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An Interpretation of Aristophanes' Eulogy in Plato's Symposium

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ABSTRACT

Plato's *Symposium* centers on the praise of the god of love, Eros, bringing together various perspectives on desire from prominent Greek intellectuals. Among them, Aristophanes' encomium stands out for its mythopoetic expression, reflecting the comic poet's profound insight into human nature, society, and politics. Through the allegory of spherical humans split in half by Zeus, Aristophanes suggests that desire originates from humanity's longing for an original state of wholeness. This eros is not merely a response to bodily trauma, but also a yearning for self-identity and the unity of the soul. The article further reveals that Aristophanes attributes higher value to love between men, thereby reflecting the interconnection between political ideals and gender order in ancient Greek society. Moreover, by analyzing rhetorical devices, temporal structure, and the redemptive function of Eros, the paper explores the mechanisms of irony and metaphysical symbolism embedded in Aristophanes' speech. Love, in this view, is not only an expression of emotion and desire, but also a philosophical response to the fractures within the self and the ruptures of history. As a comic poet, Aristophanes deftly employs humor and myth to construct eros as a complex structure that traverses the domains of nature, ontology, society, and power.

THE NATURAL STATE OF HUMANKIND

The Original Spherical Human

The earliest humans were fundamentally different from humans today. Unlike the current binary of male and female, original humans possessed three sexes: male, female, and androgynous. Their bodily structure also differed completely. In his encomium, Aristophanes offers a detailed portrayal of these primordial beings:

"Each type of person was originally whole and round in form: their back and sides formed a circle, their bodies were spherical, they had four hands and four legs, and on a circular neck were two identical faces facing opposite directions but sharing one head. They had four ears and two sets of genitals, and presumably all their other organs were duplicated as well." (Plato, B. 2019,48)

These original beings were said to be descendants of the sun, the earth, and the moon, symbolizing the divine elements of the cosmos—a pure

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state of nature. They were immensely powerful and complete in themselves. Through this mythic description, Aristophanes implies a view of human nature prior to civilization: a condition of self-sufficiency, independence, and natural wholeness, untouched by social institutions or dependency.

The Hubris of the Spherical Humans

Empowered by their completeness, the spherical humans grew increasingly bold. No longer in need of the Olympian gods' guidance or protection, and facing gods who no longer symbolized natural forces but imposed civilization and law, these beings grew defiant. As Aristophanes narrates, they "began to entertain ambitions of challenging the gods themselves." (Plato, B. 2019, 48)

This moment hints at Aristophanes' veiled political critique: powerful collectives that possess internal wholeness and autonomy may rebel against imposed norms and external authority, echoing the emergence of tyrannical impulses in political life.

Apollo's Severing of the Spherical Humans

"To the gods of the city-state, the existence of these primordial humans posed an existential threat—especially as human power grew unchecked. The gods thus increasingly desired to transform this adversarial relationship." (Wang, 2022)

To preserve divine authority without annihilating humanity (and thereby losing the source of worship and sacrifice), Zeus devised a strategy: he ordered Apollo to split the spherical humans in two. Those originally male or female became homosexuals, while the androgynous beings became heterosexuals.

Zeus also commanded Apollo to rotate their faces toward the severed side and heal the wound, leaving a scar as an eternal reminder. Humanity was thus weakened and multiplied, stripped of the power to challenge the gods.

Aristophanes, through this myth, offers a justification for same-sex love: since all humans originate from an equal, dual-bodied state, love between any genders is a natural yearning for original unity. Love, in this view, is not hierarchical—whether heterosexual, male-male, or female-female, all forms express a shared desire for restoration of lost completeness. Aristophanes' preference for male-male love stems from the belief that the original all-male beings were superior in stature. (Lin, 2017)

Furthermore, the gods represent rulers, while humans represent the ruled. Just as rulers cannot annihilate the people who threaten their power—since their legitimacy depends on the governed—Zeus' weakening of humanity symbolizes sovereign strategies of discipline and control. The Olympians, as Aristophanes depicts them, are not abstract embodiments of divine truth; rather, they are calculative and dependent on human belief to sustain their existence.

Likewise, human civilization needs divine order to prevent the endless escalation of primal desire. Once human nature is curtailed and disciplined, emptiness and yearning emerge. In this void, **eros** arises—not merely as a craving for bodily union, but as a philosophical impulse, directing human longing toward metaphysical, existential, and ethical wholeness.

THE TRAGEDY OF THE HALVED HUMAN

Once cleaved, the spherical humans became "halved beings," who ceaselessly longed for a return to their original wholeness. Each half desperately sought its lost counterpart, and when they finally found one another, they "clung tightly together, entwined, longing to be fused into one. Refusing to be separated, they stopped eating and doing anything else, and eventually died. If one half died, the other, still living, would search again for a partner, clinging desperately whether it encountered a split-off woman (as we now call women) or a split-off man." (Plato, B. 2019, 50)

This overwhelming sense of lack drove the halved beings to grasp any partner they could find, even if it was not their original counterpart. Yet physical union brought no true healing. Out of pity, Zeus moved the genitals to the front, enabling procreation. Through this act, he hoped to prevent humanity's self-destruction and to sever the possibility of returning to absolute wholeness.

This, then, is the tragedy of the halved human: the unending search for unity through sex and intimacy, always striving to return to a natural state that has been permanently locked away. We are left to live in harmony with Eros, revering the god in hopes of receiving healing. As Aristophanes declares: "It is he who now bestows upon us the greatest blessings, who leads us to our own kind, and promises us the highest hope for the future: that if we reverently honor the gods, Eros will restore us to our nature, heal us, and make us whole and happy." (Plato, B. 2019, 53)

Gradually, humanity forgot its former defiance against the gods and accepted the discipline of divine rule. Eros became a measure of human strength, and reverence toward Eros and the gods determined one's happiness. (Nehamas, 2007)

THE COMIC POET'S VIEW OF EROS

The Allegory of Love: A Tragic Pursuit of Wholeness

Aristophanes states: "The only way for humanity to attain happiness is through love, through finding one's partner to heal our split nature." (Plato, B. 2019, 53) His encomium constructs a symbolic philosophical allegory, endowing love with an ontological mission to "repair trauma and restore wholeness." This reflects not only a naturalistic understanding of eros but also a presupposition that humanity is eternally caught in lack and yearning. (Sun, 2019)

From a philosophical-psychological perspective, this obsession with "original wholeness" resonates deeply with Lacan's theory of the mirror stage. Lacan asserts that self-identity is founded on the misrecognition of a unified image—the Ideal-I—which is constantly pursued because the subject is always already split. (Vasseleu, 1991) Similarly, Aristophanes depicts humans as split beings, living with a wound that becomes the very source of desire, marking eros as inherently tragic.

Moreover, because one's "true half" may already be lost or asymmetrical, the pursuit of love is always shadowed by disillusionment. This doomed quest for a natural state that can never be regained distinguishes Aristophanes' eros from Socratic ascent toward the Form of Beauty; it becomes instead an ontological longing destined never to be fulfilled.

Eros and Power: From Hierarchy to the Disciplined Political Body

Aristophanes claims that male-male love is "the noblest," embodying "manliness," and argues that "their conduct is not driven by shamelessness but by courage, strength, and masculinity, attracted by kindred spirits." (Plato, B. 2019, 51) He adds, "only such youths grow up to be statesmen." These remarks reveal that Aristophanes' account of eros remains grounded in the physical—bravery and bodily vigor are key virtues, while the soul and virtue in the Platonic sense are not central concerns. (Lin, 2017)

Viewed differently, Aristophanes places eros within the framework of social hierarchy and power. Love becomes a mirror of civic potential and political aptitude, where the preference for male-male desire reflects ancient Greek valorization of masculine virtue.

Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* argues that "sex" is not a natural fact but a product of discursive regimes and power. (Foucault, 1990) From this angle, Aristophanes constructs a regime of body-politics: only the strong, masculine, male-loving bodies are worthy of political leadership. This represents a real-world extension of a philosophical concept into the realm of lived experience. (Fu et al., 2025) This value chain—"desire—courage—rule"—reveals the deep embedding of eros in ancient gender and power structures.

Yet this hierarchical erotic order also exposes its exclusivity and instrumental rationality. Women are relegated to lower sexual roles, lesbian love is barely acknowledged, and heterosexuality is treated as a fallback compromise. This male-centric erotic ideal not only reflects the gender structure of the polis but also rationalizes male dominance in the public sphere.

The Normativity of Eros and Gendered Order: a Limited Liberation

Though Aristophanes mythologically legitimizes homosexuality, he does not establish gender equality in the modern sense. His endorsement of male-male love is rooted in an ideology of masculine virtue and political utility—it is not about emotional value or equal rights, but about proximity to an idealized warrior-man archetype.

From the lens of contemporary gender critique, Judith Butler has emphasized that gender and sexuality are not natural facts, but performative constructs shaped by repeated acts. (Salih, 2007) In this light, Aristophanes' praise of male homoeroticism is not a challenge to gender or sexual norms but a reproduction of state-sanctioned masculine desire. This triadic structure—body, desire, and politics—conceals deeper gender oppression, universalizing heterosexuality and subordinating femininity.

The Temporality and Redemptive Function of Eros: From Fragmentation to Historical Return

Beyond physicality and politics, Aristophanes' eros contains a unique temporal and historical dimension. Love is not an ephemeral emotion or reproductive function, but a structure stretching

across past trauma, present lack, and future hope. Humans, split by Apollo, carry the loss of original wholeness as a historical scar; eros, in the present, propels them toward reunion; and the promise of return, as Aristophanes says, lies in revering Eros.

In this schema, Eros is not merely an interpersonal mediator but a quasi-religious figure of redemption. Love's essence is not desire satisfaction but remembrance and return to a primordial state. As Plato suggests in *Phaedo*, knowledge is a recollection of the soul's pre-existence. (Plato, 2006) Likewise, Aristophanes' eros is a recollection and restoration of the once-whole self—a temporally structured return.

This ontological tragedy—our inability to become whole again despite the yearning—recalls Nietzsche's idea of the "eternal recurrence": a ceaseless repetition of unattainable desire that paradoxically gives meaning to existence. (Nietzsche & Hollingdale, 2020) Thus, Aristophanes' eros is not merely bodily, political, or comic—it is also historical and redemptive. It channels human hope through an irreparable fracture, elevating love to a metaphysical response to the brokenness of being.

CONCLUSION

Through a close reading of Aristophanes' speech in Plato's *Symposium*, this paper has revealed how the comic poet, through mythological allegory, infuses eros with profound and multifaceted philosophical significance. Aristophanes views the human longing for "original wholeness" as the root of love, constructing eros as a mechanism that spans the dimensions of body, politics, and being. Beneath the lighthearted tone of his speech lies a weighty metaphysical and social critique.

On the natural level, love emerges from a primal rupture—it is a compensatory drive following the loss of self. On the social level, love becomes embedded in the structures of the polis and gender hierarchy, reflecting ancient ideals of masculinity, political potential, and bodily normativity. Aristophanes affirms the universality of eros while subtly

exposing the social premises—hierarchy, discipline, and identity—that underlie its discourse.

As a comic poet, Aristophanes narrates a story of why humans fall in love, but he also transcends a mere celebration of desire and flesh. He depicts love as an existential struggle and a quest for selfhood. His speech reminds us that love is not only instinct or emotion, but also a metaphor for the complex relationships between human beings, the divine, power, and the self. Revisiting this speech today not only deepens our understanding of classical theories of love, but also prompts reflection on the entangled relations of love, gender, and power in the modern world.

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