

## EROS AS THE Ἰδέα OF THE SOUL IN THE *SYMPOSIUM*

In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates argues for the immortality of the soul, on the supposition that “the always moving is immortal” (*Phd*, 245c), and the hypothesis that “[i]f the soul exists in this way, namely that this thing which moves itself is nothing other than soul, then it would have to be that the soul is both immortal and ungenerated” (*Phd*, 245e-246a). In that same dialogue, the “look” (ιδέα) (*Phd*, 246a) of the soul manifests Eros as the source of the soul’s ungenerated motion. In the *Symposium*, Socrates’ λόγος about Eros connects the soul’s immortality to its knowledge of Eros’ origin, nature, and gift to humans, a knowledge whose sine qua non is the soul’s initiation into the mystery of Eros’ dual nature.

That Plato presents Socrates’ speech about Eros in the *Symposium* as entirely unoriginal cannot be an accident. No dramatic effort is made to conceal its origin in his soul’s μιμησις, first, of the results of Diotima’s instruction (199C-201E), and, next, in a μιμησις of this instruction itself (201E-212A). Socrates’ “own” λόγος about Eros, and, therefore, the basis for his “claim to understand nothing other than matters of Eros” (177DE), is not really his own, then, but that of another’s,

namely his priestly guide in erotic matters. His speech relates how the Mantinean woman’s tuition led him to the knowledge of Eros as a daimonic mixture of opposites that are incapable of ever being brought into concordance. The Eros made manifest in Socrates’ λόγος is therefore an impossible being according Eryximachus’ medical standard of knowledge. Lacking beauty, he is not something good and therefore only incorrectly identified with the beloved, a mistake made by both the young Socrates and Agathon. Lacking unity, Eros nevertheless is not searching for any missing half or whole, unless either happens to be good for its own sake. Thus, true Eros is not the lover of Aristophanes, whose speech makes no mention of the good at all. Being between ugliness and beauty, Eros is akin to true opinion, which only is by reason of non-being, as it is neither ignorance nor knowledge. Eros, therefore, is a lover of wisdom, and, like all philosophers, he is somewhere between total ignorance and complete knowledge.

Socrates’ non-original λόγος of the final and highest truth of Eros’ non-being points to the lover and the beloved, both together in their opposition, becoming inseparable in one soul. However, not every soul has the potency to unite Eros in this way but only the soul that has been initiated into the true nature of beauty and the truth belonging to the origin of the finest offspring of Eros’ common desire to conceive and

give birth in beauty. The initiation into both the truth of beauty and the origin of Eros' finest offspring is rooted in knowledge (first ἐπιστήμη, then μάθημα) of Eros' origin, nature, and gift to humans. The theogonic story of Eros' origin in seduction, divine madness, and the celebration of the birth of beauty, of course, does not constitute, properly speaking, this knowledge. But it does prepare the soul of the initiate to catch sight of a being whose manner of being, as a whole, is characterized by what is manifest in Plato's Symposium as the unstable "community" (koinônia) of desire, divine madness, seductive cunning, and beauty, which, despite not exhibiting any universal link or connection among themselves, are nevertheless always present wherever and whenever Eros is present.

Diotima divides her initiation into a preparatory and final teaching about the mystery of Eros. The preparatory initiation concerns the Eros common to all humans, and it is guided by a knowledge that orders the suppositions behind Eros' common recognition, a recognition that defines all the speeches preceding Socrates', by dividing and gathering them together into a series of pairs. Eros is accordingly divided into the lover and beloved, while the lover's desire for immortality and happiness is divided in turn, into the desire for beauty

and the desire to conceive and beget in pure beauty; likewise, the beautiful beloved of this divided desire is divided into beautiful bodies and beautiful souls; so, too, are Eros' offspring divided, into physical and immortal children. Finally, the φρονέσις and ἄρετή that are begotten in the souls of creative poets and craftsmen are divided between that ordering their souls and that ordering (διακοσμήσεις) households and cities. The divided knowledge of the common Eros is asymmetrical, however, because both halves of the pairs are not recognized as equal: the lover is more divine than the beloved; the desire to conceive and beget in pure beauty is more lovely than the desire for beautiful things; the beauty of the beloved soul is greater than that of the beloved body; the immortality of the "spiritual" children is greater than that of physical children; and the greatest part of φρονέσις is not the part that orders the souls that conceive and beget it in συνουσία and education (παιδεύειν), but that part that provides διακοσμήσεις to households and cities (209A).

Diotima's preparatory instruction of Socrates' is itself divided by her question to him about the cause (αἴτιον) of Eros and desire, which she "one day" (207A) asked him about. Her "natural" explanation to Socrates of this cause fits neither with her account of the common

Eros that comes before it nor with what follows it, her perfectly sophisticated (τέλειοι σοφωτισται) (208C) account of the “irrationality” (ἀλογίας) of lovers that she says is rooted in Eros’ and desire’s natural cause. The cause in question is the impermanence of genesis, which governs both the properties of the body and the possessions of the soul (including knowledge!), such that each is both always coming into being and passing away. What appears as the same in the body or soul is actually a semblance of the original, which keeps on being itself by continuous regeneration. Only in this way—and in no other—can the mortal partake immortality, which eliminates Diotima’s wonder about why all animals, and not just humans, are “sick” with the desire both for intercourse and to provide and care for their offspring, as they all have an Eros for immortality. Socrates’ wonder about the truth of Eros (208B), however, is not eliminated by this account, no doubt because it does not address beauty at all in relation to Eros’ cause and therefore removes the relation to the beautiful from Eros and desire. Presumably, too, the perfect sophistry of the account that follows is connected with a deficiency in relation to beauty, because Eros is restricted in this account to the desire for beautiful bodies (σώματα τὰ καλὰ) (209B).

Socrates’ preparatory initiation comes to an end with Diotima’s announcement that while “even” he could probably be initiated into the

erotic matters discussed thus far, she has doubt about whether he is ready for the initiation into the final and highest mystery, to which the instruction thus far has been merely en route. The path to this mystery involves two ascensions. The first ascension charts the path from beautiful bodies to the εἶδος of beauty itself, while the second points the way beyond even the “single knowledge” (τινὰ ἐπιστήμην) (210C) of the everlasting being of beauty’s one form (μονοειδὲς), to the beautiful itself as the learning matter (μαθημάτων) 211C) that leads to the divine vision of the “beautiful through that which makes it visible” (ὁρῶντι ὃ ὁρατὸν τὸ καλόν) (212A). The highpoint of the first ascension is only reached after the lover comes to value the beauty of souls over that of bodies, while that of the second is achieved when the lover finds it only worthwhile to live his life begetting and rearing the true ἀρετή born from being in touch with true beauty’s source. The advance to valuing the beauty of souls over that of bodies requires that the lover is properly guided from the love of one to two beautiful bodies, and from the beautiful λόγοι engendered therein, to the love of all beautiful bodies born in the recognition of their common beauty, a recognition that slackens his Eros for just one beautiful body. The ascension of psychic beauty that follows this yields the lover’s finding satisfaction in

edifying converse with the beloved, notwithstanding the beloved's body's lack of beauty, and leads eventually to his vision of the kinship of beauty in the deeds and νόμοι engendered by beautiful souls. And, with this, the lover's vision alights beauty itself, which is "nearby" (σχεδόν) (211B) his final goal. The lover's achievement of this goal is not only said by Diotima to engender true ἀρετή, namely, the source of φρονέσις and its greatest part διακοσμήσεις in households and cities, but also to win for the lover the love (θεοφιλεῖ) of the gods and therefore for him—above all men—whatever share in immortality is possible for a mortal. The soul of such a lover, it must be stressed, in becoming the beloved of the gods, therefore succeeds in bringing together—in one soul—the lover and beloved.

Apollodorus reports that Socrates concluded his speech by telling "Phaedrus and you others" that Diotima persuaded him of this, and that all of the company except Aristophanes applauded Socrates. And, as the latter was beginning to respond to Socrates' speech's criticism of his own, Socrates' drunken beloved, Alcibiades, enters. Had Aristophanes been able to complete his response, Socrates most likely would have been challenged to make explicit the basis of his speech's criticism of Aristophanes, which concerned the connection between the lover's desire for unity and the good. But instead of a discussion of this

there is a final speech not about Eros's truth but about the truth of Socrates' Eros. The salient revelations of this truth are two: (1) in praxis, Socrates' did not yield to the seductions of Athens' greatest seducer and vulgar lover, and, (2), Socrates, despite the ugliness of his body, is the beloved not only the gods but of mortals too—despite his being, or, perhaps, because of his being—the greatest lover of both.

The dialogue's dramatic incompleteness mirrors the incompleteness of its treatment of its subject matter. The true goal of Eros, the Good, or the independent One, is never explicitly discussed in its relation to beauty. The content of the dramatic completion of the dialogue is also incomplete, as Aristodemus fell asleep for a long time, awakening only at the end of Socrates' attempt to prove to Agathon and Aristophanes that the same man could have the knowledge necessary to compose comedy and tragedy.

By way of a conclusion, I propose the following suppositions in relation to the reason for the incompleteness of Plato's dialogue the *Symposium*:

1. The truth of Socrates' Eros made manifest in the dialogue is not rooted in the distinction between two determinate kinds of Eros, the vulgar and the heavenly—but, rather, it is rooted in the recognition of the indeterminate twofoldness of Eros' being. From this recognition

follows the necessity of ever-renewing the exemplary lover's (e.g., Socrates') knowledge of Eros,<sup>1</sup> which, like all the soul's possessions, is impermanent. This knowledge is the source of the soul's potency (δύναμις) both to recognize in Eros' vulgarity the initial appearance of Eros' true goal—the incomparable unity of the Idea of the Good that is the true source of all beauty (sensible, psychic, intelligible)—and to employ the more fully disclosed truth of this goal as the guide of the soul's erotic desire to conceive and beget in beauty.

2. The Platonic Eros is therefore neither a singular passion with a representative mode of being that lends itself to the possession of an Ego nor an affection that originates in the body. Not being the former, Eros is beyond the ambit (let alone “intervention”) of the Ego's cognitive judgment; not being the latter, Eros' origin clearly lies beyond the world of sensible bodies and of the discovery by mortals of their causal laws. While knowledge of Eros is possible, this knowledge, like Eros itself, is subject to the endless cycle of coming into and passing out of being that defines the semblance of even the most immortal of human lives.

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<sup>1</sup> Dramatically portrayed in the Symposium by Socrates' συνοήσις before arriving at the banquet.