

SOCRATIC SEDUCTION

Lovers, One and All

A lecture
by
Dr. John Verdi (*)
(September 26, 1980) (**)

Socrates makes me mad.

Don't get me wrong. He doesn't anger me, though there was a time not long ago when his apparently arrogant irony irritated me. No, the pug-nosed philosopher doesn't anger me, he maddens me, and during the next threequarters of an hour, I'll explain how he does so, and why I hope he makes you mad, too.

I must confess to another motive behind addressing you this evening. I am here to repent publicly for having implied, the last time I spoke from this platform, that Socrates was a man apart, a man who could not, or would not, love those around him. I suggested that one so adept at devastating irony necessarily lived in a world devoid of human love. Tonight's talk explores the opposite possibility. Phaedrus tells Socrates that the topic of Lysias's speech is appropriate for his ears, since «the discourse on which (they) spent (their) time was a sort of love-speech» (P. 227c), and Socrates himself tells Eryximachus in the **Symposium** that love is the one thing in the world he understands. I now believe that Socrates is indeed himself a lover, and a seducer of young men, one whose example we are compelled to follow, if we would be lovers, too. And though I hope you'll not take this amiss, I shall go a perilous step further and suggest that seduction is the primary activity of this college, where above all else, we attempt to become lovers, one and all.

(*) St. John's College, Santa Fe N. M.

(**) St. John's College'de verilen konferans metnidir.

To these ends my talk is divided into three parts, namely, The Divine Madness, Consummation through Conversation, and finally Liberation and Love.

Part I: The Divine Madness.

I think most of us would hesitate only a short while before agreeing with Socrates when he says in the **Symposium** that the daimon, Eros, was born from the union of Resource (poros) and Need (penia). We are all familiar with those unrelenting attempts at devising clever ways to convince one with whom we are in love to yield to us, and which often paint a most comical picture to our friends and relatives viewing from outside. Perhaps the efforts are no more grand than writing a poem in honor of the beloved, or discovering where he or she will be at a certain time, so that we might «accidentally» be there too. Still, the resourceful lover recognizes the way through obstacles such as the reserve, reticence, or even resistance of the beloved.

Love is also needy, always in pursuit, never at home where it is, restless, ever-engaged in the search for what it has not. How often have you suffered the malaise of this neediness when your lover has gone, whether for a moment or forever? Yet even in his or her presence, haven't you felt that anxious expectation, you know not why, that keeps you from rest, the need to possess what you love, to absorb it, to become one with it?

Socrates also calls love a «sort of madness», «given by the gods for our greatest prosperity» (P. 245c). In one sense this, too, rings true for the passions in general seem to descend upon us, like alien forces, pushing, wrenching, upsetting, making us sometimes mad and frenzied, without control. We find our actions to be almost not our own. In fact, we even wonder at ourselves and our behavior. But does this sound like a divine gift of the highest bliss?

Here we discover one of the paradoxes of love: it is a gift, not on account of itself, but for its object, that to which the lover never attains while being a lover, that of which the lover is always in need, towards which his resourcefulness guides him and which his madness him to reach.

P. — Phaedrus

S. — Symposium

G. — Gorgias

Perhaps, this does not sound correct to us. The attainment of one's goal in love doesn't seem to lessen one's love. It would be strange, wouldn't it, for lovers to unite, only then to become non-lovers? But this is too easy a rebuttal to Socrates. It is, I think, what makes us peculiarly human that we are always in love, always looking for what we have not, never finding it, but sensing that maybe we are closer. And it is either god or beast who does not long for what we lack--god because possession is already his, beast because he is satisfied with what he has (S. 204a). Only we, like love itself, stand midway--midway between ignorance and wisdom, ugliness and beauty, the bad and the good.

Love, then, is like the ladder Diotima describes in the **Symposium**. The beauty of individuals, which is beauty present to the sight, leads us ever upward, to beauties which cannot be seen by the body's eye, until finally, to the beautiful, the true, the good itself. Upon reaching this height, the ladder of love is no longer needed. The goal achieved, the means can be discarded. To be in love is a sign that we have not reached the end, yet also a sign that we are moving towards it. This another of love's paradoxes, for love is a state at once to be cherished, and yet to be discarded. It is a sign of both our strength and weakness, of our search and our need to search.

Socrates also likens love to the force that causes the lover to grow wings, which aid him in his ascent to the beautiful.

«When he that loves beauty is touched by such madness... (and) is called a lover,... as soon as he beholds the beauty of this world, (he) is reminded of true beauty, and his wings begin to grow (P. 249e)».

Love allows us to soar, to transcend the mundane, and climb toward the highest good. Although this description of love may sound somewhat abstract, isn't it really accurate? Haven't you, while in love, felt somehow above the world?

It is all well and good to compare love to a ladder or to the force that causes wings to grow. Both images reflect love's ability to carry us up in some way, but remind us that while we love, still more awaits to be climbed. In the **Symposium**, however, Diotima suggests that love is no mere mode of transportation, though it does indeed move us. She gives Socrates a most curious characterization of the activity of love when she says that it is to «beget with the beautiful,

in body and soul» (206b). Now what are we to make of this? Our simple understanding of love as a mediator, as it were a vehicle to move us closer to some distant, external goal, seems in need of revision. Love is not exactly a longing for the possession of the beautiful, the true, the good, but rather for the immortality which comes from the generation of beautiful, true, and good things.

Now, Diotima tells Socrates that those men whose procreancy is of the body turn to women as the object of their love, and raise families. But those who love the spirit bear things of the spirit, such as wisdom and the other virtues. Consider, for example, Socrates and Theatetus. Plato uses the image of being in labor to describe Theatetus's struggle over the question, what is knowledge? Socrates patiently awaits the birth in order to ascertain whether Theatetus's offspring is worthy of rearing or just a mere wind egg. In a similar vein, Diotima tells Socrates that a friend of the spirit, attracted to another by the beauty of the other's soul, by constant association with so much beauty,

«will bear and bring forth that of which he has long been full, and will, together with his friend, raise the newborn (S. 2209C)».

It is this offspring, whatever it may be, that love seeks to bring to life. This progeny, to the extent it is immortal, is the cause of the immortality of its parents, just as the *Iliad* to this day reminds us of Homer, and the laws of Athens of Solon.

Now, however, you might want to say that Socrates has missed the point about love in a most fundamental way. His aim is all wrong. We don't think of love as wanting to possess the good **for ourselves**, nor as wanting immortality **for ourselves**. Isn't real love, love big with expectation, necessarily directed to gaining the good for **others**, for possessing only in order to divest of possession to another? Isn't Socrates's notion of love simply too selfish for us to accept it as what we think love ought to be?

Socrates, however, recognizes that perhaps more than anything else, love characterizes our mortal nature. Only insofar as we are mortal do we love. To the extent that we are mortal we seek the immortal and divine. But it is to the extent that we share in the divine that we recognize the need to seek. That is, because we are, like love itself, midway between the mortal and immortal, between the earthly and the divine, do we recognize both what we are and what we lack. Neither brutes nor gods love.

How does this help us answer those who say that Socratic love is simply selfish, and not what we would call love in its highest sense? I think Socrates realizes that the act of loving itself betrays our weakness. Perhaps a divine being can dispense favors selflessly, but it would not be by an act of love. There is, however, a sort of generosity involved in the creation of beautiful things from the union with the beloved, a generosity which reflects, I think, a need to give, beyond the desire to possess the good for one's self. This is perhaps the best we can do as humans, and is, I suspect, of the essence of love. It is the recognition that we **are** lacking, that we need the help of love, which is the first step towards the divine. Socrates exhorts us to recognize our need to love when he says:

«I try to persuade others that for the possession of beauty, a better partner for our human nature than love will not readily be found. On account of this, I say that all men must worship love, and that is why I myself worship the things of love and practice them to perfection, and urge others to do the same (S. 212b)».

Part II: Consummation Through Conversation.

So this is Socratic love, and Socrates is indeed a lover. But **how** does he love, and how does he make lovers of others? Like all great seducers, like the serpent in the Garden of Eden, like Don Giovanni, Socrates seduces through his words. But unlike those other masters, Socrates does not tell people what they want to hear. Rather, they are seduced when they have been told that their own thoughts are empty, contradictory, false. They are seduced if at all, when they hear what they think they least of all want to hear.

Consider Phaedrus. When he meets Socrates, and they walk together outside the walls of Athens, Phaedrus is terribly excited about the speech of Lysias he has recently heard and has been in the process of memorizing. Lysias believes he has shown that it is better to submit to a non-lover than to a lover, because non-lovers will treat us better. Phaedrus is so taken with this speech, and so convinced that what Lysias says is the truth, that he barely hesitates before reading it to Socrates. Though set forth as the opinions of Lysias, the speech is surely addressed by Socrates as representing the beliefs of Phaedrus, or at least those to which Phaedrus contemplates surrendering himself. And the reasons Phaedrus presents

for preferring the non-lover are at first glance attractive, since non-lovers are not devoid of reason, as are lovers. Non-lovers are not mad. (241c).

Socrates follows with a speech defending the same point of view. And thus begins his seduction of young Phaëdrus. But I am getting ahead of myself. We don't even know yet what seduction is, so how can we say Socrates seduces Phaëdrus? What if we were to say that seduction is tempting and succeeding? The serpent not only tempts Eve in the Garden, but also succeeds in leading her away from God. Satan tempts Christ in the desert, but surely does not seduce him. This definition, however, only pushes our question back a step, since the problem of what temptation is must be at least as difficult as that of the nature of seduction.

If seduction is a leading away from, as its Latin roots suggest, from what is one led in a full-fledged seduction? Certainly Eve is led from the right way of life. In our modern sense of the word, a woman might be seduced by a man, or vice-versa, to do something she considers wrong, or at least something she does not consciously desire. Don Giovanni must **seduce** his women, because they do not give in to him readily, though through his seductive activity, they eventually do so willingly. The Don complicates matters, however, because although Eve is led away from what is known to be the right way of life, by being persuaded, however easily, that a better way is open to her, it is not clear in the case of the Don that he has not seduced women to a better way of life, to a life of passion, romance, and abandon. I might venture to say that seduction involves a leading away from what one **believes** is the right way.

Yet this, too, falls short. For I am unconvinced that belief is an essential part of all seductions. Somehow that paints seduction in a too epistemological light. Although belief may be involved in many seduces minds, I'd want to argue that the question centers more clearly around devotion and allegiance than around belief. The ambiguity arises because very often devotion rests upon belief. But to the extent that it does not, then neither will seduction. And this explains a little better Don Giovanni's art. It was not the beliefs of his women he needed to change. It was, instead, their allegiances, and not everyone forms allegiances on the basis of belief.

Seduction, however, is not simply leading someone to change his or her allegiance. This might be mere persuasion. Rather, the means used in seduction are perhaps the most crucial element, for therein rest something which is not what it appears to be, something sly, maybe ironic, at times even devious, or downright deceptive.

Let's see if this makes any sense with the case of Socrates. In the early dialogues, Socrates typically leads his interlocutor to contradict himself. He traps Meno when the latter asks him if he didn't think Gorgias knew what virtue was. Socrates responds:

«I'm a forgetful sort of person, and I can't say just now what I thought at the time. Probably he did know. (71c)».

But of course Socrates is not forgetful, and he knows too well that the opinions of Gorgias were just so much hot air. By questioning Meno about the nature of virtue, he ultimately forces him to contradict himself. Meno can then reply only by saying.

«Socrates, even before I began to associate with you, I used to be told that you yourself are in doubt, and that you lead others to doubt; and now it seems to me that you are bewitching and enchanting me and casting a spell over me, so that I am reduced to utter perplexity. (80a)».

Just as in «Don Giovanni» Zerlina is made helpless by the Don's promises of marriage and by his «Vieni», Meno is left unable to speak by the dialogue he had with Socrates, by Socrates's **Ti Phaes Aretane Aeni**, what do **you** say virtue is?

But isn't Socrates just playing with Meno? Why hasn't he been more straightforward, Why does he lead Meno, as he does Callicles, Polus, Theatetus, Thrasymachus, Hippias and the rest to a position from which they cannot escape? Can this in any way be a form of love?

I once thought that these very instances helped to show Socrates to be a man devoid of love, apart from his fellows, so that he could embarrass them with his dialectical skill and irony, simply to uncover their shortcomings. Now, however, I see these same acts as acts of love. Recall that in the **Symposium**, Eros, the offspring of Need and Resource, is described as, an adept wizard, sorcerer, and

sophist. Meno in describing his own state of perplexity, says to Socrates: you bewitch and enchant me. Is this bewitchment, this stinging, which Socrates inflicts on his interlocutors, part of an act of love? But how could it be?

In the **Symposium** Socrates and Phaedrus agree that love is a sort of desire, and that it must be directed towards something the lover hasn't got, or is not himself. It is here that love begins, in the recognition of need, in perplexity, in wonder. To say that knowledge begins in wonder is to say that knowledge begins in love, for wonder is a kind of love. Socrates, in his attempt to make a lover of Meno, in his attempt to seduce him, must first of all show him what he (Meno) neither has nor is. Once Meno feels this lack, the lack in this instance of the knowledge of what virtue is, he is in a position to become himself a lover, a seeker after wisdom. Socrates seduces Meno through dialectic. He tells him not what he would like to hear, but what, for his own good, he ought to hear. Just as Eros is a wizard, so is Socrates, and I would venture to say, so are all seducers.

The method of dialectic, however, is not what it seems to be, especially in the hands of the master seducer. It seems to be the give and take of question and answer, the perplexity of Socrates seeking resolution in the wisdom of Gorgias and Meno. What it actually leads to is an indictment of the ideas of these two sophists, charged with inconsistency and falsehood, a charge arrived at by a method itself not entirely above board.

But now you ask, so what that Socrates has shown Meno his failings in this roundabout way? Remember what Callicles says after Socrates has done him a similar turn?

«I don't know how, but you seem to speak the truth, Socrates, but I share the feeling of the common people: I am not quite convinced by you. (G. 513c)».

But although Socrates succeeds in showing Callicles his need, the latter is, as Socrates says, too much in love with demos, the common people, who he hopes will carry him to power. His devotion is to them, or perhaps through them to himself, and this devotion is too great for the power of dialectic to break. Not even Socrates, the great lover, can seduce Callicles.

But still, isn't this just all wrong? When Don Giovanni seduces women, he wants them to become **his** lovers. When Socrates seduces young men, he wants them to become philosophers, wisdom's lovers. How can one possibly call what Socrates does seduction, when his greatest hope is that eventually those who love him will see through him, see through his particularity, and ascend to a vision of the Forms?

Perhaps the solution lies in something I mentioned earlier. Unlike some other seducers, Socrates plays his trade not by giving his boys what they want to hear, but rather by deviously leading them into uncomfortable positions of self-reflection, wherein they see themselves in a less glorious light. Rather than getting them to focus on imaginary nobility in themselves, he forces them to turn away from themselves, since they find themselves, at the core, fraught with contradictions.

Why not, then, turn to Socrates and love only him? I think this is a real possibility and a danger Socrates recognizes. At worst one of his young men could become infatuated with him, and never learn to see beyond him. Socrates as an individual might be just as enslaving as any other individual, with the consequences that the seduced never goes beyond a vision of this one man. The scene at the end of the *Phaedo* surely tells us that Socrates, not wisdom, may as yet have been the main attraction for some of his followers.

Socrates is ambiguous in this regard. The love of a beautiful soul is the second rung on the ladder to the beautiful in the *Symposium*, and if Socrates can get his followers to see the beauty in **his** soul, he will at least have gotten them started on the climb to the beautiful. It can be that Socrates at one and the same time seduces men to himself and to philosophy, if only because to some extent he is the paragon lover of wisdom. What is beautiful in him is just this never ending search, this madness, called love, directed towards the highest good. And like any real lover, Socrates wishes his beloved to delight in the things which delight him. It is in this way, by **creating lovers**, that Socrates himself begets upon the beautiful. For love is itself beautiful, and those who love, to the extent that they do, are beautiful.

The process of seduction Socrates employs is dialectic, as I have already said. To this process there are two stages. In the first Socrates must clear his interlocutor's soul of all other lovers. The seducer

must get the seducee to forget he has other lovers. The serpent does this to Eve, Don Giovanni to Zerlina, and Socrates tries to do this with all his boys. He does so by exposing the intellectual emptiness of the lovers' beliefs. Let me give some examples.

Phaedrus is convinced that Lysias has written the most wonderful speech imaginable on love, and it is with this enthusiasm that he reads it to Socrates. Lysias, or at least his speech, has overtaken Phaedrus, and now controls him. Socrates knows he cannot succeed in making Phaedrus a lover of wisdom until the young man is made to put aside his love of Lysias. This Socrates accomplishes by providing a speech on love more wonderful than the tome of Lysias, though for himself, he does not believe the argument he presents. This is the first step in the seduction of Phaedrus: his soul is freed from the love of Lysias.

Socrates can effect this liberation from other lovers in yet another way, as when he and Meno discuss the nature of virtue. Meno is in love with the teachings of Gorgias, which he has made his own. Socrates leads Meno to the numbed state of bewilderment, from which Meno has no escape, when he is shown the emptiness of Gorgias's views, since they inevitably lead to the conclusion that part of virtue is virtue entire. Meno is left helpless, and Socrates can now do with him as he wishes. Socrates has gotten Meno to this condition, however, by raising Meno's expectations that he could really be of help to Socrates in answering the question, «what is virtue?», while all along Socrates knows the exercise is a futile one.

Don't think, though, that the first step in Socratic seduction always works. It clearly fails with Callicles and Alcibiades. But here I think the failure stems from the too strong love which each of these men has for the common people, popular opinion. In fact Socrates says just this, that «the love of demos dwells in your soul, Callicles, and resists me» (G. 513c). Dialectic, then, essentially and in its deepest respect, like love, because it works not on reason alone, but on that interface between reason and passion. Socrates recognizes the power the passions have over men's souls, and in order to make them mad with the love of wisdom, he must first make them mad.

Now, the elimination of the influence of other lovers, once accomplished, gives rise to the second stage of seduction. Having revealed the deep-seated need of the interlocutor for a real lover,

Socrates cannot simply leave him empty. The act of consummation, which both the seducer and seducee long for, must follow. This act is the turning of the now helpless young man in the direction of the truth. This moment, which Socrates totally controls, surely emerges as the most awesome of the dialectical-seductive act. For it is at this climatic moment that the soul is moved. It is the breaking of the chains in the cave of the **Republic**. It is Zerlina's «Andiam» to Don Giovanni's persistence. Some might even think it is Eve's first bite of the fruit in the Garden.

But as I have hinted, Socrates' art does not end here, not in consummation. No, the act of love, that act of abandon devoid of knowledge, but pregnant with hope, is transformed by Socrates into a lifelong madness which transcends the act with which it begins, so that the seduced may, as Socrates tells Phaedrus, «live his life simply with love through philosophical discourse» (P. 257b).

Part III : Love and Liberation.

Love, then, is both a blessing and a curse. It moves us towards the eternal and the true, but is itself restless, and gives us no rest. It desires to give birth to beautiful children, only because it is itself not immortal.

Socrates works his seductive magic by first revealing in others the paucity of their intellectual lives, and then redirecting their allegiance to the unchanging reality of wisdom. He stands as a model for those he has seduced, a man whose search never ends, and whose love is obvious to all who would see.

Now I'll go further. Seduction is this college's business, for here we are not concerned with producing what the world calls educated people. We don't care about dispensing information. We live here in profound disagreement with the spirit of the age, because it is filled with disdain for thinking, and overcome by infatuation with the expedient. Today one proves his worth by **answering** questions, not by asking them. This, I think, is where we at St. John's stand most in conflict with so much of the rest of our country's system of higher education, for here the **question** dominates. The question is at the root of all pursuit, and thus at the root of love. To think well is to question well, and to question well is to love well. Thus it is, I believe,

no coincidence that Socratic love finds its expression in the persistent questioning of dialectic. There is no other way. I have suggested, however, that seduction involves a method whose true nature is obscured, a method which derives its power by walking that thin line between truth and falsity, between candor and deception. Dare I suggest that this is really **our** business?

When any of us first comes to the college, he or she arrives burdened with lovers. Perhaps we have been taken by some author read in high school, or like myself, by some I first met in graduate school. Often we come puffed up with self-love, or love for approval of others. Very few come already recognizing their need to be pointed in the right direction. I think this is why freshman year for the student, and the first couple of years of teaching for a tutor, can be so difficult. We are in the process of being seduced, and seduction is often most bewildering, confusing, and painful. We are in the process of changing our loyalties from what may be a particular bit of truth, to the search for truth itself. We don't know our direction, but are left in acute need for guidance.

The seduction has been successful when we cast away former allegiances, be they to our own intelligence or to the doctrines of another, and begin to feel this need. For need is the mother of love and the feeling of need is the first step towards wisdom.

But the books we read and discuss at the college don't merely leave us bewildered and humbled. Through the tutors and fellow students, I think you are taught how to love well, that is, how to pursue wisdom, that is, how to ask questions. Does this seem some what empty and pointless? Why spend one's time asking questions? Aren't there any answers?

Of course there are, and not even Socrates would deny this. But there are answers and there are answers. Perhaps Gorgias seduced Meno with an answer, but is love ended there. Perhaps this is Don Giovanni's greatest fault, that, unlike Socrates, his momentary acts of love never become extended acts of loving.

What I'm trying to say is this: the best answers are disguised questions. They say «yes, but.» They point at once both to themselves and **beyond** themselves. They too, like the seducer, walk that line between truth and falsity, for they say, «Look here,» but then, when

we look, tell us, «No! Look there, beyond us.» They take away our ignorance, but do not give us that final knowledge. We remain, in their presence, lovers, still seekers, confident only that we are headed in the right direction, and sometimes not sure even of that.

There are then two kinds of seducers of which you must beware: those who give answers which put an end to questioning, which, as it were, kill the passion of love within you; and there are those who ask questions which are themselves disguised answers, questions which lead nowhere but to a ghostly skepticism. These inflame a madness which is no love, one which is mere futile frenzy. But those who seduce with questions that always point beyond, which give barely a moment's rest before forcing us to uncover more, those are the seducers to whom you ought to surrender. Those are the seducers to whom I urge you to surrender.

Who are they? I think you all know the answer to that question. You live with them day after day. Are they the books we read here? Only incidentally are the books seducers. I think Socrates would have us see that only other people can work the deepest charms on us. The books are doubtless indispensable to the spiritual seduction I have suggested is the main work of St. Jon's, but they are not themselves the active principle. We are, you and I, students and tutors--we are both seducers and seduced, some perhaps more skilled than others, but each working magic on the other. In the most important way what is best in the conversations we share in the classroom, ultimately reduces to seduction, to a destruction of old loyalties by persistent questioning and eventually a turning toward new beauty. The environment the college creates allows us all, as friends who share a common purpose, to examine the offspring of our discussions, and if deemed worthy, to nurture and raise them.

Yet we are not all equally skillful at seduction. And frankly, as far as you students are concerned, the tutors are your seducers. The tutors, themselves in love with learning, try to lead you to be captured by that same passion. The tutors try to inhabit that world between ignorance and wisdom, between the earthly and the divine, the world of the question. And the question is a sly, tricky, almost, we might say, questionable vehicle, for it itself walks that very same line between the true and the false. The questions Socrates asks, and the questions you find yourselves being asked in class, are not what they appear to be. They are indeed in one sense a call to answer; but

in another, they despise answers which themselves fail to lead beyond to other questions. The tutors, too, are tricky, seductive, filled with questions. They are mad, not over the books we read, but over the truth contained in those books; for there is truth in every book we read.

The books, however, stand apart, for their authors can never be led to change their minds by anything we might say in class. They are not themselves candidates for seduction. This is perhaps why an oral on a student's essay, or the discussion period after a lecture, presents an exciting and unique opportunity. At these times we can speak with the author, and have the chance to examine a well-defined set of ideas with the one whose labor has given it birth.

You might suspect that I'm very near the end of this talk, having already hinted at the discussion to follow. And you are correct. I hope you understand better now why Socrates makes me mad, and why I want all of you to become mad, too; for in the madness of love we express what is both most human and most divine in us.