

Plato's Symposium and Diotima's Ladder of Love

Plato's dialogue the *Symposium* is one of the key texts of the Platonic tradition: it relates a series of speeches made in praise of Eros at a party thrown in celebration of Agatho's victory in the contest of Dramas in the Festival of Dionysus. There are seven speeches and the first five are from some of the renowned and cultured gentlemen of Athens. Each praises Eros – Love or Desire – in his own way, and culminates in an extravagant pyrotechnic from Agatho himself: all good and all blessedness is attributed to Eros who is, he claims, "of all the Gods, the most blissful, the most beautiful and the best."

The sixth speaker is Socrates: he begs permission to cross-question Agatho before making a formal speech and, this being granted, he shows that since desire is always the desire for something which is lacking Eros cannot, in this sense, be the best or the most beautiful: rather this praise must be given to the *beloved* – the object of love and desire. The point being made, Socrates begins his speech.

Strangely, rather than speak for himself, Socrates recalls the teaching he received from the priestess Diotima of Manitea and his entire speech is actually hers. She, he explains, had in her turn questioned him about the relation of love to the beloved when Socrates had called Eros a God – and had showed him that Eros was not a God – for how could a God be thought to be lacking in anything? Rather, she said, Eros was a "great daemon" or spirit who acted as an intermediary between the Gods and humankind connecting those who lacked but loved beauty to the Beautiful. All forms of love, it seems, are variations on a desire for beauty – and ultimately a desire for immortal and never-ending beauty. Eros himself, she said, was the offspring of Poros (Wealth or Resource) and Penia (Poverty) conceived on the birthday of Aphrodite, the Goddess of Beauty. 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 itself 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, taught Diotima, on the same day.

In passing she points out that Eros has the same relationship to the lack of beauty and the gaining of beauty that philosophy has to ignorance and the gaining of wisdom. We philosophize because we lack wisdom, but feel the need for it.

Whether we are referring to the physical or the immaterial self, she next says, we teem with seeds which we can only bring forth in the presence of beauty: the sowing of these seeds allow us a certain access to immortality – or at least an image of immortality. Let us pick up her teaching and initiating of Socrates from this point. She says:

208c Nor is it less plain, from instances of a different kind, that immortality is the great aim and end of all. For, if you observe how the love of fame and glory operates on men, and what effect it has upon their conduct, you must wonder at their folly in labouring so much and suffering so greatly in the pursuit of it, unless you consider the mighty power of that passion which possesses them, a zeal to become illustrious in after-ages, and to acquire a fame that may last forever and be immortal. For this, more than for the sake of their families or friends, are they ready to encounter dangers, to expend their treasures, to undergo the severest
 d hardships, and to meet death itself. . . . But though immortality be thus sought by all men, yet men of different dispositions seek it by different ways. In men of certain constitutions, the generative power lies chiefly and eminently in their bodies. Such persons are particularly fond of the other sex, and court intimacies chiefly with the fair: they are easily enamoured in the this way of love; and procure to themselves, by begetting children, the preservation of their names, a remembrance of themselves which they hope will be immortal, a happiness to endure forever.

209a In men of another stamp, the faculties of generation are, in as eminent a degree, of the mental kind. For those there are who are more prolific in their souls than in their bodies; and are full of the seeds of such an offspring as it peculiarly belongs to the human soul to conceive and to generate. And what offspring is this, but wisdom and every other virtue? Those who generate most, and who are parents of the most numerous progeny in this way, are the poets, and such artists of other kinds as are said to have been the inventors of their respective arts. But by far the most excellent and beauteous part of wisdom is that which is conversant in the founding and well-ordering of cities and societies; a part of wisdom distinguished by the names of temperance and justice. When the soul of any man has been
 b teeming with the seeds of this wisdom from his youth (and of divine souls it is the native property thus to teem), as soon as he arrives at maturity of age, and those seeds are fully ripened, he longs to sow them in the souls of others, and thus to propagate wisdom. In this situation of his mind, his whole employment, I suppose, is to look about and search for beauty, where he may generate; for never can he generate on aught which is ugly or uncomely.

Meeting first then with outward beauty, that of the body, he welcomes and embraces it; but turns away from where he sees deformity in the body; for his soul is full of love. But if, in his further and deeper search, he has the good fortune to meet with the inward and hidden beauty of a well-natured and generous soul, he

then entirely attaches himself, and adheres closely to the whole person in whom it is found, the compound of soul and body. He now finds in himself a facility and a copiousness of expression when he entertains this partner of his soul with discourses concerning virtue; by what means it is acquired; what is a character completely good; what studies should be pursued; what arts be learnt; and how time should be employed in order to the forming such a character.

Desirous, therefore, thus to form and perfect the object of his love, he undertakes the office of preceptor. Indeed, whilst he is conversing intimately with that which is fair, those seeds of wisdom, which he was before big with, burst forth spontaneous, and he generates. From this time, whether in the presence or absence of his mistress, his mind and memory become prompt and active; and he readily produces all his mental store. Both the parents then join in cherishing, rearing up, and cultivating the fruits of their love and amorous converse. Hence it is that a friendship of the firmest kind cements such a pair; and they are held together by a much stricter band of union than by an offspring of their bodies; having a common and joint interest in an offspring from themselves more beautiful and more immortal. Who would not choose to be the father of such children, rather than of mortals sprung from his body? Who that considers Homer, Hesiod, and other excellent poets, with the admiration they deserve, would not wish for such an issue as they left behind them, an issue of this mental kind, such as perpetuates their memory with the highest honour, and procures for them an immortality of fame? Or such a posterity as that whose foundation Lycurgus laid at Lacedæmon, a race of which himself was the first father, the preservers of their country and of all Greece? Amongst you Athenians, what honours are paid to the memory of Solon, who begat the Laws! And abroad as well as at home how illustrious are the names of many others, Barbarians as well as Grecians, who have exhibited to the world many noble actions, and have thus begotten all kinds of virtue! To men like these have temples often been erected, on account of such their progeny: but never was any man thus honoured on account of his mortal merely human offspring.

210a In the mysteries of Love thus far perhaps, Socrates, you may be initiated and advanced.¹ But to be perfected, and to attain the intuition of what is secret and inmost, introductory to which is all the rest, if undertaken and performed with a

¹ We have here a pause, or break, more solemn and awful than any to be met with elsewhere in Plato. But it has great propriety in this place, as it becomes the sublime and mysterious character of Diotima; and as it is necessary, besides, for ushering in with the greater solemnity those very sublime and mysterious speculations which follow it. -S.

mind rightly disposed, I doubt whether you may be able. However, not to be wanting in a readiness to give you thorough information, I will do my best to conduct you till we have reached the end. Do but you your best to follow me.

Whoever then enters upon this great affair in a proper manner, and begins according to a right method, must have been from his earliest youth conversant with bodies that are beautiful. Prepared by this acquaintance with beauty, he must, in the first place, if his leader lead aright, fall in love with some one particular person, fair and beauteous; and on her beget fine sentiments and fair discourse. He must afterwards consider, that the beauty of outward form, that which he admires so highly in his favourite fair one, is sister to a beauty of the same kind, which he cannot but see in some other fair. If he can then pursue this corporeal beauty, and trace it wherever it is to be found, throughout the human species, he must want understanding not to conceive, that beauty is one and the same thing in all beauteous bodies. With this conception in his mind, he must become a lover of all visible forms, which are partakers of this beauty; and in consequence of this general love, he must moderate the excess of that passion for one only, which had hitherto engrossed him wholly.

After this, if he thinks rightly, and knows to estimate the value of things justly, he will esteem that beauty which is inward, and lies deep in the soul, to be of greater value and worthy of more regard than that which is outward, and adorns only the body. As soon, therefore, as he meets with a person of a beauteous soul and generous nature, though flowering forth but a little in superficial beauty, with this little he is satisfied; he has all he wants; he truly loves, and assiduously employs all his thoughts and all his care on the object of his affection. Researching in his mind and memory, he draws forth, he generates such notions of things, such reasonings and discourses, as may best improve his beloved in virtue. Thus he arrives, of course, to view beauty in the arts, the subjects of discipline and study; and comes to discover, that beauty is congenial in them all. He now, therefore, accounts all beauty corporeal to be of mean and inconsiderable value, as being but a small and inconsiderable part of beauty.

From the arts he proceeds further to the sciences, and beholds beauty no less in these. And by this time having seen, and now considering within himself, that beauty is manifold and various, he is no longer, like one of our domestics who has conceived a particular affection for some child of the family, a mean and illiberal slave to the beauty of any one particular, whether person or art, study or practice; but betaking himself to the ample sea of beauty, and surveying it with the eye of

intellect, he begets many beautiful and magnificent reasonings, and dianoëtic conceptions in prolific philosophy, till thus being strengthened and increased, he perceives what that one science is which is so singularly great, as to be the science of so singularly great a beauty. But now try to give me all the attention you are master of.

Whoever then is advanced thus far in the mysteries of Love by a right and regular progress of contemplation, approaching now to perfect intuition, suddenly he will discover, bursting into view, a beauty astonishingly admirable; that very beauty, to the gaining a sight of which the aim of all his preceding studies and labours had been directed: a beauty, whose peculiar characters are these: In the first place, it never had a beginning, nor will ever have an end, but always is, and always flourishes in perfection, unsusceptible of growth or of decay. In the next place, it is not beautiful only when looked at one way, or seen in one light; at the same time that, viewed another way, or seen in some other light, it is far from being beautiful: it is not beautiful only at certain times, or with reference only to certain circumstances of things; being at other times, or when things are otherwise circumstanced, quite the contrary: nor is it beautiful only in some places, or as it appears to some persons; whilst in other places, and to other persons, its appearance is the reverse of beautiful. Nor can this beauty, which is indeed no other than the beautiful itself, ever be the object of imagination; as if it had some face or hands of its own, or any other parts belonging to body: nor is it some particular reason nor some particular science. It resides not in any other being, not in any animal, for instance; nor in the earth, nor in the heavens, nor in any other part of the universe: but, simple and separate from other things, it subsists alone with itself, and possesses an essence eternally uniform. All other forms which are beauteous participate of this; but in such a manner they participate, that by their generation or destruction *this* suffers no diminution, receives no addition, nor undergoes any kind of alteration.

When from those lower beauties, reascending by the right way of Love, a man begins to gain a sight of this supreme beauty, he must have almost attained somewhat of his end. Now to go, or to be led by another, along the right way of Love, is this: beginning from those beauties of lower rank, to proceed in a continual ascent, all the way proposing this highest beauty as the end; and using the rest but as so many steps in the ascent; to proceed from one to two, from two to all beauteous bodies; from the beauty of bodies to that of souls; from the beauty of souls to that of arts; from the beauty of arts to that of learning; until at length from

this learning he arrives at that one study which is the beholding of no other thing than of that supreme beauty; and thus finally attains to know what is the beautiful itself.

- a Here is to be found, dear Socrates, here if any where, the happy life, the ultimate object of desire to man: it is to live in beholding this consummate beauty; the sight of which if ever you attain, it will appear not to be in gold, nor in magnificent attire, nor in beautiful youths or damsels: with such, however, at present, many of you are so entirely taken up, and with the sight of them so absolutely charmed, that you would rejoice to spend your whole lives, were it possible, in the presence of those enchanting objects, without any thoughts of eating or drinking, but feasting your eyes only with their beauty, and living always in the bare sight of it. If this be so, what effect, think you, would the sight of beauty itself have upon a man, were
- e he to see it pure and genuine, not corrupted and stained all over with the mixture of flesh, and colours, and much more of like perishing and fading trash; but were able to view that divine essence, the beautiful itself, in its own simplicity of form?

212a Think you, that the life of such a man would be contemptible or mean; of the man who always directed his eye toward the right object, who looked always at real beauty, and was conversant with it continually? Perceive you not, that in beholding the beautiful with that eye, with which alone it is possible to behold it, thus, and thus only, could a man ever attain to generate, not the images or semblances of virtue, as not having his intimate commerce with an image or a semblance; but virtue true, real, and substantial, from the converse and embraces of that which is real and true. Thus begetting true virtue, and bringing her up till she is grown mature, he would become a favourite of the Gods; and at length would be, if any man ever be, himself one of the immortals.

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Thus is the teaching of Diotima reported, and Socrates ends by saying that he was persuaded by this initiation and "full of this persuasion myself, I endeavour to persuade others, and to show them, that it is difficult for any man to find a better guide or assistant to him than Love [Eros], in his way to happiness. And on this account, I further contend, that every man ought to pay all due honours to that patron of human nature. For my own part, I make it my chief study to cultivate the art which Love teaches, and employ myself upon the subjects proper for the exercise of that art with a particular attention; encouraging others to follow my example, and at all times, as well as now, celebrating the power and virtue of Love as far as I am able.