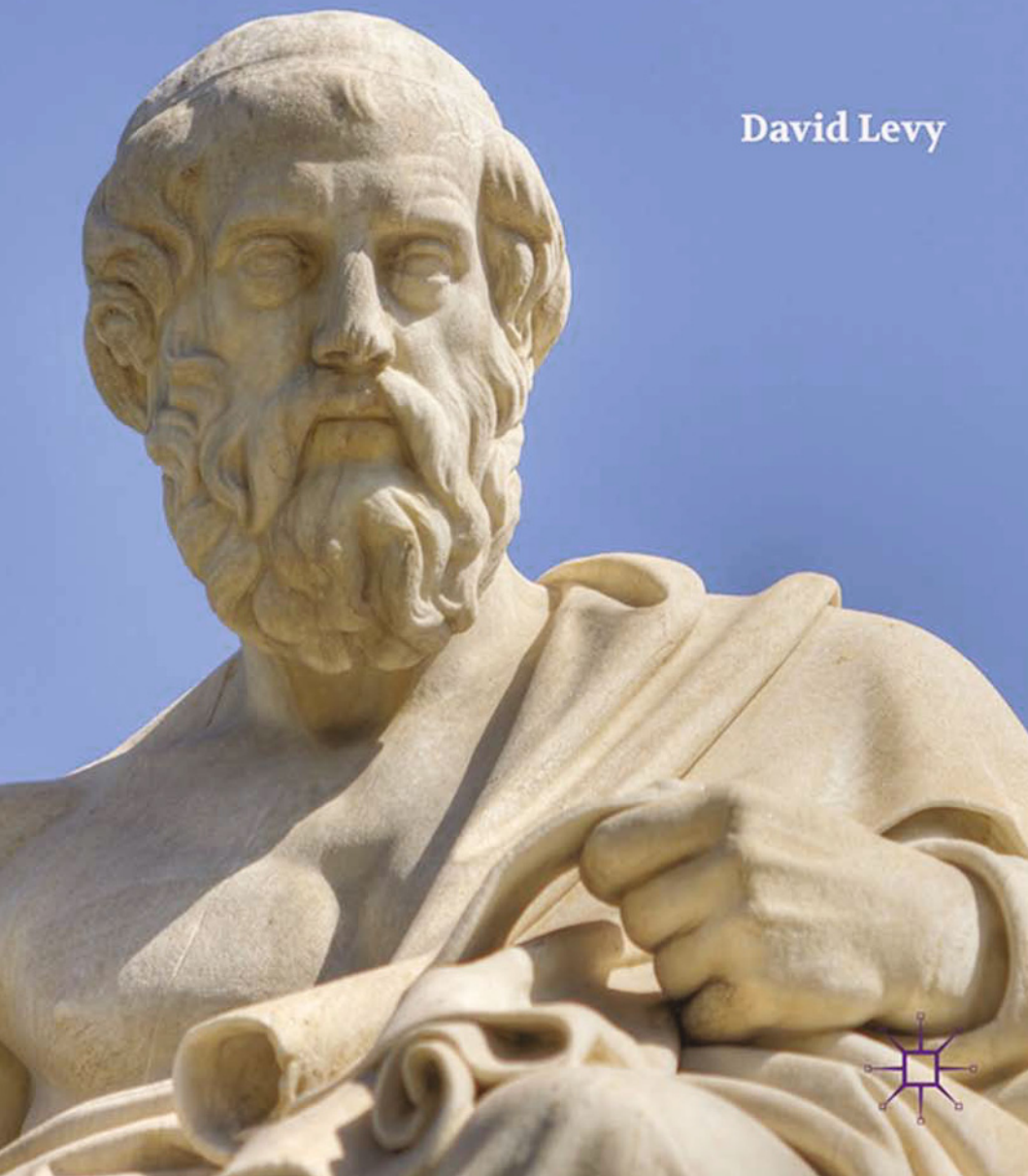




RECOVERING POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Eros and Socratic Political Philosophy

David Levy



EROS AND SOCRATIC POLITICAL
PHILOSOPHY

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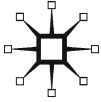
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NOTE FROM THE SERIES EDITORS

Palgrave's *Recovering Political Philosophy* series was launched with an eye to postmodernism's challenge to the possibility of a rational foundation for and guidance of our political lives. This invigorating challenge has provoked a searching reexamination of classic texts, not only of political philosophers, but also of poets, artists, theologians, scientists, and other thinkers who may not be regarded conventionally as political theorists. The series publishes studies that endeavor to take up this reexamination and thereby help to recover the classical grounding for civic reason, as well as studies that clarify the strengths and the weaknesses of modern philosophic rationalism. The interpretative studies in the series are particularly attentive to historical context and language, and to the ways in which both censorial persecution and didactic concerns have impelled prudent thinkers, in widely diverse cultural conditions, to employ manifold strategies of writing—strategies that allowed them to aim at different audiences with various degrees of openness to unconventional thinking. The series offers close readings of ancient, medieval, early modern and late modern works that illuminate the human condition by attempting to answer its deepest, enduring questions, and that have (in the modern periods) laid the foundations for contemporary political, social, and economic life.

Eros and Socratic Political Philosophy opens a new perspective on what is the most distinctive theme in Plato's political philosophy—the exploration of *eros* or erotic love, seen as the core of the human psyche and hence of political psychology. David Levy focuses on the three Platonic dialogues in which erotic love is addressed most directly and thoroughly (the *Republic*, the *Phaedrus*, and the *Symposium*) and examines them with the scrupulous attention to textual details that is needed to bring out both the unity and the depth of Socrates's teaching on this subject. The interpretation brings alive the Socratic teaching on love in a way that will be of great, even gripping, concern to any thoughtful human being, but especially to those whose experience of love is bound to cause them to

wish for deeper, more penetrating accounts of what their soul is undergoing than is generally available today. Levy explains why it is that Socrates singled out erotic longing as the key object of his inquiries, or why this subject is so crucial to genuine Socratic philosophizing and to political philosophy in general.

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INTRODUCTION

The theme of this book is Plato's teaching about love or, to use his term, *eros*.¹ I take as a guide one particular puzzle in the statements of Plato's Socrates about *eros*: his curious tendency to waver in his evaluations of it, his praising *eros* to the heavens on one occasion only to criticize it most harshly on another. It could seem that Socrates is confused about *eros*. If he were, he would not be alone in his confusion. As the poets attest, some ambiguity is common in our evaluations of *eros*. All who have had a taste of love sympathize with Romeo when he says:

Come what sorrow can,
It cannot countervail th' exchange of joy
That one short minute gives me in her sight.
Do thou but close our hands with holy words,
Then love-devouring Death do what he dare—
It is enough I may but call her mine.²

But we are just as likely to find some truth in Benvolio's assessment of Romeo's love: "Alas that Love, so gentle in his view, / Should be so tyrannous and rough in proof."³ And we often hold two views of love at once, as Sappho eloquently testifies: "Eros loosener of limbs once again trembles me, / a sweetbitter beast irrepressibly creeping in."⁴ There is little in the human heart that we praise as highly as love, but *eros* has also received harsh words, at times from the parents and friends of lovers, on occasion from the lovers themselves, and few will deny that even or precisely as we fall deeply in love we tend to feel some reservations about the experience.

We study *eros*, in the first place, because we are intensely moved by it, yet do not understand it. We fear that, lacking clarity about this, about what attaches us most deeply to others, about what provides so many of our greatest sorrows and joys, our understanding of our lives as a whole is bound to be insufficient. We fear that without knowledge of love, we may remain in the dark about who we truly are and how we should live.

Thus, we seek self-knowledge. In this quest, we turn to those who appear to have understood eros and offer to teach us about it. We turn then to Plato, in the first place, because he seems unrivaled among philosophic authors in the importance he places on understanding eros, as he indicates by having his Socrates claim, on numerous occasions, that erotic matters are the only thing he has come to know through his life spent in philosophy (*Symp.* 177d7–8, 198d; *Theages* 128b1–4; cf. *Lysis* 204b5–c2; *Charmides* 155d4–e2; *Phdr.* 257a7–8).⁵

It is not only the centrality of eros to Plato's thought that draws us to it. The peculiar manner in which he presents his treatments of eros also renders their study most attractive. For Plato ties his probing analyses of eros to such rich and moving depictions of it that lovers for millennia have believed that Plato understood the depths of their own hearts. Plato's presentation of his teaching about love, with its dramatic portrayals of lovers and beautiful speeches about love, thus appears to give voice to lovers' deepest longings and to portray their highest hopes with astonishing beauty. In this regard, Plato provides a welcome contrast to much contemporary discourse about love, which, in the forms of both post-modern thought and modern psychology, has an unfortunate tendency to reduce love to some baser motive, often sexual desire.⁶ Plato does not deny that lower desires play a role in the experience of eros, but he insists on understanding this role within the phenomenon of love as a whole, which permits him to understand what the lower desires may contribute to the full, apparently much higher, experience. Perhaps equally important to the appeal of Plato's treatments of eros is that he never divorces these treatments from consideration of that most urgent of questions, the question of the human good or the best way of life. That is, Plato's discussions and depictions of eros are always accompanied by investigations of the goodness of love or the place of love in the best way of life, and this enables and encourages readers to integrate what they learn about love from Plato into their understanding of human life as a whole. Thus, if Plato's philosophy cannot be said to be necessary for learning to love better—indeed, love seems to flourish just fine in the midst of some confusion, or “madness,” as Socrates puts it—it at least promises to teach us to live better as lovers.

Yet Plato has also placed a riddle before those who wish to understand what his Socrates learned about love by having Socrates treat eros quite differently on different occasions. In the *Republic*, Socrates seems to do all he can to deprecate eros, attributing it to the lowest part of the soul (*Rep.* 439d), attributing to it the power to cause the greatest injustices (*Rep.* 572eff.), and generally trying to banish it from the best city he can imagine. But then, in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, Socrates seems to

offer eros glowing praise. Furthermore, even though the broad gist of his treatment of eros is laudatory in both the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, it is by no means obvious that what Socrates says in either dialogue is consistent with what he says in the other. Therefore, at first glance, it seems possible that the Platonic Socrates has no consistent understanding of eros from which we might hope better to understand it. But, if this were the case, it would be quite strange for Socrates, who is hardly averse to professing his own ignorance, to place such stress as he does on his knowledge of eros. And it is just as possible that Socrates, who argues that speeches need to be suited to the souls of those listening (*Phdr.* 271dff.), treats eros differently in each dialogue, as he speaks with different people, for some reason other than a change in his understanding of it, and that Plato means to lead us to Socrates's understanding of eros by forcing us to ask why Socrates both praises and blames it. The Platonic texts, therefore, tempt us—indeed, if we wish to be fair to Plato's Socrates, we must make the attempt—to see whether we can find a unified understanding of eros behind his diverse treatments of it.

A full treatment of Socrates's view of eros could lead one through all the dialogues, or at least through all those in which Socrates appears, but this would be a monumental task and one far exceeding the scope of the present study. I focus instead on Socrates's two most extensive treatments of eros, those of the *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*, as well as on the *Republic*, which, as mentioned above, seems to include a sustained criticism of eros. Thus, I have focused on what are undeniably the two most relevant dialogues to a consideration of eros as well as the dialogue that most raises a question about Socrates's view of eros. By so limiting myself, I necessarily forgo the opportunity to offer a comprehensive view of Socrates's understanding of eros, but I do hope to provide an explanation of how the treatments of eros in these three dialogues accord with one another and even seem well designed to supplement one another. By offering this, I hope to provide a suggestion about Socrates's understanding of eros that will be of use for the interpretation of the other dialogues.

Finally, this approach to Plato may be of particular interest to students of political philosophy. Perhaps nothing is so distinctive in Plato's political thought as is his treatment of the family. The communism of the family that Socrates proposes in the *Republic* is particularly notorious; the fact that Plato's Athenian stranger distinguishes the regime he is describing in the *Laws* from a superior regime, a regime fit for gods, by the inferior regime's inclusion of private families, underlines the significance of the family to Plato's understanding of politics (*Laws* 739a–e). However, for us today who take the family for granted as a common if not universal feature of our social arrangements, and especially for those among us

who fear the weakening of the family in contemporary society, Plato's apparent wish to do away with it is surely a puzzle. The explanation many of us have been given since we first studied the *Republic* is that Socrates wishes to do away with the family in order to rid the city of faction and thereby promote the city's unity. Socrates certainly provides grounds for this interpretation, although as I show in chapter 1, his reasons are considerably more complicated than this interpretation suggests. However, even if we grant for the time being the adequacy of this interpretation, it still raises a question about eros. For it means that Socrates, that famous fan of eros, for some reason thinks little enough of heterosexual eros that he is willing to require his guardians to ignore its claims on their hearts. And the fact that communism of the family proves to be quite difficult to implement, to say the least, and is thus a great threat to the possibility of Socrates's best regime, underlines the importance of eros to Plato's politics: why does Socrates require, at such great cost to the practicability of his proposed regime, such suppression of ordinary erotic attachments? Finally, Socrates's focus on eros in his account of the tyrannical soul, that is, his finding the source of this greatest of political evils in eros, would seem to remove all doubt concerning the importance of eros to his understanding of politics.

The interpretation of the *Republic*, Plato's deservedly most famous political work, therefore, entails an understanding of eros. Though the *Republic* indicates much about eros, I doubt any interpreter of it would deny a wish for some supplement to these indications, that is, for some further explanation of Plato's treatment of eros in political life, which includes some of the most distinctive and troubling aspects of his political thought. The *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* could then offer that supplement,⁷ and I intend to show that the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* do explain the treatment of eros in the *Republic*. What is more, I will show that this understanding of eros is essential to Plato's view of political life. By understanding eros we can come to understand an important aspect of the tension between philosophy and politics, for the eros of nonphilosophers turns out to be a key source of the limits of reason in political life.⁸

The question of whether or how Socrates's treatments of eros accord with one another is hardly a new one.⁹ Many have noted the apparent discrepancies in Socrates's different statements about eros, such that one can easily wonder whether Socrates makes any important statement about eros that some scholar or other has not believed to be in tension with another of Socrates's claims. I turn now to a consideration of some of the apparent discrepancies that have received the most scholarly attention, in order to introduce the reader to the subject matter while indicating how my approach will differ from those of my predecessors.

The apparent difference between Socrates's harshness toward eros in the *Republic* and his praises of it in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* has been noted by many,¹⁰ but the apparent discrepancies hardly end there. In particular, some have noted a harshness or coldness in Socrates's view of eros in the *Symposium* similar in spirit to that of the *Republic* and at odds with his treatment of eros in the *Phaedrus*.¹¹ That is, although Socrates may be more laudatory of eros in both the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* than in the *Republic*, the eros he praises in the *Symposium* is not really love as we typically understand it, love of another human being, whereas it is precisely this love that is praised in the *Phaedrus*. Martha Nussbaum has articulated this argument most elegantly, and her argument begins with a consideration of Gregory Vlastos's influential paper, "The Individual as Object of Love in Plato" (1973).¹² In this paper, Vlastos, noting Socrates's indications in the *Symposium* that love is for a person's abstract qualities—beauty and goodness—and above all for the beautiful itself, argues that "Plato's theory is not, and is not meant to be, about personal love for persons—i.e., about the kind of love we can have only for persons and cannot have for things or abstractions" (1973, 20–31).¹³ Thus, according to Vlastos, Socrates's treatment of love in the *Symposium* agrees with his teaching in the *Republic*, "according to which one is loved so far, and only so far, as he produces good" (13–14, 20). Nussbaum starts from Vlastos's reading of the *Symposium* in her *The Fragility of Goodness*, granting its validity as an interpretation of Socrates's *Symposium* speech, and then juxtaposes to this view of eros Socrates's treatment of eros in the *Phaedrus* (1986, 201ff.).¹⁴ In that dialogue, according to Nussbaum, we find a new assessment of eros, in which the love of another individual is inseparable from philosophic insight, and erotic passions are "*intrinsically valuable components of the best human life*" (1986, 218–219, italics in original). Thus, Nussbaum suggests that Plato's thinking developed from the *Symposium* and *Republic*, where he is largely critical of the passions and love of another human being, to the *Phaedrus* (1986, 202–203).¹⁵

This suggestion of a development in Plato's thought receives further support from a very stark change in Socrates's statements about madness. In the *Republic*, Socrates has only criticism for madness (see especially *Rep.* 403a10–11), but in the *Phaedrus*, Socrates distinguishes "divine" from merely "human" madness, praises divine madness, and then classifies eros as the best form of this madness (*Phdr.* 244a5–8, 245b1–2, 249d4–5, 265a9–b5).¹⁶ Vlastos and R. Hackforth are both struck by this apparent deviation on Plato's part from his usual strict rationalism,¹⁷ and Nussbaum takes this change in Plato's treatment of madness as further support for her argument that his thought has undergone a development from the anti-passionate rationalism of the *Republic* (1986, 204–205, 218–219).¹⁸ Thus,