Commentary on David Black's "Asylum for the Shameless"

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Dr. David Black's reading of Plato's *Symposium* in "Asylum for the Shameless" is broad and profound and displays a lifetime's attention to the inner workings of this beautiful dialogue. Both the overall argument and the granular details of Black's analysis give evidence that he has found a perspective from which the deep order and thematic unity of the dialogue may be viewed entire. I would love to hear Dr. Black's further remarks in three areas: why shame is not a virtue; whether shame is a foundational concept elsewhere in Plato's dialogues; and how Dr. Black managed to resist explicitly linking his analysis with the dynamics of contemporary social media and politics.

Symposium is usually approached as though it were a magpie's nest filled with glittering baubles, and as though its commentator's job were to celebrate the delights of this or that shiny piece. At best we are encouraged to see a narrative progression of some kind among these pieces. Professor Black's approach is to understand the dialogue as an encyclopedia—literally an all-around education—on the ways in which shamelessness defeats the

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Socratic method. In this approach *Symposium* anatomizes the antithesis of the Socratic Method; Black demonstrates how Socrates' modest, self-effacing, cooperative quest for the true may be subverted by the shameless, self-aggrandizing competitive quest for the esteem of others. In Black's reading, *Symposium* is a series of assays of the various ways shameless crowd-think can blemish the beautiful and belie the true. This approach not only illuminates *Symposium*, but it also shows how the *Symposium* connects with the rest of Plato's thought. It shows us how sophistry, with its appeals to flattery and the nurturing of narcissism, can be blindingly glamorous and can make the Socratic method impossible to practice. My own interest in Classical aesthetics and rhetoric made me appreciate the subtlety of David Black's linking of the distinction between Socratic Philosophy and Greek sophistry to the distinction between two approaches to the erotics of poesis: one based on the narcissistic self-promoting variety of crowd identity, the other based on the humble and self-effacing Socratic Method, in service to truth and the beauty.

The essay affords ubiquitous pleasures of detail. For example, consider note # 5: "Certainly, it is not unimportant that Socrates uses the adjective 'beloved' when referring to Agathon here. It is largely because of Agathon's interest in becoming a beloved that the young poet cannot spar philosophically with the likes of Socrates. The young tragedian is skilled in presenting himself as an object of adoration but cannot engage meaningfully in dialectic due to his deficient capacities as a lover." The reader should savor the use of litotes: "Certainly, it is not unimportant that…". Litotes, as the name suggests, is the embodiment of modesty: assertion by denial of the negative. Certainly, it is

not unimportant that Black employs this trope when speaking of Agathon's immodesty. This is the kind of finesse to be found in the essay.

The first of three areas in which I would like to hear more is: why is shame not a virtue? For context I'll touch on just four moments in the essay. One, we are told that "shame can portend moral danger" (6) and thus, as Aristotle says, it should be praised, Dr. Black seems perhaps to accept Aristotle's assertion that shame is not in itself a virtue (Ethics, 1108a30). Two, the essay quotes *Symposium* to the effect that shame is constitutive of social virtue, and that "if a lover makes a young man 'wiser and better' then the love is 'not shameful'" (184E). Three, Black avers that "A person of shame respects the truth…". And four, we read that "shame is heaven-sent, a gift of the gods carried to us by the intermediary spirit of eros." My question thus, is shame a virtue after all, and if not, what is there in the definition of shame which makes it not a virtue? Or is shame to the virtues what Mnemosyne is to the muses: the mother of them all?

My second question is probably too broad for this setting and is as much a suggestion for future work as it is a request for rebuttal. Black has shown convincingly that the foundation of the architecture *Symposium* is in the distinction between the lover and the one desiring their own adoration. But Plato's system of thought is arguably grounded on different elementary distinctions in other dialogues. For example, Phaedrus rests upon the distinction between friendship and tyranny. Whereas, the ground of the poetics of Republic comes down to the distinction between superficial mimesis and the edifying metaphysical depth of demiurgic creation, where such creations cultivate the capacity of the citizen for dialectic, and so, for self-government,

of both the self and the city. Of course, these oppositions resemble each other in key ways and together comprise Plato's larger system of thought. Giambattista Vico's circle of ideas has famously no bottom, each nexus being capable of generating the others by implication, its own primacy only provisional. Is one of Plato's approaches fundamental, or is Plato's system, like Vico's, one where no single way of speaking is more fundamental than the others?

My third question concerns what Dr. Black has left unsaid: the practical extension of the implications of *Symposium*, including his definition of narcissism, to the toxic shamelessness of the crowd dynamic and the antisocial extremism of contemporary social media. This dynamic no doubt connects with Plato's distrust of democracy, for its reliable default to the shameless courting of the crowd, the tendency of democracy to devolve into demagogy. How was Black able to muster the self-control to resist comment on contemporaneity? Perhaps in this the essay exhibits a kind of global litotes. The connection is everywhere implicit but never overt. Social media platforms are the technological constitution of seemingly limitless shameless crowds.

We may infer from David Black' modest reading of *Symposium* that anyone who wants to approach the beautiful and the true today faces in the metaverse just what Socrates faced in the crowded court of Athens. As Yeats put it: "the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity."