

Review of Bachelor Thesis

Title: From Desire to Knowledge, the Ascent of Philosophical Eros in Plato's The Symposium
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The original aim of the bachelor thesis, as stated in SIS, was to “demonstrate and delimit the notion of eros as a philosophical concept (...) through Plato’s Symposium” with the use of texts of R. Barthes and E. Lévinas. Zelimhan is dedicated to the topic, as is obvious from his writing: we can feel from the very beginning that questions he raises stem from his genuine interest. As a supervisor, however, I had a very limited opportunity to influence the course of the work as I received the first version just a few days before the submission deadline.

The final text has three main parts. The first one (*Eros and erotic desire*) is a kind of literary-philosophical reflexion that tries to discuss “romantic encounter” by drawing on different authors (Plato, Barthes, Lévinas; Dostoyevski and Voltaire are also mentioned). Zelimhan is gradually trying to establish a distinction between “immature” and “mature” love/lover. This part is very hard to follow: the text is fragmented (perhaps Barthes’ influence?), the author is constantly switching perspectives, he deals with texts that are not just different, but rather disparate. Clear interpretative perspective is missing, no deeper analysis of mentioned texts can be found here. Some interpretations that the author suggests seem textually unfounded and (therefore) arbitrary (see below, especially the points 3 and 7).

The other two parts make much better sense. They are focused, the author makes use of relevant secondary literature and proves good understanding (especially) of the philosophical perspective of E. Lévinas. He also shows that he is aware of fundamental difficulties that arise from his attempt to confront authors who are more than 20 centuries apart and whose writings differ in almost all possible aspects.

In the part *Encountering the Other as Other*, Zelimhan introduces the reader into the philosophical perspective of E. Lévinas, namely his concept of “the Other” and his interpretation of “metaphysical desire”. He touches upon the fundamental question of the thesis (as I see it): what is the nature of “metaphysical desire” in Lévinas and in Plato, and what relation it has to the erotic desire. Zelimhan’s intention is (as far as I understand) to show how we could interpret Plato’s texts in a lévinasian way: the nature of erotic desire aims at the Other and Plato is therefore more respectful for “irreducible otherness” of the Other that is usually claimed.

I find the discussion in the second (*Encountering the Other...*) and third part (*The Question of Philosophy...*) interesting and stimulating, yet not very convincing and clear. As already mentioned, the author seems to be aware of some fundamental difficulties,¹ he is, however, unable to escape them. The cause is obvious: the topic is too broad and general and the gap between Plato and Lévinas is huge and manifold since it contains differences in their literary style, philosophical view, vocabulary, historical context etc. Questions like “What is the relation between desire and knowledge in Plato and Lévinas?”² cannot be answered seriously within a standard bachelor thesis. The second problem, connected to the first one, is the lack of one clear interpretative approach: in the first part, the author jumps between different texts as if they were context-independent. As a result, he does not work with philosophical *concepts*, but stays only (or mostly) on the level of mere *words*. In parts two and three, this problem diminishes, yet it is still there. A more direct question and focused aim would have been much more appropriate.

I have several questions regarding the text itself:

1. The author talks about a “pre-reflexive” or “pre-philosophical understanding” of love and connects it with Aristophanes’ myth in *Symposium*. I have two questions here:
 - What can we know about a pre-reflexive understanding, how can we approach it?
 - Why should be the myth of Aristophanes attributed to such an understanding?

¹E.g.: “However, there is also the question of whether Platonic metaphysics are not part of the critique Lévinas launches against Western philosophy.” See also the footnote 67, p. 36.

²See the *Introduction* p. 9.

2. On p. 18–19 the author writes: “(...) in Plato’s doctrine it is unclear whether the path of philosophical eros should lead one away from romanticism, away from bodily pleasures, and towards celibacy.” Several questions here:
 - What is a “romanticism” in Plato?
 - Where can we find Plato’s doctrine?
 - Where does Plato connect “the path of philosophical eros” with celibacy? Where does such question raises from?
3. The author links his distinction between mature and immature lover with Pausanias distinction between two kinds of love (p. 20). Why does he do it, when there are more differences than similarities?
4. The author has several claims about the Aristophanes’ myth that should be clarified:
 - according to the author, the myth is a depiction of a possessive love (p. 22)
 - the Aristophanic myth is “questioning the interest of philosophical eros” and asks “if in its desire for the rational whole it does not at the same time desire tyranny” (p. 37) – Why “rational whole”? And why a tyranny?
5. On p. 25 we read: “In our quest for knowledge, stemming from simple desire, recognition of radical alterity is a fecundity for knowledge itself, of eternal things as well as of creation.” What does it mean? Whose perspective is that: of Plato, Lévinas, the author, or someone else?
6. “It seems that (...) the Platonic eros, being that force, power, or essence, which gives rise to the ‘ascent’ towards the Good is very much within the same terms as Lévinas’ metaphysical desire (...)” (p. 31) – This is a big claim that is not sufficiently explained in the thesis. Could the author clarify what are his main reasons for it?
7. The author has a strong, surprising and unorthodox interpretation of Alcibiades’ speech: “(...) in Alcibiades’ speech we recognize a criticism of the inhumanity of philosophy (...)” (p. 35); or: “Effectively, it seems that Plato recognizes this limitation and inhumanity of Socrates, hence the importance of Alcibiades’ accusations.” (p. 45) – Why does he allign Alcibiades’ speech with Plato’s final view?
8. The author labels Eros in *Symposion* a god, even in the context of Socrates’ speech. Why?

Summary The author has proven a genuine interest both in the topic and in philosophy: he uses writing about philosophical texts as a mean to answer basic philosophical questions that are also his own. It seems that for him, zealous looking for answers matters more than a tedious manufacturing of a solid academical text. A bachelor thesis, however, is an academical text and as such, it has to be measured by corresponding standards. Therefore, I **recommend the thesis for a defence** with suggested **grade two**.

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