The Erotic Politician

Anthony T. Kronman

I. THE CHARACTER ISSUE

During his first campaign for the presidency in 1992, Bill Clinton was dogged by what came to be called the “character issue.” Critics charged that Clinton’s character was flawed in ways that made him unfit to be president. They said that he had dodged the draft during the Vietnam War, showing personal cowardice and an unwillingness to put the interests of the country before his own. They accused him of marital infidelity, claiming that he had been as disloyal to his wife as to the nation. Marriage is an institution of love that demands a renunciation of the pleasures of free sexuality, and fidelity to a single person. Clinton’s attackers claimed that he lacked the will to forego these pleasures, to make the sacrifice that marriage demands, preferring his own gratification to the welfare of the woman to whom he had pledged his love. So too, they said, he had been unwilling to sacrifice his own safety and well-being for the good of the country in a time of war, another form of infidelity.

His critics acknowledged that Clinton had many ideas, that he was (as some described him) a “policy wonk” with a vast repertoire of programs and plans. But they insisted that he lacked the habits of self-sacrificing love on which the people’s trust might securely be based. What emerged from Bill Clinton’s life, they said, was the portrait of a man driven by self-centered desires, a man who would never make a sacrifice for anything or anyone other than himself, and whose declared commitments—to people and programs and ultimately to the country itself—therefore could not be trusted.

Bill Clinton, of course, denied the charge, noting that he had jeopardized his political career by opposing the war in Vietnam, and insisting that his efforts to save his marriage during a troubled period

* Dean, Yale Law School. My thanks to Adina Storch, Yale Law School Class of 1999, for her helpful research assistance, and to the editors of the Yale Journal of Law & the Humanities for their encouragement and support.
proved his devotion to it. In addition, he tried repeatedly to move
discussion away from the character issue. "I'm not interested" in
George Bush's character, Clinton said pointedly in his second debate
with Bush, urging voters to shift their attention from personalities to
programs and ideas, to what Clinton called "the character of the
presidency" and Bush described as "the vision thing." But the
character issue would not go away, and Bush himself returned to it at
the end of their final debate. "And lastly," Bush said with broken
syntax but real feeling, "the other night on character, Governor
Clinton said it's not the character of the president but the character
of the presidency. I couldn't disagree more. Horace Greeley said the
only thing that endures is character. And I think it was Justice Black
who talked about great nations, like great men, must keep their word.
And so the question is, who will safeguard this nation? Who will
safeguard our people and our children?" Others had put the
question more harshly, but Bush, too, refused to let the issue of
personal character be displaced by a debate about policies and
programs and, throughout the campaign of 1992, sought to link
character and trust.

Bill Clinton has now been President of the United States for nearly
six years, and the character issue that received such attention in 1992,
and again in 1996, remains with us still. Recent events—Paula Jones's
sexual harassment suit and the allegation that Clinton was sexually
involved with a White House intern—have given the issue new life.
The controversy surrounding these charges has centered mainly on
their truth, but there has been a fierce debate as well over the
relevance of Clinton's private behavior to our assessment of his
performance in office. Some say these are largely or entirely distinct,
and that Clinton's private conduct—however we judge its ethical
quality—has no bearing on our judgment of his public persona. They
insist that those who link the two are moralistic and naive. Others

1. The 1992 Campaign: Transcript of 2d TV Debate Between Bush, Clinton and Perot, N.Y.
2. Id.
3. The 1992 Campaign: Transcript of 3d TV Debate Between Bush, Clinton and Perot, N.Y.
that private behavior does not necessarily inform a politician's public conduct); Will a President
Fall over a Fumble?: It Would Have Ruled Out Some of the World's Greatest Statesmen,
GUARDIAN, Jan. 28, 1998, at 18 (asserting that many of history's great statesmen have led
scandalous private lives). But see Tony D'Andrea, Editorial, It Is Clinton's Public Life, ST.
PETERSBURG TIMES, Feb. 12, 1998, at 19A (claiming that a president's private life is public);
Richard Grenier, Editorial, Kathleen Willey and Democracy, WASH. TIMES, Mar. 20, 1998, at
A19 (arguing for a collapse of the distinction between public and private in evaluating political
figures); Connie S. McNeilly, Editorial, Morals Do Matter, ST. PETERSBURG TIMES, Feb. 12,
1998, at 19A (arguing that the public good hinges on all citizens taking responsibility for wrong-
doing in their private lives).
argue that Clinton's public and private lives are in truth quite closely joined. They contend that both reveal an adolescent selfishness and a narcissistic wish to be admired, traits that are reflected, Clinton’s critics say, as much by his addiction to opinion polls and his public abandonment of allies like Lani Guinier as by his private infidelities.  

Today, the character issue once again threatens to overshadow the debate about ideas that Clinton would plainly prefer. Countless articles and thousands of hours of television talk shows have been devoted to it. Opinions continue to differ and much confusion remains. But despite the fact that many Americans now profess to be sick of the subject, interest in the character issue seems, if anything, to be growing.

In this Essay, I explore the character issue and some of the questions it raises. My goal is not to adjudicate the claims that have been made about Bill Clinton’s character. I have no interest in passing judgment on him. What I am interested in are the philosophical questions that underlie the character issue. Like most philosophical questions, these have been less widely discussed than the personalities and events that give rise to them. But they are ancient questions of perennial interest, and by reflecting on them we may gain a deeper understanding of how the character issue bears on the nature of politics generally.

II. HABIT, CHARACTER, AND LOVE

George Bush’s response to Clinton’s attempt to divert their debate from character to ideas rested upon the unexpressed but entirely correct assumption that a person can have a theory about something without possessing the corresponding character trait. A person may have an elaborate theory of justice, for example, or of courage, but not be a just or courageous person. And the reverse is true as well: Someone may be just or courageous, but have only a crude theory of what justice or courage is. Of course, beliefs and ideas are not unconnected to traits of character. A change in beliefs may be a stimulus to, or even a condition of, a change in character. Many educational programs and therapeutic techniques assume a connection of this kind. But theory and character are not the same, and even the most perfect inventory of a person’s ideas cannot by itself establish what kind of character he or she possesses.

But if a character trait is not a theory, a set of beliefs or ideas, then what is it? We can make a start by defining a trait of character in the way Aristotle did, as a disposition, a settled tendency to act or feel in

certain ways in recurrent situations. A character trait is a habit of action or feeling.\(^6\) Still, this is plainly an incomplete definition, for most people have many habits that neither they nor others consider traits of character. I am in the habit, for example, of going grocery shopping on Sunday afternoon. There are reasons I do this. Shopping on Sunday fits my family's pattern of living; it is a particularly convenient time for me to go. But my habit of Sunday shopping is not a trait of character in the sense in which we normally use that term.

That character traits are habits is an old and appealing idea. It expresses our sense that a person's character has its foundation in something deeper than thought, as all habits do. But it raises an important question, for even if all traits of character are habits, the reverse is clearly not the case. Character traits are a subset of the wider class of habits, and the question is, what distinguishes this subset from the rest?

A good answer, if a crude one, is that character traits are distinguished from other habits by their relatively greater importance in defining a person's identity. There is no bright line here, but only the graduated distinction between a core and a periphery. Some of my habits (like Sunday shopping) are peripheral. I can easily imagine abandoning this habit if, for example, my family's schedule changed in a way that made shopping on Saturday more convenient. I shop on Sunday because it is instrumentally reasonable for me to do so. The importance to me of shopping on Sunday is tied to these reasons and changes when they do. But I have other habits that are more intimately connected to who I am. Reading, for example, is a habit of this kind. In part, I read for instrumental reasons. I read to prepare for workshops and faculty committees and to keep abreast of developments in my field. But beyond that I read for the sheer pleasure of reading (something I cannot say about grocery shopping).

Reading is, for me, an intrinsically and not just instrumentally valuable activity. More importantly, it is one of the activities that defines who I am. Even if I never shopped for groceries again—if I arranged for someone else to do it for me instead—I would be the same person. Perhaps I would become a bit lazier; perhaps my political outlook would become a little less democratic, on account of being less involved with others in one of life's most common tasks. But these would be modest adjustments at the periphery of my character. By contrast, if I were forced to stop reading, I am sure I would become someone quite different than I am. Reading is for me


---

HeinOnline -- 10 Yale J.L. & Human. 366 1998
a core activity. It is one of my constitutive habits. I am a reader but not—in the same sense or to the same degree—a shopper. In every person’s life there exists a blurred and wavering but crucially important line between those habits that belong to the core of his or her being and those that do not. The line is drawn at different points in different lives, but no life can be coherent without it. No human life can have definition and shape without the distinction between habits that are only habits and those that are traits of character.

A person’s core habits—those that constitute his character—reflect his core concerns. They show what he cares most about. Between these and his peripheral concerns there is, of course, a continuous gradation. Most people’s core concerns, moreover, are plural and conflicting, even incommensurable. Still, it is meaningful to ask what someone’s main concerns are—what he or she cares most about. When we ask about a person’s character, this is what we really want to know.

Philosophers have often approached the question of character by asking whether a person possesses a short checklist of virtues—bravery, temperance, prudence, and the like. But this is a restricted view that captures too little of what we mean by traits of character. The question of character is better posed by asking simply what a person cares about. This more directly expresses the aim of our inquiry and, unlike the traditional approach, provides greater scope for the amazing range of character-types that we know from life and its fictional representations.

Character and caring are thus related ideas. But what does it mean to care about something? In one broad sense, the expression “care about” denotes only a special intensity of interest or desire. The things I care about, in this first sense, are just those I find important. Each of my core habits—the character traits that make me who I am—is an expression of care in this first sense, regardless of the form my caring takes and whatever its object may be.

But care also has a second meaning, one that draws attention not only to the intensity of my interests and desires, but to their aim as well. Many of the things I care about in the first sense are important to me only because they satisfy some interest or desire of my own. Around noontime, for example, I generally begin to care about food—a ham sandwich and a Coke. But I care about these things only because of their power to satisfy my hunger and thirst. I am not at all interested in their own well-being. I have no desire to see that things

7. See Harry G. Frankfurt, The Importance of What We Care About, in The Importance of What We Care About: Philosophical Essays 80 (1988).
go well for them. Indeed, absent some very unusual interest on my part, that is a ridiculous way of speaking. That I do not care about my sandwich for its own sake is revealed by the fact that in acting on my care for it, I consume the sandwich—I make it disappear. I "take care" of the sandwich in the familiar, ironical sense of demolishing it. In the process, the sandwich becomes part of me. Indeed, that is the whole point of ordering and eating it. My relation to the sandwich is thus entirely self-centered.

But there are other things I care about in a less self-centered way. I care, for example, about the Peabody Museum of Natural History in New Haven. In part, I care about it because of the pleasure its exhibits afford me and my children. When I visit the Museum, I consume its visual displays in the same way I consume a sandwich—though of course the displays do not disappear in the process, as the sandwich does. But beyond my desire to be gratified by what I see in the Museum, I also care about the Museum as an institution. I believe in its cultural value and want to see it preserved for others; in particular, for those who will come after me in time. I hope the Museum will survive as part of the inheritance I and others of my generation pass on to our successors, and to see that it does, I am prepared to make a sacrifice of dollars and perhaps of time.

Of course, when I pay for my ham sandwich, I am making a sacrifice of sorts as well. I am sacrificing the other things I might buy with my money. But this act of sacrifice is completely self-centered. By paying for my sandwich I give up one thing that is good for me for something else that is. It is true, of course, that by making a contribution to the Museum I also satisfy a desire of my own, namely, the desire to conserve the culture of which I, along with others, am a custodian. But this desire, unlike my desire for the sandwich, has as its aim the welfare or well-being of something apart from me. It is, in this sense, a self-sacrificing desire. In some small way, I sacrifice myself for it; I subordinate my own interests to the Museum’s so that it may endure.

To that extent, in my relation to the Museum, it is I who disappear and the Museum that is preserved, reversing the relation I have to my ham sandwich. When I say that I not only enjoy visiting the Museum but care about it too, it is this self-sacrificing attitude I am trying to convey. Used in this sense, care denotes something more than an intensity of interest or desire. (If I am hungry, my interest in the sandwich may be excruciatingly intense.) It denotes a concern for the well-being of something or someone other than myself, a concern that some, but not all, of my most intense interests display.

A second example may be helpful. I said that reading is one of my core habits—the elimination of which would change who I am. To a
certain degree, reading is for me like eating; I consume books and
magazines for pleasure. In some cases—with most magazines, for
example—the pleasure of reading lasts only as long as the activity. At
the end of it, nothing remains. There is nothing to think or talk about,
and I throw away the magazine itself, like the wrapper on my
sandwich. But in other cases, my reading has a more durable quality.
Generally, for example, when I finish a book of philosophy, I
continue to think and talk about it, and I add the book to my library.
I care about my library in the way I care about the Peabody Museum.
It pleases me to think of it outlasting me and passing on to my
children. It pleases me, more generally, to think of reading as an
enduring activity into which I came and from which eventually I will
depart. I have a strong desire that this activity, like the Museum, be
kept up for others, that reading remain in good repair, and building
a library that others will inherit is one physical expression of this
desire.

I view reading as a cultural enterprise that, depending on the
circumstances, may be weak or strong, vibrant or anemic, inviting or
inaccessible. In this sense, I conceive reading to have a variable well­
being of its own. I see its well-being as connected to, yet distin­
guishable from, my own. And I am willing, even anxious, to make
some sacrifice of my welfare for its—by taking time, for example, to
introduce my children and my students into the activity of reading,
when I would rather be reading myself. In short, I care about reading
in the second of the two senses I have distinguished. Or, to put the
point more simply, I love to read. For a self-sacrificing desire marked
by a willingness to put another's welfare before one's own is what we
mean by love, the weightiest word in our lexicon of feeling.

I have said that a person's character consists of his or her core
habits; that these reveal what the person cares about in the first broad
sense of desiring most intensely; and that among these habits are
some that display care in a second sense—that show what the person
loves and is prepared to sacrifice his or her own welfare to protect. A
person's character is not defined entirely by the habits of love. It also
always is defined, in part at least, by habits based on desires of a self­
directed kind. We all have deep and powerful habits of this sort,
which extend from the normal to the pathological. Every person's
character is partly constituted by them and by the tension that exists
in every human soul between these habits of self-interest, on the one
hand, and those of love on the other. But the latter nevertheless play
a special role in the definition of a person's character. That is because
they disclose his or her ultimate values. They tell us what that person
is willing to sacrifice for. They reveal the transcendent values that for
him or her define the limits of all self-regarding care. If we want to
know who someone is, it is therefore particularly important to know
who or what he loves: to know whose well-being he places before his
own. It is in his preparedness to give himself up that a person’s
identity, his character, comes most clearly into view. To put the point
paradoxically, a person is never more himself than when he gives
himself away.

It is against this background that we should view George Bush’s
linkage of character and trust in the 1992 presidential campaign. Both
Clinton and Bush appealed for our trust and both based their appeal,
in part, on a plan for political action. But Bush stressed that trust
does not depend on plans alone. Emergencies arise for which no plan
can prepare us, and beyond that, there is always the question of
whether someone who has proposed a plan (a tax cut, a trade policy,
a military strategy) will actually carry the plan out. No further
refinement of the plan can satisfy our doubts on either score. Whether
we can trust a politician to keep his promises and to deal wisely with
emergencies depends, Bush said, on our assessment of his character.
In these respects, trust is a function not of the politician’s plan but of
his character traits, of habits that lie below the level of thought and
constitute the core of his identity. These habits are the basis of the
trust we have in our friends and, to some degree, Bush urged, in
politicians too.8

The most important of these habits, as they bear on a person’s
trustworthiness, are the self-sacrificial habits of love. Our confidence
that a person will keep his promises and be steady in emergencies is,
of course, enhanced if we believe that his own self-serving desires
draw him in this direction. But it is strengthened even more if we
believe that he is drawn by a commitment that overrides his natural
self-interest and subordinates his own welfare to the welfare of
someone or something else—if we believe he is disposed to act from
love. This is the strongest commitment a person can have. It marks
the limits of all his other self-centered concerns. It is therefore the
most important habit to consider in asking whether a person can be
trusted.

It may seem odd to ask what a politician loves. It is not a question
we are used to asking. But it is precisely the question that George
Bush put before us, and which he insisted is as important as any issue
of policy in deciding whether a politician can be trusted.

8. It will be recalled that Bush himself was criticized for being untrustworthy when he raised
taxes in the second year of his presidency, after having explicitly promised not to do so. See, e.g.,
Art Buchwald, George Bush’s Lip-Sinking Act, WASH. POST, May 15, 1990, at C1; Leonard Silk,
III. ENTER ALCIBIADES

The character issue has led us to love, and to the relationship between love and politics. This is a large subject, and an old one. It has been a topic of reflection for thousands of years. But no writer has had more to say about it than Plato, and no text offers more insight into it than Plato's Symposium, the most famous work ever composed on the subject of love.

The Symposium is the story of a drinking party, told many years afterward by a man who himself heard the story secondhand. The party takes place in the home of a wealthy Athenian named Agathon. Its purpose is to celebrate Agathon’s first victory as a tragic poet in the great Athenian festival; historical evidence suggests a dramatic date of 416 B.C.9 Those present include Agathon, Socrates, the comedian Aristophanes, a physician named Eryximachus, Phaedrus (lover of the rhetorician Lysias), and several others. Hung over from the day before, one of the participants suggests that drinking be kept to a minimum and that the partygoers devote themselves to conversation instead. As a topic, Eryximachus proposes “the great and glorious god Love,”10 and suggests that each in turn make a speech in praise of love’s powers.

Several speeches follow. When Socrates’s turn comes, instead of offering his own account of love, he repeats what the priestess Diotima—“a woman wise in this and many other kinds of knowledge”—once told him about it.11 Just as Socrates finishes, there is a commotion at the door. Alcibiades, the Athenian politician, enters, drunk and leaning on his friends, “crowned with a massive garland of ivy and violets.”12 He first embraces Agathon and crowns him with ribbons, but then, seeing Socrates, takes the ribbons back and places them on Socrates’s head instead, insisting that Socrates will not permit him to praise anyone else in his presence. Eryximachus tells Alcibiades that they have been making speeches in praise of love, and urges him to make a speech of his own. Alcibiades agrees but says that he must make a speech about Socrates or risk provoking his anger. He proceeds to describe his love for Socrates and his failed attempt to seduce him. A brief exchange between Socrates, Alcibiades, and Agathon follows. Then a band of revellers bursts in and

---

11. Id. at 43 (*201d).
12. Id. at 53 (*212d-e).
disrupts the party, which degenerates into drunken confusion. By
dawn, all have fallen asleep except Socrates, Agathon, and Aris­
tophanes. The latter two doze off, and Socrates—unaffected, as
always, by the wine—rises to go about his business, in an exit the
sobriety of which contrasts perfectly with the drunkenness of
Alcibiades’s entrance.

The sudden arrival of Alcibiades—a living Dionysus—is the most
dramatic moment in the Symposium, perhaps in all of Plato’s
dialogues. The effect is heightened by the drama of Alcibiades’s own
career, the outlines of which were well-known to Plato’s ancient
readers.13

Alcibiades was an extraordinary figure in the politics of late-fifth­
century Athens. Well-born and beautiful, a ward of Pericles, Al­
cibiades was raised in a circle of wealth and power. From his youth,
he was renowned as a man of enormous erotic appetite who scan­
dalized his fellow citizens with a series of reckless affairs. During the
first phase of the Peloponnesian War, Alcibiades served with
distinction in the Athenian army and later engineered a number of
political plots to promote his own influence. In 416 B.C., the dramatic
date of the Symposium, he was a leading proponent of the Sicilian
campaign, which ended in disaster for the Athenians and eventually
destroyed their empire. Alcibiades’s enthusiastic support for the
campaign inflamed the hopes of the Athenians, and they elected him
as one of the three generals to lead their fleet to Sicily. Shortly before
the fleet sailed, however, it was discovered that someone had
mutilated a number of the sacred boundary stones, or hermes, that
protected the entrance to many buildings in Athens. A rumor spread
that Alcibiades had committed the crime himself in a drunken frenzy.
Despite his demand for a formal trial to resolve the charges against
him, the Athenian fleet left on its ill-starred mission. Shortly
afterward, however, Alcibiades was recalled to Athens to stand trial
for impiety. On his way back, he deserted and joined the Spartan
cause instead, campaigning against his native city with considerable
success. But after seducing the wife of the Spartan king, Alcibiades
lost their trust as well and sought refuge with the Persians in Asia
Minor.

In 411 B.C., he switched sides again, taking command of the
Athenian fleet at Samos. For three years he warred, on the
Athenians’ behalf, against both the Spartans and Persians, and in 408
B.C. returned in triumph to Athens, where he was honored and

13. See generally WALTER M. ELLIS, ALCIBIADES (1989); STEVEN FORDE, THE AMBITION
restored to full power. But after several military defeats, the Athenians repudiated him once more and he fled to Thrace. Following the Athenians' crushing loss at Aegospotami in 405 B.C., Alcibiades again sought the protection of the Persians. The following year, he was killed in Phrygia by Spartan assassins. According to an ancient tale, he was murdered while visiting his favorite courtesan, a woman named Timandra.

What emerges from these biographical details? The picture of a man overflowing with desire, with sexual longing and political ambition, reckless to the point of self-destruction, shifting restlessly from one attachment to another, unable to remain faithful to any person or cause for long, irresistibly attractive to others but devoted only to himself and his own satisfaction—a man of immense erotic energy but no capacity for love. This is the man who bursts, like a natural force, into Agathon's party, and who turns the conversation from a philosophical examination of love to a very personal inspection of Socrates himself. And in the story that he tells about Socrates and his campaign to seduce him, Alcibiades confirms his reputation as a loveless man, charged with erotic feeling but unable to escape the confinement of his own self-centered desires.

Of course, this is not what Alcibiades actually says. What Alcibiades reports is not his own failure as a lover, but Socrates's. I have tried everything, Alcibiades says, to make Socrates love me. I have talked endlessly with him about philosophy; I have wrestled with him in the gymasia; I have adorned myself and entertained him in my home—all to no avail. So many others have been swept away by my charm and beauty, Alcibiades complains, but not Socrates. Even in my arms, he confesses with embarrassment, Socrates did nothing but sleep.

It is clear from Alcibiades's account that what he really wants from Socrates is to be admired by him. What he desires is to be an object of desire. He wants above all else to feel his own irresistible appeal. Alcibiades's love for Socrates is to that extent self-centered, and when his efforts at seduction fail, he feels dishonored and ashamed.

By contrast, what Socrates wants is Alcibiades's improvement. He wants Alcibiades to become a better man. He wants him to yield to the "pang of philosophy" that Alcibiades admits he feels in his soul, to turn his gaze from appearance to reality, to be ashamed of the life he is now leading. Socrates wants to redirect Alcibiades's desire from himself to something else—not to Socrates the man, but to the

14. PLATO, supra note 10, at 59 (*218a).
way of life that Socrates is following. He wants Alcibiades to become a philosopher too.

For that to happen, however, Alcibiades must suppress his "love of popularity," his desire to be an object of desire. His desire must be refocused on an object other than himself, on the truth that lies beyond the realm of transient human things. He must learn to love the pursuit of truth for its own sake and not as an expression of his own beauty or power. A genuine philosopher will be prepared to give up the self-centered gratifications of human life when these conflict with the pursuit of truth itself. He will be prepared to sacrifice himself on its account. Socrates, who refused to accept exile in place of death on the grounds that doing so would make a mockery of philosophy, exemplifies this sacrificial love.16 His effort to turn Alcibiades around, to seduce him to philosophy, is thus an effort to transform a self-centered desire into a self-sacrificing one, to turn eroticism into love. For Socrates to succeed in this endeavor, it is essential that he frustrate Alcibiades's desire to be desired.

Socrates fails to do so. Alcibiades never escapes the pull of his own self-centered appetite for the desire and applause of others. As soon as he leaves Socrates's side, Alcibiades admits, this desire gets the better of him and his attraction to philosophy is overpowered. This reminds us that the seductive appeal of philosophy is limited and that not everyone is able to make the sacrifices it demands. But Alcibiades's inability to give up the life that he is living and to pursue philosophy instead is his failure, not Socrates's. In his refusal to succumb to Alcibiades's seductive invitation, Socrates shows that he cares about the good of something else for its own sake: that he cares, first, about the well-being of Alcibiades's soul, and second, about the integrity of philosophy itself. He demonstrates his capacity for love. By contrast, in rejecting Socrates's invitation to philosophy, Alcibiades shows he is a loveless man, in this respect like every other. He reveals that he is incapable of sacrifice, of putting anyone or anything ahead of himself. Though filled with erotic energy, he makes it plain that he is wholly lacking in love. This is the essence of the man, of the erotic but unloving politician, who bursts into Agathon's party, inflamed by wine and desire—on the very evening, some speculate, the hermes were toppled—and whose personal fate lies like a shadow across the festival mood of the Symposium.

15. *Id. at 57 (*216b).

IV. DIOTIMA'S LESSON

Alcibiades is a type of politician familiar to us all. In him we see, in exaggerated form, some of the same qualities that many politicians of our own age display; the young Jack Kennedy comes to mind. But, however common, the type of politician that Alcibiades represents is not the only kind. To Alcibiades, the erotic but loveless politician, we may contrast another: the loving politician who defines a timeless norm of health in public life and by comparison with whom Alcibiades seems badly incomplete, even pathological. But who is this loving politician? The speech of Diotima that Socrates recounts in the Symposium suggests an answer.¹⁷

All mortal creatures, Diotima tells Socrates, desire to be connected to something that outlasts them. Mortal beings come and go; that is their condition. But there is in every one of them a desire to escape this condition by participating in something that endures, in something that does not come and go but lasts forever, in immortality. Even dumb animals have this desire. Their procreative urge, Diotima says, connects them to the ongoing life of their species, which is larger and more lasting than their individual careers. The intensity of this urge, and its universality, show that even thoughtless animals desire to participate in immortality, in the only way they can.

Like other mortal creatures, human beings possess this desire too. But unlike animals, who can satisfy it only in one mindless way, human beings pursue immortality along three different paths, and intelligence is an ingredient in each. This distinguishes humans from animals, on the one hand, and from the gods on the other, who, being immortal, have no yearning to achieve it. That human beings seek immortality in a variety of ways, and that they do so in a deliberate and thoughtful fashion, are thus traits no other beings—higher or lower—share. They are traits that uniquely define our intermediate human condition.

The first of these three ways is sexual reproduction. This is, of course, the most animalic of the three. But even here the desire to participate in immortality assumes a distinctive human form. For although human beings share the urge to reproduce, the begetting and raising of children is carried on by them within a setting that has no counterpart in the animal world—within the institution we call marriage (which historically has assumed many different shapes). It is true that some other animals mate for life. But marriage is unique to human beings. Marriage is a system of normative precepts, partly

¹⁷. See PLATO, supra note 10, at 43-53 (*201d-212b).
legal and partly cultural. It is more than a biological relationship. Marriage is an ethical and juridical relationship as well, which is why we call it an institution. Through the institution of marriage, the process of human reproduction is integrated into the wider realm of human culture as a whole and given a stabilizing form that facilitates not only the biological preservation of the species, but also the transmission of its cultural endowment. Sexual reproduction within the normative framework of marriage is the way one generation of human beings produces another and participates in the timeless life of the species, whose distinctive mode of being has a cultural as well as a physical component.

The second way that human beings pursue immortality is more directly political—through acts of citizenship in service to their cities (or nations). A city, like a marriage, is an institution: an ensemble of laws, norms, values, and traditions. But unlike a marriage, it is an institution that outlasts the lives of its individual members. A marriage is over the day one partner dies. A city, by contrast, may continue indefinitely, through many generations of citizens, bound together by evolving laws and changing traditions. By participating in the life of his city—by making laws or even just by following them—a citizen thereby establishes a link to, and acquires a share in, something that has no necessary limit in time. Through acts of citizenship, one escapes, however incompletely, the limits of mortality in a second way.

Third, human beings satisfy their desire to be in touch with what endures through the activity of thinking. This is, Diotima says, the rarest and most perfect kind of immortality that human beings are able to achieve. In thinking, one aims to grasp the truth, the immortal forms of things, by actively employing the power of understanding that is their deathless counterpart in us. Even if the human species disappeared, and all its cities fell to ruin, the truth would still exist. Of everything that outlasts my individual life, the truth is the most lasting of all. Only it stands entirely beyond the realm of appearance and disappearance, of coming into being and passing away, and when my mind is engaged in thought, in the pursuit of truth, I am therefore as completely in touch with immortality as it is possible for a human being to be.

Each of these three ways of pursuing immortality requires sacrifice. If I am to achieve a measure of immortality through my children—to leave behind in them an image of myself—I must be prepared to sacrifice on their behalf. They come into the world vulnerable and weak and can survive only if I protect them. The lengths to which both human and nonhuman parents go in protecting their children, up to the point even of dying for them, is remarkable. And, beyond this,
the uniquely human institution of marriage calls for an additional sacrifice as well—the sacrifice of free sexuality for the sake of an arrangement the goal of which is the cultural, and not just biological, preservation of the species.

Political institutions also require sacrifices from their members. If a city is to last, its citizens must be prepared to give up their time, money, and even, on occasion, their lives. A city for which no one is willing to die cannot endure. Like parental sacrifice, which is required for participation in the biological immortality of the species, patriotism is essential to the maintenance of those political institutions through which a kind of immortality may be achieved in public life.

Even thinking calls for sacrifice. The truth is impersonal; it is no more mine than anyone else’s. That is why, in a philosophical conversation of the kind that Plato’s dialogues exemplify, it makes no difference who speaks the truth, so long as the truth is brought to light, and why it is absurd to view the discovery (or comprehension) of a mathematical argument as something peculiarly my own. What is peculiarly my own is not my mind—the impersonal power of thought by which I grasp the truth—but my body, and the more deeply devoted I become to thought, the more I must subordinate the interests of my body to it. A life of thought is in this sense, as Socrates says in the *Phaedo*, a long preparation for death. It is itself a kind of living death, marked by a patriotic devotion to thought that resembles its political counterpart and, like it, may require that I give up my life, in a real and not just metaphorical sense, to preserve the dignity of thinking (as Socrates himself did).

The desire for immortality, which every human being experiences, is a desire to be part of something more lasting than oneself. Human beings seek to satisfy this desire in three ways. But each of these demands a willingness to sacrifice, a loving devotion to something beyond oneself. To satisfy the human desire for a share in immortality, a person must be prepared to give himself up for the sake of something else—a child, a city, an idea. The sacrifice in question, moreover, is not external to the desire, like the price one has to pay for an expensive coat. The desire and the sacrifice are one, for the desire in question is a desire to escape the bounds of mortal life, to live for something larger than oneself, to lose one’s mortal self in an order—biological, political, or intellectual—that outlasts it. It is, at bottom, a desire to sacrifice, and the very act of doing so fulfills it.

---

But this desire, though universal, is frequently overborne by another. The desire to share in immortality, which can only be satisfied through some form of self-sacrificing love, is locked in an eternal competition with the equally universal attachment we have to our mortal selves, and often enough the latter prevails. There are many human beings who neglect their children, betray their cities, and darken their minds for self-centered gratification. These loveless human beings—of whom Alcibiades is an example—are well-known to us. They exist everywhere, in every period. Indeed, we are intimately acquainted with the type, for each of us is, to some degree, like Alcibiades. None of us is free of the narcissism that chains Alcibiades to himself and prevents him from accepting Socrates’s invitation to give up the pleasures of adulation for the selfless pursuit of truth. But to the extent that we resemble Alcibiades, we, too, are bound to be unhappy, trapped within the limits of mortality that all earthly creatures desire to escape. This desire and its fulfillment are a natural part of mortal life, as much as egoism and its consequences. However common Alcibiades’s failure to love may be, and however familiar to us from our own inability to make the sacrifice required to connect with what endures, his life of self-absorption therefore represents something pathological that runs against the grain of his own deepest longing, the longing for immortality, which he (and we) share with every human being.

V. THE ECONOMY OF LOVE

Even those healthy human beings who are able to satisfy this longing by loving something other than themselves face a terrible dilemma, however, for the ways of human love are not only plural but conflicting. The love I feel for my family may conflict, for example, with that I feel for my city. My city may ask me to make sacrifices that jeopardize the welfare of my family, and vice versa. The love I feel for one is always potentially threatened by the love I feel for the other. And philosophy is in tension with both, since it has a way (as Socrates’s own life again suggests) of weakening my attachments to family and city alike, by making these seem ephemeral in comparison with the durability of truth. The human capacity for sacrifice, and hence for love, is limited, and the three loci of human love—our families, cities, and minds—are not only in competition for this scarce resource, but make mutually antagonistic demands upon it. Paul Kahn calls this competition “the economy of love,”\(^{19}\) a phrase that nicely

---

suggests the conflicts among the three main forms of human love and the difficult, sometimes impossible, choices these conflicts entail.

The need to compete for love is a fact of political life. Those who want to see their cities flourish and the law endure must compete for a sacrificial devotion to their cause. They must compete against both the prepolitical allegiances of family life and the transpolitical commitment to thought. The first demands that citizens subordinate their civic duties to a more intimate form of loyalty, and the second demands loyalty to a cause that goes beyond all political boundaries. Each insists that citizens put something else ahead of patriotic feeling, and threatens the durability of the political realm from a different direction. For a city to endure, these threats must be contained and only the politician who knows how to compete for love can do so.

But there is another and more positive dimension of politics that this negative account of the economy of love ignores. For while it is true that political love is threatened by the two others that oppose it, the survival of the city also depends upon these loves and, potentially at least, draws strength from them. This is clearest in the case of the prepolitical love for family and children. A city that sets itself too firmly against this love cannot survive. To flourish and be strong, civic love must root itself in the realm of prepolitical attachments. It must be nourished by them and draw on the sacrificial love they engender. Loyalty to the city must be linked to family loyalty, so that the preservation of the first comes to be seen as essential to the preservation of the second, not just in a physical but in an ethical sense as well. For this to happen, children must be brought up in a certain way. They must be raised to be patriots, so that their love of home and family comes, by a natural extension, to include the city too. A willingness to sacrifice for the sake of the city cannot grow in thin air. It must be rooted in more nourishing soil. This is the point of Burke’s famous remark that all our political loyalties begin with an allegiance to the “little platoon” of family and friends.20 The claim that patriotic sentiment must grow from our prepolitical attachments is one of the great themes of the conservative tradition, and perhaps its most profound truth. The first task of the politician is to see that this connection is fortified, among other ways through education.

Politicians have a second task, however, and that is to ensure that the love of their cities is nourished by the very different love of truth. This transpolitical love is also motivated by the universal human desire to be in touch with what lasts—with the immortal truth of

---

things, with goodness and justice as they are and always will be. It is this love that moves every philosophical mind and, though it competes with political love, with devotion to one's city, it too (like the prepolitical love of family) can be a source of patriotic feeling. This happens when a political community comes to see itself as devoted to the truth, to perfect justice, and to the project of achieving it on earth. The effort to do so must always fall short of its goal, and can never be more than a tendency, partial and incomplete. But those who view themselves as members of a political community committed to the idea of perfect justice and to giving it an earthly form will be more strongly attached to their community and more willing to sacrifice on its behalf. This is the central claim of the utopian tradition in political thought that runs from Plato to Martin Luther King, Jr. "The moral arc of the universe is long," King said, "but it bends toward justice." King understood that the power of this idea, which is rooted in the human love of truth, can be a binding force in politics as well and be made to serve the cause of patriotism instead of threatening it from without.

Both the utopian and conservative traditions, so often opposed by advocates and observers alike, thus tell us something true about political life. For each insists that to achieve his goal, a politician must transform the city's adversaries in the competition for love into allies instead. This can never be done completely. Tensions will always exist between the city's demand for loyalty, on the one hand, and the competing demands of our families and minds on the other. But in each case the tension can be ameliorated and, to some degree, changed into its opposite—into a form of solidarity and support. This is supremely difficult to do, since the two competing loves that a politician must enlist in his city's cause themselves pull the human spirit in opposite directions—one toward something more concrete than politics, the other toward something more abstract. Still, it is not an impossible task, and there are politicians who succeed to a degree that justifies our viewing its pursuit as an ideal. In our own political tradition, Lincoln's First Inaugural Address comes to mind, with its simultaneous invocation of the "mystic chords of memory" and the "better angels of our nature," and its enlistment of both as the guardians of civic friendship.

The politician who embraces this ideal is the loving politician, the measure of true health by which Alcibiades and others like him—erotic but unloving—must be judged. For such a politician not only shows a self-sacrificing devotion to his city, but also a deep understanding of human love generally—of its origin and forms, its competitive diversity, and the opportunities that exist, within this competition, for collaborative support. Politicians who possess this understanding are rare. But when they do appear, like some precious gift, the depth of the love they show for the enterprise of politics is the solidest foundation we can have for giving them our trust. It is the surest basis for believing in their character, as distinct from their policies and plans. The erotic politician loves only himself and his attachments are as fickle as Alcibiades's. He may be brilliant and charming, irresistibly so, but his self-absorption makes him unreliable and risks disaster for himself and his city. The loving politician has a steadier character, and the secret of his steadiness lies in the familiar human paradox that he fulfills himself by giving himself up to a more durable cause.

I have drawn these two types in an exaggerated way. They are ideal types, and reality is always more complex. Most politicians are to some degree like Alcibiades—narcissistic and faithless. But most are also, to some degree, devoted to their country or cause and prepared to sacrifice on its behalf. There is, moreover, no psychological requirement that politicians be uniformly loving or self-absorbed in every aspect of their lives, across the entire range of their public and private relations. Human beings—politicians included—are generally more fragmented than that, behaving selfishly in some ways and in certain relationships, and selflessly in others. Alcibiades, who is faithless in each of Diotima's three ways of love, displays an unusual consistency of character. But Alcibiades is not the norm. When it comes to love, most human lives (including those of presidents) are more muddled and mixed than his. To be sure, the distinction between love and narcissism is crucially important in every area of life, public as well as private. Love is the foundation of trustworthiness in all our activities and relations. That is why character always matters, in everything we do. But it does not follow, as the simplifiers of human life insist, that a faithless spouse can never be a loving politician, or that narcissism and love can never be combined in the same soul. We all know they can. 23 And we also all know how hard

it is to tell the two apart. The erotic politician and his loving opposite often look and sound alike, as do the faithful spouse and the philanderer, differing only with respect to inner attitudes that are notoriously hard to observe. It is easy to be mistaken here, and to confuse the one for the other.

Yet despite the complexities of temperament and the difficulties of observation that make it so hard to avoid such confusion, the long-term health of the political world depends upon our capacity to do so with at least moderate success, and on our willingness to keep trying. For if we cannot separate the erotic from the loving politician, or simply give up the effort to tell them apart, the political world will eventually be undone by the Alcibiadean narcissism that is the common enemy of everything we build on earth in pursuit of our desire to belong to something more lasting than ourselves. That is Diotima's lesson. In our continuing debate about the character issue, it is the most important lesson to keep in mind.