position where some form of ontological unity is the basis for salvific knowledge and, furthermore, this unity is either had through love or is its font. Love of God, for all each, intimately connects wisdom and unity. What I wish to do is to clarify how each sees this connection. To begin the analysis let us start with Plato.

Plato’s discussion of love takes place primarily through three dialogues: the *Lysis*, the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus* (though I shall here concern myself primarily with the first two). Through these dialogues we see Socrates expound on the ‘art of love’ (*ta erotica*), which, he memorably tells his fellow symposiasts, is the sole thing he claims to know. This rather remarkable claim from Socrates is in itself noteworthy since at his trial Socrates argues that his wisdom consists solely in the fact that he realises that he knows nothing.<sup>6</sup> On the surface then, Socrates’ claim in the *Symposium* is unique, possible contradictory and assuredly important. As we shall see below, we are right to pay particular attention to this statement since

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in Socrates' 'Diotima' speech we see the real meaning behind his words, namely Platonism.

Turning to the *Lysis* we see Socrates in discussion with Hypothales on the subject of how best to speak to the object of one's affections in order to win him. Hypothales loves Lysis and is quite literally constantly singing his praises, recounting his many beauties and virtues, listing his great deeds and those of his ancestors, and generally pining for Lysis so much that he is now becoming quite a bore to those around him. Socrates chides Hypothales for eulogising Lysis over-generously, since no skilled lover would ever do so. For, as Socrates teaches, if after you have placed the object of your affections on such a high pedestal you succeed in securing him, you have in fact only succeeded in announcing your own prowess at winning such a prize. Those who are wise in love, rather, only ever praise their beloved *after* they have them since they fear what the future may hold. (*Lysis* 206a) Praising your beloved to the skies before you have some commitment only makes your beloved big-headed and thus less likely to accept you, or if they do accept you, the flattery leaves them constantly second-guessing themselves as to whether they made the right choice or really could have done better.

So humbled, Hypothales enquires as to the best way to speak to one's beloved, to which Socrates then offers a master class in the art of questioning – *elenctic* – which is the *real* art of love. When Socrates says that he knows the art of love, Plato is making a play on words: between the noun *eros* and the verb *erotan* (meaning to question). So Socrates' prowess is not in the art of love understood as sexual strategies or romantic manoeuvres, but rather in dialectic. Thus the true 'art of love' is philosophy and Plato devotes a great deal of these three dialogues to making this claim. In so doing he subverts the then prevalent Athenian practice of *paiderastia* – the socially sanctioned sexual relationship between older men and young teenaged boys through which youths were supposed to learn virtue.

The history and social role of Athenian *Paiderastia* is a complex story and far too involved for my present purposes; however we should note that it was commonly understood to include at least two kinds of love: heavenly,

Uranian love whose object is the soul, and whose goal is the inculcation of virtue in the beloved; and common or Pandemotic love, whose object is the body and whose aim is mere sexual pleasure (*Symposium* 180c-e). Heavenly love is solely homosexual since not only does it take the Goddess Urania (whose descent is always male) as its model but also because in such a relationship the possibility of lustful procreation is absent.<sup>7</sup> In the dialogues we are considering, Plato makes Socrates the agent of subversion,<sup>8</sup> or more accurately submersion of Pandemotic by Uranian love. The goal of love is, for Socrates, philosophical intercourse – the dialectical questioning which is key to apprehension of the form of the Good. So in the *Lysis* we see Socrates teach by example. He questions Lysis himself on the nature of friendship. These mock dialogues (*ersatz* because even more so than in other dialogues the interlocutor is turned into a Socratic yes-man) are set pieces or examples of the kind of dialectic required to do philosophy: they pose analytic questions concerning the nature of friendship *per se* in order slowly to winnow out mistaken and contradictory views. For instance, is the *friend* the lover or the beloved? Does friendship inhere in a relationship between like or unlike people? And what is the true basis of friendship, that is, what is it in the friend that is loved and thus makes them a friend? It is only through such sustained dialectic that a true understanding of the subject of friendship can be had and, correspondingly, the nature of love is only grasped through the self-same form of philosophy. The true artist of love, then, must be first the lover of wisdom, for only through *elenchus* can one come to know what love is to begin with. Conversely, and with respect to the Good, knowledge of the good can only come from proper practice of love of the good, which turns out to be philosophy.

This point is made most forcefully in the *Symposium*, Plato's dramatic masterpiece on the nature of love. Socrates' speech in this dialogue comes in the form of the recounted wisdom of Diotima of Mantinea, a woman whom Socrates credits as teaching him the art of love. According to Diotima, what we all love is the good, that is we all want for ourselves what is good and lasts forever. Alas, being mortals, this

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is not our natural gift and the best we can do to satisfy our desire is to reproduce ourselves in an endless cycle thus "giving birth in beauty whether in body or soul" (*Symposium* 206b). Again there are two forms of love being referred to here: to give birth in beauty through the body is natural to heterosexual love, for through procreation parents give birth to children who resemble them and so share in their beauty. However the second form, homosexual love, (as idealised in Athenian pederastia) gives birth to accounts of "wisdom and the rest of virtue" (209b). It is through this kind of love that dialectic flows towards its end in the apprehension of the Good. Moreover Diotima argues that the accounts of virtue spawned by pederastic love are protected from falling into mere narcissism or vulgar physicality because of the elenctic nature of dialectic itself. The characteristic quality of dialectic is to question critically: what we would now refer to as the hermeneutics of suspicion. Diotima maintains that this quality of dialectic provides it a fundamental openness to the world which guarantees it safety from the crass or tawdry and, rather, propels the artful lover to beautiful accounts of virtue of a particular sort: those which can be used "in the proper ordering of cities and households" (209a), "which make young men better" (210c) and "produce theories in unstinting love of wisdom" (*philosophia*) (210d). Diotima teaches that to love well is not to pursue the beloved in myriad ways (the subject which engaged Socrates' interlocutors) but rather to love a different beloved. Diotima bids us love the form of beauty inherent in created beautiful instantiations. This does not mean that we give up on the object of our affections in pursuit of some higher form of love but rather that we see our natural beloved as but one form of the beautiful, and that it is the Form of beauty within our lover which is the real prize.

It is with the introduction of Platonic Forms that we can finally tackle the question of love of God. It is no simplistic substitution to suggest that for Plato love of God is simply love of the Good. The Gods in Platonic dialogues rarely stand for themselves, so when Socrates speaks, for instance, of the Goddess of love in her two forms (Urania and Pandemos) acting in certain

ways, he is really talking about humans acting according to love of the soul or love of the body. Love of God therefore must for Plato mean love of the triumvirate of the forms of Goodness, Beauty and Truth, and this, as we have seen from the *Lysis and Symposium*, is had through proper practice of the art of love, that is philosophy. Loving God in the appropriate way, that is a way which subverts and subsumes the ideals of Athenian pederasty such that through elenchus we see the Forms inherent in the beloved, results in wisdom. But with this we should not assume that it is cold-blooded analysis to which we are being called. The very fact that dialectic is understood as the *art* of love indicates that Plato's concern is for a fundamental openness to the world, an openness which excludes the merely rational in favour of a more holistic engagement with wisdom. Elenchus is no mere science, not a mechanical application of critical tools to the object at hand, but rather a kind of phronesis or craft such that its proper practice is the result of imagination as well as analysis. The art of love as *philosophia* is a negotiation from what is known into what is unknown and this requires a continuing openness to the revelation of the Good inherent in the world. Thus Plato's legacy for our understanding of the love of God and loving God is that we realise the immanence of God's love in the world and through the process of elenchus reveal the essential form of God's love within the beloved.

This legacy is, of course, taken up in various ways in Christian history and before we move to look at Leibniz we should briefly veer towards the neo-platonic version of the love of God.

Plato's Forms inherent in the world are given structure in Plotinus's depiction of the emanation of creation from the One. The One is identified with the Form of the Good by Plotinus and stands below or supports Being itself.<sup>9</sup> It is thus understood as constant and undiminished becoming and, as pure becoming, as the 'thrown-ness' of Dasein in Heidegger's terminology, the One manifests the fundamental openness to the world which Plato was at pains to ensure through elenchus. Thus Plotinus, in rolling the Forms into *the* ontological reality from which all else ensues, naturalises and

reifies elenctic openness to being. Moreover the particular way in which the One is identified with the form of the Good prepares the way for later Christians to identify the One with the logos, that is the rational Trinitarian counterpart to Platonic dialectic. If Plato tells us that the art of love is philosophy and that the true artist sees the form of Beauty in the beloved, Plotinus allows for Christians the Form of the Good, the True and the Beautiful to reside in the One Christian godhead, known through Logos, itself incarnated to redeem creation. It is rather an elegant and fortuitous piece of philosophy since it allows for the Christianisation of Plato's Forms in the concept of God and the valorisation of the elenchus in the form of the immanent logos. This immanence must now be carried to its logical end through a consideration of Leibniz.

God in Leibniz's world is the perfect monad. In his *Monadology* he characterises the universe as composed of monads which are immaterial, simple substances. (*Monadology* §1-10)<sup>10</sup> We are all, despite apparent sensory evidence to the contrary, simple, immaterial substances. The way we happen to look turns out to be nothing more than 'WFP' (well founded phenomena), but in substance we are the same as God, the difference being merely in degree of perfection and knowledge (what Leibniz would classify together in terms of predicates). God is for Leibniz quintessentially the perfect being and creator of the universe. These are, as it were, the non-negotiable axioms at the heart of his theology. As a perfect, necessary being, God lacks nothing yet creates the world out of itself without resultant diminishment. There is here more than a hint of Plotinus' One, in which Leibniz showed much interest.<sup>11</sup> The key aspect for our purposes is Leibniz's foundation of divine immanence in creation. God and world are intimately related since they are both fundamentally the same, simple, monadic substance, the differentiation between them obtaining through their relations to all others. These interrelationships Leibniz calls perceptions since they do not entail external causation – monads are famously 'windowless' – however they are not sensory but rather logical. All monads, divine and otherwise, are interrelated in a system of logical

necessities governed by the law of sufficient reason whereby each monad is determined to be created as it is (with its particular predicates and relations) and not in some other way.<sup>12</sup> We are all thus interconnected in a web conforming to a necessary pre-established harmony. For Leibniz this harmony is tantamount to the logos, the essential rationality of God's creation through and for which God is ultimately to be loved.

Now the web of perceptions which connects all things and by which we know the universe and God is understood by us through what Leibniz calls *apperception*: equivalent to conscious self-reflection. (*Monadology* §15) The art of love practiced as philosophy is for Leibniz thus found through our reflective rational apperception, that is, reflection on the necessary interrelations between all monads. So where Plato argued that love of God/Good amounts to philosophical pursuit of the Beautiful as instantiated in beautiful things (thus wisdom arises from love), and Plotinus reifies the Forms such that the One gives rise to the Forms now immanent in creation and known through the logos (thus knowledge of God arises from wisdom), Leibniz disperses the essential nature of the one, perfect, creator God into all monads so as to establish the immanent Forms in substantial reality (thus unity arises from knowledge of God). Moreover mutual perception of monads of each other as well as their own self, apperceptive, consciousness conforms to the supremely rational pre-established harmony maintaining the relationships between monads. When we properly understand our connections to all monads and to God, we come to proper understanding of the nature of our true selves as substantially identical to God. For Leibniz therefore, true love of God can only come from a rational understanding of the perfection of his creation, organised before all time, to account for not only the initial state of every monad in existence but also all of their continuing changes and redescribed relations. The love of God can only spring from such an appreciation and awareness of God's necessary perfection and of creation arising from it.

For Leibniz this rational reflection – which is indeed our only true activity since no monad causally acts on any other in an external sense –

is a means by which we are made more perfect. I have already noted that for Leibniz the essential characteristic of God is that it is the one perfect being, everything else is a limited reflection of God in so far as we are not aware of all of the various perceptual links between us and everything else – only God knows this – but through apperceptive reflection we are able to discover at least some part of this and thus grow in our own perfection. The love of God, for Leibniz, springs from this growth in perfection, for as we more and more resemble God in the self knowledge of our accidental attributes, the more we take on the corollary knowledge and activity of God, namely the care for others and the desire for their perfection. Leibniz holds that God's love for us is his pleasure in our perfection, (*Monadology* §83-85) echoing the commitment to the world which for Plato and Plotinus was revelatory of the Forms. For Leibniz what is revealed is not the inherent beauty residing in the beloved, but rather the awareness of its growing ontological actuality and excellence. For Leibniz the attraction to our beloved is the necessary result of greater understanding of the true nature of reality. Love issues from wisdom which is knowledge of unity.

I have now very briefly considered how Plato and Leibniz considered what it means to love God. For Plato love of God turns out to be equivalent to philosophy, and wisdom its result, whereas for Leibniz love of God only ensues from the cultivation of rational understanding and the growth of wisdom. What needs consideration now is how these two opposites might be redeemed through the notion of unity. However for both Leibniz and Plato this unity obscures the issue of imperfection. For Plato love of God/Good is possible only when material nature is transcended and for Leibniz, who posits this unity through our shared monadic substance with God, absolute unity is denied though our contingently created natures. No matter how far one delves into substantial unity one cannot escape the imperfection of created monads. How our authors deal with the problem of imperfection (seen in Christian terms as the problem of Theodicy) is beyond the scope of this discussion. However one promising avenue of research might be through

Ramanuja's more robust conception of unity in difference within his doctrine of the Universe as the body of God. This task must, however, be left to my fellow contributors and respondents.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> To put it another way, was the pop music producer Phil Spector correct when he wrote 'to know, know, know him is to love, love, love him' (a song immortalised in 1958 by 'The Teddy Bears' and covered many times since) or is Plato right when he argues in three of his Socratic dialogues that knowledge of the good flows from love of the good – that is wisdom flows from union?

<sup>2</sup> See particularly sections X: 24-30. Augustine, *Confessions*. Trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin Classics, 1961), pp. 230-32.

<sup>3</sup> Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Ephesians* IX. Trans. Roberts-Donaldson. Christian Classics Ethereal Library, ([http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/ANF-01/anf01-16.htm#P1214\\_224344](http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/ANF-01/anf01-16.htm#P1214_224344)).

<sup>4</sup> Encyclical letter, *Deus Caritas Est*, of the Supreme Pontiff Benedict XVI to the Bishops, Priests, and Deacons, Men and Women Religious and all the lay faithful On Christian Love, Dec 25 2005.

<sup>5</sup> The extent of Leibniz's faithful practice of Christianity is put into doubt in Matthew Stewart's intriguing text *The Courtier and the Heretic: Leibniz, Spinoza and the Fate of God*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> Or more precisely that his wisdom is worthless. *Apology* 21d - 24b. All references are to the Hackett edition of *Plato, Complete Works*. Ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997) unless otherwise stated.

<sup>7</sup> The creation of Urania was not through sexual procreation but rather castration. See Hesiod's *Theogony* II: 176-206. (<http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/hesiod/theogony.htm>)

<sup>8</sup> We see this subversion in the *Symposium* where Alcibiades relates at length how his love for Socrates' remarkable gifts of dialectic turned the normally pursued youth into the pursuer, contrary to the norms of *paiderastia*.

<sup>9</sup> See Terrence Irwin, *Classical Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p.186.

<sup>10</sup> References to Leibniz's *Monadology* are from Leibniz, *Discourse on Metaphysics and other essays* (Indianapolis Indiana: Hackett, 1991)

<sup>11</sup> The One emanates all things from itself without diminishment. Terrence Irwin, *Classical Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p.194.

<sup>12</sup> The principle of sufficient reason is for Leibniz the logical counterpart to that which determines a thing to be itself and not something else. Leibniz

understood this to be a necessary truth of a rational created order. (*Monadology* §32).

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