
Response to Presidential Address

DANGER IN DESIRE:
A RESPONSE TO SOCRATES, DIOTIMA AND MAYO¹

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Judith Butler often makes an appearance in Cris Mayo's work, but one is less likely to encounter Immanuel Kant or Socrates. What are they doing here? Later in this brief response, I'll speculate about where they came from. First, let's go back to the Symposium.

I suspect that if Socrates and the boys were going to invite a female to the Symposium (besides the dancing girls, of course), Mayo would be a likely choice. So let's assume for a moment that Mayo attended this Symposium and took her turn formulating a paean to Eros. What would she say?

MAYO: I have listened with interest to all, but especially to you, Aristophanes and to you, Socrates. Aristophanes' story of the androgynes makes it clear that desire is desire precisely because it is, in principle, unfulfillable. Socrates reminds us that this desire, this love of something that is missing or wanted, must itself be educated toward divine beauty, that this is the ultimate goal of education. And Diotima—who speaks through her good friend Socrates—speaks true as well. It is she who understands that desire points to the future, that desire is the daimon that leads us onward by crafting a vision of future possibility. Creativity is energized when desire appears.

Together you sing a powerful paean to Eros. But you weaken and prostitute desire when you cast sexual desire (and other bodily desires) in an instrumental role in moving from the beauties of earth to the beauties of heaven. Your assumption that heaven and earth, supernatural and natural, soul and body are of different orders of goodness blind you to the centrality of desire—all desire—in human existence, whether it presents itself as sexual or political or spiritual.

For you, bodily desire for the beloved is merely an instrumental experience, one that acquaints the lover with desire as a possibility and moves him or her along toward a higher object of desire.

But in both cases, the desire for the reasoned, the ephemeral, the spiritual is more valued and valuable than bodily desire. I want to challenge the privileging of the mind and the spirit over the body, of making bodily experience merely instrumental in intellectual and spiritual enlightenment.

I go even further. I want to challenge the distinction that separates bodily experience from the experience of searching for understanding and for enlightenment. It is not because I'm trying to argue for the goodness of sexual desire. But because it simply is true, as I've learned from my students at gsas, that desire of mundane and sexual kinds prompts links with others, with the world, with our best selves. When you shortchange the embodied nature of desire, you lend support to those who would fail to educate our children in the depths of their experience as embodied persons for whom desires of all kinds are powerful forces for creativity. In doing so, you enable the *miseducation* of the young people with whom I have worked.

I agree that desire's task is futurity. It takes us beyond that space we inhabit now. But futurity should not be construed to mean appreciation of divine beauty. And desire is not "merely" emotion. Rather desire motivates the process of reason and the possibility of learning, and must be understood within that interpretive frame. We reason in our most spontaneous yearnings. That is my song of love to love.

Now let's suppose for a moment that society really is in disarray, with cultural mores being violated left and right. (We're not straying here. I get the impression that Plato was not all that happy with Athenian culture in the 5th century B.C.) Somehow I get invited to the Symposium. I am invited to speak after Mayo. What would I say?

STENGEL: I hesitate to speak in this exalted company. One knows that Socrates will not go easy on me, even if it is my first Symposium. I confess, however, that it is Mayo who frightens me. Her wit is legendary; her intellect formidable. What fate can possibly await me? Nonetheless, I sally forth in the spirit of inquiry—and because I find it all so interesting!

I have heard that Socrates and Diotima and Mayo all know that desire is not the opposite of reason. We owe them a debt of remembrance. This is ancient wisdom, all too often forgotten in any age, in any political climate, in any set of social arrangements. Desire's role in the life of the human, in the development of the soul is much more complicated. Put simply, it is like the psychologist's principle of eustress—enough stress (energy) to get moving and keep moving but not so much as to freeze action (distress). But our three guides offer a more complicated picture. There is something about the very nature of reason that it cannot proceed without desire.

It makes no difference whether that desire is sexual, or political or spiritual. In that sense, all desire is important. But there is another sense in which desire is judged—by Socrates and Diotima at least—by its

object and by whether that object is so positioned to move the direction of desire toward divine beauty.

Mayo wants to keep the body in desire. Oddly perhaps, I don't think she's so clear about how/why this matters, but I also don't think she has to be. She offers something more powerful than a defense of the body. She tells us that that desire is something one cannot do alone. It is relational. She tells us that desire is our link to the world and the others who inhabit it, the world in which the body enacts desire. We are cut off from the very possibility of beauty, of creativity when we disrespect the body. Am I right, Cris?

MAYO: Yes, that's right.

STENGEL: Good. You also tell us that desire's task is futurity. So if I understand correctly, we become what we love, what we desire. Desire is not just our link to the world; it is our link to growth, to genesis, to becoming. But Cris, why do you emphasize futurity and not creativity? Why is it more important to you to emphasize the "essential temporality" of human living than it is to link desire to genesis, to what may well be the divine in the world? You miss the opportunity here, I think, to ground your own claim that centralizing desire (including bodily desire) is the tool for touching that which is fully human. (And I would want to assert that "fully human" is as close as we can come to divine.)

MAYO: Well, Barb, surely you know that I am not excluding creativity from a vision of futurity. I will have to think more about whether I even want to bring the divine into the picture.

STENGEL: OK, but I have another question. You tell me that the motivating force of desire can direct itself multiply. I can see how your understanding of desire might work for an economics of the Other, but I don't see how to make sense out of it when I pursue an economics of myself. I experience competing desires on a regular basis, all of which move me to action. The result sometimes seems to be nothing but pain...and all those competing desires sure do gum up the works of reason.

How *do* I distinguish between and among the desires that impact me? Any thoughts?

MAYO: Barb, I hope you will give me some time to work this out. As you know, while this work does build on what I have done before, it's really just begun.

STENGEL: Of course I will. I don't mean to rush you. But here's another thing I want to ask, and I have to ask it flat out. Do you not see the danger in desire? I confess surprise that you did not repeat the words of Foucault here.

MAYO: Ah Barb, I know what you mean: Foucault's 1983 statement, "My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is *dangerous*, which is not exactly the same as bad."²

STENDEL: Yes, Cris, that's the passage that comes to mind. It's one that you have quoted,³ am I right? I assume you recognize the danger in desire. Can you talk about that now?

MAYO: The danger is that desire comes to control us. I acknowledge that when I quote the *Phaedo*. And that's why I make use of Kant as well. The disruption of desire is also productive, in part because it reins in what could come to control us.

STENDEL: Yes, you make that point, but your warning is lost in your paean to desire. Desire offers the energy needed to overcome inertia, to move us in the direction of the future, to energize learning, to stimulate creativity. But as energy, it has no direction. Direction must come from oneself. These are, of course, not my ideas. Do you recognize them?

MAYO: Knowing you, Barb, it's probably John Dewey.

STENDEL: Well yes, it is Dewey, but I was thinking about the one who brings Dewey to the masses, not unlike Plato has for Socrates.

MAYO: Oh, you mean Jim Garrison.

STENDEL: And why do you not use *Dewey and Eros*⁴ as a source here?

MAYO: Well, Barb, you know I'm not so much the pragmatist.

STENDEL: Oh, that's right. I did know that.

Still, you have more in common with Garrison's Dewey than you may realize. You talk about desire and you make it clear that you mean desire construed broadly as this energy that motivates futurity construed as learning. To use Garrison's line, "our destiny is in our desires." But the power of desire requires that it be educated—not by rational criticism toward predetermined "higher" forms, but in just the way you seem to be suggesting when you remind us that learning, like desire, is not something you can do alone. It's the relational quality of desire that acts to defeat the tendency to control. You have come to us today with a song that rehabilitates desire, that recenters eros in the educational task. It will not be without its dangers but it is a worthy task. I have just one more question.

MAYO: I know better than to ask you to withhold it.

STENDEL: By virtue of your focus on futurity, you and Garrison and Dewey share a kind of progressive, Western world view as you sing to love. How would the conversation change if the Buddha supped with us this night? In what is reputed to be his first sermon at Varanasi, he said that

one should seek the Middle Way, neither “the pursuit of desires and of the pleasure which springs from desire” calling it “base” and “leading to rebirth ignoble” nor the pursuit of pain and hardship (also ignoble).⁵ Enlightenment comes only when craving stops. It is the dissolution of desire. And what about our contemporary Eckhart Tolle who speaks to “the power of now,” urging all to forgo a focus on futurity for an appreciation of the present moment’s gifts.⁶ Some may dismiss Tolle as “New Age” but his voice captures a sentiment for which there is some sympathy.

I suspect that’s too much to ask all at once. So never mind. I don’t know whether I have met my mandate to sing a song to Eros. It cannot be helped now, for I must depart.

I am back from the Symposium with just one more thought. At the outset, I noted Mayo’s use of Kant and Plato as vehicles for crafting her argument to recenter desire in the educational process broadly construed and promised a thought about why. I am reminded of something Garrison says in the introduction to Dewey and Eros: “In seeking wisdom, I choose ancient implements to clear a path.”⁷ Mayo’s work in this project seems to me to be a deeper, richer extension of the issues that have guided her in earlier stages of her career. The questions she is asking—about the nature of desire, about the interplay of mind and body, about the possibility of learning—are perennial questions that wisdom seekers, philosophers, have always asked. Fresh answers to such questions have a potentially profound impact not on education viewed as an intention instrumental to other social goals, but on education understood as human living par excellence. It is not surprising that Mayo would choose ancient implements to clear this important path.

NOTES

1. This response was presented in dialogue form. My thanks are extended to Cris Mayo for her good-natured willingness to participate in my response, and for her willingness to deviate from the script when the spirit moved her.
2. Michel Foucault, interview, “On the Genealogy of Ethics,” in *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, ed. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 232.
3. Cris Mayo, “The Uses of Foucault,” *Educational Theory* 50, no. 1 (2000): 103–116.
4. Jim Garrison, *Dewey and Eros* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997).
5. “Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta” [Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion], from the Pali, trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/canon/sutta/samyutta/sn-56-011-tb0.html>.
6. Eckhart Tolle, *The Power of Now* (Novato, Calif.: New World Library, 1999).

7. Garrison, *Dewey and Eros*, xx.
