

Plato's *Symposium* and Diotima's Path of Love

Immediately before Socrates, the sixth speaker, begins his formal speech in praise of Eros (or Desire, or Love) he questions Agathon, the fifth, who has extravagantly praised his subject, calling him "a God, blest before all others." Socrates gets Agathon to admit that desire is always for something which is lacking – we do not desire what we already have (although we may desire what is at present ours to continue to be ours in the future). The lover, then is marked by a state of want: and given that the Gods cannot be said to be in such a state, Eros cannot be a God – let alone one blest above all others. Socrates then begins his speech:

[201d] And now I shall let you [Agathon] alone, and proceed with the discourse upon Love which I heard one day from a Mantinean woman named Diotima: 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 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, 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.

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?

^{202a}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.

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

Every one? People who do not know, she rejoined, or those who know also?

I mean everybody in the world. At this she laughed and said,

^c 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?

Certainly I do.

d 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.

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 daimon, Socrates: for the whole of the daimon-kind is between divine and mortal.

Possessing what power? I asked.

203a Interpreting and transporting human things to the gods and divine things to humans; 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 priestcraft concerning sacrifice and ritual and incantations, and all soothsaying and magic. God with human does not mingle: but by a middle nature is the communion between humans and gods and between gods and humans carried out, whether waking or asleep. Whosoever has skill in these affairs is a spiritual human; to have it in other matters, as in common arts and crafts, is for the mechanical. Many and multifarious are these daimons, and one of them is Love.

From what father and mother sprung? I asked.

[203b-204a] INTERLUDE: *Diotima relates the story of Eros (Love) as the offspring of Poros (Wealth or Resource) and Penia (Poverty) conceived on the birthday of Aphrodite, the goddess of beauty (because of this Eros is an attendant of Aphrodite). From Penia he inherited the characteristic of lack – an emptiness that always desires to be filled – and from Poros the resourcefulness to make good that lack. Because of the timing of his conception his pursuit of goodness centres upon beauty. In this half-way state Eros is not a mortal but not quite an immortal – he seems to continually die and revive, sometimes, says Diotima, on the same day. Socrates continues:*

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. 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
- c of this daimon. That you should have formed your other notion of Love 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 humankind?

- 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?

204d206a: -INTERLUDE: *Here, Socrates and Diotima agree that the lover of beautiful things desires that they will be his or hers, and that having beauty will make the lover happy. They agree that this wish, desire or love is common to all humankind. Humans love the good and want to possess it always.*

- 206b Now if love is always for this, she proceeded, what is the method of those who pursue it, and what is the behavior 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.

- 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. This it cannot do upon an ugly person, but only on the beautiful: the conjunction of man and woman is a begetting for both. It is a divine affair, this engendering and bringing to birth, an immortal element in the creature that is mortal; and it cannot
- d occur in the discordant. 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 labor with the burden of its young.
- e Therefore when a person is big and teeming-ripe 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.

What then is it?

It is of engendering and begetting upon the beautiful.

Be it so, I said.

To be sure it is, she went on; and how of engendering? Because this is something ever-existent and
207a immortal in our mortal life. From what has been admitted, we needs must yearn for immortality no less than for good, since love loves good to be one's own for ever. And hence it necessarily follows that love is of immortality.

All this instruction did I get from her at various times when she discoursed of love-matters; and one time she asked me,

b 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 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,
c one might suppose they do these things on the promptings of reason; but what is the cause 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.

d 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, 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
e which he loses, 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
208a grow in him, while others perish. And here is a yet stranger fact: 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 is preserved in this way; not
b by keeping it exactly the same for ever, 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: Really, can this in truth be so, most wise Diotima?

* "conning" – a rather archaic word (Taylor's translation here uses the word "meditation") – what Plato means to say is that as we turn our attention to one truth, whatever was in our mind before must make way for it. Our memories, it seems, are really memories of our memories – continually refreshing themselves.

Interlude [208c-e]: *Diotima points out how many human beings strive for immortality of name and memory (fame, glory, honour).*

They are in love with what is immortal. 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,
^{209a} and a state of bliss, which in their imagining they for all succeeding time procure. 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? Prudence, and virtue in general; and of these the begetters are all the poets and those craftsmen who
^b 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 temperance and justice.

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
^c combined in one; and straightway in addressing such a person he is resourceful in discoursing of virtue and of what should be the good man's character and what his pursuits; and so he takes in hand the other's education. 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. 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.

[INTERLUDE: *Diotima says that these ‘deathless’ offspring are creative products (such as poetry), fine laws that govern cities and so on*].

^{210a} Into these love-matters even you, Socrates, might happily be initiated; 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. He who would proceed rightly in this business must not merely begin
^b from his youth to encounter beautiful bodies. 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; 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
^c lover of all beautiful bodies, and slacken the stress of his feeling for one by contemning it and counting it a trifle. 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 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; 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
^d of knowledge, that there also he may behold a province of beauty, and by looking thus on beauty in

e the all may escape from the mean, meticulous slavery of a single instance, where he must centre all his care, like a household servant, upon the beauty of a particular child or man or single observance; and turning rather towards the great 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
e with a beauty which has yet to be told. And here, I pray you, said she, give me the very best of your attention.

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
211a final object of all those previous toils. First of all, it is ever-existent 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. 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
b a particular description or piece of knowledge, nor as existing somewhere in another substance, such as an animal or 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
c by nothing. So when a man by the right method of true love ascends from these particulars and begins to descry that beauty, he is almost able to lay hold of the final secret. Such is the right approach 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
d 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 the very essence of beauty. In that state of life above all others, my dear Socrates, said the Mantinean woman, a man finds it truly worth while 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
212a mortal trash? What if he could behold the divine beauty itself, in its unique form? 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 embrace 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 the Gods; he, above all men, is immortal.

(Translation by Lamb, with amendments)