

Received: 12.10.2009
Accepted: 28.03.2010

A – Study Design
B – Data Collection
C – Statistical Analysis
D – Data Interpretation
E – Manuscript Preparation
F – Literature Search
G – Funds Collection

LOVE AND COGNITION: THE VIEW FROM ANCIENT GREECE – AND BEYOND

David Konstan^(A,B,D,E,F)

Brown University, Providence Rhode Island, USA

SUMMARY

The ancient Greek philosophers took a highly cognitive view of the emotions in general, and of love (philia) in particular. At the same time, they recognized that some kinds of attraction operated on the level of perception, and were not fully cognitive in nature: attraction or affection of this sort (called natural philia) is found in animals, which lack reason in the full sense of the word (as the Greeks understood it) as well as in human beings, whereas the emotion of love in the full sense of the term was regarded as being specific to human beings. In addition to philia (in both senses), the Greeks employed the term erôs to identify the sentiment erotic passion or “falling in love.” The relationship between philia and erôs, and in particular the connection of the latter term with cognition, has not been fully explored. In this paper, it is argued that erôs too entailed cognition, in the sense that it involved belief and not just perception, but that, unlike philia, it was conceived, at least in some quarters, as a consequence of false belief. It is thus a human sentiment, and does not pertain to animals (though of course they can experience sexual attraction). False beliefs give rise to a mistaken sense of what human nature requires, and this in turn is responsible for the obsessive character of erotic passion.

Key words: emotion, classical antiquity, Eros

INTRODUCTION

It has now been several decades since psychologists, philosophers, and investigators from a variety of other disciplines have argued that the traditional opposition between passion and reason is dubious, and that the emotions involve at least an element of cognition in their very nature (Lyons, 1980; Lazarus, 1991: 353; Solomon, 1993: viii; Nussbaum, 2001: 19). Yet just how cognition enters into the construction of the several emotions is still under debate, and nowhere more, perhaps, than in the case of love. For one thing, love itself is ambiguous, and would seem to cover a range of sentiments: what has maternal love, for example, to do with erotic attraction, or with the affection that exists between friends? And do all these kinds of attachment have a cognitive dimension, or only some? And if all, does cognition enter into them in the same way, or in different ways?

It is well known these days that Aristotle's approach to the emotions, which he treats in most detail in his treatise on rhetoric, has much in common with certain modern theories, above all the so-called appraisal school, which understands emotions to involve a substantial degree of judgment (Lazarus, 2001: 40; cf. Hinton, 1999a: 6); and in this regard, Aristotle is not alone among ancient thinkers, but is joined by Platonists, Stoics, and even Epicureans. A closer look at how these thinkers understood love may, then, shed light on our own ideas about the connection between this emotion, or set of emotions, and cognition. This is the more the case in that classical Greek disposed of a broad vocabulary to designate love, which in some respects cut across the categories that we customarily or instinctively employ. Most conspicuously, Greek distinguished between *philia* and *erôs*, and both terms are rich enough to raise important questions concerning the role of intellect in their composition. What is more, the term "cognition" is itself far from simple in its usage, and may cover such disparate kinds of mental activity as elementary perception, which we may attribute to even fairly primitive animals, and high-order reasoning that is specific to human beings. Here, ancient Greek was perhaps more discriminating, in that the term for reason, *logos*, was usually understood to denote a human faculty, and to be absent even in advanced mammals.¹ This narrow sense of *logos* may be helpful, then, in differentiating kinds of emotion, and more particularly of love, that necessarily entail rationality — or were thought to do so — and those that operate on a more instinctive level, without the participation of judgments based on reason.

PHILIA

Let us begin with *philia*. Depending on the context, *philia* is commonly translated as either "love" or "friendship." Although the two senses are distinct in Greek — the opposite of *philia* in the sense of love is hatred (*misos*), while its opposite in the sense of friendship is enmity (*ekhthra*) — it is telling that the same term serves for both (Konstan, 2010). For friendship is simply mutu-

al love, with the further condition that each party must be aware of the other's affection. As Aristotle explains in the *Rhetoric*, "a friend [*philos*] is one who loves [*ho philôn*] and is loved in return [*antiphiloumenos*]," and he adds: "Those who believe that they are so disposed toward one another believe that they are *philoî* [plural of *philos*]." Yet this alone is still not quite enough to define friendship, as we shall see in a moment. First, we must inquire what love is. Aristotle's answer to this is simple: "Let loving [*to philein*] be wishing for someone the things that he deems good, for the sake of that person and not oneself, and the accomplishment of these things to the best of one's ability" (*Rhetoric* 1380b36-81a1; cf. *Nicomachean Ethics* 8.2, 1155b31 ff.: "one must wish good things for a friend for his sake"). Note how intellectual this definition seems: it depends entirely on a wish, and what is more, one that takes account of the other person's idea of what is good; there is nothing here about feelings of deep intimacy or intense passion, such as one frequently encounters in modern definitions of love (e.g., *Webster's New International Dictionary* 1959; Hatfield and Rapson, 2000: 654-55); in fact, there is no reference to feelings at all. A wish (*bouleusis*) involves an intention, not a sentiment. Friends, then, reciprocally wish for one another's good.

But this is still not enough to account for the *philia* that obtains between *philoî* or friends. For we need to know as well the cause of such an altruistic wish, that is, why a person should be so disposed toward another. Here again, the cognitive aspect of *philia* comes to the fore. For Aristotle does not make it a matter of personal "chemistry," an unknown or ineffable force of attraction that simply draws one individual to another (compare Montaigne's famous explanation of his love for La Boétie in his essay *On Friendship*: "If you press me to tell why I loved him, I feel that this cannot be expressed except by answering: Because it was he, because it was I" ["*parce que c'était lui; parce que c'était moi*"]). The reasons for coming to love a friend have rather to do with an assessment of the other person's value: he or she may provide entertainment, or be of some use, or finally — and this is the best and most enduring motive — may be a fine and decent individual, whose character invites our *philia*.

So far, so good: *philia* arises on the basis of a judgment concerning another person's qualities. But it has often passed unnoticed that pleasure, utility, and virtue are not the only bases for *philia*. Aristotle specifies, in particular, that it may also arise out of kinship or *sungeneia*. Aristotle explains that fathers love their children because they are part of themselves: they are somehow one, even though they are distinct individuals (*Nicomachean Ethics* 8.12, 1161b16-33). The love of other blood relatives has a similar foundation, derived from the bond with the father. Aristotle affirms too that the *philia* between husband and wife is in accord with nature, since human beings are naturally given to forming couples (*Nicomachean Ethics* 8.12, 1162a16-19; cf. *Politics* 1.1, 1252a26-30). What are we to say about the cognitive basis of this kind of *philia*? I can, of course, be inspired to love someone because I know that person is a relative, even if I have learned this to be the

case only recently. People who have discovered long-lost children or siblings sometimes react this way. This is something that non-human animals cannot experience: you cannot tell a cat that this other cat, which was raised separately, is really its sister, and that they should love each other as family (nor can you discourage them from incest on these grounds), although it is possible that some instinctive recognition of kinship exists for still undetermined reasons (smell, for example). If I love my child because I realize that she or he is part of me, then my love is cognitive in character (we may note in passing that love for adopted children cannot be explained this way).

The term “natural” (*kata phusin, têi phusei*), however, in the case of the bond between spouses raises alarms, for it suggests that their affection is in some sense instinctive. At the very beginning of his discussion of *philia*, Aristotle states that it “seems to inhere naturally [*phusei*] in a parent [*tôî gennêsanti*] toward a child [*to gegennêmenon*], not only among human beings but also among birds and most animals, and also in those of the same species toward one another, and this above all in human beings” (*Nicomachean Ethics* 8.1, 1155a16 ff.). The reference to animals here is a giveaway: they do not form attachments on the basis of an evaluation of the character or other traits pertaining to another, but instinctively. Aristotle, then, would seem to be implying that something of the sort lies behind the human tendency to pair off in couples. Here too, the purpose is procreation. But Aristotle notes that this function, which human beings share with other animals, is not the entire reason for the formation of households: beyond that, there is a division of labor between husbands and wives, and this endows marriage with an element of the pleasant and the useful, and, if both are good people, it will be founded on virtue as well (1162a24-26). *Philia*, then, may have a compound source in human beings. On one level, it is natural and something we share with other creatures: the instincts to care for offspring and to pair off for purpose of mating, where these occur, are instances. On another level, it depends on an evaluation of traits in another, and above all qualities of character, that involve rational judgment and go beyond the perceptive faculties that human beings share with other animals, however developed these may be.

That *philia* operates on these two distinct levels has been overlooked, for the most part, by scholars. It is awkward that Aristotle, and other ancient thinkers, tended to apply the same term to the instinctive affect and the more sophisticated or rational emotion, but once we are attuned to the significance of expressions like “natural,” and to the sharp difference in cognitive capacities of human beings and other animals that the ancient philosophers took for granted, we can see that there was something approaching a systematic awareness of the two dimensions of *philia*. And this points the way to a refinement in the way we ourselves think of love: for if we separate out instinctive attachment, which psychologists these days have investigated in detail, particularly in connection with infants (there is a whole subdiscipline called attachment theory: see Cassidy & Shaver, 2008), from more developed forms

of love, while at the same time recognizing a connection between them, we may achieve a better understanding of the love that underlies friendship.

ERÔS

Whereas the psychological bases of friendship still tend to be neglected in modern research, however, there is a great amount of attention paid to another aspect of love, and that is erotic enamorment. It is in this area that popular handbooks flourish, and serious researchers confess to their bafflement about its nature. True, in the new, quasi-discipline of evolutionary psychology, passionate love is explained as a mechanism that favors continuity of the genetic line (Buss, 1994), but this kind of just-so story takes for granted the nature of the phenomenon that is to be explained. Just what erotic love is remains a mystery.

The word *erôs* is, of course, Greek, though it does not follow that it means just what the modern term “erotic” connotes. Still, in attempting to understand what connection might exist between romantic love, or falling or being in love, and the higher cognitive functions, it may be helpful to consider what the ancient thinkers had to say on the subject. Unfortunately, the matter is far from perspicuous, and we have to do some filling in of the gaps. In particular, there have been few studies, to my knowledge, that have examined the intellectual or cognitive dimension of *erôs* — or whether, indeed, there was one at all. On the one hand, there is some reason to think that *erôs* might have been supposed to operate solely on the level of perception, or what the Greeks called *aisthêsis*, a faculty that human beings share with animals. The fact that erotic love was generally imagined to arise at first sight, and, unlike the kind of *philia* that enters into friendship, not to require time and familiarity in order to mature, might lead one to suppose that reason had little to do with this *pathos*, and that it was pretty much an instinctive response to beauty (Bartsch, 2006: 67-83). Indeed, poets of a philosophical bent, like the Epicurean Lucretius, could symbolize both animal lust and human enamorment by the goddess Venus. Nevertheless, there are at least equally good reasons to believe that *erôs* was conceived to be a peculiarly human passion, distinct from the mere sexual urges of animals in heat or in the mating season (and to which human beings may also be susceptible). For example, one of the typical ways of ridiculing lovers in the classical diatribe tradition was to show how those who are enamored mistake flaws in their beloveds as excellences. Thus, Lucretius writes, in his vivid satire on romantic love: “One man derides another and advises him to appease Venus because he is cursed with a vile passion, often failing to see, poor fool, that his own plight is far worse. To such men a swarthy skin is ‘honey-gold,’ a slovenly slut ‘beauty unadorned,’ the gray-eyed ‘a miniature Athena,’ a wiry and woody wench ‘a gazelle,’ a dumpy and dwarfish ‘one of the Graces, the quintessence of all charms,’” etc. (4.1157-62; trans. Smith, 2001). Now, this kind of mistaken interpretation depends on belief — false belief, to be sure, but precisely the capacity to err

indicates that reason or cognition is playing a role here, and not just sensation. Animals do not deceive themselves in this way about the object to which they are attracted, so far as we know; certainly, they cannot give expression to such erroneous views, and we may doubt that they entertain them. It would appear, then, that *logos* does have a role in enamorment, in the sense that creatures that do not possess it are not capable of falling in love. They are subject to sexual desire, and in addition, as we have said, to instinctive affection or *philia* for their young and for members of their own species, but not to *erôs*, as the Greeks understood it.

PHILIA VS. ERÔS

Ancient Greek, then, had two terms for kinds of love that would seem to be expressed in English (and in Latin too, for that matter) by the single word “love,” albeit in different constructions (for instance, “being in love”). The English expressions suggest that there is a close relationship between the two ideas. Were *philia* and *erôs* similarly related in Greek, or did they pertain to two distinct, albeit loosely connected, semantic fields? According to Aristotle, people moved by *philia* and *erôs* have different aims: the former desire to spend time with the other, whereas the latter wish most of all to see the person (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1171b29-35). At one point Aristotle seems to suggest that *erôs* is an intensification or excess (*hyperbolê*) of *philia* (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1158a10-13), in that one may have several *philoî* or friends, though not very many, whereas one usually feels *erôs* for just one individual at a time. He remarks too that an erotic relationship between a man and a boy can result in *philia* when the boy matures, if they both have decent characters. But the implication appears to be that *philia* follows upon *erôs*, rather than that it evolves naturally from it.

If Aristotle was the great authority on *philia*, he did not try to compete with his teacher on the topic of *erôs*, on which Plato remains the deepest thinker. Leaving aside the details of his vision, it is safe to say Plato held that the root cause of *erôs* is a desire, innate in human beings, for contact or communication with the disembodied intellectual domain that our minds naturally inhabit, but from which we are alienated by our incarnated state, in which we are subject to the illusions of ordinary perception and the distractions of corporeal appetites. And yet, the sensible world contains, as it were, traces of the higher, noumenal universe, which stimulate our longing for that which is properly ours, and draw us to it (we have, it may be, a dim memory of direct contact with the noumenal, from the time preceding the descent of our souls into the material world). These traces manifest themselves as beauty or *to kalon*, and are the basis of erotic attraction; but those who fail to see beyond mere bodily beauty to the transcendent idea of beauty that informs it remain mired in the sensible world, and can never satisfy the yearning that they feel, since they embrace the wrong object, a mere shadow of the real cause of their desire (Lucretius’ image of lovers feeding on empty simulacra or images

at the end of the fourth book of *De rerum natura* may be read as a materialist adaptation of the Platonic theory). Understood this way, *erôs* is a specifically human passion (unless we take seriously in this context Plato's comments concerning the transmigration of souls): its source lies in the intangible entities that are the proper object of *nous* or *logos*, as opposed to those perceivable by the senses. For Plato, at least if we go by what he says in the *Lysis*, this transcendental impulse is the cause not only of *erôs* but also of *philia*, both of which he assimilates also to elementary desire or *epithumia* (Penner & Rowe, 2005: 211-12).

Erotic passion, then, is predicated on a kind of misprision, that is, mistaking something else for the proper object of attraction. This explains the obsessive and insatiable quality of *erôs*: one attempts to fill a lack with the wrong substance, as it were — as Lucretius puts it, it is like dreaming of drinking water when one is thirsty. The tendency to idealize the beloved, which Lucretius mocked, results from confusing the real person with the imagined object of desire. *Philia*, on the contrary, as Aristotle represents it, is elicited by an accurate appreciation of the qualities of the other, above all those grounded in character. Such love is perfectly attainable in this world: Aristotle rejects Plato's reduction of all forms of affection to a displacement of metaphysical desire. Erotic love may thus be seen as a pathology of *philia*, based on a distorted evaluation of the love object. But what, then, causes this misperception?

CONCLUSION

If *philia* is, as Aristotle says, the desire that good things accrue to the other, for the other's sake and not one's own, then *erôs*, it would seem, goes astray insofar as it is based essentially on need, that is, on a desire to fill a lack in oneself. Since another person can never meet such a need, *erôs* tends to be unstable and fickle, always seeking the imagined ideal. The inner emptiness clouds our vision of the real qualities of the other, which might have been appreciated in their own right for what they were, and thus have been the foundation of genuine friendship or *philia*. But this emptiness in fact results precisely from mistaken ideas about the self and its true needs. Seen this way, *erôs* amounts to an aberration of *philia* resulting from false beliefs, which arise not so much from our fallen state as incarnated beings as from a lack of understanding. Human love, that is, *philia*, has an instinctive basis in elementary attachments such as parental affection, but in an elective association such as friendship (which extends also to relations among family members), this capacity is modulated by the human ability to reason and to judge, and hence assumes a fundamentally cognitive character. But this very development, inasmuch as it depends on beliefs and judgments, is subject to error — what the Epicureans, again, would describe as the addition of opinion to the information provided by our senses, and which leads us to see beauty or refinement where it does not in fact exist — and this opens the way to pathological forms of love and depend-

ency. The capacity for human love, which is grounded in cognition, goes hand in hand with its perversion. This view was most coherently expounded, I believe, by the Epicureans, as I have hinted several times, but a full exposition of how they did so will have to await another occasion.

REFERENCES

- Bartsch, S. (2006). *The Mirror of the Self: Sexuality, Self-Knowledge, and the Gaze in the Early Roman Empire*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Buss, D. M. (1994). *The Evolution of Desire: Strategies of Human Mating*. New York: Basic Books.
- Cassidy, J. & Shaver, P., eds. (2008). *Handbook of Attachment: Theory, Research, and Clinical Applications*. 2nd edition. New York: Guilford Press.
- Ganson, T. S. (2009). The Rational/Non-Rational Distinction in Plato's Republic. *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 36, 179-97.
- Hatfield, E. & Rapson, R. L. (2000). Love and Attachment Process. In: M. Lewis & J. M. Haviland-Jones, eds., *Handbook of Emotions* (pp. 654-62). 2nd ed. New York: Guilford Press.
- Hinton, A. L. (1999). Introduction: Developing a Biocultural Approach to the Emotions. In: A. L. Hinton, ed., *Biocultural Approaches to the Emotions* (pp. 1-37). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Konstan, D. (2010). La haine et l'inimitié: les deux pôles opposés de l'amitié. In: J. Peigney, ed., *Amis et ennemis en Grèce antique*. Bourdeaux: Editions Ausonius.
- Lazarus, R. S. (1991). Cognition and Motivation. *American Psychologist*, 46, 352-367.
- Lazarus, R. S. (2001). Relational Meaning and Discrete Emotions. In K. R. Scherer, A. Schorr & T. Johnstone, eds., *Appraisal Processes in Emotion: Theory, Methods, Research* (pp. 37-67). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lyons, W. (1980). *Emotion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nussbaum, M. C. (2001). *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Penner, T. & Rowe, C. (2005). *Plato's Lysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Smith, M. F., trans. (2001). *Lucretius: On the Nature of Things*. Indianapolis: Hackett.
- Solomon, R. C. (1993). *The Passions: Emotions and the Meaning of Life*. Revised edition. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co.
- Webster's New International Dictionary of the English Language*. (1961). 2nd ed. Springfield, Massachusetts, USA: G. and C. Merriam.

Notes

¹ Ganson (2009) argues that according to Plato *Republic* 10.602-03, the non-rational part of the soul is capable of holding beliefs, which can be in contradiction to those entertained by the rational part. These non-rational beliefs consist in "uncritical responses to appearances" (182); but are these really beliefs, even if "belief comes in degrees" (183)? As Ganson notes, "In thinking about our non-rational side Plato takes as a model the psychology of animals and small children, who lack the cognitive sophistication required to be aiming at truth and goodness" (185-86); and he adds: "is it at all plausible to ascribe beliefs to a creature that lacks the concept of truth?" (186). Ganson affirms that "sensory appearances of sense-perceptions ... have an assertoric character" (186; cf. 195, etc.), but assertion in the absence of the ability to formulate a proposition seems dubious to me. When Plato speaks of contrary *doxai* (603D), it is perhaps better to render *doxa* here as "impressions" or "seemings," by which the non-rational part of the soul can be led. Further bibliography in Ganson.

Correspondence address:

Prof. David Konstan
Brown University
Providence, Rhode Island, USA