

Are Human Beings Rational?

Theory of Action in Plato's *Symposium*¹

"... you would have to be puzzled by their irrationality"

Plato, *Symposium* 208c3-4

Assume that human motivation crucially involves a kind of drivenness, similar to being in love. When you are in love, you will go to great lengths for your 'object of desire,' even if this makes you look ridiculous. Now suppose that this is how you quite generally want the things that you associate with your life going well. You think of them as good, and respond accordingly: you genuinely desire them. Whether you attain them, however, is not fully in your power, and they inherently extend your motivations beyond the confines of your particular life. While you pursue your own happiness, you find yourself pursuing the happiness of those you love, or the success of projects you would rather 'die for' than abandon. You find yourself caring more about your contributions to science, your work as an artist, your children, a legislative act you fought for throughout your political life, the business that everybody tells you is impossible to build, and so on, than about your immediate life going well.

¹ I benefitted greatly from discussion of this paper at Paris 1, during a conference on "Desiring the Good in Plato." David Sedley, Malcolm Schofield, and Christopher Rowe helped me get clear about the question of whether I am ascribing a 'pessimistic' view of human life to Plato, which is not my intention. Jens Haas encouraged me to stick to my intuition that, though Plato's view of life is not pessimistic, it is also not straightforwardly optimistic. The claim is, indeed, that much of what we do – for example, devote our lives to philosophy – can appear to be irrational.

This, as I see it, is a paradox about the pursuit of happiness that Plato describes and aims to resolve in the *Symposium*, offering an intricate and much-neglected theory of rational motivation. I shall call the central phenomenon the Paradox of Irrationality: human beings look irrational while they rationally pursue the good. Section 1 of the paper offers a close look at the Paradox of Irrationality. Sections 2 to 6 consist in analysis of eleven premises, formulated in *Symposium* 199-209, premises that I take to be central to Plato's proposal. I conclude by comparing Plato's account of motivation, and its claims about our relationship to death, to what Homer and Bernard Williams say about the desirability of immortality.

1. The Paradox of Irrationality

Admittedly, few scholars discuss Socrates' speech in the *Symposium* with a view to the theory of motivation.² It is difficult to rephrase precisely what Plato is proposing, in particular because we are dealing with a text that has a multifaceted history. Among other things, the speech became central to Neoplatonist metaphysics, to several traditions in theology, and to Freudian as well as other discussions of love. Given the various attractions of the relevant ideas, it is easy to lose sight of what is perhaps the least 'lofty'

² For some exceptions, cf. Ralph Wedgwood, "Diotima's Eudaimonism: Intrinsic Value and Rational Motivation in Plato's *Symposium*," *Phronesis* 54 (2009), 297-325; Charles Kahn, "Plato's Theory of Desire," *Review of Metaphysics* 41 (1987): 77-103; Gabriel Richardson-Lear, "Permanent Beauty and Becoming Happy in Plato's *Symposium*," in J. Leshner, D. Nails, and F. Sheffield (eds.), *Plato's Symposium: Issues in Interpretation and Reception* (Harvard, 2007). See also Richard Kraut, "Plato on Love," in Gail Fine (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook on Plato* (Oxford, 2008), 286-310; and Frisbee Sheffield, *Plato's Symposium: The Ethics of Desire* (Oxford, 2006).

suggestion in the text, a suggestion about the nature of human motivation.

My starting point is a remark by Diotima, a teacher of Socrates. Diotima says that, if you look at the things parents do for their children, heroes for fame, and so on, you have to be puzzled by their irrationality (*alogia*) – or rather, you *would* have to be puzzled if you did not understand the nature of love, and that is, the workings of happiness as ultimate motivator (208c). People look irrational in the ways in which they pursue happiness. They pursue with fervor and passion things that can bring much sorrow, and that point beyond the confines of their own lives. Plato suggests that there is a set range of such pursuits: having children, making material things (as craftsmen or as inventors, or in the sense of 'making money'), winning fame (as a war hero, athlete, poet, and so on), being a politician, writing laws or constitutions, creating art, coming up with ideas, attaining knowledge and virtue (208c-209e, 205d). These are not pursuits that *some* people take up, while others lead other kinds of lives. Rather, the claim is that pursuits of this kind shape every human life.

These pursuits have various features in common. First, agents tend to think of them as important components of a good life. Second, while these pursuits are undertaken in the hopes that they make our lives happy and fulfilled, they also come with much exhaustion, potential harm, and a risk of failure. Third, these pursuits all have products; they are kinds of creation. Fourth, the products of these pursuits tend to survive the agent.

In discussing happiness, philosophers often point out that it is impossible to pursue happiness directly. Bernard Williams calls this an "ancient platitude," and indeed it is.³ The observation goes at least as far back as Plato's *Symposium*. One aspect of the Paradox of Irrationality lies exactly here: in striving for happiness, people seem to strive for *other things*. If these other things – say, philosophical insight or having a family – are to make us happy, they must be pursued as valuable in themselves, rather than as means to happiness. That is, part of the paradox is that in order to pursue happiness one must pursue something else.⁴

Plato's Paradox of Irrationality, however, goes beyond this observation. In typical human pursuits, something is embraced as good. When we embrace something as good, Plato suggests, we in a certain sense lose sight of our own happiness. For example, when we are committed to the good of our children, this pursuit 'takes over.' It is not assessed in the light of whether it really makes us happy; we do not back off when we realize that we are constantly exhausted and worried; we hold on to it as something good. A certain move that seems plausible for small-scale endeavors, namely that we give up on them when they make us miserable, is not rational when it comes to the pursuit of genuinely good things. What is recognized as good in the kinds of pursuits that Plato has in mind – art,

³ Bernard Williams, "A Critique of Utilitarianism."

⁴ Peter Railton calls this the Paradox of Hedonism. "Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality." Railton suggests that a sophisticated hedonist re-adjusts her projects (which are embraced as valuable in themselves) when it turns out that they make her unhappy. That is, her way of embracing these projects is provisional: if they did not make her happy, she would back off. From Plato's perspective, this solution is insufficient: it is not compelling for cases in which we pursue things that are genuinely good.

political reform, science, the raising of children, and so on – *really is good*. Once such a project becomes central to our life, and is embraced as good, we respond rationally to this goodness by hanging on to it.

That is, the fact that one cannot pursue happiness directly means that one shall be 'sold' to the pursuit of other things. The pursuit of other things is not provisional or instrumental, viewed either as conducive to one's happiness or else as to be dismissed. The pursuit of happiness actually *consists* in the pursuit of other things. Accordingly, the pursuit of happiness is genuinely paradoxical – it is, qua being the pursuit of happiness, the pursuit of other things. Plato points to a perplexing phenomenon about the pursuit of happiness, namely that we are *rational* in pursuing things that importantly extend beyond our own lives.⁵

2. Simple Desire

It is time to turn to the text. The Paradox of Irrationality is discussed in *Symposium*

⁵ Notably, Diotima's observation that, to the uninitiated, human striving for happiness might appear irrational, does not hang on an empirical claim to the effect that human beings are on average miserable. Rather, it is that we come to be engaged in typical human endeavors associated with happiness in such a way that these endeavors and their hoped-for products take center stage. A brief comparison with Kant might be helpful. Kant thinks that we are rather bad at pursuing happiness. In making his argument that we have practical reason in order to be autonomous law-givers, Kant claims that we surely cannot have reason for the purpose he thinks eudaimonists (the stupid ancients!) advocated, namely the pursuit of happiness. Why not? For Kant it is obvious that we cannot have reason for the pursuit of happiness because we are miserable failures at securing happiness; since we have our capacities for some end, we must have reason for another end (*Groundwork*, Section I [4:395-397]). Kant's perception might be shaped by Christian culture, and the idea that human life is a vale of tears, with life after death as the only real prospect for happiness (a perspective that none of the ancients shares).

199-207.⁶ Socrates reports some of the things Diotima, a priestess – and thus arguably someone knowledgeable about life and death, things human and divine – taught him. For present purposes, I shall neglect the question of who is speaking, Diotima, Socrates, or Plato. Instead, I shall assume that Plato is putting forward a theory for our consideration. As is customary for him, Plato leaves it somewhat open whether we should fully endorse this theory, or whether there are further issues to consider, issues that might be raised by some other speaker. However, this need not detain us from studying the merits of the theory. Indeed, I think that Plato's quasi-skeptical move – the proviso that, if we looked at other arguments, put forward by other theorists, we might adjust our views – is well-taken, and nicely in tune with how many of us do philosophy today.

⁶ Here is an outline of the argument (I am not discussing the claims in the precise order in which they come up in the text, though I follow what I take to be the progression of the argument):

Love: Love (*erôs*) is for something. (199e)

Love-Desire: To love (*erôs*) is to desire (*epithumein*) that which is loved. (200a)

Lack: Desire (*epithumia*) involves a lack, or a potential future lack, of that which is desired. (200a-e)

Need: A lack of X can only be a motivating lack if one perceives that one lacks and needs X. (204a)

Possession: Those who are happy (*eudaimones*) are happy through possession of goods. (205a)

Why: We do not ask why someone wants to be happy. That one wants to be happy is a final (*telos*) answer. (205a)

Good: Desire for goods is love. (205b) All love is for the good. (205a-206a)

Motivation: Desire for goods – and for being happy – is the greatest and most violent love for everyone. (205d)

Forever: To love the good is to want to have the good and to want to keep it, that is, it is to want the good forever. (206a)

Immortality: Along with desiring the good (*meta agathou*), we must desire immortality. (207a)

Counterfactual: This desire is overtly counterfactual: we do not live forever, and we cannot have the good forever. Mortal nature seeks immortality according to its powers. (207d)

I am breaking off right before Diotima explains how production – and that is, the striving for a mortal kind of immortality – depends on beauty. We can only 'give birth' (to children, heroic deeds, ideas, laws, artwork, etc.) *in beauty*. Since I am not discussing the relationship between the good and the beautiful here, I shall leave this aside. I agree with Richardson-Lear (2007) that, though the classes of good and beautiful things are for Plato co-extensive, the value-properties good and beautiful play different role in our lives.

Diotima speaks about love (*erôs*). Before she says what she thinks love is, however, she classifies love as a kind of desire (*epithumia*). Consider the following two claims.

Lack: Desire involves a lack, or a potential future lack, of that which is desired. (200a-e)

Need: A lack of X can only be a motivating lack if one perceives that one lacks and needs X. (204a)

Desire involves a need, either an actual need in the present or a potential need in the future. I can desire health when I am sick, but also when I am healthy (because I might fall ill), and similarly with other objects of desire. For me to desire something that I lack, however, I must be aware that I lack it. This is what it means that the lack is a *need*.

Notably, the claim that desire involves a perceived lack is a general claim about *all* desire.⁷ Not only the bodily desires, and the destructive or addictive desires, are considered painful. The same goes for the desires of reason. The desire for knowledge, for example, is a maddening and painful desire. The genuinely ignorant person is not in pain. But those who had some taste of knowledge, and became aware of their own ignorance, and of the goodness of knowledge, are in pain. Their ignorance presents itself to them as a need, a painfully perceived need. This need is their motivator in the pursuit of knowledge (203e-204c). The upshot of this view is that desire, whatever its object, is

⁷ In the *Republic*, Plato arguably puts forward a different theory, according to which the pleasures or desires of reason do not involve pain (582a-587b).

tied to pain. This is a step toward addressing the Paradox of Irrationality. The paradox arises, in part, because typical human pursuits seem to involve much toil, exhaustion, and suffering. Would it be possible to avoid this by reforming one's desires, striving for other things? Plato's answer in the *Symposium* is 'no.' Motivation inherently involves states of not-having-what-is-desired, and these states are experienced as pain.⁸

In Lack and Need, the notion of desire is introduced without reference to the good. This is a remarkable feature of these premises: they talk about the *object* of desire, not about the good. In dialogues standardly considered earlier than the *Symposium*, Plato repeatedly discusses the so-called Socratic Paradox: everyone desires the good. In this formulation, the notions of desire and of the good are inextricably bound up with each other. Desire is the attitude we have to the good, and the good is that which we desire. This conception leads into well-known difficulties. In an obvious response, one might say that people do not desire the good, but that which *seems* good to them. Against this move, Plato tends to defend a robust version of the Socratic Paradox, according to which everyone desires what really is good. As the Socrates of the *Symposium* shall go on to argue, there is a sense in which everyone desires *the* good (and that is, what really is good). But notably, this is not a point that Socrates makes for all desire. His most general point about desire –

⁸ Socrates can serve as an example. The Socrates of the *Symposium* is driven by his love for philosophy. He is hunting for knowledge that he does not have. His followers are equally crazed. They are infected with philosophy like with an illness. Socrates, in many ways a model person, is not portrayed as having what he desires. On the premises of the *Symposium*, this means that he is not happy: happiness is the lasting possession of goods (202c-d, 205a). Surely, wisdom counts as a good in the relevant sense. Socrates does not have wisdom, but desires it; accordingly he is not happy. For a different reading cf. Sheffield (2006).

the point of Premises 3 and 4 – is that it has an object.

3. Happiness as Possession of Goods

Consider next how Plato characterizes happiness and its role in motivation.

Possession: Those who are happy (*eudaimones*) are happy through possession of goods.

(205a)

Why: We do not ask why someone wants to be happy. That one wants to be happy is a final (*telos*) answer. (205a)⁹

We pursue goods the possession of which makes us *eudaimones*; it makes us people who live well (205a).¹⁰ 'Goods' (*agatha*), as Plato uses this term, are the kinds of things which can be possessed. Examples are virtue, health, children, artwork, and so on.¹¹ Notably, happiness is not itself yet again such a possession. Plato's proposal in Socrates' speech in the *Symposium* is thus distinctly different from the better-known Aristotelian proposal,

⁹ Commentators tend to rephrase this passage as if Plato said that happiness was the final or chief good. Cf. Sheffield; see also Wedgwood (2009, 306).

¹⁰ Plato frequently uses the verb *eudaimonein*, being happy, rather than the noun *eudaimonia*.

¹¹ The relevant Greek clause is, at several places, literally translated in terms of something *being one's own*; in this sense, knowledge or virtue count plausibly as 'possessions.'

namely that happiness is the chief good and the chief end.¹² According to the *Symposium*, the goods possession of which brings happiness are not desired *for the sake of* happiness. The qualification 'final' attaches to an answer given in response to a why-question ("because I want to be happy" is a *final answer*), not to happiness as an end, as Aristotle has it.¹³ Goods or good things – values, as perhaps we might say today – are ultimate objects of desire.¹⁴ Happiness consists in possession of these goods.

This matters to Plato's response to the Paradox of Irrationality. In order to resolve the paradox, Plato must explain how anything *other* than happiness can be genuinely important to us. The paradox raises the challenge that, in raising children or trying to advance science as goods, we exhaust ourselves and take on much hardship. If the relevant goods were ultimately not good in themselves (but only good for the sake of happiness), their pursuit might appear to be an irrational distraction from what really

¹² Interpreters who read Aristotle into Plato point to a formulation in 205d. There, Diotima says that the greatest and most painful love for everyone is the desire for good things and for being happy (*kai tou eudaimonein*). However, it is by no means clear that Plato here *identifies* desire for good things and desire for happiness. More plausibly, the clause 'and for being happy' refers back to the complicated relationship that was explored earlier on: that one is happy through possession of good things.

¹³ It is a controversial question whether Plato held the core convictions of eudaimonism. In the *Symposium*, Socrates says that desire for the good and for happiness is the greatest and most violent love. In the *Republic*, he says that, while people may not care to do and have what is really just and beautiful, everyone seeks what is genuinely (and not only apparently) good. In the *Philebus*, Socrates argues that the good we all want is the good life. (*Symposium* 205d, *Republic* V.505d-e, *Philebus* 21d.) But Plato's discussions are misrepresented if we add up these passages, and claim that he holds, in sum, more or less the kind of eudaimonism that we associate with Aristotle.

¹⁴ This is not to say that Plato does not see that something might be desired for the sake of something else (cf. *Lysis* 219-221). However, in the *Symposium* Plato does not argue that happiness is the chief good, and the good for the sake of which all other things are desired.

matters, namely happiness. That is not the case. These goods are truly and genuinely good: to possess them *is* to be happy.

4. Love-Desire as a Subclass of Desire

Desire, we saw, is a generic term. Plato thinks that there are different desires. Love, or love-desire, is a particularly forceful kind of desire. It is the core motivator of typical human pursuits. Consider the relevant claims.

Love: Love (*erôs*) is for something. (199e)

Love-Desire: To love (*erôs*) is to desire (*epithumein*) that which is loved. (200a)

Good: Desire for goods is love. (205b) *All* love is for the good. (205a-206a)

Motivation: Desire for goods – and for being happy – is the greatest and most violent love for everyone. (205d)

By defining love as a certain *kind* of desire, namely desire for the good, Plato introduces a momentous distinction.¹⁵ He proposes that there are two kinds of desire: desire, and love (or love-desire).¹⁶ The difference is explained via the *object* of desire. Love is for the

¹⁵ Socrates relates the following line of thought. People misuse the term love, like they misuse the term *poiêsis*. *Poiêsis* means 'the making of something', not just 'poetry.' Poetry is one kind of making, but only one of many kinds. People make a similar mistake in how they talk about *erôs*, love. They use it for a specific phenomenon, rather than in the appropriately broad sense (205b-c).

¹⁶ Sheffield renders this in tentative terms, and does not make much of it. "It may well be the case that *erôs* is a specific form of desire, and not reducible to the category of desire as such. If so, then we can draw no general conclusions about desire as such from this account." (54) Contra Sheffield, I think that this is a momentous step in Socrates' speech. Against the Socratic Paradox, according to which all desire is for the good, Socrates now says that only a certain class of desires is for the good.

good, and that means, for that which really is good, rather than for what appears good to the agent. This is a remarkable step away from the Socratic Paradox, which claims that every instance of desire is for the good.¹⁷ There is a kind of desire – call it simple desire – which can be directed at what merely seems good. Another kind of desire, namely love-desire, is directed at goods. However, note that Plato speaks of ‘goods’ in the plural here: he does not make the Aristotelian claim that love is for *the* good, namely happiness. Rather, love is for the goods that, if one has them, make one happy. This formulation implies that the things we typically associate with happiness – having children, contributing to science, and so on – actually *are* good.

The difference between desire and love translates into the scope of these motivations. Desires can be highly particular: one might have a desire for *this* cup of coffee. Love, insofar as it is for the good, extends beyond such small-scale motivations. Love is for the goods associated with a well-going life. The difference between love-desire and simple desire also relates to the level of commitment. Love is characterized by a high degree of commitment. It is, compared to other desires, a more complete desire. Consider taking pictures with a camera. Many people take pictures, without making photography the pursuit of their lives. For them, wanting to take a good picture might be a simple desire, a

¹⁷ Sheffield does not acknowledge the starkness of this proposal (53-55). She describes things as if Socrates talked about what appears good to different agents. She supports this interpretation by pointing to the fact that, according to the famous scale of beautiful things (where Beauty itself is the highest), things are more or less beautiful, or beautiful in higher and lesser ways. However, this is a rather different point. Everyone desires something good or beautiful; the things of lesser beauty are not ugly. They are beautiful *and* ugly (beautiful in one respect, and ugly in another, 211a).

desire that figures in some local context of their life. Love motivates only if one makes something into a project that figures in what one sees as a good-life-for-oneself; that is, in our example, if one becomes a photographer.¹⁸

5. Desiring the Good Forever

Turn now to the way in which desire for goods extends beyond our lives.

Forever: To love the good is to want to have the good and to want to keep it, that is, it is to want the good forever. (206a)

Immortality: Along with desiring the good, we must desire immortality. (207a)

To desire good things is to desire to possess them. A desire for the having of a good is a desire to *continue* to have it. There is no inbuilt limit: to desire the good X is to desire to have X and keep having X for an unspecified and thereby unlimited time period. To desire something good is to desire it in an inherently unlimited fashion.

Contrary to what interpreters assume, the claim is not that we desire to have *happiness* forever. Rather, the claim is that we desire to have those goods forever possession of which brings happiness. But what does it mean that we want to possess these goods forever? Would it not seem that we desire good things only for as long as we live? Yes,

¹⁸ Socrates says that people pursue business, athletics, or knowledge in different ways. Only those who turn to these things in a specific way are described, as Socrates puts it, by the "complete term" of love (205d).

we want to keep them, but not forever – we want to keep them as long as we need them, and, that is, as long as we are alive. Who would, for example, want to be healthy when they are dead? Plato's proposal continues with the claim that it is impossible to desire to have the good forever without at the same time desiring that one's life goes on forever. A desire for immortality goes along with the desire for having the good forever.

Interpreters of the *Symposium* have been drawn to the following explanation of these claims: Plato in effect uses a religious notion of *eudaimonia*; *eudaimonia* is the blessed and everlasting happiness of the gods; the fact that we want happiness means that, ultimately, we want divine happiness.¹⁹ Against this, I propose that Plato is interested in an analysis of our relationship to goodness of good things. It is, he proposes, a fact about the way in which we respond to and relate to the good that we want it in an inherently unlimited way. There may be a theological or religious angle to this thought. But primarily, it is a claim in the theory of motivation.

Before I ask what could possibly be considered an argument for this claim, note how it differs from a number of other views. First, Plato's proposal is different from the idea that, when one wants to have some good at a given time in the future, one has a reason to want to be alive at that time (as in, for example, wanting to survive a serious illness long

¹⁹ Sheffield explains, in this context, *eudaimonia* as "the everlasting happiness characteristic of the divine" (75). She writes "The paradigm of the happy life, as we learnt earlier, is the life of the gods (202c10-d5) and that life is clearly one where good and beautiful things are possessed in a stable and secure manner. As the description of *erôs*' intermediate nature suggested, in our aspiration towards this state we are aspiring to the everlasting happiness of the divine." (83)

enough to see one's children grow up). Second, Plato's proposal is different from the idea that all desires are conditional on being alive (consider that one might want things even though, on the whole, one would rather be dead). Third, nothing in Plato's proposal hangs on the assumption that the soul is immortal. In fact, the presumption is that this is *not* the case.²⁰ The proposal keeps referencing the *Iliad*, where heroes try to achieve the immortality of fame, knowing full well that this is the best they can hope for. Fourth, Plato's proposal does not rely on any specific conception of the gods. Whether there are gods, whether they are blessed, and whether we should emulate the gods, are questions that are independent from the claim that we desire the good in an unlimited fashion.

So, what argument can be adduced for the claim that a desire for immortality must go along with desire for the good? The only argument, I think, that Plato has, is that otherwise human life would look thoroughly irrational. If we want to make the case that typical human pursuits such as having a family, or striving to be successful in some profession or art, or trying to contribute to the political order of one's community, are rational components of the pursuit of the good, then we must assume that human beings rightly consider the good as something that does not immediately fit into the confines of a

²⁰ Wedgwood (2009) writes as if it was obvious that Plato, in dialogues such as the *Phaedo* and *Republic*, was committed to the immortality of the soul. As I see it, this is a perspective that scholarship inherited from centuries of theologically-minded reception of Greek thought. It is entirely possible to read Plato in a more Socratic fashion, and that is, in the way in which the Hellenistic philosophers seem to have read his dialogues. On this reading, the *Phaedo* looks different: no argument for the immortality of the soul fully works; each is critically examined. In the end, it is obvious that Socrates *believes* (as in 'has faith') that the soul is immortal, but is not in a position to prove it. The *Republic* and other dialogues offer *myths*, not arguments, in which life in the afterworld figures importantly. Further, in a range of dialogues, such as the *Timaeus*, it is by no means clear that Plato thinks of the soul as non-physical. On the whole, it seems misguided to assume that Plato takes the immortality of the soul for granted.

limited human life. The good things that human beings want are good things that extend beyond their lives. Pursuit of these goods may exhaust us or it may fail, but it is a rational response to the 'larger than life nature' of goodness. The good things that are desired in pursuits such as raising children or improving laws are such that their goodness is not exclusively and maybe not even predominantly located in the particular life of the agent.

6. Counterfactual Desire and Creativity

The upshot of this argument is that rational human motivation is thoroughly shaped by the fact of death. Here are the final steps in the argument of *Symposium* 199-207.

Counterfactual: Desire for immortality is overtly counterfactual: we do not live forever, and we cannot have the good forever. Mortal nature seeks immortality according to its powers (*kata to dunaton*). (207d)

Conclusion: The desire to have the good forever and the desire for immortality are reflected in action-guiding desires for surrogate forms of immortality: the immortality of having children, of living on in one's works, and so on. Rational pursuit of happiness generates creativity.²¹

Our desire to have the good forever is an overtly counterfactual desire – it is a desire for what we know we cannot have. Desire for immortality thus does not directly motivate

²¹ Through creativity, mortal nature perpetuates itself. Plato's catch-phrase is 'to save the mortal': *to thnêton sôzetai*; 208a, cf. 206b-207a.

particular actions. In our actions, we are not concerned with figuring out how to become immortal. The counterfactual desire for immortality needs to be deflected, and transformed into action-guiding desires for surrogates of immortality. These surrogate desires motivate broad domains of human action. Love-desire is resourceful. It finds many expressions: reproduction, every kind of production, every kind of ambition to achieve something, all inquiry, political reform and military goals, and every form of art.

Consider an objection. Perhaps the notion of a desire for the impossible, namely immortality, is confused. Perhaps it is not actually possible to have such a desire. Insofar as we realize that death is certain, we *cannot* desire to have the good forever. This objection may sound like an Aristotelian point, but it is not. Aristotle argues that deliberation (*bouleuesthai*) is about the things that are in our power (*ta eph' hemin*). Deliberation is concerned with the things that can be brought about through action, *ta prakta* (*NE III.5*), not, for example, with the things that are brought about by nature. This argument, had Plato formulated it, would leave intact the desire to have the good forever. The Platonic agent does not *deliberate* about possible courses of action that might make her immortal. She knows that there are no such courses of action. She deliberates about possible courses of action that reflect her surrogate desires.

Part of the claim of *Symposium* 201-209 is that these surrogate desires motivate activities that are formative of human life. The most basic of these activities is reproduction. Why is this an activity that shapes human life? Perhaps we should say, in the spirit of

Aristotle's function argument in NE I.7, that reproduction is precisely *not* specific to human beings, but shared with animals and plants. However, this is not how Plato construes matters. The idea that productive activities are formative of human life is not a claim about the ways in which humans differ from other kinds of animals. Indeed, Socrates says that, observing the awful states in which animals are who desire to reproduce, and how they devote themselves to the care and safety of their offspring, we must assume that they too seek immortality (207a-d). The claim is that surrogate desires, which reflect the desire for immortality, structure human motivations. Human reproduction is not a 'natural' occurrence; rather, it has complex motivations that reflect our relationship to the good. All production, study, science, art, all political, military and other endeavors, likewise reflect our relationship to the good. Socrates' interlocutor, Diotima, says that these activities would look irrational if we did not have the explanation that human beings want the good forever (208). This premise aims to render human action – the great lengths to which people go for their children, their work, and so on – rational.²²

Plato's proposal, however, is not that all agents look *equally* irrational, being in the same way driven by desire to have the good forever. His proposal leaves much room for variation. Many different pursuits can be motivated by this desire. Not all of us are like

²² At this point, Plato turns to the issue of love for a particular person. It is in the context of loving a particular person that human beings can best act on their deepest desire: to create something (children, poems, laws, etc.) that will outlast them. The Platonic account of love for another person is often deemed offensive. It not only fails to capture the particularity of the loved person; it also presents love for another person as an enabler for something that is deemed to be ultimately more fundamental.

Achilles, or Socrates, throughout our lives motivated by one good, be it heroic fame or knowledge. Plato's conception, however, has the resources to say something about such lives. It offers an account of how happiness relates to other values. In particular, it aims to explain why other values are (what today we may call) *final* values, even though the deepest motivation of human agents is that they want to lead good lives. The fact that, say, the value of creating great art can drive a person's whole life, and thus, for her, be a final value, is explicable because of the specific way in which we desire happiness. We desire happiness by desiring to have good things forever. And that means, we must view the good things we pursue as ultimately important. Only if we do, we recognize them for what they are: good. It is an adequate response to real goodness that we do not want it in a limited way; we want to have and keep it. The pursuit of happiness is, accordingly, fraught with distress, and with incomplete achievements. Given the kinds of projects we must set for ourselves due to the nature of desire for the good, we are likely to partially fail. Note that this is not the familiar Christian point that to seek happiness in 'this life' is a misguided enterprise – that one is bound to fail because happiness is only to be had in the afterlife. Plato's conception does not involve the idea that, ultimately, happiness would come with immortality, which therefore is to be desired (a life after death, that is). Rather, his claim is that the way in which we strive for a happy life in 'this life' inherently oversteps the boundaries of a one mortal life.

7. Is Immortality Desirable?

But why assume in the first place that human beings desire immortality? Bernard

Williams argues that, if we envisage immortal life as a realistic option, we see that in fact we would not want it. Life, he argues, would be meaningless. "Immortality, or a state without death, would be meaningless [...]; so, in a sense, death gives the meaning to life."²³ We want to live a little longer than in fact we do. But eventually, Williams argues, boredom would be so overwhelming that we would choose to be mortals, and die.²⁴

Consider that Homer's *Iliad* might be read as making a similar point. The gods lead a pointless life. They argue, battle, love, hate, deceive, and so on, but nothing is at stake. Eventually, they shall have to laugh it off and get together at one of their divine banquets. Their lives are not *interesting* – they do not have the real friendships, loves, and parent-child relationships that human beings have; they do not show real courage, do not perform truly admirable deeds, and so on. It is because human beings are mortal that all these things matter greatly to them.²⁵ Without this limit to one's life, nothing looks the same. Is that a side of the *Iliad* that the *Symposium* does not consider?

²³ P. 82.

²⁴ Williams, Bernard, "The Makroupos Case: reflections on the tedium of immortality," in B. W., *Problems of the Self*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1976, 82-100.

²⁵ The movie *Troy* is much-lamented by Classicists, who, for example, cringe at seeing the Trojan horse in a story that is arguably the *Iliad*. However, the movie gets this central idea right, though it is placed in an anachronistically romanticized scene. Brad Pitt *alias* Achilles says to Briseis, captured princess of Troy and priestess of Apollo: "The gods envy us.//They envy us because we're mortal.//Because any moment might be our last.//Everything's more beautiful because we're doomed." These lines are not in the *Iliad*; it would be hard to extract a quote that expresses the idea quite as neatly. But arguably, the *Iliad* is through-and-through about the contrast between the mortal lives of human beings and the immortal lives of the gods. For an influential scholarly discussion of this point, cf. Seth L. Schein, *The Mortal Hero* (Berkeley 1984).

No. Neither Bernard Williams nor the proposed reading of the *Iliad* show anything about immortality that would call Plato's argument in question. For Williams, immortality is a *realistic* option. The fact that we age, for him, is a contingency.²⁶ It is conceivable that at some point in the future this might not be so, at least for some of us, and then eternal longevity becomes an option. Thus, Williams looks at human motivation, as we know it, and adds a further question, namely whether one would choose to be immortal. The Iliadic comparison between mortality and immortality is similar insofar as it, too, suggests that we would not choose immortality. There are things about our mortal lives that we value deeply. But the Iliadic comparison between mortal and immortal life also differs from Williams' argument. It explores the worlds of immortals and mortals under the premise that, for humans, the fact of death changes everything.

The *Symposium* accounts for the intuition of the *Iliad*: death changes everything. The fact of death makes it the case that desire for happiness must be deflected into creative or productive activities. This explains broad domains of human life, and shows that, while they might look irrational (given how much suffering people take on, and how they seemingly get derailed from pursuing their happiness), in fact they are not. By adopting this view, Plato rejects the kind of thought-experiment that Williams proposes. Whether or not it is true that science will at some point enable us to achieve eternal longevity, death does not seem to be a contingent fact about our life, *as we know it*. Death is a necessary fact of human life, as we know it, and a fact that shapes motivation.

²⁶ Williams (1967), p. 89.

Death is, further, not an isolated occurrence – a single event at the end of life. Rather, everything about our lives is mortal (207d-208a). The material stuff out of which we consist must constantly renew itself. We are not in a straightforward sense the same person throughout life; parts of us die off and others come into being. This does not only affect the body. Even more importantly, it affects our mind. Thoughts recede into the background when new thoughts are formed, and our efforts at remembering things reflect how our minds strive for persistence. Production and creation are constant work: in trying to hold on to things once understood, to experiences and memories, we in effect reproduce ourselves all the time. The basic motivation to produce thus runs deep: even in order to remain a person with a persistent mind, we need to be active. Williams' proposal, that, if we did not die at the end of our lives, we would be immortal, seems inherently flawed from this perspective. Nothing about ourselves is simply – as it were by itself, without our efforts – persistent. While, on the surface of our lives, we create things outside of ourselves (children, poems, laws, art), we even more basically have to sustain our minds. All of our motivations, even the way in which we strive to know and remember things, are shaped by the fact of death.

Like the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey* too explores the contrast between mortality and immortality.²⁷

Odysseus chooses to be mortal, though he is offered life with Calypso, a goddess at whose side he too would be immortal. He also chooses mortality over a mixture of

²⁷ Cf. Segal, *Singers, Heroes, and Gods in the Odyssey* (Cornell, 1994).

mortality and immortality, namely life with the Phaeacians, where marriage with Nausicaa would secure him a life that bears traces of mortality, but is entirely devoid of human toil. The *Odyssey* adds to the argument of the *Iliad*. Human modes of valuing are not just fundamentally shaped by the awareness of death as an end, and as a constant feature of the processes in our minds and bodies. They are also shaped by the particular things that human beings need, such as food (Odysseus is *always* hungry), and the generational ties within which particular motivations are formed. By marrying one of his super-human potential brides, Odysseus would opt out of this nexus: no longer father, no longer husband of Penelope, no longer son of his own father. Sitting on Calypso's island, he is thoroughly bored and has absolutely nothing to do, in part because he is lifted out of his relationships to the past and future of other human beings. The seven years on that island are not worth many lines: Odysseus' mind is blank.

What now about the point, arguably made both by Williams and Homer, that immortality is not choiceworthy? To this even the Socrates of the *Symposium* could agree. Plato's proposal is not that we love immortality for its goodness. Rather, the point is that we *must* have a counterfactual desire for immortality, because this reflects how we desire the good – namely in an inherently unlimited fashion. We can have this desire, located fully within this life, and at the same time make the considered judgment that immortality is not choiceworthy.