

The Symposium: Socrates in the porch

The *Symposium* is one of Plato's most influential dialogues: its seven speeches made in praise of Love (Eros) during the festival of Dionysus take the reader through a series of deepening insights into the power which draws us to the great ocean of divine beauty and, ultimately, its source which works a magical transformation on the soul. But well before the speeches begin we have a curious episode that may be worth considering, since it is easy to pass it by without too much attention.

The dialogue is actually a report by Apollodorus to a friend who asks whether he (Apollodorus) was present at the much reported symposium – in fact he wasn't there, but he had had a detailed account of it from Aristodemus: so the dialogue is actually a report of a report – a device that Plato sometimes uses perhaps to give some distance to the words and events and so to mark them off as a sacred enactment such as was displayed during the celebration of the mysteries. Of all the dialogues of Plato indeed, the *Symposium* is the one which most signals the merging of philosophic *logos* with the *drama* of the mysteries (perhaps, we might allow the *Phaedo* to be its equal in this respect). Apollodorus himself admits that his nickname, *the madman*, seems to be well earned for he says, the transport of delight he experiences when he hears philosophy concerning the non-material world “proves me beyond question out of my senses and a madman.”

The report begins with Aristodemus explaining that upon meeting with Socrates who is on his way to the party given by Agathon he is invited to join him. His account continues with these words:

After this little talk together, he said, on they went. But on the way, Socrates musing, and attentive to something in his own mind, was outwalked by him; and, observing him to stop, bid him walk on. When he was come to Agathon's house, the door of which was open, an incident, he said, happened, which put him into some confusion. For a servant, who was coming out, meeting him there upon the spot, led him directly to the banquet-room, where he found the company just going to supper. Immediately Agathon, on seeing him enter the room, said,

Aristodemus, you are come very opportunely to sup with us. But if any other purpose brings you hither, defer it to another time. I was looking about for you in the temple yesterday, with intention to desire your company, and could not see you. But how came you not to bring us Socrates with you?

Upon which I looked back, said he, but could nowhere see Socrates following me, as I had imagined. However, I declared I came along with Socrates, upon his invitation hither to supper.

You did well, said Agathon; but where is he then himself?

He was following me in but just now, said I; and for my part, I wonder where he can be.

Boy, said Agathon to one of his servants, will you go and see if you can find Socrates, and conduct him in? Then, turning to me,

Do you, Aristodemus, said he, take your place next to Eryximachus.

And immediately he ordered a servant to come and wash my feet clean, that I might take my place upon the couch. Just then the boy who had been sent out returned, and told us, that Socrates had withdrawn himself into the porch of some neighbouring house, and was there standing; and when I called to him, said the boy, he refused to come.

Absurd! said Agathon: go and call him again; and do not leave him in that manner.

But Aristodemus told me, that he himself opposed it, and desired that Socrates might be let alone, *for that it was usual with him so to do.*

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Eventually Socrates joins the party (although, we may note, after the food had been served and, for the most part, eaten), and the round of speeches in praise of Eros begins.

But what does this little, and apparently insignificant, interlude mean? ‘Standing in a porch’ can be a rather mundane matter, although we might note that the same word (*prothuro*) is used again in the *Philebus* when, the company searching for the good, has almost tracked it down as something better than either pleasure or wisdom, and Socrates says that they are now standing in the *vestibule* (*prothuro*) of the good.¹

Plato cannot show us what is going on in the soul of Socrates: we are not even able to see in his head, but whatever the experience has wrought in Plato’s model sage, his presence in the symposium transforms a party of clever speechifying into a mystery drama – something sacred. In classical Greek temples there was usually a *pronaos* (a fore-porch) – and according to ancient writers, it was on the columns of the pronaos of the temple of Apollo at Delphi that the famous maxims were written, such as ‘Know Thyself’. We might not be too surprised if the import of that exhortation is principally discussed in the *First Alcibiades*, which was understood to be the entrance – the vestibule – of the serious study of the Platonic dialogues in the Iamblichean syllabus.

Interestingly, just in case the incident at the porch is missed, Plato also has Socrates shown to be undergoing a similar experience, as related by Alcibiades in the seventh of the speeches in which he recalls serving with him on campaign with the Athenian army:

For thinking deeply about something one morning, he stood considering it; and though he was not able to discover what he was investigating, he did not desist, but stood exploring. It was now too midday, and the soldiers perceived him, and wondering, said one to the other, that Socrates had stood from the morning cogitating. At length some of the Ionian soldiers when it was evening, having supped (for it was then summer), laid themselves down on the bare ground, that they might observe whether he continued in the same posture through the night. But he stood till it was morning and the sun rose; after which he departed, having first adored the sun.

¹ Proclus, too, often uses the word – for example in the *Theology of Plato*, bk III, ch 19 64.10 (ch.13 p. 211 Taylor): “And as in the most holy of the mysteries, prior to the mystic spectacles, those that are initiated, are seized with astonishment, so in intelligibles prior to the participation of *the good*, beauty shining forth, astonishes those that behold it, converts the soul to itself, and being established in the *vestibules* [of *the good*] shows what that is which is in the adyta, and what the transcendence is of occult good.”

As I say, we cannot look into the soul of Socrates, nor can we hear the voice of his *daemon* who plays a significant role in the explanations he gives for his actions (and, indeed, his inactions). But we should not ignore this incident – after all Plato could have had Socrates simply entering Agathon’s party with Aristodemus without harming the obvious course of the dialogue or its reasoned contents. A few observations then, somewhat speculative, to offer to our careful reading of the *Symposium*:

The dialogue is set in, and relies upon, a party – a joint enterprise of many who come together in the celebration of Eros during the festival of Dionysus. The retreat by Socrates to his own self alone in the porch might be considered as a symbol of the original unity of the soul before it embraces manyness. He is there for some time (although clearly nothing like the length of time reported by Alcibiades of the incident at camp in Potidaea) – long enough, at least, for Agathon to have attempted send a servant to fetch in Socrates several times. Socrates, according to the Taylor translation had become “attentive to something in his own mind” or according to the Loeb translation “becoming absorbed in his own thoughts”

The movement to self-unity can be seen both mythologically and dialectically: since the *Symposium* is connected to Dionysus, we might well consider the myth of that God so central to the mystery cult of Orpheus – he is depicted seated on his father’s throne, undivided; and then, departing, torn apart by the Titans, only to be “remembered” and made an integral whole through the ministrations of Athene.

And dialectically, we are to begin with an isolation of a particular subject, before defining, then demonstrating its relative parts (by a kind of spreading out) and finally returning to its causal interior by analysis.

We might think about why it is that Simplicius offers the newcomer to philosophy the *Handbook of Epictetus* as a suitable starting point: the key teaching here is that we must reduce our human and earthly life to a singular vantage point – seeing everything to do with how we live as being “what is up to us” and dismissing “that which is not up to us.” The multiplicity of the outer world, with its indefinite twists and turns of fate, is thus overpassed. Or we might see the *First Alcibiades* as reducing the whole of philosophy to a single art – that of *knowing one’s self*.

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All of this may have some bearing on what Socrates is experiencing during his sojourn in the porch. Further, the implication is that we too, if we are to explore the ascending path given to Plato’s readers by Diotima/Socrates, must ready ourselves for the deepening of the self in the mysteries. We should remember that the mysteries were not primarily a set of secret teachings but an intensification of the experience of divinity. One philosopher who clearly underwent this is Plotinus. He begins his treatise on the *Descent of the Soul into Bodies* (Ennead IV, 8) with these words:

Often when by an intellectual energy I am roused from body, and converted to myself, and being separated from externals, retire into the depths of my essence, I then perceive an admirable beauty, and am then vehemently confident that I am of a more excellent condition than that of a life merely animal and terrene. For then especially I energize according to the best life, and become the same with a nature truly divine: being established in this nature, I arrive at that transcendent

energy by which I am elevated beyond every other intelligible, and fix myself in this sublime eminence, as in a divinely ineffable harbour of repose. But after this blessed abiding in a divine nature, falling from intellect into the discursive energy of reason, I am led to doubt how formerly and at present my soul became intimately connected with a corporeal nature; since in this deific state she appears such as she is in herself, although invested with the dark and ever-flowing nature of body. . .

It may be possible, then to think of the course of the following symposium as a recovery of that “truly divine nature” – the seven speeches connected together as one whole, just as the seven scattered members of the torn-apart Dionysus were reintegrated: a reproduction amongst the gathered drinkers of what was quietly experienced in the *prothuro*.