
PLATO (C. 429—347 BCE) – THE SYMPOSIUM DIALOGUE

The Speech of Aristophanes

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STUDIES

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Guthrie, W.K.C. *Plato: the Man and His Dialogues—the Earlier Period*. Volume 4 of *A History of Greek Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975.

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ANALYSIS BY R.E. ALLEN (1991): 32-37

“Aristophanes no more expresses Plato's theory of love than Calicles in the *Gorgias* expresses Plato's theory of Justice; Aristophanes is a character in a Dialogue, and not the leading character. Jung and Freud also misinterpret Aristophanes, whose story implies

that individual human being are not inherently bisexual, but inherently either homosexual or heterosexual; it is the primitive whole, not its halves, which is capable on occasion, of being androgynous [189d-e, 191d—192b].” (32)

“Aristophanes ... has given a brilliant analysis of romantic love, offering an etiological myth that explains Eros by a quasi-historical account of the division of human nature. Each of us is the product of our ancestor’s bisection: just as they were primitively combined with one, and only one, other person to constitute a whole of which each was half, so we are halves longing to meet one and only one person who is our other half, so that in our union we become whole.” (33)

“This implies the *uniqueness* of the Beloved: **if Eros is desire for wholeness, there is one, and only one, other half that will satisfy that desire....** The desire for wholeness is directly connected with intrinsic delight in the presence of the Beloved.” (33)

“The uniqueness of the Beloved and the intrinsic delight in the presence of the Beloved imply that **Eros involves much more than sexual intercourse....** Again, *delight in the Beloved implies a desire for permanent association with the Beloved*, whereas desire for sexual intercourse ceases when appetite is satisfied. Eros is not the same as Aphrodite.” (33)

“But there is another side. Diotima will show that romantic love implies immortal longings, and Aristophanes’ claim that lovers wish something besides sexual intercourse, a permanent union that they cannot describe but only hint at obscurely, is perhaps proleptic to Diotima’s account of **Eros as implicitly love of Beauty itself**. *If this is true, then the most fundamental desire of our nature is not for another human being, but implicitly for knowledge or contemplation of what always is and never changes.*” (35)

INTRODUCTION BY ROBIN WATERFIELD (1994): XI-XLV

“Plato’s *Symposium* is without a doubt one of the most famous works of literature in the Western world. It is living proof that a great book does not need to be a long book.” (xi)

WE DO NOT UNDERSTAND LOVE

“As a topic, love is not far from being a great unknown to most people. We think of certain feelings that arise, especially in our hearts, as love or as manifestations of love;

this may be right, but it does not bring us any closer to understanding love, **and as long as we do not understand a subject ourselves, we are prey to external influences.**" (xi)

NOT COURTLY LOVE, NOT ROMANTIC LOVE

"The first [Courtly Love] gives us our tendency to over-invest in the object of our affection - to put him or her on a pedestal (and then later to be disappointed by his or her humanity); the second [Romantic Love] gives us our tendency to think that in matters of love the heart should be trusted more than the head, and even that the head is positively to be ignored. Again, the reader should watch out for these conditioned ideas and resist the temptation to impose them on Plato or to judge Plato by their standards." (xii)

THE MEANING OF "SYMPOSIUM" IN GREEK SOCIETY

"The setting is a symposium hosted by the dramatist Agathon in the winter of 416 BCE.... Socrates ... was not as well off as the people who formed the nucleus of his circle, but his fame and influence among them was so great that he would certainly have been on their guest-lists.... The 'symposium' was an institution of upper-class Athenian life.... **The consumption of alcohol was indeed the main purpose of the party, but the evening meal would have been eaten first.** *The guests would all be men*; their host would provide chaplets and perfume, and they would recline in a half-lying position on couches. Their left arms rested on cushions and supported the upper half of their bodies, so that their right hands were free for eating and drinking from the table in front of them.... At the party which forms the setting of our book, the symposiasts urbane agree to dismiss the hired entertainment and amuse themselves by delivering speeches in praise of the god, Love personified." (xiii-xiv)

HOMOEROTICISM

"In ancient Athens, homoeroticism was considered perfectly natural, especially in the leisured classes. I use the less familiar term *homoeroticism* because not many Athenians were actually homosexual in the sense of being inclined to love *only* members of their own sex: **Pausanias and Agathon in our Dialogue, with their life-long affair, were exceptions rather than the rule.** More commonly, the same people were sexually inclined towards members of both sexes; and Athenian society did not regard the

homoerotic element as perverted and the heteroerotic element as normal.... There are undoubtedly social factors at work here. **Any society which represses its women as much as ancient Athens did runs the risk of forcing its members to find other outlets for their sexuality.**" (xv)

SOCRATES' ATTITUDE TOWARDS HOMOEROTICISM

"Plato, then, certainly portrays Socrates as attracted towards young men and boys.... It seems likely that Socrates exploited the homoerotic nature of the Athenian circle within which he moved for his own ends. **If he played the lover and pursued young men, he was trying to make them consummate a lifelong affair with philosophy, not with himself; he turned the 'patronage' of the lover to educational purposes.**" (xvii)

LOVE IN PLATO

"It is still possible to read in the literature the idea that for Plato beauty is the object of love. But this is wrong: this is Agathon's idea, and it is explicitly denied by Diotima.... **It is not beauty which is the object, but happiness**, which in turn is defined as the permanent possession of goodness. Beauty is our means to that goal, in the sense that in its various manifestations it is our partner - the medium or receptacle in which we can give birth to children who will guarantee, or who we think will guarantee, our happiness. *We may be attracted towards beauty, but our real goal is happiness.*" (xxxiv)

INTRODUCTION BY PROF. BENJAMIN JOWETT

"**Of all the works of Plato the *Symposium* is the most perfect in form**, and may be truly thought to contain more than any commentator has ever dreamed of; or, as Goethe said of one of his own writings, more than the author himself knew. For in philosophy, as in prophecy, glimpses of the future may often be conveyed in words which could hardly have been understood or interpreted at the time when they were uttered. (Cp. *Symp.* 210a foll., 223d.) More than any other Platonic work the *Symposium* is Greek both in style and subject, having a beauty 'as of a statue,' while the companion Dialogue of the *Phaedrus* is marked by a sort of Gothic irregularity. More

too than in any other part of his writings, Plato is emancipated from former philosophies. The genius of Greek art seems to triumph over the traditions of Pythagorean, Eleatic, or Megarian systems, and ‘the old quarrel of poetry and philosophy’ has at least a superficial reconciliation. (Rep. 607b.)

“An unknown person who had heard of the discourses in praise of love spoken by Socrates and others at the banquet of Agathon, is desirous of having an authentic account of them, which he thinks that he can obtain from Apollodorus, the same excitable, or rather ‘mad’ friend of Socrates, who has already appeared in the *Phaedo*. He had imagined that the discourses were recent. There he is mistaken: but they are still fresh in the memory of his informant, who had just been repeating them to Glaucon, and is quite prepared to have another rehearsal of them in a walk from the Piraeus to Athens. He had not indeed been present himself, but he had heard them from the best authority. Aristodemus, who is described as having been in past times a sort of humble but inseparable attendant of Socrates, had reported them to him.

[And then specifically regarding the speech of Aristophanes, Jowett writes:]

“**Aristophanes professes to open a new vein of discourse, in which he begins by treating of the origin of human nature.** The sexes were originally three, men, women; and the union of the two;¹ and they were made round, having four hands, four feet, two faces on a round neck, and the rest to correspond. Terrible was their strength and swiftness; and they were essaying to scale heaven and attack the gods. Doubt reigned in the celestial councils; the gods were divided between the desire of quelling the pride of man and the fear of losing the sacrifices. At last Zeus hit upon an expedient. Let us cut them in two, he said; then they will only have half their strength, and we shall have twice as many sacrifices. He spake, and split them as you might split an egg with a hair; and when this was done, he told Apollo to give their faces a twist and rearrange their persons, taking out the wrinkles and tying the skin in a knot about the navel. **The two halves went about looking for one another, and were ready to die of hunger in one another's arms. Then Zeus invented an adjustment of the sexes, which enabled them to marry and go their way to the business of life.** Now the characters of men differ accordingly as they are derived from the original man or the original woman, or the original man-woman. Those who come from the man-woman are lascivious and adulterous; those who come from the woman form female attachments; those who are a section of the male follow the male and embrace him, and in him all their desires centre. They cannot tell what they want of one another, but they live in pure and manly affection and cannot be separated. If Hephaestus were to come to them and propose that they should be melted into one and remain one in this world and in the world

¹ In other words, there were originally three forms of human nature: Man; Woman; Man-Woman.

below, they would acknowledge that this was the very expression of their want. *Love is the desire of the whole, and the pursuit of the whole is called love.* There was a time when the two sexes were only one, but now God has halved them, - much as the Lacedaemonians have cut up the Arcadians, - and if they don't behave themselves he will quarter them, and they will hop about with half a nose and face *in basso relieve*. Wherefore let us exhort all men to piety, that we may obtain the goods of which love is the author, and be reconciled to God, and find our own true loves, which rarely happens in this world. And now I must beg you not to suppose that I am alluding to Pausanias and Agathon, for my words refer to all mankind everywhere.”

Robin Waterfield (1994: xxiii-xxiv) writes: “Aristophanes' speech is bound to strike us as exceptional for its Rabelaisian whimsy, its pathos, and its psychological insight. There is no telling how it would have struck ancient reader, and, we cannot even be sure whether or not it is supposed to bring a smile to our lips.... Is it a satire on romantic love, or is it a sad commentary on the elusiveness of true happiness (which become dependent upon the hazard of meeting one's true partner) and on the unsatisfactoriness of sex as a poor second best to the total unification we are really after?... **Love may be a cosmic universal force, but in human beings it is a longing for lost happiness.** Diotima would agree that love can fulfill one's highest aspirations, but would disagree with quite how Aristophanes sees those aspirations being fulfilled, **and she would also put more control over our happiness into our own hands rather than into those of an external soul-mate.**”

Allan Bloom (2001: 103-4) writes: “Taking Eros seriously is, at least from Aristophanes' point of view, connected with his opinion that man is primarily a *comic* being. The comic speech of Aristophanes ... is a masterpiece that shows as clearly as anything the level of Plato's literary genius. He puts in the mouth of the greatest of all comic poets a speech that is at least worthy of Aristophanes and perhaps, in the brilliance of its invention, surpasses anything Aristophanes could have done.... That the philosopher should be compelled to do such a thing teaches us something about the nature of ancient philosophy that we are all too likely to neglect. In ordinary histories of philosophy Aristophanes plays no role, whereas in Plato's presentation he is central. **Plato is persuaded that the philosopher must meet this great poet on his own ground and try to surpass him. This shows that philosophy must be comprehensive, that it must contain all the charms within it, and that poetry is perhaps the most powerful of charms.** The poets up to Socrates' own day had told men much more about man than had the philosophers.”

Allan Bloom (2001: 104-5) writes: “Moreover, Plato makes Aristophanes the expositor of the truest and most satisfying account of Eros that we find in the *Symposium*. **There has probably never been a speech or poem about love that so captures what men and women actually feel when they embrace each other....** Once one knows Aristophanes'

speech, it is very difficult to forget it when one most needs it. **It is the speech for an experience that is speechless.**”

THE SPEECH (388-387 BCE) OF ARISTOPHANES (189C – 193E)

[189] Then, as my friend related, Aristophanes took up the word and said: “Yes, it has stopped, though not until it was treated with a course of sneezing, such as leaves me wondering that the orderly principle of the body should call for the noises and titillations involved in sneezing; you see, it stopped the very moment I applied the sneeze to it.”

The very physicality of Aristophanes as he is introduced – sneezing uncontrollably – suggests a very bodily way he has of analyzing the world and its meaning. And this very bodiliness of a person is what grounds humor, a sense of the ridiculous.

“My good Aristophanes,” replied Eryximachus, “take heed what you are about. Here are you buffooning before ever you begin, and compelling me [B] to be on the watch for the first absurdity in your own speech, when you might deliver it in peace.”

At this Aristophanes laughed, and—“Quite right, Eryximachus,” he said; “I unsay all that I have said. Do not keep a watch on me; for as to what is going to be said, my fear is not so much of saying something absurd—since that would be all to the good and native to my Muse—as something utterly ridiculous.”

“You think you can just let fly, Aristophanes, and get off unscathed! **Have a good care to speak only what you can defend;** [C] though perhaps I may be pleased to let you off altogether.”²

This remark about being able to “defend” one’s remarks in front of one’s hearers gives notice that the *symposium* habit in Greek culture was a serious vying, one man before the others; it was an agonistic exercise. Though done in the context of leisure and drink (and drunkenness), this exercise of speeches was a serious thing.

² Plato, *Lysis, Symposium, Gorgias: English Text*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson, trans. W. R. M. Lamb, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA; London, England: Harvard University Press, 1925), 133.

LOVE "THE BEST FRIEND OF MEN; THE HELPER AND HEALER OF ILLS"

“It is indeed my intention, Eryximachus,” said Aristophanes, “to speak in somewhat different strain from you and Pausanias. **For in my opinion humanity has entirely failed to perceive the power of Love:** if men did perceive it, they would have provided him with splendid temples and altars, and would splendidly honour him with sacrifice; whereas we see none of these things done for him, though they are especially his due.

Notice that Aristophanes seeks to explore not what Love *is*, but its *power*; that is, what it causes human beings to do.

OUR ORIGINAL NATURE: "THE PRIMEVAL HUMAN WAS ROUND"

[D] He of all gods is most friendly³ to men⁴; he succours mankind and heals those ills⁵ whose cure must be the highest happiness of the human race. Hence I shall try and introduce you to his power, that you may transmit this teaching to the world at large. You must begin your lesson with the nature of man and its development. For our original nature was by no means the same as it is now. In the first place, there were three kinds of human beings, [E] not merely the two sexes, male and female, as at present:

³ This adjective *philanthropos* (here in the superlative form) is the same adjective (and noun form) that the early Fathers of the Church used to name the Incarnation: they called it the *philanthropy*; that is, the love (*phil-*) of God for humanity (*anthropos*). It reads: ἔστι γὰρ θεῶν φιλανθρωπότατος, Plato, *Lysis, Symposium, Gorgias: Greek Text*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1925), 134.

⁴ It is significant that Aristophanes begins his exploration of Love (and of Friendship) by examining human nature - the way it actually is and what it requires. This is important, because it places the whole investigation at the level of existence rather than of accident. Love, and Friendship, has something to do with *being*, rather than, say, a preference one has or an accidental occurrence that one can just as easily do without.

⁵ R.E. Allen (1991): 31 writes: “Aristophanes revises the naturalism of Eryximachus by treating Eros, not as a dual cosmic force at work in the world process at large, which also represents its friendship or attunement, *but as a single healing force within human beings.*”

there was a third kind as well, which had equal shares of the other two, and whose name survives though the thing itself has vanished.⁶

WKC Guthrie (1975): 371-2 writes: “To understand the power of Eros, and how much we are indebted to him, one must know the nature and history of mankind. Originally, there were three sexes—male, female, and hermaphrodite. Individuals were round in shape, back and sides forming a circle—with four arms and four legs, one head with two faces and four ears, two sets of reproductive organs and everything else to match.... **In the pride of their strength, they attacked the gods.... Therefore, the instinct of love is an attempt to restore our original state.** Halves of hermaphrodites are heterosexual, halves of women are Lesbians, and those of men are drawn to men from their boyhood.... For our happiness we must take Eros as leader, and obeying his command find our true mate, or at least the one most congenial to our own nature, and by fulfilling our love return as nearly as possible to our pristine state.”⁷

For ‘man-woman’¹ [i.e., an *androgynous* person] was then a unity in form no less than name, composed of both sexes and sharing equally in male and female; whereas now it has come to be merely a name of reproach. Secondly, the form of each person was round all over, with back and sides encompassing it every way; each had four arms, and legs to match these, and two faces perfectly alike [190] on a cylindrical neck. There was one head to the two faces, which looked opposite ways; there were four ears, two privy members, and all the other parts, as may be imagined, in proportion. The creature walked upright as now, in either direction as it pleased; and whenever it started running fast, it went like our acrobats, whirling over and over with legs stuck out straight; only then they had eight limbs to support and speed them [B] swiftly round and round.⁸

Where Aristophanes came up with such a bizarre image/story is unknown, though it is likely it is the fruit of his own fecund imagination. He knows what he wants to convey about *what it feels like for us* to long to be whole, to find our

⁶ Plato, *Lysis, Symposium, Gorgias: English Text*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson, trans. W. R. M. Lamb, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA; London, England: Harvard University Press, 1925), 135.

⁷ It is worth pondering whether our entry into friendship involves a *returning* to a state of being we once were or, as I would strongly aver, an entry into a whole new way of being a self, a genuine *advance* of one's being.

¹ *i.e.* “hermaphrodite”; *cf.* Lucret. v. 837 foll.

⁸ Note how this is intended to be funny! Perhaps Aristophanes judges that an account of human being is *flawed* to the degree that it fails to inspire laughter.

“other half”; that is, to become whole. He invents a story – these rounded doubles – to get his hearers on towards the point he wishes to make about Love.

THE SEXES WERE THREE: CHILDREN OF SUN, MOON, AND EARTH

The number and features of these three sexes were owing to the fact that the male was originally the offspring of the sun, and the female of the earth; while that which partook of both sexes was born of the moon, for the moon also partakes of both.¹ They were globular in their shape as in their progress, since they took after their parents. Now, they were of surprising strength and vigour, and so lofty in their notions that they even conspired against the gods;⁹

It is such a curious and compelling fact how often, and very early in the literacy of the human race, we have written testimony to a widely-held conviction that human beings, very early on, sought to challenge the gods ... and that the gods noticed this and then acted to curb the *hybris* of human beings.

Now the sexes were three, and such as I have described them; because the sun, moon, and earth are three; and the man was originally the child of the sun, the woman of the earth, and the man-woman of the moon, which is made up of sun and earth, and they were all round and moved round and round like their parents.

THE MYTH OF OTYS AND EPHIALTES: THE DECISION TO SPLIT HUMAN BEINGS

The significance and power of *myth* is demonstrated here, demonstrating how such a story can be as much about the truth as can be a philosophical discourse. This story told by Aristophanes can be (and to imitate a thought from G.K. Chesterton when talking about dragons in children stories) *more than true*, because it so successfully evokes in its hearers what it actually feels like to be a human being, to feel incomplete and to not know why, and yet to go throughout

^{*1} The double sex of the moon is mentioned in an Orphic hymn (ix. 4): *cf.* Macrob. iii. 8.

⁹ Plato, *Lysis, Symposium, Gorgias: English Text*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson, trans. W. R. M. Lamb, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA; London, England: Harvard University Press, 1925), 135–137.

the world seeking a wholeness they each know that they lacked ... and do not know why they lack it or why someone took it from them.

Now, they were of surprising strength and vigour, and so lofty in their notions that they even conspired against the gods;¹⁰ and the same story is told of them as Homer relates of [C] Ephialtes and Otus [Giants],² that scheming to assault the gods in fight¹¹ they essayed to mount high heaven.¹²

In a time when the **soul** (and its powers) of human beings was mostly unknown, and even in our own age when people have lost touch with soul (and its powers), the ability **to be powerful meant being physically big** (in this case, Ephialtes and Otys are giants). And so only human beings *really big* might take on the gods.

“Thereat Zeus and the other gods debated what they should do, and were perplexed: for they felt they could not slay them like the Giants, whom they had abolished root and

¹⁰ It is worth recalling that Aristophanes was one of the first men of Athens to condemn Socrates; Socrates who went about saying that Zeus did not exist, or any of the Olympian gods. **Allan Bloom (2001: 104)** writes: “One must not forget that Aristophanes was said by Socrates to be his first accuser and to have made an important contribution to the actions that led to his execution.” And, later at page 106: “In the *Apology* Socrates does not even attempt to prove that he believes in the Olympian gods, but he does say that he has never denied that the sun and moon are gods [i.e., the ‘cosmic gods’ rather than the ‘Olympian gods’].”

² Homer, *Od.* xi. 305 foll.; *Il.* v. 385 foll.

¹¹ Pierre Grimal in *The Dictionary of Classical Mythology* (1996), s.v. “Aloadae” writes: “The name given to the sons of Poseidon by Iphimedia, the daughter of Triops.... **Otus and Ephialtes, who were giants**; indeed each year they grew a cubit in breadth and a fathom in height. When they were nine years old, nine cubits (about four meters) broad and nine fathoms (nearly seventeen meters) tall, they decided to make war on the gods.”

¹² Recall here the account of Genesis of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11: 1-9). At verse 4 it reads, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.” And, regarding God's response to this arrogance, see v7: “Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech.”

branch with strokes of thunder—it would be only abolishing the honours and observances they had from men;¹³ nor yet could they endure such sinful rioting.¹⁴

In the Greek understanding, Zeus (the highest of the Olympian gods) had a particular care for the (human) *stranger* who meets other human beings, who was keenly aware of acts of inhospitality to strangers when performed by human beings, and who would punish the human beings who acted in this way. Think also of how often the Olympian gods would appear to human beings as strangers, disguised as human beings. There is some pathos, then, in seeing Zeus “perplexed” at what to do with human beings – strangers in relation to the gods.

ZEUS’ DECISION (190D-E)

Then Zeus, putting all his wits together, spake at length and said: ‘Methinks I can contrive that men, without ceasing to exist, shall give over their iniquity **through a lessening of their strength**. [D] I propose now to slice every one of them in two, so that while making them weaker we shall find them more useful by reason of their multiplication;¹⁵ and they shall walk erect upon two legs. If they continue turbulent and do not choose to keep quiet, I will do it again,’ said he; ‘I will slice every person in two, and then they must go their ways on one leg, hopping.’¹⁶

¹³ Notice the profound self-centered motivations of these gods. Their concern for human beings extends only to them as servants to the gods’ good pleasures. Yet, how often we can see this same pagan viewpoint in Christians today, who think that God wants what they, people, when really well off, would want for themselves.

¹⁴ Plato, [Lysis, Symposium, Gorgias: English Text](#), ed. Jeffrey Henderson, trans. W. R. M. Lamb, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA; London, England: Harvard University Press, 1925), 137.

¹⁵ We have an intriguing echo to the Genesis 2-3 account, in which the “earth creature” (the *Adamah*) is split, because “it is not good for the man to be alone.” **The biblical teaching leaves no room for the relation of this “splitting” to “punishment” for *hybris*, rather this splitting of Adamah is a *gift*, the gift of gender for the sake of responding to Adamah’s loneliness.**

¹⁶ I think here of C.S. Lewis’ characters in *Voyage of the Dawn Treader* – the Dufflepuds. A powerful link here to the Sacrament of Marriage in the Church, for in Aristophanes’ theory about Love, he links the healing of a person’s own nature with a healing of his or her relationship with the god Zeus. For Catholics, Marriage is precisely both of these: a healing within each other (the famous, or notorious, “remedy for concupiscence”) and with God.

Notice what worries Zeus and the gods is the physical strength of human beings, and how that, unchecked, was destined to challenge the physical strength of the gods.

ZEUS' ACTION¹⁷

So saying, he sliced each human being in two, just as they slice sorb-apples to make a dry preserve, or eggs with hairs; [E] and at the cleaving of each he bade Apollo turn its face and half-neck to the section side, in order that every one might be made more orderly by the sight of the knife's work upon him;¹⁸ this done,¹⁹ the god was to heal them up.²⁰

There is something profoundly cruel that Aristophanes teaches about Zeus and the gods here. Zeus mutilates in the most severe way this “rounded” creatures, and then commands Apollo (the physician god) to turn each half's head around **so that they could see, not just feel, how brutally violated they were.** There is no question but that this is about punishment, and about asserting control, about the humiliation of human beings, and about making sure they will always know whom not to challenge ever again.

¹⁷ Zeus acts to place a clear boundary on human being, doing so for the overtly selfish reasons of the Olympians, but doing so also to satisfy a taste for cruelty that he has. That is, not only does he severe human being in half, but then he also directs Apollo to twist and set the humans' head around so that they can contemplate the terrible gash Zeus had ordered in their beings.

¹⁸ R.E. Allen (1991): 31 writes: “So Zeus, in order to keep them alive but to weaken them, had them cut in two by Apollo and their faces turned toward the cut, so that they might become more orderly by contemplating the fact of their own division.”

¹⁹ Here one sees arriving the later idea, found especially in Cicero's *de Amicitia*, that a friend is “another self.” See Cicero's *Laelius: On Friendship* (129 BC): “was in earlier times one of the greatest European best-sellers, and exerted a tremendous influence, notably on Dante.... **But to the Romans, for whom ‘friendship’ meant an intricate affair of practical tit-for-tat upon which their whole political life was based,** it was clear that Cicero was striking a blow for a more idealistic approach than theirs.... it is based on something more elevated - on *a community of feeling.*”

²⁰ Plato, *Lysis, Symposium, Gorgias: English Text*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson, trans. W. R. M. Lamb, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA; London, England: Harvard University Press, 1925), 137–139.

APOLLO THE HEALER

Then Apollo²¹ turned their faces about, and pulled their skin together from the edges over what is now called the belly, just like purses which you draw close with a string; the little opening he tied up in the middle of the belly, so making what we know as the navel. [191] For the rest, he smoothed away most of the puckers and figured out the breast with some such instrument as shoemakers use in smoothing the wrinkles of leather on the last; though he left there a few which we have just about the belly and navel, to remind us of our early fall.²²

One senses in the work of Apollo here something of “art” – notice the attention to smoothing out the wrinkles – and some pride he takes to re-make what Zeus had so savagely mutilated.

THE RESULT: "EACH DESIRING HIS OR HER OTHER HALF"²³

Now when our first form had been cut in two, each half in longing for its fellow²⁴ would come to it again; and then would they fling their arms about each other and in mutual

²¹ The motive here seems strictly practical: human beings could not survive being torn in half, unless the wound could somehow be sewn together. But, further, **Allan Bloom (2001: 106-7)** writes: “Human beings are always imitations of the gods. In the first case, the circles, man imitates the cosmic gods [i.e., the sun and moon and earth are circular]; in the second case, they imitate the Olympian gods.... It is at this point that man becomes separated from the cosmos and has a nature peculiar to him. He now fears the gods, must seriously worship them, and live within a world determined by *nomoi* that are not natural.”

²² Plato, *Lysis, Symposium, Gorgias: English Text*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson, trans. W. R. M. Lamb, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA; London, England: Harvard University Press, 1925), 139.

²³ **Allan Bloom (2001: 107)** writes: "The cutting, the wound to human nature, inflicted by the Olympian gods, gave birth immediately to what is most distinctively human: longing, longing for wholeness. Thus, what is perhaps the most important strand of philosophy and literature come into being. Man is essentially an incomplete being, and full awareness of this incompleteness is essential to his humanity and ground for the specifically human quest for completeness or wholeness. Man must resist spurious contentment because it conceals his fundamental condition." The biblical teaching prefers to speak of the *creatureliness* of human being, teaching not that human being is "incomplete" so much as it is an intrinsically *dependent* being.

²⁴ **Allan Bloom (2001: 111)** writes: “Aristophanes’ loves are pointed towards each other horizontally, with no upwardness or transcendence implied in them. Socrates’ loves, as we shall see, are

embraces [B] yearn to be grafted together, till they began to perish of hunger and general indolence, through refusing to do anything apart. And whenever on the death of one half the other was left alone, it went seeking and embracing either any half of the whole woman (which now we call a woman), or any half of the whole man²⁵ on which it might happen.²⁶

Here Aristophanes captures so poignantly in this story *vital* (“vital” in the sense of *necessary*, not optional, for life) requirement that a person not be alone, that he or she have someone with whom to have a life. And the image of two mutilated “halves” clinging to each other is powerful, capturing something real and deep in our experience as human beings. But this *necessity to cling* compromises the other necessity that each half feed itself.

ZEUS' COMPASSION: THE CREATION OF SEXUAL INTIMACY

There is remarkable resonance in this story to the Genesis 2-3 story. In the biblical account of things in Paradise, God makes an earth-creature (*adamah*), a completely singular being, though as we learn, is somehow “in the image and likeness of God.” It is whole ... but as God later discovers is terribly alone, because unlike anything else in creation. In the biblical account, God has to consider this, and to put His mind to this “problem” posed by the earth-creature. And what God comes up with is the further creation of *gender*. But in the *splitting* of the originally whole earth-creature, forming what would now become a male and female human being, **it is God’s intent to bless both of them, and not to mutilate but to make wholeness possible.**

vertical, pointing upward and beyond. Aristophanes allows us to take our beloveds with the utmost seriousness, and this is what we seem to want in love. But, for those who have really plumbed the depth of the erotic [or, I should say, *human!*] experience, there is a haunting awareness that one wants something beyond, something that can poison our embraces.”

²⁵ The almost overwhelming *pathos* of this scene; the searing poignancy! Man would rather die from hunger than, turning away, lose his wholeness. **Allan Bloom (2001: 107)** writes: “So the first consequence of Zeus’ act was that the two halves were moved to embrace each other as if they were still a whole. But this made it impossible for men to do anything else, and they starved to death.”

²⁶ Plato, *Lysis, Symposium, Gorgias: English Text*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson, trans. W. R. M. Lamb, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA; London, England: Harvard University Press, 1925), 139.

In this plight they were perishing away, when Zeus in his pity provided a fresh device.²⁷ He moved their privy parts to the front—for until then they had these, like all else, on the outside, and did their begetting and bringing forth not on each other but on the earth, like the crickets.

Notice here that it is not Apollo who does this next bit of surgery, but Zeus himself! This is interesting. For it suggests that *sexuality – the power to make life*; or as we will see in this Symposium dialogue, *the capacity for immortality* – is something that only the highest god has the right to give to anyone or anything.

These parts he now shifted to the front, [C] to be used for propagating on each other - in the female member by means of the male; so that if in their embracements a man should happen on a woman there might be conception and continuation of their kind; and also, **if male met with male they might have some satiety of their union and a relief,**

I find this comment about the reason for sexual relations between men quite telling. **Notice there is nothing in this about a conjugal understanding of male with male “marriage”, such that it is being understood as simply a different and legitimate form of married life.** Rather, it is understood as a kind of remedy for sexual tension, or as Aristophanes has it, a relief. This would give some evidence to what Robin Waterfield (see my Notes above) that the Greeks were not so much about *homosexual* liaisons as a legitimate social institution, as it was about *homoeroticism*, a kind of equal opportunity practice of sexual relief with others.

and so might turn their hands to their labours and their interest to ordinary life.

²⁷ It ought to be noticed that not just any of the Olympians deals with human beings but only the highest god, Zeus.

Thus anciently is mutual love ingrained [D] in mankind, reassembling our early estate and endeavouring to combine two in one²⁸ and heal the human sore.²⁹

THE SEARCH FOR WHOLENESS IN THE OTHER

“Each of us, then, is but a tally¹ of a man, since every one shows like a flat-fish the traces of having been sliced in two; and *each is ever searching* for the tally that will fit him. All the men who are sections of that composite sex that at first was called man—woman are woman—courters; our adulterers are mostly descended from that sex, [E] whence likewise are derived our man-courting women and adulteresses. All the women who are sections of the woman have no great fancy for men: they are inclined rather to women, and of this stock³⁰ are the she-minions.³¹

²⁸ R.E. Allen (1991): 31 writes: “So this is **the origin of Eros**: he is inborn in us and unites our ancient nature, making one from two and healing us [191d]. Each of us is only a the token of a human being, sliced like a flatfish, and ever seeking his matching token (*symbolon*), whether that token is male or female.” Allan Bloom (2001: 105) writes: “Eros is, according to Aristophanes’ account, a very great god who provides man with the greatest of goods. But in the body of the speech, Aristophanes abandons all attempts to give a cosmic account of Eros. It is only human. **Eros is not a god but a kind of consolation provided to men by Zeus**. It is a very great good, but it is only a cure for a wound.” And later at page 110: “Eros is not in itself part of the natural order, but a compensation for the loss of the natural order.”

²⁹ Plato, *Lysis, Symposium, Gorgias: English Text*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson, trans. W. R. M. Lamb, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA; London, England: Harvard University Press, 1925), 139–141.

^{*1} A tally, or notched stick matching another, is the nearest English equivalent for σύμβολον, which was a half of a broken die given and kept as a token of friendship; see below, 193 A (λίσιπαι).

³⁰ That is, prostitutes. Aristophanes’ point that women who, finally, really prefer to be with women are the ones able to become prostitutes, offering “services” that fail to touch their own search for their others halves. But, something else worth noting is how Aristophanes is attempting a sort of metaphysic of human “types.” So, for example, a prostitute is the way she is not by some moral failing but out of something operative within her very nature. The same is true for the adulterer.

³¹ Plato, *Lysis, Symposium, Gorgias: English Text*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson, trans. W. R. M. Lamb, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA; London, England: Harvard University Press, 1925), 141.

WHY MEN SEEK MEN: BEING VALIANT THEY EMBRACE WHAT IS
VALIANT—"THEY EMBRACE THAT WHICH IS LIKE THEM"

Men who are sections of the male pursue the masculine, and so long as their boyhood lasts they show themselves to be slices of the male by making friends with men and delighting [192] to lie with them and to be clasped in men's embraces; these are the finest boys and striplings, for they have the most manly nature.³² Some say they are shameless creatures, but falsely: **for their behaviour is due not to shamelessness but to daring, manliness, and virility, since they are quick to welcome their like.** Sure evidence of this is the fact that on reaching maturity these alone prove in a public career to be men.³³

I recall here something in St. Thomas Aquinas, OP, when he is writing about how a divine being *likens* a human being to Himself, through which likening the lesser being is given the power to relate to, and understand to some degree, the higher being.

ST. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia. 43, 5 regarding "Whether it belongs to the Son to be sent invisibly."

REPLY, 2: "By grace the soul takes on a God-like form. That a divine person be sent to someone through grace, therefore, *requires a likening to the person sent through some particular gift of grace.* Since the Holy Spirit is Love, the likening of the soul to the Holy Spirit occurs through the gift of charity, and so the Holy Spirit's mission is accounted for by reason of charity. The Son in turn is the Word; not, however, just any word, but the Word breathing Love: "The Word as I want the meaning understood is a knowledge accompanied by love" (*De trinitate*, IX, 10). Consequently, not just any enhancing of the mind indicates the Son being sent, but only that sort of enlightening that bursts forth into love...."

So, what Aristophanes is teaching here is that a younger man, by being welcomed and held by an older and "excellent" specimen of a man, is *likened* to the latter. Aristophanes argues that this is not about shameless sexual intercourse

³² An interesting analysis of the homosexual relationship, primarily because it places the basis for same sex attraction and union at the level of Nature - one is born *towards* either the same or other sex. Thus if one is a male who is the other half of a male, then both fulfill their Nature (precisely in accord with Natural Law!) in their intimate union.

³³ Plato, *Lysis, Symposium, Gorgias: English Text*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson, trans. W. R. M. Lamb, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA; London, England: Harvard University Press, 1925), 141-143.

between an older man and a boy, but is about a young man being given a way to desire to be as strong and “excellent” as the older man. Very difficult for us in our age to grasp how this makes sense, how this makes emotional sense. I cannot grasp the insight, only the fact – how Aristophanes sees this fact of Greek life and defends it as something good.

THEIR DISINCLINATION TO MARRY AND BEGET CHILDREN: THE STATESMAN

So when they come to man’s estate [B] they are boy-lovers, and have no natural interest in wiving and getting children, but only do these things under stress of custom; they are quite contented to live together unwedded all their days. A man of this sort is at any rate born to be a lover of boys or the willing mate of a man, eagerly greeting his own³⁴ kind.³⁵

ἐπειδὴν δὲ ἀνδρωθῶσι, [B] παιδεραστοῦσι³⁶ - thus the English word “pederasty”.

Probably the most important part of that paragraph is Aristophanes’ insight that *each person seeks to be with his own kind*.

³⁴ As the **Loeb** translation puts it: “A man of this sort is at any rate born to be a lover of boys or the willing mate of a man, eagerly greeting his own kind.”

³⁵ Plato, *Lysis, Symposium, Gorgias: English Text*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson, trans. W. R. M. Lamb, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA; London, England: Harvard University Press, 1925), 143.

³⁶ Plato, *Lysis, Symposium, Gorgias: Greek Text*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1925), 142.

THE WONDER AT FINDING ONE'S OTHER HALF: THE DESIRE FOR A
"SOUL'S MATE"³⁷

Well, when one of them—whether he be a boy-lover or a lover of any other sort—[C] happens on his own particular half, the two of them are wondrously thrilled with affection and intimacy and love, and are hardly to be induced to leave each other's side for a single moment.

Perhaps we would describe this as the infatuation stage of a relationship.

These are they who continue together throughout life, **though they could not even say what they would have of one another.**³⁸

It is precisely here that late Socrates-Diotima will have much to say. He will argue that this very ignorance – “could not even say what” – is culpable, a terrible ignorance. He will argue that such Love knows exactly what it would have of the other – to give birth of goodness in one's beloved, and to know how to educate the other, to show him his own soul and its powers.

No one could imagine this to be the mere amorous connexion, or that such alone could be the reason **why each rejoices in the other's company with so eager a zest**³⁹:

³⁷ **Allan Bloom (2001: 109)** writes: “The seriousness or the engagement of the total person in the attraction to others is what makes Eros so important and so admirable.... The touchstone is the recognition of neediness and surrendering oneself to its possible cure.... Such seriousness comes from an inner necessity dictating the union between human beings, which is the most important thing in life.”

³⁸ The one significant piece that is missing the theory of Aristophanes is the following. The reason that human beings were split by Zeus was that when whole human beings were intrinsically arrogant, desirous of storming heaven. When they find their other half and return again to wholeness, **what has eventuated in the meanwhile that will have cured that destructive arrogance** that caused them to be severed in the first place? *There is a redemptive element that is missing here.*

³⁹ Recall here **C.S. Lewis'** definition of *joy* in his autobiography: “The unsatisfied desire more desirable than any other satisfaction.” Or, in Lewis' Afterword to the 3rd edition of *The Pilgrim's Regress* (1943), he writes: “The experience is one of intense longing. It is distinguished from other longings by two things. In the first place, though the sense of want is acute and even painful, yet the mere wanting is felt to be somehow a delight.... But this desire, even then there is no hope of possible satisfaction, continues to be prized, and even to be preferred to anything else in the world, by those who have once felt it. This hunger is better than any other fullness; this poverty is better than all other wealth.... For this sweet Desire cuts across our ordinary distinctions between wanting and having. To have it is, by definition, a want: to want it, we find, is to have it. In the second place, there is a peculiar mystery about the *object* of this Desire. In experienced people (and inattention leaves some inexperienced all of their lives) suppose, when they feel it, that they know what they are desiring.... If it comes in a context with

obviously the soul of each is wishing for something else that it cannot express,⁴⁰ [D] only divining and darkly hinting what it wishes.⁴¹

THE DESIRE TO "MELT INTO ONE": "THE VERY EXPRESSION OF HIS ANCIENT NEED"

Suppose that, as they lay together, Hephaestus should come and stand over them, and showing his implements¹ should ask: 'What is it, good mortals, that you would have of one another?'⁴² - and suppose that in their perplexity he asked them again: '**Do you desire to be joined in the closest possible union, so that you shall not be divided [E] by night or by day?**'⁴³ If that is your craving, I am ready to fuse and weld you together in a single piece,⁴⁴ that from being two you may be made one; that so long as you live, **the pair of you, being as one, may share a single life;** and that when you die you may also in Hades yonder be one instead of two, having shared a single death. Bethink yourselves

erotic suggestions, he believes he is desiring the perfect beloved.... Every one of these supposed *objects* for the Desire is inadequate to it."

⁴⁰ R.E. Allen (1991): 31 writes: "When a half meets its other half, they are stunned by friendship and kinship and Eros, and they delight in being with each other. The reason for this is not desire for sexual intercourse [192c]; on the contrary, the soul of each wishes for something it cannot put into words. Lovers desire to live a common life and die a common death, to become one in a complete and lasting union. The reason is that this was our ancient nature, and we were once wholes. So Eros is the name for the desire and the pursuit of wholeness. It both arises from and strives to cure the diremption of human nature."

⁴¹ Plato, *Lysis, Symposium, Gorgias: English Text*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson, trans. W. R. M. Lamb, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA; London, England: Harvard University Press, 1925), 143.

^{*1} *i.e.* his anvil (*Od.* viii. 274), bellows, tongs, and hammer (*Il.* xviii. 372 foll., 474 foll.).

⁴² A particularly interesting insight of penetrating psychological force; namely, the fact that two lovers, even in the midst of their best lovemaking, are not exactly sure what it is that each is seeking in, or with, his or her beloved.

⁴³ Allan Bloom (2001: 108) writes: "What is real is man's permanent separation from his truest nature, along with an unremitting longing somehow to correct the separation.... **It is unclear whether man would prefer to have that first nature without Eros or to have suffered his wound and have the pleasure of Eros.**" Again, I recall C.S. Lewis - "the unsatisfied desire more desirable...."

⁴⁴ One can't help but hear in these words the biblical teaching at **Genesis 2: 24**: "Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh."

if this is your heart's desire, and if you will be quite contented with this lot.⁴⁵ Not one on hearing this, we are sure, would demur to it or would be found wishing for anything else: **each would unreservedly deem that he had been offered just what he was yearning for all the time, namely, to be so joined and fused with his beloved that the two might be made one.**

LOVE IS THE UNCEASING PURSUIT OF WHOLENESS

The obvious difficulty of this formulation is that it suggests that once two people become one – welded together through life and death – then Love has done its job and there is no further reason for its “work”. This is almost as lame as the Church teaching (I am still not sure whether how seriously and completely it meant this) that the sole purpose of love seeking procreation – being welded together if you will – is to beget children, such that when the children are there in the world such love has exhausted its reason.

“The cause of it all is this, that our original form was as I have described, and we were entire; **and the craving and pursuit [193] of that entirety is called Love.**⁴⁶

[193] καὶ διώξει ἔρως ὄνομα.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ This is romantic love at its sharpest. The *desire* to “melt into one” is what romantic love would suggest is *attainable*. But in fact human beings cannot, at least at the level of bodiliness, “melt into” each other. Or, to put this critique of romantic love even sharper: **real love creates difference between the lovers, it makes their otherness all the more vivid. Real love makes relationship possible, whereas romantic love hopelessly blurs otherness (at least in its theory), a person confusing the reality of the other with his or her own reality.** In the end, Romantic Love captures an affective experience correctly (the longing to “melt into” the other) but then makes judgments about what Love is actually on the basis of this affective experience ... and in doing this judges poorly.

⁴⁶ Plato, *Lysis, Symposium, Gorgias: English Text*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson, trans. W. R. M. Lamb, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA; London, England: Harvard University Press, 1925), 143–145.

⁴⁷ Plato, *Lysis, Symposium, Gorgias: Greek Text*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1925), 144.

THE WICKEDNESS OF HUMANS AS THE CAUSE OF THE LOSS OF PERSONAL WHOLENESS

Formerly, as I have said, we were one; but now for our sins we are all dispersed by God,⁴⁸ as the Arcadians were by the Lacedaemonians¹; and we may well be afraid that if we are disorderly towards Heaven we may once more be cloven asunder and may go about in the shape of those outline-carvings on the tombs, with our noses sawn down the middle, and may thus become like tokens of split dice.⁴⁹

Aristophanes returns to the idea of human sexuality as sourced in the desire of Zeus to punish human beings – ripping them in half – but then to make sure that they stay alive so that they will remember who is Boss, and so that they will continue to give to the gods the gifts they, the gods, expect to have from human beings.

THE SUMMONS TO GOODNESS BEFORE THE GODS: "THAT WE MAY AVOID EVIL AND OBTAIN THE GOOD"

Wherefore we ought all to exhort others to a pious observance of the gods in all things, so that we may escape harm [B] and attain to bliss under the gallant leadership of Love. Let none in act oppose him—and it is opposing him to incur the hate of Heaven: if we

⁴⁸ Again, note an echo in the Tower of Babel story in Genesis. Also, note the psychologically acute perception contained in this theory about humans and love: our wickedness causes us to feel split and isolated. Further, one can imagine the collision that will occur later when certain strains of Christian consciousness connected wickedness with sex. **Suddenly a unitive and healing force (which obviously has its dark side) is being characterized as the force that causes a splitting in human nature!**

¹ Probably referring to the dispersal of Mantinea into villages in 385 BCE (Xenophon, *Hell.* v. 2. 1 foll.).

⁴⁹ Plato, *Lysis, Symposium, Gorgias: English Text*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson, trans. W. R. M. Lamb, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA; London, England: Harvard University Press, 1925), 145.

make friends with the god and are reconciled, we shall have the fortune that falls to few in our day,⁵⁰ of discovering our proper favourites.⁵¹

CONCLUDING REMARKS OF ARISTOPHANES: HAPPINESS AS THE FINDING OF ONE'S OTHER HALF—"HIS PRIMEVAL NATURE HAD ITS ORIGINAL TRUE LOVE"

Robin Waterfield (1994): 81-2 writes: "It adds to the sadness of Aristophanes' doctrine of unfulfilled and unfulfillable longing that he is the only one of the named protagonists of the Dialogue who is alone at this symposium."

And let not Eryximachus retort on my speech with a comic mock, [C] and say I refer to Pausanias and Agathon; it may be they do belong to the fortunate few, and are both of them males by nature;⁵²

HAPPINESS: THE PEACE OF THE RESTLESS HEART

what I mean is—and this applies to the whole world of men and women—**that the way to bring happiness to our race⁵³ is to give our love its true fulfilment:** let everyone find his own favourite, and so revert to his primal estate.⁵⁴

This idea of *reversion* to our primal "roundness" if you will is so interesting. It reminds me that the Greeks had a circular notion of Time, the "eternal

⁵⁰ Another point of particular poignancy!

⁵¹ Plato, *Lysis, Symposium, Gorgias: English Text*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson, trans. W. R. M. Lamb, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA; London, England: Harvard University Press, 1925), 145–147.

⁵² Plato, *Lysis, Symposium, Gorgias: English Text*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson, trans. W. R. M. Lamb, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA; London, England: Harvard University Press, 1925), 147.

⁵³ I am strongly reminded of St. Augustine in his opening lines of *Confessions*, where he speaks of human life as a continual quest for *rest*: "For You have made us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You." The "restless heart" image is strong in this account offered by Aristophanes.

⁵⁴ Plato, *Lysis, Symposium, Gorgias: English Text*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson, trans. W. R. M. Lamb, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA; London, England: Harvard University Press, 1925), 147.

returning” of what was before. The Jewish and therefore Christian idea of Time was linear. And so we speak about married life as *a way forward*, a way into one’s “future and a hope.”

"LOVE, WHO IS OUR GREATEST BENEFACTOR": LEADING US BACK TO OUR OWN NATURE

If this be the best thing of all, the nearest approach to it among all acts open to us now must accordingly be the best to choose; and that is, **to find a favourite [D] whose nature is exactly to our mind. Love is the god who brings this about; he fully deserves our hymns.** For not only in the present does he bestow the priceless boon of bringing us to our very own, but he also supplies this excellent hope for the future,

HUMAN WHOLENESS IS A GIFT

Aristophanes has told of how the gods, under the direct action of Zeus, brought about the punishing of human beings, and their mutilation. Yet it will be another god, Eros, who if we make sure to be good boys and girls to the gods, *will* restore us to our ancient life and heal us ... **by making it possible for us to seek successfully our “other half” and so revert to original wholeness.**

that if we will supply the gods with reverent duty he will restore us to our ancient life and heal and help us into the happiness of the blest.⁵⁵

CONCLUSION OF HIS SPEECH

“There, Eryximachus, is my discourse on Love, of a different sort from yours. As I besought you, make no comic sport of it, for we want to hear what the others will say in their turn—I rather mean the other two, [E] since only Agathon and Socrates are left.”⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Plato, *Lysis, Symposium, Gorgias: English Text*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson, trans. W. R. M. Lamb, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA; London, England: Harvard University Press, 1925), 147.

⁵⁶ Plato, *Lysis, Symposium, Gorgias: English Text*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson, trans. W. R. M. Lamb, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA; London, England: Harvard University Press, 1925), 147.

PLATO (C. 429—347 BCE) –

THE SYMPOSIUM DIALOGUE

The Speech of Socrates - Diotima of Mantinea (201 D to 212 D)

Version: 21 February 2001; 19 March 2017; 20 March 2017

STUDIES

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SYMPOSIUM (388-387 BCE): THE SPEECH OF DIOTIMA OF MANTINEIA (201D—212A)

The Speech of Socrates

[201D] “And now I shall let you alone, and proceed with the discourse upon Love which I heard one day from a Mantinean woman named Diotima:¹ in this subject she was skilled, and in many others too; for once, by bidding the Athenians offer sacrifices ten years before the plague, she procured them so much delay in the advent of the sickness. Well, I also had my lesson from her in love-matters; so now I will try and

¹ These names suggest a connexion respectively with prophecy and with the favour of Heaven.

follow up the points on which Agathon and I have just agreed by narrating to you all on my own account, as well as I am able, the speech she delivered to me. So first, Agathon, I must unfold, [E] in your manner of exposition, who and what sort of being is Love, and then I shall tell of his works. The readiest way, I think, will be to give my description that form of question and answer which the stranger woman used for hers that day. For I spoke to her in much the same terms as Agathon addressed just now to me, saying Love was a great god, and was of beautiful things; and she refuted me with the very arguments I have brought against our young friend, showing that by my account that god was neither beautiful nor good.

THE REALITY OF SOMETHING “IN-BETWEEN”

“ ‘How do you mean, Diotima?’ said I; ‘is Love then ugly and bad?’

“ ‘Peace, for shame!’ she replied: ‘or do you imagine that whatever is not beautiful must needs be ugly?’

[202] “ ‘To be sure I do.’

“ ‘And what is not skilled, ignorant? Have you not observed that there is something halfway between skill and ignorance?’

“ ‘What is that?’

“ ‘You know, of course, that to have correct opinion, if you can give no reason for it, is neither full knowledge—how can an unreasoned thing be knowledge?—nor yet ignorance; for what hits on the truth cannot be ignorance. **So *correct opinion*, I take it, is just in that position, between understanding and ignorance.**’

“ ‘Quite true,’ I said.

[B] “ ‘Then do not compel what is not beautiful to be ugly,’ she said, ‘or what is not good to be bad. Likewise of Love, when you find yourself admitting that he is not good nor beautiful, do not therefore suppose he must be ugly and bad, **but something betwixt the two.**’

LOVE IS NOT A GOD

“ ‘And what of the notion,’ I asked, ‘to which everyone agrees, that he is a great god?’

“ ‘Everyone? People who do not know,’ she rejoined, ‘or ‘those who know also?’

“ ‘I mean everybody in the world.’

[C] “ ‘At this she laughed and said, ‘But how, Socrates, can those agree that he is a great god who say he is no god at all?’

“ ‘What persons are they?’ I asked.

“ ‘You are one,’ she replied, ‘and I am another.’

“ ‘How do you make that out?’ I said.

“ ‘Easily,’ said she; ‘tell me, do you not say that all gods are happy and beautiful? Or will you dare to deny that any god is beautiful and happy?’

“ ‘Bless me!’ I exclaimed, ‘not I.’

“ ‘And do you not call those happy who possess good and beautiful things?’

[D] “ ‘Certainly I do.’

“ **‘But you have admitted that Love, from lack of good and beautiful things, desires these very things that he lacks.’**

“ ‘Yes, I have.’

“ ‘How then can he be a god, if he is devoid of things beautiful and good?’

“ ‘By no means, it appears.’

“ ‘So you see,’ she said, ‘you are a person who does not consider Love to be a god.’

LOVE IS A REALITY “IN-BETWEEN”

“ ‘What then,’ I asked, ‘can Love be? A mortal?’

“ ‘Anything but that.’

[E] “ ‘Well what?’

“ ‘As I previously suggested, between a mortal and an immortal.’

“ ‘And what is that, Diotima?’

“ ‘A great spirit, Socrates: **for the whole of the spiritual¹ is between divine and mortal.**’

“ ‘Possessing what power?’ I asked.

“ **‘Interpreting and transporting human things to the gods and divine things to men; entreaties and sacrifices from below, and ordinances and requitals from above: being midway between, it makes each to supplement the other, so that the whole is combined in one.** Through it are conveyed all divination and priest-craft concerning sacrifice and ritual [203] and incantations, and all soothsaying and sorcery. *God with man does not mingle*: but the spiritual is the means of all society and converse of men with gods and of gods with men, whether waking or asleep.

θεὸς δὲ ἀνθρώπων οὐ μίγνυται, ἀλλὰ διὰ τούτου πᾶσα ἐστὶν ἡ ὁμιλία καὶ ἡ διάλεκτος θεοῖς πρὸς ἀνθρώπους <καὶ πρὸς θεοὺς ἀνθρώποις>,² καὶ ἐγρηγοροῦσι καὶ καθεύδουσι¹

The Greek noun *homilia* means “a being together, a communion, an intercourse, a converse, a company.” The Latin synonym is *commercium*. The Greek noun *dialektikos* means “a discourse, a discussion or debate, an arguing.”

Whosoever has skill in these affairs is a spiritual man; to have it in other matters, as in common arts and crafts, is for the mechanical. **Many and multifarious are these spirits, and one of them is Love.**’

εἷς δὲ τούτων ἐστὶ καὶ ὁ Ἔρως.²

WHERE DID LOVE COME FROM?

“ ‘From what father and mother sprung?’ I asked.

¹ Δαίμονες and τὸ δαιμόνιον represent the mysterious agencies and influences by which the gods communicate with mortals.

² <καὶ πρὸς θεοὺς ἀνθρώποις> Wolf.

¹ Plato, *Lysis, Symposium, Gorgias: Greek Text*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1925), 178.

² Plato, *Lysis, Symposium, Gorgias: Greek Text*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1925), 178.

[B] “ ‘That is rather a long story,’ she replied; ‘but still, I will tell it you. When **Aphrodite** was born, the gods made a great feast, and among the company was **Resource**, the son of **Cunning**.

οἵ τε ἄλλοι καὶ ὁ τῆς Μήτιδος υἱὸς Πόρος.³

And when they had banqueted there came **Poverty** abegging, as well she might in an hour of good cheer, and hung about the door.

οὔσης ἀφίκετο ἡ Πενία, καὶ ἦν περὶ τὰς θύρας.⁴

Now Resource, grown tipsy with nectar—for wine as yet there was none—went into the garden of Zeus, and there, overcome with heaviness, slept. **Then Poverty, being of herself so resourceless devised the scheme of having a child by Resource, [C] and lying down by his side she conceived Love.**

κατακλίνεται [C] τε παρ’ αὐτῷ καὶ ἐκύησε τὸν Ἔρωτα.⁵

Hence it is that Love from the beginning has been attendant and minister to Aphrodite, since he was begotten on the day of her birth, and is, moreover, by nature a lover bent on beauty since Aphrodite is beautiful.

THE NATURE OF LOVE AS CHILD OF RESOURCE AND POVERTY

Now, as the son of Resource and Poverty⁶, Love is in a peculiar case. First, he is ever poor, and far from tender or beautiful as most suppose him: [D] rather is he hard and parched, shoeless and homeless; on the bare ground always he lies with no bedding, and takes his rest on doorsteps and waysides in the open air; **true to his mother’s nature, he ever dwells with want.**

³ Plato, *Lysis, Symposium, Gorgias: Greek Text*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1925), 178.

⁴ Plato, *Lysis, Symposium, Gorgias: Greek Text*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1925), 180.

⁵ Plato, *Lysis, Symposium, Gorgias: Greek Text*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1925), 180.

⁶ The particular form of Poverty that is **Penury** expressed what we call “a grinding poverty”; it means a person left with no resources at all ... rather than less than he or she would prefer. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “penury” – “The condition of being destitute; hardship, poverty, need.”

But he takes after his father [Resource, the son of Cunning⁷] in scheming for all that is beautiful and good; for he is brave, impetuous and high-strung, **a famous hunter**, always weaving some stratagem; **desirous and competent of wisdom, throughout life ensuing the truth**; a master of jugglery, witchcraft, [E] and artful speech.

Pierre Grimal (Blackwell, 1996): “The personification of expediency and the son of Metis. Married to Penia (Poverty), he gave birth to Eros (Love).” The English word “expedient” means “useful for effecting a desired result; suited to the circumstances or the occasion.” But it also can have a meaning in the moral domain as “based on or offering what is of use or advantage rather than what is right or just; guided by self-interest.”

Pierre Grimal (Blackwell, 1996): “Metis, whose name means either *prudence* or, in a pejorative sense, *treachery*, was a daughter of Oceanus and Tethys. She is said to have been the first wife, or mistress, of Zeus; she gave him the drug which forced Kronos to regurgitate all the children he had swallowed.... On the advice of Gaia, Zeus swallowed Metis, and thus gave birth to Athena.”

Note that Eros is understood as having no direct connection to Aphrodite-love. He is only locally proximate to her when he is born (apparently, he is conceived and born simultaneously!) in Aphrodite's garden during her birthday party. This suggests that the Greeks had a keen perception about the difference between Eros-love and Aphrodite-love. **Pierre Grimal (Blackwell, 1996):** “Later, Plato formulated the idea of two Aphrodites, the daughter of Uranus, Aphrodite-*Urania*, the goddess of pure love, and the daughter of Dione, Aphrodite *Pandemia* or Aphrodite of the populace, the goddess of common love.”

LOVE IS NEITHER MORTAL NOR IMMORTAL – “BETWIXT”

By birth neither immortal nor mortal, in the selfsame day he is flourishing and alive at the hour when he is abounding in resource; at another he is dying, and then reviving again by force of his father's nature: yet the resources that he gets will ever be ebbing

⁷ Our English noun “cunning” most often has a pejorative meaning, suggesting a person who gets what he or she gets by trickery, by deceiving others. However, the original meaning of this word, and one highly exalted as most characteristic of both Greek (e.g., Odysseus) and Bible people, is “the capacity or faculty of knowing; wit, wisdom, intelligence.” Cunning as meant in Socrates' speech is something closer to “know how”, what the Bible calls “wisdom” (i.e., as in the content of the Wisdom books – savvy; savoir faire).

away; so that Love is at no time either resourceless or wealthy, and furthermore, *he stands midway betwixt wisdom and ignorance*. The position is this: no gods ensue wisdom or desire to be made wise; [204] such they are already; nor does anyone else that is wise ensue it. Neither do the ignorant ensue wisdom, nor desire to be made wise: **in this very point is ignorance distressing, that a person who is not enlightened or intelligent should be satisfied with himself. The man who does not feel himself defective has no desire for that whereof he feels no defect.'**

There is magnificent “bite” to this last remark. I think of the thought of Nicolas Cusa (1401-1464) on “learned ignorance” – a knowing “betwixt” knowing and not knowing.

THE WISE ARE THOSE BETWIXT – INTERMEDIARIES

“ ‘Who then, Diotima,’ I asked, ‘are the followers of wisdom, if they are neither the wise nor the ignorant?’

[B] “ ‘Why, a child could tell by this time,’ she answered, ‘that they are the intermediate sort, and amongst these also is Love. **For wisdom has to do with the fairest things, and Love is a love directed to what is fair; so that Love must needs be a friend of wisdom, and, as such, must be between wise and ignorant.**

Ἔρως δ’ ἐστὶν ἔρως περὶ τὸ καλόν, ὥστε ἀναγκαῖον Ἔρωτα φιλόσοφον εἶναι, φιλόσοφον δὲ ὄντα μεταξύ εἶναι σοφοῦ καὶ ἀμαθοῦς.⁸

This again is a result for which he has to thank his origin: for while he comes of a wise and resourceful father, his mother is unwise and resourceless. Such, my good Socrates, is the nature of this spirit.

That is, a “spiritual man” who exists halfway between the world of the senses and the Real. The Philosopher-King of Plato's *Republic VII* is a person such as this. The Christian tag that corresponds to this is “*in the World but not of it.*”

⁸ Plato, *Lysis, Symposium, Gorgias: Greek Text*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1925), 182.

LOVE IS THE LOVER, NOT THE BELOVED

That you should have formed your other notion of Love [C] is no surprising accident. You supposed, if I am to take your own words as evidence, that the *Beloved* and not the *Lover* was Love. This led you, I fancy, to hold that Love is all-beautiful. The lovable, indeed, is the truly beautiful, tender, perfect, and heaven-blest; **but the lover is of a different type**, in accordance with the account I have given.’

“Upon this I observed: ‘Very well then, madam, you are right; but if Love is such as you describe him, of what use is he to mankind?’

THE NEED TO SPECIFY “KINDS” OF LOVE

We in contemporary American English have a terrible poverty of language around the word “love”, such that we can say, and believe that we make sense, that we *love* cars, movies, dogs, the stars, a spouse, our children, one’s country, etc. We could say as Socrates will here that we also *abuse* language, showing no discipline about the meaning of Love. Socrates-Diotima is about to explore the particular kind of Love that he means. What exactly is the nature of the love of the Lover he wants to describe, the Love that is “betwixt” wisdom and ignorance, betwixt fullness and emptiness?

[D] “ ‘That is the next question, Socrates,’ she replied, ‘on which I will try to enlighten you. While Love is of such nature and origin as I have related, **he is also set on beautiful things**, as you say. Now, suppose someone were to ask us: In what respect is he Love of beautiful things, Socrates and Diotima? But let me put the question more clearly thus: What is the love of the lover of beautiful things?’

“ ‘That they may be his,’ I replied.

“ ‘But your answer craves a further query,’ she said, ‘such as this: What will he have who gets beautiful things?’

“This question I declared I was quite unable now to answer offhand.

[E] “ ‘Well,’ she proceeded, ‘imagine that the object is changed, and the inquiry is made about the good instead of the beautiful. Come, Socrates (I shall say), what is the love of the lover of good things?’

“‘That they may be his,’ I replied.

“‘And what will he have who gets good things?’

“‘I can make more shift to answer this,’ I said; ‘he will be happy.’

[205] “‘Yes,’ she said, ‘the happy are happy by acquisition of good things, and we have no more need to ask for what end a man wishes to be happy, when such is his wish: the answer seems to be ultimate.’

“‘Quite true,’ I said.

“‘Now do you suppose this wish or this love to be common to all mankind, and that everyone always wishes to have good things? Or what do you say?’

“‘Even so,’ I said; ‘it is common to all.’

[B] “‘Well then, Socrates,’ she said, ‘we do not mean that all men love, when we say that all men love the same things always; *we mean that some people love and others do not?*’

“‘I am wondering myself,’ I replied.

“‘But you should not wonder,’ she said; ‘for *we have singled out a certain form of love*, and applying thereto the name of the whole, we call it love; and there are other names that we commonly abuse.’

“‘As, for example — —?’ I asked.

“‘Take the following: you know that *poetry*¹ is more than a single thing. For of anything whatever that passes from not being into being the whole cause [C] is composing or poetry; so that the productions of all arts are kinds of poetry, and their craftsmen are all poets.’

“‘That is true.’

“‘But still, as you are aware,’ said she, ‘they are not called poets: they have other names, while a single section disparted from the whole of poetry—merely the business of music and metres—is entitled with the name of the whole. This and no more is called poetry; those only who possess this branch of the art are poets.’

“‘Quite true,’ I said.

^{*1} Cf. above, 197 A.

“ ‘Well, it is just the same with love. **Generically, indeed, [D] it is all that desire of good things and of being happy²—Love most mighty and all-beguiling. Yet, whereas those who resort to him in various other ways—in money-making, an inclination to sports, or philosophy—are not described either as loving or as lovers,** all those who pursue him seriously in one of his several forms obtain, as loving and as lovers, the name of the whole.’

“ ‘I fancy you are right,’ I said.

[E] “ ‘And certainly there runs a story,’ she continued, **‘that all who go seeking their other half¹ are in love;** though by my account love is neither for half nor for whole, unless, of course, my dear sir, this happens to be something good.

We find out later in this Dialogue that Aristophanes was ticked off by this reference to his speech here, because Socrates makes hash of it. Socrates criticizes Aristophanes for failing to mention that the reason anyone – whether half a person or a whole person – goes hunting has to be analyzed as to whether that which he or she hunts is good. **Aristophanes, perhaps without noticing it, has made love a merely natural process** – severed things trying to become whole again – rather than the human pursuit of a transcendent Good with other people and for other people.

THE LOVE MEANT HERE IS LOVE OF THE GOOD

This that Socrates-Diotima now argues is a profound correction of Aristophanes. For Aristophanes, the love he means is one that is related to the finding of a *specific* good ... for himself or herself: my other half. But what Socrates-Diotima is about to talk about is a love of Goodness itself, wanting all good for everyone ... because it is Good. It is, then, a love that is directed to a transcendent purpose – loving what is good because it is Good. So then, the Penury in Love leaves it “hunting” always for the Good – the good of virtue, the good of others, and so forth. It is an unrestricted kind of love, because Goodness is transcendent.

^{*2} Cf. above, 204 E–205 A.

^{*1} A “prophetic” allusion to Aristophanes’ speech, 192 foll.

For men are prepared to have their own feet and hands cut off if they feel these belongings to be harmful. The fact is, I suppose, that each person does not cherish his belongings except where a man calls the good his own property and the bad another's; [206] *since what men love is simply and solely the good*. Or is your view otherwise?

“ ‘Faith, no,’ I said.

“ *‘Then we may state unreservedly that men love the good?’*

“ ‘Yes,’ I said.

“ ‘Well now, must we not extend it to this, that they love the good to be theirs?’

“ ‘We must.’

“ ‘And do they love it to be not merely theirs, but theirs always?’

“ ‘Include that also.’

“ ‘Briefly then,’ said she, **‘love loves the good to be one’s own forever.’**

“ ‘That is the very truth,’ I said.

WHAT IS THE ACTIVITY UNIQUE TO THIS KIND OF LOVE

[B] “ ‘Now if love is always for this,’ she proceeded, **‘what is the method of those who pursue it, and what is the behaviour whose eagerness and straining are to be termed love? What actually is this effort? Can you tell me?’**

“ ‘Ah, Diotima,’ I said; ‘in that case I should hardly be admiring you and your wisdom, and sitting at your feet to be enlightened on just these questions.’

“ *‘Well, I will tell you,’ said she; ‘it is begetting on a beautiful thing by means of both the body and the soul.’*

“ ‘It wants some divination to make out what you mean,’ I said; ‘I do not understand.’

ALL GOOD PEOPLE ARE PREGNANT – YEARNING TO GIVE BIRTH

[C] “ ‘Let me put it more clearly,’ she said. ‘**All men are pregnant, Socrates, both in body and in soul: on reaching a certain age our nature yearns to beget.**

κουῶσι γάρ, ἔφη, ὃ Σώκρατες, πάντες ἄνθρωποι καὶ κατὰ τὸ σῶμα καὶ κατὰ τὴν ψυχὴν, καὶ ἐπειδὴν ἔν τινι ἡλικίᾳ γένωνται, τίκτειν ἐπιθυμεῖ ἡμῶν ἢ φύσις.⁹

This it cannot do upon an ugly person, but only on the beautiful: the conjunction of man and woman is a begetting for both.¹ *It is a divine affair, this engendering and bringing to birth, an immortal element in the creature that is mortal;* and it cannot occur in the discordant. [D] The ugly is discordant with whatever is divine, whereas the beautiful is accordant. Thus Beauty presides over birth as Fate and Lady of Travail; and hence it is that when the pregnant approaches the beautiful it becomes not only gracious but so exhilarate, that it flows over with begetting and bringing forth; though when it meets the ugly it coils itself close in a sullen dismay: rebuffed and repressed, it brings not forth, but goes in labour with the burden of its young.

An extraordinary and beautiful line of thought. Socrates-Diotima, recalling that Love-Yearning (Eros) was born on the same day as Love-Beauty (Aphrodite) was born, teaches that **it is the experience of real Beauty that causes this particular Love-Yearning in every person to feel its pregnancy;** that is, its desire to be a source of Good in others. Without an experience of real Beauty, this Love-Yearning never notices how much it has to offer, and then desires intensely to give to others.

Therefore when a person is big and teeming-ripe [E] he feels himself in a sore flutter for the beautiful, because its possessor can relieve him of his heavy pangs. For you are wrong, Socrates, in supposing that love is of the beautiful.’

A very good clarification now complete. A less profound understanding judges that Love is a longing for the Beautiful. Socrates-Diotima, far more profound, argues that **Love-Yearning is because of the Beautiful, and is that which activates Love-Yearning to want to be a source of Good for others.** This is the specific activity of this kind of Love: *the intense desire to bring about the Good in others.*

“ ‘What then is it?’

⁹ Plato, *Lysis, Symposium, Gorgias: Greek Text*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1925), 190.

¹ The argument requires the application of “begetting” and other such terms indifferently to either sex.

“ ‘It is of engendering and begetting upon the beautiful.’

Τῆς γεννήσεως καὶ τοῦ τόκου ἐν τῷ καλῷ.¹⁰

“ ‘Be it so,’ I said.

“ ‘To be sure it is,’ she went on; ‘and how of engendering? Because this is something ever-existent and immortal in our mortal life.

Πάνυ μὲν οὖν, ἔφη. τί δὴ οὖν τῆς γεννήσεως; ὅτι ἀειγενές ἐστι καὶ ἀθάνατον ὡς θνητῷ ἢ γέννησις.¹¹

[207] From what has been admitted, we needs must yearn (ἐπιθυμεῖν) for immortality no less than for good, since love loves good to be one’s own forever. And hence it necessarily follows that love is of immortality.’

ἐπιθυμέω, *set one’s heart upon a thing, long for, covet, desire*, c. gen. rei,¹²

THE STRANGE STATE OF BEING AND ACTIONS THAT LOVE CAUSES

“All this instruction did I get from her at various times when she discoursed of love-matters; and one time she asked me, ‘What do you suppose, Socrates, to be the cause of this love and desire? **For you must have observed the strange state into which all the animals are thrown, whether going on earth or winging the air, when they desire to beget:** they are all sick [B] and amorously disposed, first to have union one with another, and next to find food for the new-born; in whose behalf they are ready to fight hard battles, even the weakest against the strongest, and to sacrifice their lives; to be racked with starvation themselves if they can but nurture their young, and be put to any sort of shift. As for men,’ said she, ‘one might suppose they do these things on the

¹⁰ Plato, *Lysis, Symposium, Gorgias: Greek Text*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1925), 192.

¹¹ Plato, *Lysis, Symposium, Gorgias: Greek Text*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1925), 192.

gen gen. or genit. = genitive

¹² Henry George Liddell et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 634.

promptings of reason; **but what is the cause [C] of this amorous condition in the animals? Can you tell me?**

“Once more I replied that I did not know; so she proceeded: ‘How do you design ever to become a master of love-matters, if you can form no notion of this?’

“ ‘Why, it is just for this, I tell you, Diotima—as I stated a moment ago—that I have come to see you, **because I noted my need of an instructor.** Come, tell me the cause of these effects as well as of the others that have relation to love-matters.’

CONTINUALLY BECOMING A NEW PERSON – LOSS & GAIN

“ ‘Well then,’ she said, ‘if you believe that love is by nature bent on what we have repeatedly admitted, you may cease to wonder. **For here, too, on the same principle as before, [D] *the mortal nature ever seeks, as best it can, to be immortal. In one way only can it succeed, and that is by generation; since so it can always leave behind it a new creature in place of the old.*** It is only for a while that each live thing can be described as alive and the same, as a man is said to be the same person from childhood until he is advanced in years: yet though he is called the same he does not at any time possess the same properties; ***he is continually becoming a new person,*** and there are things also which he loses, [E] as appears by his hair, his flesh, his bones, and his blood and body altogether. And observe that not only in his body but in his soul besides we find none of his manners or habits, his opinions, desires, pleasures, pains or fears, ever abiding the same in his particular self; **some things grow in him, while others perish.** And here is a yet stranger fact: [208] with regard to the possessions of knowledge, not merely do some of them grow and others perish in us, so that neither in what we know are we ever the same persons; but a like fate attends each single sort of knowledge. What we call *conning* implies that our knowledge is departing; since forgetfulness is an egress of knowledge, while conning substitutes a fresh one in place of that which departs, and so preserves our knowledge enough to make it seem the same.

EVERY MORTAL THING STAYS THE SAME ... BY CHANGING

I think that what is being set up here is the argument that one way that a Lover (“begetting the good”) can be immortal – the good that he or she became – is by

being willing to let go (to die) of his or her life ... and by allowing them his or her disciples to continue the goodness in the world. Disciples of the good are both alike but also different from their Master – the one who “gave birth to” the good in them. A disciple becomes “a semblance of the original.”

Every mortal thing is preserved in this way; not by keeping it exactly the same forever, [B] like the divine, but by replacing what goes off or is antiquated with something fresh, in the semblance of the original. Through this device, Socrates, a mortal thing partakes of immortality, both in its body and in all other respects; by no other means can it be done. So do not wonder if everything naturally values its own offshoot; since all are beset by this eagerness and this love with a view to immortality.’

“On hearing this argument I wondered, and said: [C] ‘Really, can this in truth be so, most wise Diotima?’

A FIERCE DESIRE FOR FAME AS LONGING FOR IMMORTALITY

“Whereat she, like our perfect professors, said: ‘Be certain of it, Socrates; only glance at the ambition of the men around you, and you will have to wonder at the unreasonableness of what I have told you, unless you are careful to **consider how singularly they are affected with the love of winning a name, “and laying up fame immortal for all time to come.”**’¹ For this, even more than for their children, they are ready to run all risks, [D] to expend money, perform any kind of task, and sacrifice their lives. Do you suppose,’ she asked, ‘that Alcestis would have died for Admetus, or Achilles have sought death on the corpse of Patroclus, or your own Codrus² have welcomed it to save the kingdom of his children, if they had not expected to win ‘a deathless memory for valour.’ which now we keep? Of course not. **I hold it is for immortal distinction and [E] for such illustrious renown as this that they all do all they can, and so much the more in proportion to their excellence. They are in love with what is immortal.**

THOSE WHO GIVE BIRTH TO CHILDREN

^{*1} Diotima, like Agathon, breaks into verse of her own composing.

^{*2} A legendary king of Athens who exposed his life because an oracle had said that the Dorian invaders would conquer if they did not slay the Athenian king.

Now those who are teeming in body betake them rather to women, and are amorous on this wise: by getting children they acquire an immortality, a memorial, and a state of bliss, which in their imagining they “for all succeeding time procure.”

THOSE WHO GIVE BIRTH TO SOULS

[209] *But pregnancy of soul—for there are persons,’ she declared, ‘who in their souls still more than in their bodies conceive those things which are proper for soul to conceive and bring forth; and what are those things?*

VIRTUES OF SOUL

Prudence, and virtue in general;

φρόνησίν τε καὶ τὴν ἄλλην ἀρετήν.¹³

φρόνησις, εως, ἡ, *purpose, intention*,¹⁴

and of these the begetters are all the poets and those craftsmen who are styled *inventors*. Now by far the highest and fairest part of prudence is that which concerns the regulation of cities and habitations; it is called *sobriety* [B] and *justice*.

ἧ δὴ ὄνομά ἐστι σωφροσύνη τε καὶ δικαιοσύνη.¹⁵

¹³ Plato, *Lysis, Symposium, Gorgias: Greek Text*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1925), 198.

¹⁴ Henry George Liddell et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 1956.

¹⁵ Plato, *Lysis, Symposium, Gorgias: Greek Text*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1925), 198.

σωφροσύνη [ῶ], Dor. -ύνα, Ep. and poet. σαφροσύνη (as in Hom. and in later poetry, IG2².3632.11, 3753), ἦ, *soundness of mind, prudence, discretion*,¹⁶ 2. *moderation in sensual desires, self-control, temperance*,¹⁷

δικαιοσύνη, ἦ, righteousness, justice,¹⁸

SOCRATES' VOCATION – BEGETTING GOOD (VIRTUES) IN SOULS

So when a man's soul is so far divine that it is made pregnant with these from his youth, and on attaining manhood immediately desires to bring forth and beget, he too, I imagine, goes about seeking the beautiful object whereon he may do his begetting, since he will never beget upon the ugly. Hence it is the beautiful rather than the ugly bodies that he welcomes in his pregnancy, *and if he chances also on a soul that is fair and noble and well-endowed*, he gladly cherishes the two combined in one; and straightway in addressing such a person he is resourceful in discoursing of virtue and of what should be [C] the good man's character and what his pursuits; and so he takes in hand the other's education.

Dor Dor. = Doric

Ep Ep. = Epice, in the Epic dialect

poet Poet. = Poeta, poetical

Hom **Homerus** Epicus [Hom.]

See entry in Author and Works List for specific works.

IG IG = *Inscriptiones Graecae*. See Complete Listing.

2 IG = *Inscriptiones Graecae*. See Complete Listing.

² IG = *Inscriptiones Graecae*. See Complete Listing.

¹⁶ Henry George Liddell et al., [A Greek-English Lexicon](#) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 1751.

¹⁷ Henry George Liddell et al., [A Greek-English Lexicon](#) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 1751.

¹⁸ Henry George Liddell et al., [A Greek-English Lexicon](#) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 429.

καὶ πρὸς τοῦτον τὸν ἄνθρωπον εὐθὺς εὐπορεῖ λόγων περὶ ἀρετῆς καὶ περὶ οἷον
χρῆ εἶναι [C] τὸν ἄνδρα τὸν ἀγαθὸν καὶ ἃ ἐπιτηδεύειν, καὶ ἐπιχειρεῖ παιδεύειν.¹⁹

For I hold that by contact with the fair one and by consorting with him he bears and brings forth his long-felt conception, because in presence or absence he remembers his fair.

THE COMMUNITY OF THE CHILDREN OF GOODNESS

Equally too with him he shares the nurturing of what is begotten, **so that men in this condition enjoy a far fuller community with each other than that which comes with children, and a far surer friendship, since the children of their union are fairer and more deathless.**

Plato was one in whom Socrates, his Beloved Teacher, begat the virtues, giving birth to the soul of the young Plato. All of this that Plato became, and for all human history, he credits to the man *Socrates who was singular in his ability to give birth to the souls of men* (no evidence at all that Athenian culture at this time allowed women to be taught in such a way – though we should never forget that Socrates was a married man, married to Xanthippe).

Any normally functioning person, in a biological sense, may propagate in the normal biological way, bringing children into the world. One could say that one has become “immortal” because he or she has biological children.

But what Socrates did in Plato was to be the profound cause of Plato’s soul and its awakening and its capacity to give birth to virtue. **Plato is arguing that what Socrates – and the community of young men that learned from him – did in his soul – its awakening and training and strengthening – was a far more important giving birth in the world than merely having babies.**

BEING VIRTUOUS IS MORE ETERNALLY SIGNIFICANT THAN JUST BEING ALIVE

¹⁹ Plato, *Lysis, Symposium, Gorgias: Greek Text*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1925), 198–200.

Everyone would choose to have got children such as these rather than the human sort—[D] merely from turning a glance upon Homer and Hesiod and all the other good poets, and envying the fine offspring they leave behind to procure them a glory immortally renewed in the memory of men. Or only look,’ she said, ‘at the fine children whom Lycurgus¹ left behind him in Lacedaemon to deliver his country and—I may almost say—the whole of Greece; while Solon is highly esteemed among you for begetting his laws; and so are [E] divers men in divers other regions, whether among the Greeks or among foreign peoples, for the number of goodly deeds shown forth in them, *the manifold virtues they begot*. In their name has many a shrine been reared because of their fine children; whereas for the human sort never any man obtained this honour.

“ ‘Into these love-matters even you, Socrates, might haply be initiated; [210] but I doubt if you could approach the rites and revelations to which these, for the properly instructed, are merely the avenue. However I will speak of them,’ she said, ‘and will not stint my best endeavours; only you on your part must try your best to follow.

HOW DOES ONE GIVE BIRTH TO SOULS?

He who would proceed rightly in this business must not merely begin from his youth to encounter *beautiful bodies*.

Perhaps because of our overly sexualized society, we think that being attracted to beautiful bodies is something lustful. Socrates-Diotima’s point is that a young person demonstrates **a capacity to be moved by Beauty**. It is this innate capacity to notice and to respond positively to Beauty that Socrates means here. It is this response to Beauty – that of a person or thing – in a young person that a Teacher uses to help begin to educate that young person about the reality of his or her soul, to begin to get him or her to notice its unique capacities.

In the first place, indeed, if his conductor guides him aright, he must be **in love with one particular body**, and engender beautiful converse therein;

This is important, as any Teacher knows. True learning is not abstract. One cannot fall in love with Literature; rather one falls in love with particular books, such that he or she may eventually say that “I love Literature.”

^{*1} The legendary creator of Spartan laws and customs.

It is dangerous to teach the young abstractly. For example, it is dangerous to teach a young person to love Humanity, but to never demand of him or her that he or she do the hard work of loving actual people!

FROM PARTICULAR BEAUTIES TO THE IDEA OF BEAUTY

[B] but next he must remark how the beauty attached to this or that body is cognate to that which is attached to any other, and that if he means to ensue beauty in form, it is gross folly not to regard as one and the same the beauty belonging to all; and so, having grasped this truth, **he must make himself a lover of all beautiful bodies, and slacken the stress of his feeling for one by contemning it and counting it a trifle.**

Socrates-Diotima argues that a person needs to be awakened to the real difference between his or her attraction to beautiful bodies, and his or her attraction to Beauty itself, noticing and reflecting on the fact that he or she even has the power, the gift, to be able to notice and to respond to Beauty. Gerard Manley Hopkins put it in his poem “The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo,” at line 35:

“Give beauty back, beauty, beauty, beauty, back to God, beauty’s self and beauty’s giver.”

AN AWAKENED SOUL IS OF GREATER SIGNIFICANCE

One could enter at this point into the “sacramental principle” that is so central in the Roman Catholic way of perceiving the world, the created world – all of it, not just the “more spiritual” parts of it. This principle accepts that all that exists “hides” but also in part “reveals” the Maker, or to use Hopkins again, all things reveal “Beauty’s self and Beauty’s giver.”

But his next advance will be ***to set a higher value on the beauty of souls than on that of the body***, so that however little the grace that may bloom in any likely soul [C] it shall suffice him for loving and caring, and for bringing forth and soliciting such converse as will tend to the betterment of the young;

ASCENT FROM LOVE OF PARTICULAR BODIES TO A LOVE OF CARRIERS OF TRUE CULTURE

Culture refers to “the meanings (what we understand about ourselves alone and as a group) and values (what we alone or as a group endeavor, dream, long for, hope, aim ourselves towards) that inform a Way of life.” A **society**, by contrast, is what a people *does* together – the activities of selves and institutions, relying on each other, to secure together the necessities of life – food, shelter, safety, health, etc.

Socrates-Diotima talks about how one educates a young person from loving beautiful bodies or things – the necessary particularity that awakens the love of Beauty in a soul – to loving a goodness that is good for everyone, and that serves the awakening of the souls of everyone – the works of Culture such as law and constitutions and even The Academy of Plato where he taught young men how to become Statesman and mathematicians and scientists.

and that finally he may be constrained to contemplate the beautiful as appearing in our observances and our laws, and to behold it all bound together in kinship and so estimate the body’s beauty as a slight affair. From observances he should be led on to the branches of knowledge, that there also he may behold a province of beauty, and by looking thus on **beauty in the mass may escape from the mean, meticulous slavery of a single instance**, where he must centre all his care, [D] like a lackey, upon the beauty of a particular child or man or single observance; **and turning rather towards the main ocean of the beautiful may by contemplation of this bring forth in all their splendour many fair fruits of discourse and meditation** in a plenteous crop of *philosophy*; until with the strength and increase there acquired he descries a certain single knowledge connected with a beauty which has yet to be told. And here, I pray you,’ [E] said she,’ give me the very best of your attention.

THE RIGHT AND REGULAR ASCENT TO THE IDEAS – CONTEMPLATION AND VISION

“ ‘When a man has been thus far tutored in the lore of love, passing from view to view of beautiful things, **in the right and regular ascent**, suddenly he will have revealed to him, as he draws to the close of his dealings in love, a wondrous vision, beautiful in its nature; and this, Socrates, is the final object of all those previous toils.

First of all, it is ever-existent [211] and neither comes to be nor perishes, neither waxes nor wanes; next, it is not beautiful in part and in part ugly, nor is it such at such a time

and other at another, nor in one respect beautiful and in another ugly, nor so affected by position as to seem beautiful to some and ugly to others.

THE ETERNAL IDEAS

Nor again will our initiate find the beautiful presented to him in the guise of a face or of hands or any other portion of the body, nor as a particular description or piece of knowledge, nor as existing somewhere in another substance, such as an animal or [B] the earth or sky or any other thing; *but existing ever in singularity of form independent by itself, while all the multitude of beautiful things partake of it* in such wise that, though all of them are coming to be and perishing, it grows neither greater nor less, and is affected by nothing. So when a man by the right method of boy-loving ascends from these particulars and begins to descry that beauty, he is almost able to lay hold of the final secret.

This expression “boy-loving” has, in our present culture, been too quickly understood as meaning a homosexual relationship – an older man with a younger one or boy. While it is true that human beings never cease to surprise anyone by their capacity for perversity, this “boy-love” here is not what Socrates-Diotima is talking about.

What Socrates-Diotima means here is that the Beauty that a Teacher sees in his or her students, or potential students, is that very awakening of the soul of the Teacher to the soul of student – Beauty dwells here. It is the awareness of this that causes the true Teacher to want his or her students to awaken to the nature of their own souls, teaching them step-by-step – the “right and regular ascent” that he has sketched here in brief – what the soul is and for and towards what it exists.

THE LADDER OF BEING

Such is the right approach [C] or induction to love-matters. **Beginning from obvious beauties he must for the sake of that highest beauty be ever climbing aloft, *as on the rungs of a ladder,***

from one to two,

and from two to all beautiful bodies;

from personal beauty he proceeds to beautiful observances,

from observance to beautiful learning,

and from learning at last to that particular study which is concerned with the beautiful itself and that alone;

so that in the end he comes to know [D] *the very essence of beauty.*

THE ULTIMATE GOAL – A KIND OF PERSON

In that state of life above all others, my dear Socrates,' said the Mantinean woman, 'a man finds it truly worthwhile to live, as he contemplates essential beauty. This, when once beheld, will outshine your gold and your vesture, your beautiful boys and striplings, whose aspect now so astounds you and makes you and many another, at the sight and constant society of your darlings, ready to do without either food or drink if that were any way possible, and only gaze upon them and have their company.

[E] But tell me, what would happen if one of you had the fortune to look upon essential beauty entire, pure and unalloyed; not infected with the flesh and colour of humanity, and ever so much more of mortal trash? *What if he could behold the divine beauty itself, in its unique form?*

[212] Do you call it a pitiful life for a man to lead—looking that way, observing that vision by the proper means, and having it ever with him? Do but consider,' she said, 'that there only will it befall him, as *he sees the beautiful through that which makes it visible, to breed not illusions but true examples of virtue, since his contact is not with illusion but with truth.* So when he has begotten a true virtue and has reared it up he is destined to win the friendship of Heaven; he, above all men, is immortal.'

SOCRATES CONCLUDES HIS SPEECH

[B] “This, Phaedrus and you others, is what Diotima told me, and I am persuaded of it; in which persuasion I pursue my neighbours, to persuade them in turn that towards this acquisition the best helper that our human nature can hope to find is Love. Wherefore I tell you now that every man should honour Love, as I myself do honour all love-matters with especial devotion, and exhort all other men to do the same; both now and always do I glorify Love’s power and valour [C] as far as I am able. So I ask you, Phaedrus, to be so good as to consider this account as a eulogy bestowed on Love, or else to call it by any name that pleases your fancy.”

After Socrates had thus spoken, there was applause from all the company except Aristophanes, who was beginning to remark on the allusion which Socrates’ speech had made to his own;¹ when suddenly there was a knocking at the outer door, which had a noisy sound like that of revellers, and they heard notes of a flute-girl. “Go and see to it,” [D] said Agathon to the servants; “and if it be one of our intimates, invite him in: otherwise, say we are not drinking, but just about to retire.”²⁰

^{*1} See 205 E.

²⁰ Plato, *Lysis, Symposium, Gorgias: English Text*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson, trans. W. R. M. Lamb, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA; London, England: Harvard University Press, 1925), 173–209.