

## Love and Madness in Plato's *Phaedrus*

In this paper, the points that I shall focus upon and contextualise are:

(i) Plato despite advocating 'rationalism' in philosophic methodology has used a vocabulary replete with terms like passion, frenzy and madness to describe and analyse love (*eros*) in one of his early period Dialogues, *Phaedrus* and has referred to it as 'divine madness'.

(ii) 'Divine madness' may seem like an oxymoron but Plato has very discretely demarcated 'irrational excesses' from philosophic tendencies and has accordingly distinguished between 'human' madness (which can be pathological) and 'divine' madness, which is always philosophical. This distinction is quite parallel to the demarcation made between passion or motivation and obsession and pathological neurosis etc by psychoanalysts.

(iii) If interpreted in terms of modern theories of Philosophy of Mind, especially the one propounded by Ryle, it can be argued that Plato has actually been able to categorise madness as love as a separate realm from madness as irrationality. In the '*The Republic*'<sup>1</sup> madness and irrationality were treated synonymously. However, in *Phaedrus*, while irrationality clearly has a human origination, divinity has clearly a divine design and telos. Hence in the *Phaedrus*, madness does not denote an evil disposition, instead it is a referent of a philosophic inspiration. An endeavour has been made, in this paper, to appreciate how Plato probes the boundaries of madness in this Dialogue by separating the divine origins of it from human madness. In a way he demarcates, in my understanding between love as divine madness or love as passion and love as excessive desire or obsession.

iv) The focus in this paper will, therefore be, to elaborate on the concept of eros in term of madness via a reference to the etymological derivation of it as delineated in the dialogue. An attempt has also been made to make references to Psyche (soul) in connection to *eros* as being an 'intermediary' or 'spirit' in the tripartite analysis of it and accordingly how these analyses justify Plato's usage of the vocabulary loaded with terms like madness and zeal.

To elucidate the foregone points, I have tried to briefly rephrase those excerpts from a recent time translation<sup>2</sup> that many substantiate these references.

### Background

The Dialogue, *Phaedrus* has only two interlocutors mainly in conversation i.e., Phaedrus and Socrates (P)<sup>o</sup> (Lysias being mainly in the background)

Here Plato has delineated dialectics not as a method of collection and division but has recurrently alluded to it as a philosophical methodology which is better than using a rhetoric for explaining and describing a term. Socrates (P) makes two speeches to improve upon Phaedrus' notion of eros or love, which according to former is both 'incorrect' and 'untrue'.

<sup>o</sup> Socrates 9p) because, it is Plato himself through the mouthpiece of the protagonist Socrates. So P here stands for Plato

In my interpretation, it is rejection of this speech and also the one made by Socrates himself (his first speech or left hand speech)<sup>3</sup> that clarifies how he (Plato) demarcates the boundaries between madness as a referent of love or a philosophic passion and obsession or love as an irrational excess.

Also, allusions have been made by Socrates(P) to mythical tales (e.g. chariots, winged horses charioteers)<sup>4</sup> yet, it may be inferred that the real intent of this speech is to use these references, only as philosophic metaphor or an analogy.

#### References and Excerpts from the Dialogue, *Phaedrus*

Love or *eros* is characterized as madness and Plato justifies the usage of such a term as would semantically imply contradiction of any rationality. Socrates (P) explains this madness in terms of intensity of passion (as a cognate of *eros*) or an inspiration drawn from the knowledge of the reality. He, first of all traces the origin of the term mania. Through this derivation, he is able to establish that 'mania' or 'madness' being divine in origin is 'non-sensuous'.

In the first speech he had preferred excessiveness of a desirous non lover to the temperate lover. Here in the second speech, Socrates 'recants' and elucidating lover's madness states that madness is not an evil especially when it comes from gods and is also the 'correct' and 'true' characterization of the love when the lover is a philosopher. According to Socrates(P):

(i) "... the ancient inventors of names did not consider madness (mania) a disgrace or reproach; otherwise they would not have woven it into the noblest of arts, that by which the future is foretold, this very name, and called it the 'manic' art. But believing it to be a noble thing, whenever it occurs by divine dispensation, they named it thus—though men of the present ignorantly insert a T and call it the 'mantic' art. And this is confirmed by the name that was given by them to the rational investigation of the future, for inasmuch as it is an art which supplies in a rational manner insight (*nous*) and information (*historia*) to human understanding (*oiesis*), they originally called it 'oio-no-(h)ist-ike,' but the word has lately been altered and made more impressive by the modern introduction of the long O (*oionistike*)."(244 c 1- d 1)

(ii)"...Now, to the same degree as prophecy (mantike) is more perfect and august than augury (oionistike), both in name and fact, to the same degree, as the ancients testify, is madness superior to a sane mind, for the , one is only of human, but the other of divine, origin." (244 d2–d6) These two long references from the Dialogue clearly show that Plato has accredited the word madness by pointing out its etymology which renders it as being highly inspirational or as an intense motivation(passion).

An interesting equation can be deciphered by referring to a further assertion made by Socrates(P) while explaining the divine origin of the term madness.

"...For prophecy is a madness, and the prophetess at Delphi and the priestesses at Dadona when out of their senses have conferred great benefits on Greece, on both

states and private individuals, but when in their senses few or, rather, none at, all." (244 b1-5)

Through this, just mentioned reference, it has been inferred here, in the paper, that Plato has sharply distinguished between sensuous and non-sensuous origin of passion. He has apparently identified the phrase, 'out of senses' literally and has referred to non-sensuous source of intense inspiration. It is inferred, here in the paper, from the above stated references from the dialogue that 'divine inspiration =(is equal to) madness' and 'human reason =(is equal to) sanity'. However, in the ultimate analysis, as is clear from these excerpts that it turns into, 'human sanity <(is less than the) divine madness.' Socrates(P) not only refutes that madness is evil but justifies the usage of the term madness by showing its divine origination.

He also classifies different kinds of madness, as has been supported by references from the Dialogue where he also 'enumerates that there are different benefits conferred by different kinds of inspired passion, i.e., whether arising out of divine sources or from human sources. The lowest among the inspired madness is that having human origin. The second kind is the one arising from prayers and religious rites, third, coming from poetry and lyrics and the highest one following from divine sources.'(paraphrased from 244 e2-245 c3)

It may appear that Plato has radically altered the connotation of passion by changing the denotation of its source i.e. from being human disposition to being an inspiration from the divine.

Love or *Eros* is the Mediator and/or Propellant.

The meaning that has been ascribed to *eros* in the *Phaedrus* is that of madness, and intense inspiration derived from divine sources. At the same time this madness is distinguished sharply from that arising out of sensuous sources.

The nature of the soul, which has been elucidated as being similar to the combined functioning of the pair of horses and their charioteer, all winged<sup>4</sup> highlights clearly the boundaries between the divine and human souls. However, Plato has simultaneously also enunciated the common features and comparable properties of these kinds of souls.

It is inferred here, in the present study, that Plato has tacitly accepted the psychological dimension of the rationally perfect divine soul. The reference to nobility of their emotions is indicative of that. Divine soul by virtue of being rationally perfect and completely noble epitomises the moral-psychological model of the soul that Plato sought in the 'multiform soul'<sup>5</sup> as discussed in the *Phaedrus*. The soul is defined here as the principle of motion and eternity and is rational in its essential content.(rephrased from lines 245d-246a).It is pointed out in the dialogue that the soul or the psyche has three elements or parts viz.,the rational, the spirited(also understood as the affective) and the body(as understood as the appetitive). The distinction between rational and irrational desires is explicated through the nature of passion. Passion is stated in the *Phaedrus*, to be located in the spirited part. The nature of spirited part is that of being in alliance with the rational. Being an ally of reason the desires residing in the spirited part are rational ones while those residing in the body and in opposition to the rational element are instinctive or

irrational desires. Accordingly, *eros* i.e., maddened love mediates between the earthly life and the divine one.

It is observed in this presentation that the conflict between desires is not merely an extension of the conflict between soul (rationality) and body (irrationality) but it states distinction between rational desires and irrational desires. It is in this context, the position of 'spirited' element and the nature of white horse becomes important. Hence, a subtle distinction between passion and obsessive or irrational desire accrues, in the *Phaedrus*.

Therefore, the first point that follows from an analysis of the nature of soul and its bearing on the nature of *eros* i.e., on the nature of love as madness is that *eros* is a rational passion as opposed to obsessive human madness or an insane excessive desire, which is not always compatible with the rule of morality and rationality. It is in the context of human souls that the function and features of passion or noble emotions become pertinent. The reason that can be cited to support this assertion is that in the state of incarnation or embodiment there is always a possibility of contradiction being present between two opposing and fully operative elements, viz., the rational and the appetitive.

The state of *Eros*; a State of Intense Madnes/ a State of Philosophic Astonishment and of Philosophic relation

An attempt is made to appreciate and note the elaborated references made about the state of *eros* in the initiated state as being in a state of zeal and excitement. It is stated here that this excitement is aroused at the sight of a personal or individual example of the Beauty. The effluence of this beauty reminds the knowledgeable lover, of the 'Idea' of pure beauty. The experience or the state of this arousal is a state of zeal even frenzy. Hence, it is stated to be like a state of madness.

The immediate and simultaneous explanation given by Plato in the *Dialogue*, is to refer to the importance of being in this state. It is explained as being progressive and being highly inspired, which is sharply distinct from the commonplace meaning of it. The meaning of madness having already been explained earlier in terms of divine is revived here in the context of love relation that accrues between the lover and the boy who personifies the Beauty.

The state of initiation is understood, in this paper, as a reference to a state of "cognitive recovery."<sup>6</sup> This state is expounded in the *Phaedrus* as "And now they are at the spot and behold the flashing glance of the beloved; which, when the charioteer sees, his memory is carried to the true beauty, and again he has sight of it, in company with prudence, standing on a holy pedestal." (254 b2-7).

Also, the state of the man initiated is described in the *Dialogue* as: "while he gazes on him there is a sort of reaction, and the shudder passes into an unusual heat and perspiration; for as he receives the effluence of beauty through the eyes, the wings moisten and he warms ... the lover end of the wing swells and starts to grow from the root upward; and his soul is filled with a sensation of warmth, ... the whole soul is boiling up and overflowing ... is similar to irritation and uneasiness in the gums at the time of cutting teeth." (251 b—c2)

The point implicitly suggested in the above stated references are about the state of initiated lover (op. cit., 251 b—c2). These also indicate the arousal of passion or of spirited element besides the mental or rational one in the lover's psyche. The spirited elements links the mental and appetitive or instructive parts. It is through love located in the 'spirited' part that facilitates this memory or initiation of the lover. The following lines prove these points:

"Now when the soul gazes upon the beauty of the boy and she receives this surpassing overflow — therefore — called Sir Passion — and is refreshed and warmed by them, ..." (257 c3-4)

The fact that the passion is referred to as 'Sir' and begins the word with capital letter (P) prove the point(as I comprehend it) that passion is a noble emotion and an ally of reason.

The above mentioned references manifest a vocabulary rich in sensuous or empirical manifestation of excitement. But the real meaning, which is suggested implicitly in these references refer to a state of knowledge and of nobility. In other words the actual connotation refers to an 'arousal of philosophical astonishment' or a state of 'philosophical curiosity.' It thereby implies the stirring up of whole psyche or the soul. It implies becoming aware of the true nature of one's soul i.e. of the rationality and of its essential disposition i.e. nobility.

The stage following the state of initiation is the stage of forming a union or relationship with the boy whose personal beauty entices the lover to remember the Form beauty. To achieve this state, Plato has recommended a prior state of instilling the similar passion in the beloved boy.

Even though the description of the encounter of the lover is discussed in terms which bear reference to a person being 'charmed' by the other sensuously, these clearly refer to 'stirring up of the soul, rising of the philosophical activity.' ( 251 a—c). The 'charmed' or the 'ravished' lover therefore refers to the philosopher who in the middle of a multitude of sensible particulars, grasps the 'Form' beauty and sees it in his beloved' ( 249 a—c).

The apex state of lover's union is described as a maddened or most passionate state. However, passion or madness, as is clear from the fore stated arguments refers to a state of high philosophic activity. Madness refers to a state of detachment from pragmatic and material concerns. So, the lover's true "interests are fastened upon the divine; he is admonished by the multitude as if he were a lunatic; they do not see that he is inspired" (249 d 1-3).

This state of passion, in fact, is a state of 'upward or propelling movement,' which is stated as 'upward thrust.' Passion is a rational and noble desire accordingly, this is a state in which there is synergy of reason and passion. So, all references to lovers 'kissing, touching and lying together,' as pointed out earlier are used as similes which refer to a state of passionate and therefore to an intellectual togetherness.

However, Plato insists to exclude any sexual intimacy from this togetherness. Physical 'proximity' is therefore understood to be used as a metaphor to allude to the actual, non-sexual and non-sensuous togetherness which facilitates the ultimate aspiration of these lovers, i.e. the attainment of discarnate state or immortality. It is asserted in the Dialogue, "The desire of those who love truly, and its fulfillment, provided that they accomplish their desires in the way [I] prescribe, in this way is made noble, and beneficial to the beloved, by the lover who is maddened through eros... ." (253 c 2-3). Therefore, "...the life they pass here is a blessed and harmonious one ..." (256 b 2-3). It is this highest state of passion, which makes these lovers, the human souls, similar to divine souls. They "are therefore masters of themselves and ... are light and winged for flight" (256 b 1-7). Also, Plato constantly refers to desire of sexual love as being 'vulgar and shameless' (oft. repeated, especially in between 254c- 257a).

### Plato's Probe into the Boundaries of Madness in The *Phaedrus*

It can be inferred, from all the foregoing discussions, that it is possible to misconstrue Plato's identification of love with madness as suggesting a reference to love as pointing to obsession. The commonplace meaning of madness implies an excess of irrationality. In psychoanalytic terms, any excessiveness of desire or a lack of restraint is alluded to as neurosis or obsession.<sup>7</sup> The misgivings about Plato's use of the term madness with reference to eros gets compounded by the fact that he has condemned such a reference in his other work, *the Republic*. In the *Republic*, he denounces any reference to madness as a 'vice or folly, which is linked with excess. It is described as lack of restraint and is applicable in the context of sexuality. Madness, according to Plato, therefore, could never refer to real love. It seems ironical, therefore to accept without becoming curious that Plato describes eros or love response in terms of madness. The pressing query thereby is : Has Plato confounded love as passion, with love as obsession, in the dialogue in consideration, i.e., *Phaedrus*?

The answer to the question sought, in the just concluded paragraph is in the negative. This answer is based on understanding of references from the Dialogue and also from those statements therein, which segregate irrational or 'sick' madness from philosophic or divine madness.

It has already been pointed out in preceding sections (of this paper) that Plato gives two speeches about the nature, meaning and essence of love as madness or *eros*. Plato justifies his use of the term madness as a cognate of love by not merely stating its source, but also by referring to the origin of this term. It has already been pointed out that Plato traces its etymological roots as being common with divine science of prophecy.

Again, it has also been clarified, in the preceding part of the paper, that Plato has used the word 'madness' as a metaphor to refer to an intense cognitive or intellectual arousal. This rational excitement accrues from intense passion. This passion in turn implies an intense state of motivation on part of the lover to make advances in his moral and rational pursuits in order to achieve ultimate spiritual perfection. This ultimate achievement can happen only to a philosophically zealous lover, \_ i.e. one who is detached from pragmatic, material and mundane concerns. This awareness

comes to the lover who remembers the Form Beauty at the sight of a visible, material manifestation of it.

It has been repeatedly claimed in this presentation that Plato has not only explicated his justification for referring to love as madness, but that there are implicit suggestions to his segregation of passion from obsession.

An application of reference to 'category mistake' as used by logicians like Gilbert Ryle<sup>8</sup> may substantiate this point. Ryle states that 'philosophical confusion or category mistake' may occur because of the persistent confusion between grammatical and logical forms. In other words confusions 'ensuing from confounding two separate logical categories as one'<sup>9</sup> leads to the fallacy of committing category mistake.

If the above stated references are used in the context of Plato's separation of madness from 'sick' or irrational madness, then it is most appropriate to defend Plato's use of the term madness as cognate of passion.

Passion is intense desire but makes its beholder noble and rational in his (i.e. lovers) focus and aim. It is programmed towards enabling the lover with rational progress and ennobling him with virtuous pursuits. Obsession, on the other hand refers to a state of regression. It makes the man act against reason, to act on the instinct, to be excessive or gluttonous in desiring carnal, bodily and material pleasures. It can never propel the man towards the path of ethical, rational and spiritual progress. So, it stands in exact contradictory position to that of passion.

Therefore, 'madness' as explicated in the *Phaedrus* is a cognate of philosophic and / or divine passion. It is logically and categorically opposite to the idea of obsession. Passion makes the lover rational and enables his perfection. Obsession deludes the person from his path of progress and makes him irrational. Plato very discerningly separated the two categories, i.e., of human obsession and of philosophic passion/madness.

## End-notes and References

- 1) *Plato: The Republic*, translated with an introduction by Desmond Lee(Penguin Books,1974)Book-VII,Part-VIII
- 2) All dialogical references and excerpts are taken from, *Selected Dialogues of Plato,The Benjamin Jowett Translation*. Revised with an introduction by Hayden Pelliccia(The Modern Library,2001)
- 3) As pointed out in *A History of Greek Philosophy,Volume-IV,Plato:The Man and His Dialogues* , W.K.C. Guthrie(Cambridge at the Univ. Press,1969)
- 4) *Philosophers in Context: Plato* , C.J.Rowe(Harvester Press,1984),paraphrased from pp161-165
- 5) Price has used this terminology to describe the state of love or initiation in *Love and Friendship in Plato and Aristotle*, A.W. Price(Oxford University Press,1989),p.68
- 6) Price,ibid,p.87
- 7) As noted in *Philosophy of Psychoanalysis*, Mrinal Miri(Indian Institute of Advanced Studies,Simla,1977),pp.13-14
- 8) Paraphrased from 'Gilbert Ryle' in *A History of Philosophical Traditions*(Routledge, London and New York,1988),pp.88-91
- 9) Rephrase of Hospers in *An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis*, J.Hospers(Allied Publishers,1999)p.89

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