

A Doctor and a Scholar: Rethinking the Philosophic Significance of Eryximachus in the *Symposium*

ABSTRACT: Too often critics ignore the philosophic significance of Eryximachus, the physician from Plato's *Symposium*, and mistakenly dismiss Eryximachus' presence in the text. However, this paper argues that a review of the role of medicine in the Platonic dialogues, coupled with a close reading of the *Symposium's* structure and language reveals how the physician's emphasis on love as a harmonizing force is analogous to Socrates' emphasis on balance and harmony throughout the dialogues. Also, the description of the good physician is reflective of the way a good philosopher operates. By employing the medical trope, Eryximachus' speech allows the reader greater insight into Platonic philosophy.



Ronald Ross is a senior undergraduate at Wittenberg University in Springfield, Ohio. He is an English and Philosophy double major, and, unsurprisingly, is captivated by the philosophy of literature. Specifically, Ronald enjoys working with American literature after 1820, especially Gothic and Beat writers. He also takes pleasure in engaging debate on philosophy of science, philosophy of education, and Pragmatism. After taking some time off to teach high school, Ronald hopes to pursue a PhD in English literature.

Plato's dialogue the *Symposium* takes place at the playwright Agathon's house the day after Agathon has won an award for one of his tragedies. Exhausted from the day before, the host and his guests decide to relax and deliver encomiums to Eros. The seven speeches that follow represent the opinions of men from a wide variety of backgrounds. There is a tragedian, a comedian, a legal expert, and even Socrates himself. However, one person and his profession often get left behind in critical work on the dialogue.

Many times, critics ignore the philosophic significance of Eryximachus, the physician of the dialogue.

A wide array of philosophers, including Mark Lutz, William Cobb, Kevin Corrigan and Elena Glazov-Corrigan, Nathan Crick and John Poulakos, Daniel Anderson, and Robert Mitchell, generally view Eryximachus in a negative light. Although their approaches are different, they all tend to dismiss the philosophic weight of Eryximachus' presence in the dialogue. And yet, given Plato's corpus of work, it seems



as if there should be something more to the speech. Eryximachus is, after all, a physician, and given the number of medical metaphors in the Platonic dialogues, it would seem to follow that the one time a physician is given free rein to speak, the reader should engage the passage in a meaningful way.

Because of this association with the medical, I want to reexamine Eryximachus' speech. Plato's use of metaphor and analogy seem to beg the reader to pay attention to what Eryximachus has to say, and I propose to take notice. I believe we disregard the physician's speech at our own peril, as Eryximachus' remarks on the nature of love directly inform our understanding of Plato's works. A review of the place of medicine in Greek philosophy as a whole as well as within specific Platonic dialogues discovers the prominence of the profession within the philosophic tradition. Moving specifically to the *Symposium*, a close reading of the dialogue's structure and language reveals how Eryximachus employs concepts in the medical sense that, when analogized to Platonic philosophy, bear directly on our understanding of Plato's corpus of works.

By engaging this trope of medicine to the Platonic conceptions of justice and the good philosopher, the reader can gain a deeper understanding of Plato's philosophy. Within Eryximachus' discourse, the physician explains how love needs a harmonizing force and how the good physician should operate. The primacy the physician places on love as a harmonizing force is similar to the weight that the character Socrates affords balance and harmony in the dialogues, and

the description of the good physician is a direct reflection on the way that a good philosopher operates. In many of the dialogues, Plato uses the trope of medicine in order to help elucidate his more difficult philosophic thoughts. Eryximachus' speech performs this same function as it allows the reader greater—and perhaps easier—insight into Platonic philosophy. By examining the physician's discourse, the reader achieves a deeper understanding of Platonic philosophy unavailable in other parts of the dialogues.

Scholarship on Eryximachus

Before we proceed further into the argument, it is necessary to examine the critical work that Eryximachus' speech has engendered. In his study of virtue in the Platonic dialogues with a primary focus on the *Symposium*, Mark Lutz only briefly mentions Eryximachus.¹ However, when Lutz does mention the doctor, he identifies the physician as a pedant who is the butt of jokes.² Notice here that not only does Lutz not really take a significant amount of time to analyze Eryximachus, he attacks the physician's person and not his comments. I contend, and will show, that the physician is philosophically important because of his words, not because of how other people in the party view him. Similarly, William Cobb also spends little time with Eryximachus in his analysis of the *Symposium*. Yet, the critic does point out that the doctor is "reduced to giving medical advice of a rather trivial sort."³ This conclusion notes only the medical aspect of Eryximachus' speech and does not then examine it for the manner in which it

might employ the medical trope. The physician's speech only becomes important once we begin to draw the necessary analogies.

The philosophers Kevin Corrigan and Elena Glazov-Corrigan also comment on Eryximachus' place in the dialogue. Although these two authors see the doctor as slightly extending the conversation of the *Symposium*, they immediately subvert anything positive they might have to say by writing that he has a capacity for the "illogical and pedantic" and that he is "like some ancient inferior Hegelian" who is blinded by his profession and "pomposity."⁴ Even though the two scholars recognize that Eryximachus contributes to the dialogue—however slight they claim the contribution might be—they ultimately undermine their praise of the physician by, like Lutz, largely criticizing him on the basis of his person while not recognizing the philosophic possibility of the medical trope.

The critics Nathan Crick and John Poulakos give Eryximachus a somewhat more sympathetic treatment in their article on the *Symposium*, but only insofar as they do not attack his person directly; rather, the authors see his speech as lacking in any substance. They believe that the physician, while delivering an honest effort at intellectual rigor in his speech, ultimately lacks the scholarly capacity to affect the conversation in a significant manner.⁵ Crick and Poulakos then conclude that Eryximachus makes, "a lame contribution to the party by displaying [a] rehearsed rhetorical appeal."⁶ For Crick and Poulakos, it is not so much

what Eryximachus represents that they critique, but rather they feel that he simply does not have the intellectual prowess to contribute anything substantive to the conversation. However, by containing their analysis to just the *Symposium*, the authors have missed the larger medical trope that is present throughout the Platonic dialogues. Like Corrigan and Glazov-Corrigan, Crick and Poulakos miss the power of Eryximachus' words because they do not see the trope within the speech.

In *The Masks of Dionysos*, Daniel Anderson takes the critique of the physician one step further than the previous authors. He believes Eryximachus' speech is actually damaging to the conversation and has to be rectified by Aristophanes' discourse. Anderson writes, "I see Eryximachos' [sic] speech and his [Aristophanes'] as linked by Empedokles [an ancient physician], whose views are distorted by the one and satirically 'corrected' by the other. I do not see Plato as portraying Aristophanes in an unfavorable light. Rather do I see Aristophanes . . . as correcting Eryximachos' distortions of Empedokles."⁷ Thus, according to Anderson, not only does Eryximachus' speech not contribute anything to the conversation, it actually sets the dialogue back. Of course, Anderson's reasoning is grounded in his reading of Eryximachus' speech through the lens of Empedocles. A deeper understanding of the physician requires moving out of a purely medical understanding of his words, and recognizing the manner in which Plato populates his dialogues with medical analogies, metaphors, and other imagery.

1. Mark J. Lutz, *Socrates' Education to Virtue: Learning the Love of the Noble* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998), 62, 78, 132, 135.

2. *Ibid.*, 62.

3. William S. Cobb, ed., *The Symposium; and The Phaedrus: Plato's Erotic Dialogues*, by Plato (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993), 66.

4. Kevin Corrigan and Elena Glazov-Corrigan, *Plato's Dialectic at Play: Argument, Structure, and Myth in the Symposium* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania University Press, 2004), 64-67.

5. Nathan Crick and John Poulakos, "Go Tell Alcibiades: Tragedy, Comedy, and Rhetoric in Plato's Symposium," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 94.1, (2008), 7.

6. *Ibid.*

7. Daniel E. Anderson, *The Masks of Dionysos: A Commentary on Plato's Symposium* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993), ix-x.



In Robert Mitchell's investigation of the *Symposium* entitled *The Hymn to Eros*, the scholar seems to offer a more positive view of Eryximachus than the previous authors. Mitchell notes how many scholars have, in fact, maligned the physician.⁸ Mitchell then goes on to say, "Eryximachus knows something. . . While listening to him we have been witnesses to the laying of the foundations of techno-logical [sic] culture. And even listening to him as closely as we have, we have barely begun to fathom the complex subtlety of that event as it has unfolded in this speech."⁹ Mitchell's reading aligns well with mine as the scholar gives Eryximachus a sympathetic, even positive reading. The physician does know something; he has knowledge to share with the reader. Even more, as Mitchell points out, many readers have failed to grasp the depth of Eryximachus' comments. However, it appears that Mitchell, too, fails to grasp the entirety of what Plato is getting at in Eryximachus. Mitchell focuses on the technological aspect of the physician's speech and so does not fully recognize the philosophical importance of the encomium. Even the seemingly positive criticism of Eryximachus still fails to recognize the physician's import in Platonic philosophy.

Medicine as Trope

Many scholars have noticed the prevalence of the use of medicine in not just Plato's work but in

Greek philosophy as a whole. As Joel Lidz suggests in his study of medicine as metaphor in the Platonic dialogues, "Greek philosophy can be adequately understood only if one recognizes that it arose in conjunction with ancient medical theory."¹⁰ I concur with Lidz in this regard but wish to narrow its focus to specifically Plato's dialogues. Mark Moses does this in part when he writes, "Plato's dialogues contain many references to Greek medical practice and medical tradition."¹¹ For instance, in the *Gorgias* Socrates states that medicine is the craft to pastry baking's knack,¹² and in the *Republic* Socrates says that as falsehood is a drug, only those who are like doctors should be able to use it.¹³

However, in order to establish Eryximachus' importance in Platonic philosophy, it is not sufficient to demonstrate that medicine exists or that it arose in conjunction with philosophy; given this argument Eryximachus is still Eryximachus, simply an existent character. Rather, medicine must be integral to understanding Plato's philosophy. Later in his article Lidz argues, "Plato makes liberal use of medical analogies."¹⁴ In order to demonstrate this claim and substantiate Lidz's argument, I need only point the reader to the earlier passages from the *Gorgias* and the *Republic*. In the *Gorgias* Plato has Socrates say, "there are two crafts. The one for the soul I call politics; the one for the body . . . has two parts: gymnastics and medicine. And in politics, the counterpart of gymnastics is legislation, and the part that corresponds to

medicine is justice."¹⁵ Here, Plato analogizes medicine to justice. Socrates is attempting to convey a message to his audience, but is unable to do so. In order to facilitate the spectators' understanding, he employs medicine as an analogy for justice. Thus, Plato suggests that for the reader to understand justice, he should—and I argue, he *must*—comprehend medicine. The use of trope in this instance suggests that the concept which Plato troped (justice) is too complicated for readers to understand by itself; thus, the second concept (medicine) is introduced because proper understanding of it can lead the student to an adequate comprehension of the former, more difficult concept. The implication is that only through an adequate understanding of the workings of medicine can the reader grasp what justice means.

The example in the *Republic* works in a similar manner. Socrates says, "Moreover we have to be concerned about truth as well, for if what we said just now is correct, and falsehood, though of no use to the gods, is useful to people as a form of drug, clearly we must allow only doctors to use it, not private citizens."¹⁶ Later on in the dialogue we find out exactly who these doctors are: the philosopher-rulers. As sovereigns of the ideal city, the philosopher-rulers must use "noble falsehoods" in order to sustain the city.¹⁷ Plato specifically chooses to use doctors as a metaphor for those people he entrusts with ruling his ideal city, and thus in order to conceptualize how Plato wishes for the philosopher-rulers to use noble falsehoods, the reader must understand the trope to medicine. Therefore, whenever Plato chooses to highlight

a link between physicians and philosophers, such as I will later argue he does with the very structure of the *Symposium*, it is important for the reader to investigate the implications. Just as medical tropes shed light on Plato's philosophy, so do the words of the practitioner of medicine enlighten different aspects of that same philosophy. We must be familiar with medicine because we cannot sufficiently grasp the dialogues without it.

The Speech of Eryximachus

Before I begin to examine Eryximachus' actual words, I think it would be useful at this point to examine Eryximachus' position in the dialogue as a whole. As I mentioned, if there is any manner in which Plato connects the physician and the philosopher, then it is most likely worthy of investigation. In fact, Plato seems to do this with the very structure of the dialogue. The *Symposium* consists of an outside frame that sets the scene for the party and an inner frame of seven speeches in praise of love: six from guests at the party and one from Alcibiades who comes late to the symposium. Along with Eryximachus who I have already talked about for some length, the other guests are, in order: Phaedrus, Pausanias, Eryximachus, Aristophanes, Agathon, Socrates, and Alcibiades. As Alexander Nehamas notes in his introduction to the *Symposium*, the speeches can be separated into two separate sets. He writes, "The praise of *erōs* in the *Symposium* can be roughly divided into two groups. The first three speeches, by Phaedrus, Pausanias, and

8. Robert L. Mitchell, *The Hymn to Eros: a Reading of Plato's Symposium* (Lanham, MD: University of America Press, 1993), 63.

9. *Ibid.*, 63-4.

10. Joel W. Lidz, "Medicine as a Metaphor in Plato," *Journal of Medicine & Philosophy* 20.5 (1995), 527.

11. Mark Moses, "Plato's Conception of the Relations Between Moral Philosophy and Medicine," *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* 44.3 (2001), 353.

12. Plato, *Gorgias* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 464d.

13. Plato, *Republic* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1992), 389b.

14. Lidz, "Medicine as Metaphor," 353.

15. Plato, *Gorgias*, 464b-c.

16. Plato, *Republic*, 389b.

17. *Ibid.*, 414b-c.



Eryximachus, naturally fall into one category, and the second three, by Aristophanes, Agathon, and Socrates, into another.”¹⁸ The reason for this categorization, Nehamas explains, is that, “The first group of speeches is rather conventional in its praise of *erōs* for its effects. . . [while the second group moves] from the benefits of love to its nature.”¹⁹ After these two groups of speeches, Alcibiades enters and gives his own encomium, not to love alone, but also to Socrates. It is important to note that Alcibiades’ entrance is not until after the first six speeches have been completed; their structured has already been solidified. Even more, Alcibiades’ actual speech does not really disrupt this order retroactively as it is directed at a different subject than Eros.

Within this structure that Nehamas outlines are two distinct sets of analogies. The first Nehamas has already explained: the second group takes the effects of Eros as explained by the first group and locates the producer of the effects as the nature of love. The second analogy, however, is the one that concerns me more. In the first group of speeches Eryximachus is the last to speak and in the second set, Socrates gets the last word. Thus, the set up of the dialogue draws a very clear parallel between the physician and the philosopher. This parallel is turned into an analogy when we consider the trope of medicine in the Platonic dialogues. As I stated earlier and will return to shortly, the physician is often used as a metaphor for the wise man in the dialogues. Plato continues this thread by calling the reader’s attention to the relationship—and analogous similarity—

between Eryximachus and Socrates by the very structure of the dialogue itself.

As for Eryximachus’ actual discourse, there are two main concepts at work in the speech: the description of a good physician and love necessitating a harmonizing force. The first of these I propose to engage, because it is perhaps the less revelatory of the two, is the idea of love necessitating a harmonizing force. Eryximachus says, “Here, too, Love is the central concern: our object is to try to maintain the proper kind of Love . . . For what is the origin of all impiety? Our refusal to gratify the orderly kind of Love, and our deference to the other sort.”²⁰ Eryximachus then goes on to state, “The task of divination is to keep watch over these two species of Love and to doctor them as necessary.”²¹ Eryximachus tells the reader that we must try to adjust or harmonize these kinds of love in order to make sure the right kind of love is the prevalent one. As one of the themes in the physician’s speech, the reader must investigate it in order to see if, like the placement of the doctor in the structure of the dialogue, this idea of harmony has an analog within Platonic philosophy.

As it turns out, the idea of harmony (as well as things necessitating harmony) is nothing new to the reader of Plato’s dialogues. In the *Republic*, Plato describes the soul such that its three parts need to be harmonized. Socrates says, “And these two [the rational and spirited parts of the soul] . . . will govern the appetitive part, which is the largest part in each person’s soul. They’ll watch over it to see that it isn’t filled with the so-called pleasures of the body.”²² Thus, just as we

must watch over and harmonize love such that good love is always in control, so must we watch over and harmonize our soul so that the rational (with the spirited) is always in control. And so, recalling the interpretive paradigm from earlier, where medicine served as a trope to facilitate our understanding of Plato’s philosophy and then adjusting this paradigm to include the words of the practitioner of medicine, Eryximachus’ comments about love take on a new meaning. By understanding how two parts of love need a unifying force so that the good love is always foremost, the reader may more readily comprehend how the tripartite soul is governed as well. Although this analogy is perhaps the less revelatory of the two, it is nonetheless important as it stands as a touchstone for engaging Eryximachus’ speech. By making this first, more obvious analogy between love and the tripartite soul, the reader is prepared to move on to the more difficult parallel.

Keeping this in mind, we move to the other theme in the physician’s speech, that of the good physician. Eryximachus says, “Everything sound and healthy in the body must be encouraged and gratified; that is precisely the object of medicine. Conversely, whatever is unhealthy and unsound must be frustrated and rebuffed: that’s what it is to be an expert in medicine.”²³ There are two distinct claims in Eryximachus’ account. They are that a physician must encourage what is good in a person and discourage what is bad. As before, this description of the good physician’s practice is one of the main themes of Eryximachus’ speech. As such, we ought to investigate for possible

analogues. Even more, Eryximachus is specifically talking about a physician in this part, not just Eros in general as before. Thus, the reader now has two very important reasons to pay attention to this passage.

However, rather than having an analog within Socrates’ espousal of his philosophy as harmony did, this idea of the good physician actually resonates with the actions of Socrates himself. As Moses reminds us, “The sage [i.e., Socrates] does not coerce others to become more virtuous, but persuades and counsels them . . . in the direction of virtuous living . . . in the same way that the skillful doctor persuades and counsels others in the direction of physical health.”²⁴ Thus, Eryximachus’ comments about the good doctor seem to echo what it is a good philosopher (or sage) is supposed to do. Both kinds of professions have the exact same goals in mind even though they might go about it in different ways.

Therefore, Eryximachus provides the reader with yet another insight into Platonic philosophy. Socrates gives many accounts about the job of the philosopher, but when we take the medical trope seriously and fully engage Eryximachus’ speech, the role of the philosopher becomes clear to us. Through conversation, Socrates, as a philosopher, is first and foremost not trying to expound some kind of dogmatic philosophical theory. Rather, he is trying to encourage the good and discourage the bad in his conversation partners. Lidz, earlier invoked for his comments on medicine in the Platonic dialogues, also suggests this later notion when he writes, “The dialogues present us with (among other things) Socrates, an individual, tailoring his

18. Alexander Nehamas, ed., *Symposium*, by Plato (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company), 1989, xv.

19. *Ibid.*, xv-xvii.

20. Plato, *Symposium* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1989), 188c.

21. *Ibid.*

22. Plato, *Republic*, 442a.

23. Plato, *Symposium*, 186c.

24. Moses, “Plato’s Conception,” 366.



speech for specific individuals, unlike a treatise, whose writer addresses any and all in the same manner.”²⁵ I concur with Lidz, but want to take his argument a step further. The reason Socrates tailors his speech for specific individuals is because he is acting in the same manner as Eryximachus’ good doctor. Socrates attempts to encourage the good and discourage the bad in his interlocutors through this tailoring.

Thus, through the power of medical trope in the dialogues, Eryximachus’ speech becomes relevant to examining both the *Symposium* and Platonic philosophy as a whole. As medical metaphor and analogy permeates many of the dialogues, to disregard the words of a physician would be foolhardy. Rather, we should

recognize the possibility for insight in the doctor’s words and read his speech accordingly. The result is that Eryximachus helps to elucidate several of Plato’s ideas so that we may more easily comprehend them. Rather than muddy Plato’s intentions, the physician enlightens us to whole new ways of understanding Platonic philosophy. As Eryximachus states, the task of the physician—and also the philosopher—is to encourage what is good and depress what is bad. We should take this advice when reading the *Symposium*. Let Eryximachus encourage understanding of Platonic philosophy within us while depressing our misconceptions. ♦

25. Lidz, “Medicine as a Metaphor,” 537.