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Preferred format:

I would prefer to participate in a shorter session, though I am happy to participate in either.

Erōs Tyrannos: Philosophical Passion and Psychic Ordering in the Republic

“Reason,” Hume writes, “is and ought to be the slave of the passions” (*Treatise*, 415); confined to means-ends deliberation, it never directly motivates action. Famously, this gives rise to a motivational gap: how can our recognition that something is good produce a motivation to act? Plato has been taken to offer a solution to this in the *Republic*; since reason, for Plato, is a faculty of desire, as well as of deliberation, the philosopher’s knowledge of the moral forms generates an attraction to them (see, e.g., Cooper 1999, Irwin 1995). Significantly, Plato characterizes this attraction as erotic:

....he goes forth, neither lessening nor losing his *erōs* until he grasps what each thing itself is by nature with that part of his soul which is fitted to grasp such an object because of their kinship, and approaching what really is and having intercourse with it, begetting understanding and truth, he knows, truly lives, is nourished and....is relieved from the pains of childbirth....(490a-b)

Plato’s treatment of *erōs* has received attention in relation to his political theorizing (see, e.g., Bloom 1968, Ludwig 2007), but its ramifications for his moral psychology have not been fully explored. In this paper, I argue that in proposing that reason experiences *erōs* for the forms, Plato introduces significant tensions into his moral psychology.

In the first part of my paper, I examine two models of *erōs* in the *Republic*. On the one hand, Plato treats the tyrant as erotic: a tyrannical soul is generated when *erōs* is implanted, driving the tyrant to suppress all contrary desires (572e). On the other hand, in Book V, Plato offers a sustained characterization of *orthos erōs*: the guardian who loves boys correctly avoids sexual pleasure; instead, he *philei* the boy as a father might his son (403a).

To which of these does philosophic *erōs* conform? Surprisingly, to the tyrant’s manic *erōs*, not the guardian’s neutered *philia*. In introducing philosophic *erōs* in Book V, Plato uses language reminiscent of the *Symposium*—just as in the *Symposium*, the initiate *ephaptesthai* the forms, then gives birth to true virtue (212a), so the philosopher *hapsasthai* the forms, then gives birth to understanding (490a-b). While *orthos erōs* avoids pleasure, philosophic *erōs* aims at the truest pleasure of all, knowledge (585c).

If the philosopher’s *erōs* resembles the tyrant’s, then does it escape Plato’s criticism of tyrannical *erōs*? I argue that it does not. Plato criticizes tyrannical *erōs* due to its connexion to *mania*; it threatens to dominate the soul, extirpating all other desires. Similarly, the philosopher’s *erōs* for the forms produces a devaluation of earthly concerns. There is thus a risk that reason might only satisfy the desires of the lower parts of the soul to the degree necessary to

support its intellectual pursuits. Far from a slave to the passions, reason would turn out to be tyrant. While one might take this to represent a flaw in Plato's argument, I conclude that this actually reveals Plato's growing sensitivity to the tensions which inevitably characterize mortal existence.

Word Count: 499