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PLATONIC LOVE

A REPLY TO PROFESSOR VERDENIUS

PROFESSOR W. J. VERDENIUS of Utrecht, in an important article on Plato's *Phaedrus*,¹ has criticised some remarks which I made about the dialogue three years ago in an article in *THE DOWNSIDE REVIEW*.² The purpose of my article was to show that the conventional modern Christian account of philosophic *Eros*, which sets it in sharp opposition to Christian *Agape*, was inadequate and inaccurate: and it was my use of some passages from the *Phaedrus*, along with a good deal else from Plato and later pagan Neoplatonism, in support of this thesis, to which Verdenius took exception. For him 'Platonic love remains here too [252 D ff] egocentric'.³ As this criticism, with others he has made, raises some interesting questions about the nature of Platonic love, I should like to pursue the argument a little further. What I said⁴ about the passage of the *Phaedrus* in question was 'And the true lover's $\epsilon\rho\omega\varsigma$ does not lead him to want to possess and use his beloved physically . . . or even spiritually. It leads him to try to make his beloved more godlike, to "work on him and adorn him" as if he was an image of the patron god (252 D). And it is precisely in trying to make his beloved more like the god that he becomes more like the god himself (253 A). Here again we find the idea that $\epsilon\rho\omega\varsigma$ is not just a self-centred passion to satisfy one's own need by acquiring something good or beautiful. It is a desire of absolute good or beauty which is somehow inevitably also a desire to increase good and beauty,

¹ *Der Begriff der Mania in Platons Phaidros*, *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 44-2 (1962), pp. 132-50.

² *Platonic Eros and Christian Agape*, Spring 1961, pp. 105-21.

³ *Art. cit.*, p. 143.

⁴ *Art. cit.*, pp. 108-9.

to make someone else better and more beautiful'. On this Verdenius comments:⁵ 'But Platonic love remains here too egocentric: the lover tries to make his beloved like himself and the god in whose train he has followed (252 E-3 B). Certainly his "love of his neighbour" is determined by his love for this god (253 A), but this love is a compulsion (ἠναγκάσθαι) and as such essentially different from the Christian love of God': and, commenting further on my remark about 253 A in a footnote,⁶ 'Armstrong turns the relationship back to front . . . In reality the lover is inspired by his own god to conform himself to this god. But he believes that he is inspired by his beloved, and on the ground of this illusion he loves him all the more'.

Before discussing the interpretation of the passage as a whole, something needs to be said about Verdenius's remark about ἠναγκάσθαι. The necessity here is surely conditional. The lovers εὐποροῦσι (get on well) because in order to do the job of improving their beloved they have to look at their god, as a portrait sculptor has to look at his model. There seems to be no other sort of necessity expressed or implied in the word, and I cannot see that anything is said about a compulsion to love either god or man. If a Christian writer were to say (as many do in various forms of words) 'You *must* contemplate Christ first yourself if you are to lead someone else to know and love him: there is no other way of going about it', he would not in that sentence be saying anything to suggest that the love of the Christian for Christ, or for his neighbour, was necessary or the result of divine compulsion.

We can now proceed to consider the passage as a whole. From the beginning at 252 E 5 it seems to me that the primary emphasis is on the perfection of the beloved. The search for the lover's own god and the contemplation and imitation of him are means to that end. This seems to be made perfectly clear in 253 A-C. Verdenius, commenting on τούτων δὴ τὸν ἐρώμενον αἰτιώμενοι (253 A 5) speaks of the lover's 'illusion'. This is perhaps laying rather more weight on the δὴ than it will bear in the context. It may be that the lover is concentrating so much on the beloved that he does not attribute a due share of responsibility for what is happening

⁵ Art. cit., p. 143.

⁶ l.c., n. 48.

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to him to the god. But the beloved is really, in an important way, responsible for what is happening, for it was he who started the whole thing off, by the reflection of the divine beauty in his own, and by making the lover look to and draw inspiration from his god in order to do the job properly of making him, the beloved, still more godlike. And even if the lover was really under an illusion and the beloved had nothing to do with his progress in godlikeness at all, it would not, surely, follow that the grateful love inspired by this illusion was 'egocentric'. Love for another called out by a benefit mistakenly believed to have been received from that other is not an egocentric love, even if the benefit consists in one's having become a better man.

Throughout 253, as it seems to me, improving the beloved is primary, the principal end to which the whole erotic enterprise is directed, and imitating the god is secondary, a means to that end. But both are essential parts of a true love-affair and cannot be separated. Plato never suggests in the *Phaedrus* that one can or will want to imitate one's god except in an erotic situation, or that love is merely an excuse, a pretext or occasion for self-perfection. Of course in his active loving the lover becomes himself more godlike; but, perhaps, in nothing is he more godlike than in the generosity with which he shares his increasing godlikeness with the beloved. The οὐ φθόνῳ of 253 B 7 must surely be meant to recall the φθόνος γὰρ ἔξω θείου χοροῦ ἴσταται of 247 A 7. Still, he as well as his beloved *is* made better and more godlike, and so his love is not self-sacrificing in the sense that the betterment of the beloved is bought by the worsening of the lover. And the love-affair *is* a means to an end, the vision of true beauty. But it seems that this end can only be attained by the pair together. The true good at which love ultimately aims is good for each of them separately. But it does not seem, in the *Phaedrus* at any rate, to be a good which they can attain, or even want, separately.

At this point I should like to take into consideration what seems to me a very important modification of his statement that Platonic love is 'egocentric' which Verdenius has made in a later article published in *Ratio*.⁷ Here he says, 'The Platonist is, in the first

⁷ 'Plato and Christianity', *Ratio*, Vol. V, No. 1, June 1963, pp. 15-32.

instance, concerned about his own soul and he is intent on self-sufficiency'. Yet, he goes on, 'this must not be interpreted as a self-seeking. Plato calls self-seeking "the greatest of all evils" because the man who loves himself to excess is "bound always to value what is his own more than what is true" (*Laws* 731 D, 732 A). Self-sufficiency, however, is not an end in itself but relates to the good (*Republic* 378 D). By striving for self-sufficiency the Platonist tries to realize the good in his life. According to Platonism the quality of being good, both in things and persons, rests on their function within a greater whole. The Platonist regards his own life as a contribution to "blissful existence for the life of the world-all" (*Laws* 903 C). God has so ordered the world that each of its parts "might secure the victory of goodness in the whole and the defeat of evil most completely, easily and effectively" (*Laws* 904 B). The philosophical *eros*, by postulating virtuous life, contributes in its own way to the victory of the good in the world. As the good of the whole is a reflection of the highest God, i.e., the Good, Platonism may be called theocentric.'

This seems to me to have much truth in it, and I am particularly grateful to Verdenius for calling my attention to the passage in *Laws* V, 731 D 7-732 B 3, which is an extremely clear and emphatic statement that self-love is a most pernicious state of mind. I should of course want to add, as my exegesis of the *Phaedrus* has made clear, that the Platonic lover may from the beginning be aiming primarily, not at his own self-sufficiency or perfection conceived as contributory to the goodness of the whole, but at the perfection of his beloved, with which he finds his own to be bound up. But this strengthens the evidence for Verdenius's general conclusion that the ultimate objective of philosophic *ἔρως* is the increase of good in the whole. This conclusion fits admirably with the idea in the *Symposium*, stressed by Robert Markus and myself, that *ἔρως* is essentially love of the good (205 E-206 B). Verdenius does not discuss Markus's interpretation of the *Symposium*⁸ at any length, though he makes clear his disagreement with it⁹: and I find no reason in what he says to abandon my belief that it helps a great

⁸ Cp. 'The Dialectic of Eros in Plato's *Symposium*', *THE DOWNSIDE REVIEW*, Summer 1955, pp. 219-30 and *Christian Faith and Greek Philosophy*, chap. vii (Love and the Will).

⁹ *Plato and Christianity*, p. 28, n. 30.

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deal towards a right understanding of the dialogue: though with the *Symposium*, even more than with other Platonic dialogues (but this is true of them all to some extent), it is always wise to admit that an interpretation completely other than that which commends itself to one at the time may turn out just as likely to be right. The longing for immortality by procreation, which Verdenius insists means that we are dealing 'not with a giving but a striving [i.e., self-centred and self-regarding] love', does not seem to me, as it did not seem to Cornford if I understand him rightly,¹⁰ to be in any normal sense of the words a selfish or self-regarding desire. 'Even in its lower forms', Cornford says, 'Eros betrays this divine quality, whereby it reaches out to something beyond its immediate and apparent object — beyond any personal happiness that can be achieved and enjoyed during the individual's life'. I do not at all want to exclude an element of eudaemonism from my account of Platonic, or of Christian, love — I shall come back to this later. Of course the philosopher whose *ἔρως* reaches his true goal is made perfect and supremely happy. But it seems to me at least equally important to say that that goal for Plato is absolute good or beauty, something which is universal and common to all who can attain it, which cannot in any ordinary sense be possessed, which is not a private and personal means of satisfaction like a drug or a concubine: and that attainment of it, or of any of the lesser goods met on the way and loved because they reflect something of it, always leads in one way or another to an increase of good in the world, to some sort of production.

There is one passage in the *Symposium*, a most important one, which seems to me difficult to reconcile with the belief that Platonic love is necessarily self-centred and self-regarding. This is the praise of Socrates by Alcibiades (215 A-222 B), which most people agree has something to do with the main theme of the dialogue, though it is not as easy as some scholars have thought to see precisely what. Krüger's criticism¹¹ of the idea of Robin and others that Socrates is presented as a sort of incarnation of the daemon Eros of Diotima's discourse seems to me entirely justified. But, though

¹⁰ See 'The Doctrine of Eros in Plato's *Symposium*' in *The Unwritten Philosophy*, pp. 74-5.

¹¹ *Einsicht und Leidenschaft*, Frankfurt, 1948, p. 289.

the precise relevance of the portrait of Socrates to the main discussion is difficult to define, one thing does seem clear, and that is that Socrates in some way is represented as in an ideal state or disposition in regard to love (my language is deliberately vague and ambiguous), and Alcibiades is not. And it is Alcibiades, in his own account of the affair, who is an example of 'Aristophanic' love, the passionate search for self-satisfaction and self-completion. Socrates is not represented as interested in himself, as desiring anything for himself. He is not represented as being passionately interested in Alcibiades either: he is not the philosophic lover of the *Phaedrus*. He is, indeed, significantly said to be more παιδικά than ἔρωστίς in all his love-affairs (222 B 3-4). His ἔρωσ, whatever precisely it is, is not any kind of ἔρωσ comprehensible to Alcibiades at all. But it has made him good: he is full of godlike virtue under his satyric outside. And he is communicative of good in that his apparently satyric 'piping' (215-6) stirs others to discontent with themselves and desire to become better — and does Socrates in the Dialogues ever play any other tune? Is he ever represented as interested in his own good rather than the good of others? Perhaps the point in what has gone before in the *Symposium* where it is easiest to see a connection with the portrait of Socrates is the culminating point, Diotima's description of the lover initiated into the 'greater mysteries', who in his contemplative union with the perfect beauty brings forth true virtue (212 A).

In my original article my attempt to demonstrate that ἔρωσ in Plato was not self-regarding and acquisitive led on to a further demonstration that the teaching about ἔρωσ of the late Neoplatonists Proclus and Hierocles, in which it comes to look remarkably like Christian ἀγάπη, was a legitimate development of ideas to be found in Plato, and not necessarily due to Christian influence. This lies outside the scope of this paper, which is exclusively concerned with love in Plato, and not with later Platonic developments. But in order to make my point I found that I had to consider, not only Plato's ideas about human love, but his ideas about divine goodness, as expressed in a famous passage of the *Timaeus* (29 E), which I translated 'He was good, and one who is good is always absolutely without any sort of selfish jealousy: so since he was quite free from this he wanted everything to be as nearly as possible like himself'.

As Verdenius has criticised, in his article in *Ratio*, the allegedly 'Christianising' interpretation which I then defended, it will be relevant to consider his view of the passage. He says:¹² 'It is evident from the context that this goodness is of a thoroughly technical kind: it consists of the mastery and the unlimited zeal with which the Demiurg [*sic*] carried out his work. One may say that he loved his work, but this love is meant for the technical achievement embodied in that which he has fashioned. The care which he devotes to the construction of the world does not arise out of his concern for the world as such, but out of his zest for work. He would have devoted the same care to the construction of any object; he does not even choose the world as his object but, encountering the chaotic material of the world, he begins without further ado and almost instinctively to arrange and construct it. When his providence is mentioned (30 B) this carried an equally technical meaning: it is the ability of an artist to imagine the completed construction as a whole and to apportion to each part its correct place.' With this I should like to consider some remarks of Bultmann's which Verdenius quotes with approval a little further on¹³ to point the contrast between Platonism and Christianity: 'Greek moral theory understands moral actions by analogy with the action of *techné* . . . Man is the work of art which is to be fashioned . . . The other is not my "neighbour" but like myself is subject to the requirements of the idea; I do not hear *his* claim, but the claim of the idea.'

The first thing which strikes me about Verdenius's own interpretation is that it is a comment not so much on the passage under discussion as on the word δημιουργός, and that it reads a good deal more into this word than is necessarily implied by its use. Plato could have had all these ideas in his mind when he used the craftsman-image to describe his world-maker, but I see no reason to suppose that he had. The term 'craftsman' need suggest nothing more than someone who makes something rationally and well according to a plan or pattern: it need not imply anything about either the craftsman's relationship to the pattern he follows or his motives for making. In particular, I can find nothing in Plato to justify Verdenius's statements that the divine craftsman 'would

¹² *Ratio*, art. cit., p. 27; cp. 'Platons Gottesbegriff' in *Entretiens Hardt I* (Vandoeuvres 1954), pp. 248-9.

¹³ P. 29, n. 32.

have devoted the same care to the construction of any object', that he 'did not even choose the world as his object' and that he began to construct it 'almost instinctively'. Plato is not, after all, talking about any old craftsman making any old piece of furniture, but about the divine world-forming reason. And divine reason in Plato does not work instinctively, like a beaver building its dam or ants their nest (as it does, in a sense, in Plotinus, though for him this divine quasi-instinctive spontaneity of action is higher, not lower, than rational planning).

But, once the ideas of casualness and instinctiveness have been excluded, I do not after all find much to quarrel with, either as an interpreter of Plato or as a Christian, about the comparison of God's love for his creation with that of an artist for his work. My main differences with Verdenius here are at a deeper level than that of the interpretation of this particular text. First of all, I cannot regard the artist's love for his work as selfish or self-regardingly acquisitive: it seems to me rather a high form of altruism. To be fair, I am not quite sure how far Verdenius would disagree with this: and it seems likely from the quotation which he gives from Bultmann that the latter would not. The difference which he finds here between Platonic and Christian love does not seem to be a difference between selfish and disinterested love but between two kinds of disinterested love, love of one's neighbour and love of 'the idea', which he regards as incompatible.

This brings me to my point of deepest difference with Verdenius, Bultmann and most other people who give accounts of Christian and Platonic love as, not just different, but essentially opposed and contrasted. This is that I, who always thought that I was a Christian of a sort, do not recognise my own beliefs in the account which they give, in this context, of Christian love. To explain this fully would take me far outside the bounds of a paper on Platonic love: and in any case I do not regard myself as competent to give a complete exegetical and theological justification of my personal interpretation of traditional Christianity. If I were to venture into the field of New Testament exegesis, in which Verdenius moves with no doubt justified confidence, I should be as out of place as Plato's bald-headed tinker.¹⁴ So I will end this paper by stating

¹⁴ Cp. *Republic*, 495 E.

as briefly as possible the points at which I find my own beliefs about Christian love more in accord with Platonism than, in the opinion of many scholars and theologians, they ought to be. This accord can of course be explained by saying that the traditional Christianity which I profess has been heavily Hellenized and Platonized; and I do not wish to deny this, though I do not think it an entirely adequate explanation—I believe that originally Christianity was in some ways closer to Plato and more Hellenizable without radical distortion than is often supposed. But I must leave this for others to discuss.

First, then, I do not find it either possible or desirable to exclude an element of eudaemonism from the Christian's love of God or of his neighbour. I entirely agree with Thomas Gould's criticism of Christians' attempts to pretend that there is no eudaemonism in their ideal.¹⁵ I do not quite know where the idea that Christian love is non-eudaemonistic came from—certainly not from the Gospels. Of course for me eudaemonism and selfishness or self-centredness are not the same thing, any more than I think they were for Plato, as I hope this paper has made clear. My difference with Verdenius on this point may to a great extent be really a difference about the use of words. I should only use 'self-centred' of the sort of self-seeking which he rightly excludes from Platonic love in his second article, and not of the awareness that a love is something satisfactory and rewarding to oneself, that one is really the better for it, along with those whom one loves, which is surely an essential component of any genuine and valuable love. Even if one seeks total self-forgetfulness in love one does so because it is the best state to be in, not the worst: and a desire for real self-annihilation has, it seems to me, no place in the Christian scheme of things.

Second, I do not find the artist- or craftsman-image inappropriate to express God's love in creating the world.¹⁶ It seems to me that, not only in creating it, but in re-creating it in Christ, the object of his loving will is not badly expressed by saying that he generously intends to make, restore and perfect the best possible image of his

¹⁵ *Platonic Love* (London 1963), p. 47.

¹⁶ Here again Thomas Gould agrees; see *Platonic Love*, p. 163.

divine goodness ; and an image is a work of art.¹⁷ Finally, I do not believe that the command to love my neighbour as myself requires me to love him without any regard for his intrinsic worth as a created image of God (though there is perhaps a real difference between Plato and Christianity here. For Christians man has worth and is lovable simply as man: so every man is our neighbour and is lovable. For Plato it generally seems as if only the good man was valuable and lovable: though he would perhaps have found this restriction hard to justify on some at least of his pre-suppositions). Nor do I think that it requires me to love him without regard for, or in opposition to, the good of the whole; or without regard for, or in opposition to, 'the claims of the idea'. The whole object of the love with which I ought to love my neighbour seems to me to be that he, with me, should become as like God as possible in the unity of a redeemed and glorious creation, which God includes, as his created image perfectly conformed to Christ his uncreated Image, in the love with which he loves himself. Perhaps I can best express my sense of the kinship between Platonism and Christianity by saying that for both of them, in the last resort, all love is love of the good. This is all very inadequate and over-simplified, and I do not mean it to suggest that I think that there are no important differences between Platonism and Christianity or, more precisely, between Platonic and Christian love. But I hope that these concluding remarks may do something to discourage people from looking for the differences in what I think are the wrong places, and may provoke others better qualified than myself as exegetes and theologians to carry the discussion further.

¹⁷ I am aware, of course, that this sort of language, and still more what I am going to say next, will offend those who want to exclude all ideas of transcendent, absolute and universal norms or standards from Christianity, which was probably what Bultmann had in mind in the remarks quoted above.

ST. AUGUSTINE
AND
CHRISTIAN PLATONISM