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Claremont McKenna College

Honesty and Love in Plato's Symposium

submitted to
Professor Suzanne Obdrzalek

by
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Abstract

Plato's account can be understood in two sections, his critical method, which prioritizes true nature over false praise, and his account of Love. This paper is divided into three sections. The first section discusses the importance of the critical spirit and explains his praise of honesty and truth. The second section describes the nature of Love as virtues of passion. In the third section, I criticize Plato for going against his virtues of passion because of his bad passions, disinterest and malice.

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Introduction

In the first section of this paper, I will discuss Plato's endorsement of the critical spirit. Socrates begins his account of Love by emphasizing the importance of truth and justifies his account of Love as being true in contrast to the empty praise of his predecessors. I analyze the accounts that Plato places into the mouth of Socrates's predecessors to make sense of Socrates's claim of falsity in their accounts. I describe the role of truth in Socrates's account of Love as allowing for the appreciation of beauty. I also describe the relationship between Socrates and Agathon as an exemplar relationship that values truth and honesty.

In the second section of the paper, I discuss the accounts of Socrates and Agathon in relation to the passions. In particular, Plato describes Diotima's ascension to the form of Beauty as both rational and passion-driven. I describe the passion towards a wider field of beautiful objects as the main virtuous passion in Socrates's account.

In the third section of the paper, I describe the importance of love in Socrates's account. I describe Plato as endorsing Socrates's view of beauty because Plato depicts Socrates as having seen the form of Beauty. By depicting Socrates as having seen the form of Beauty, he affirms the form's existence and its effects. I criticize Plato for his hierarchy of Love because it is not founded on evidence available and it is instead based on envy and malice. These bad passions are contrary to the good passions he argues for in the second section. Considering the importance of love in life and the importance of the good passions in his account of Love, the criticism shows a serious contradiction in Plato's thought.

“Love of one is a barbarism;
for it is exercised at
the expense of all others.
The love of God, too.”¹

- Friedrich Nietzsche

I

The Critical Spirit

1) Plato starts Socrates’s account with an emphasis on “what is true” (198d1-e1).

Socrates’s sarcastic praise of his fellow speakers, that they “attribute the greatest and most beautiful characteristics possible to the thing in question, whether they are true of it or not” (198e1-e5), raises the question of why Love has eluded them.

Unlike the dialogues that pick apart the arguments of interlocutors as they argued and adding confidence and strength to the Socratic point of view over time, the speeches that precede Plato’s portray the interlocutors as learned men, gathered together, clarifying their ideas in discussion as learned men do. The building up of the speeches into a totalizing idea gives it the appearance of respect and authority². However, upon Socrates’s “praise”, the speeches are unmasked of their erudite and grave tone. Upon the realization of the parodic nature of the speeches that Plato puts into the mouths of Socrates’s interlocutors, we cannot help but laugh at ourselves for taking them so seriously. Plato’s method is revealed in its most vivid form as the ability to make light of serious speech, or to make the better speech worse.

¹ Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Beyond Good and Evil*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann, Vintage Books, 1989. p. 79

² Each speech can be seen as criticizing and building on its earlier speeches. In every speech there is a reference to another speech, except the first one (Pausanias: Phaedrus(180c1-d1); Eryximachus: Pausanias (185e5-a5), Aristophanes: Every speech preceding his own (his description of the two-bodied humans mocks the exaggerated, socially accepted love, see passage 6) , Agathon: all previous speakers (194e1-b1); Socrates: all previous speakers (198d1-e1), esp. Agathon (198c1-5), Aristophanes (205d10-206a1)).

Plato educates the reader in a spirit of critical philosophy that inspires courage and daring, for only then is there freedom of criticism.

2) *Naive Phaedrus*. Phaedrus describes love as one of the oldest gods and as a useful guide for living well (178a5-d1), because he inspires shame in the lover when he does shameful things and motivates the lover to do great things (178d1-e1). Among his sources is Hesiod's *Theogony*, where Hesiod describes Eros as being the "most beautiful among immortal gods, Eros that relaxes the limbs, and in the breasts of all gods and all men, subdues their reason and prudent counsel" (*Theogony*, 120-125). This seems to raise some suspicion as to whether or not Phaedrus is observing the character of Eros in an unbiased or complete way, because description of Eros seems to imply both irrationality and sublime primordial horror. Eros is described not only as an ancient force of nature, whose nature precedes the cyclops and the monstrous Hecatoncheires (140-155), but also other uncontrollable natural elements, such as the Oceanus and the Sea³. By disregarding the sublimity, irrationality and terror of Eros, his optimism obscures and taints his perception of the object.

Phaedrus argues there is nothing better than "a lover of a respectable sort, and for a lover, a beloved of the same sort" (178c1-d1) for a man to live well. Lovers will be properly guided by honor and shame because he will feel and react appropriately to the attention of the beloved (178d5-e5). However, the literature that he cites do not seem to make those claims at all. It is clear that if Alcestis were not to die for her husband, then her husband would not be able to observe the shameful behavior. Achilles avenged Patroclus after his death despite Patroclus being unable to watch his vengeance.

³ Eros is irrational in this account because it "subdues their reason and prudent counsel". The horror of eros is implied by its age, as the older the god is the less controllable it is (Chaos was the first. The natural elements came later. The human elements came last.)

By depicting Phaedrus with an unfounded and lopsided praise of Love, Plato portrays Phaedrus as a naive theorist whose praise of love is poorly sourced and entirely neglects to give a real description of Love itself, but describes an optimistic false Love instead.

3) *Eryximachus the Learned Doctor*: Eryximachus is portrayed as a standard figure from Old Comedy, the Learned Doctor, who claims to have knowledge of many fields, but as Trivigno (2017) points out, is ignorant, self-important and pedantic (p. 57).

Trivigno points out that while he is coherent and uses well-known medical theories (p. 52-4), he is portrayed with the stereotypical traits of the Learned Doctor. He is depicted overextending his sphere of knowledge, by using medicine to describe the world in a general and universal sense (p. 61). He is also portrayed as pretentious, because he uses technical and superfluous language to bulk up his points (p. 62) and his concepts fail to function precisely in practice (p. 64).

At first glance, Socrates and Eryximachus have very similar goals. They want a theory that describes the nature of things universally, not only things being true in a particular sense or expertise. But it is revealed throughout the dialogue that they have essential differences. Eryximachus does not seem to care about what is true at all. Eryximachus uncritically extends the principle of his field, medicine, to a universal theory. The theory's failure is seen even within the field of medicine as Eryximachus seems unable to put his theories into practice. He advises against heavy inebriation but becomes heavily intoxicated by the end of the dialogue. His solutions to Aristophanes's hiccups is dubious, judging by the evidence from the text, since he does not give a definitive solution and we cannot be certain that the hiccups did not just go away on their own. Thus, if Eryximachus cannot follow his own theories and they don't appear to work for others, we can suppose that Eryximachus's theories don't work. Thus, they evidently cannot guide behavior and cannot propagate the good. Plato rejects comen for their lack of utility in the sustainment of good life.

4) *The Critical Spirit of Aristophanes*. From the eyes of Aristophanes, his dialogue is meant to impose a moral message upon the guests through his use of comedy. He communicates the tone of his enocium with the line: “my own fear about what I’m about to say is not that I shall say things that are funny - that after all, would be an advantage, and in the province of my Muse - but rather that I shall say things that people will laugh out of court” (189b5-c1). Aristophanes describes the origin of human beings as the result of cutting a pre-human being in half. He describes these creatures as “entirely round, with back and sides making a circle, and it had four arms, and equal number of legs, and two completely similar faces on a circular neck, a single head for both faces, which looked out in opposite directions; four ears; two sets of genitals” (189e5-190a5). Aristophanes describes the motion of these creatures with: “when it launched itself into a quick run, just as tumblers bring their legs round into the upright position and tumble in a circle” (190a5-b1). Aristophanes comically describes a mass of these creatures cartwheeling to Olympus to seize power from the Olympic gods. Their image of themselves as “terrifying in strength and power” (190b5-c1) is shown to be hollow, as the gods did not even consider their coup to be a serious threat, choosing to deliberate over their punishment upon learning of their betrayal (190b5-c5)⁴.

The description of the original humans is one of the layers of Aristophanic parody of Love. It shows the absurd and pretentious overconfidence of lovers when confronted with love, typified in this dialogue by Phaedrus.

As punishment for the revolt, they are split in half by Zeus and fixed up by Apollo. Apollo “twisted the faces round, and drawing the skin from all sides over what is now called the belly” and “the wrinkles... on the belly itself around the navel, to be a memorial of that

⁴ The description of their strength followed by the ability of Zeus to wipe out their entire race with lightning bolts is interpreted as humorous (190b5-d1).

ancient suffering” (190c5-191b1). The gods immediately encountered a problem. The new humans do not want to part, making it impossible for them to survive. Thus, Zeus reordered their genitals to allow for sexual intercourse. With the pleasure of intercourse, they are able to “pause from their search” and continue living (191a5-d1).

Aristophanes then states these reoriented lovers, when encountering their other half, “are [nevertheless] overpowered in a quite amazing way by feelings of affection and belonging and love, and they practically refuse to be separated from each other”, although they “wouldn’t even be able to say what they want for themselves from one another. For no one would suppose this to be sexual intercourse . . . that each of two shows such eagerness to take pleasure in each other; it is something else that the soul of each manifestly wants, which it cannot express, but dimly grasps what it wants, and talks of it in riddles”(192b5-d5). The inability to clearly define the demand of what each wants from another raises a suspicion that they wish to hide in polite and charitable views of their relationship, suggesting that the lovers, being unable to state their true intentions of sexual desire, rely on social norms to hide their shame. Aristophanes even uses Hephaestus as the god that mends the lovers together, despite it being Zeus that split them and Apollo’s clear ability to heal them. He uses the image of Hephaestus to draw links to the myth of Ares and Aphrodite’s entanglement. It draws on the idea of embarrassment over their lack of control over Eros and humiliation of being found out by the others (Obdrzalek, p. 78).

The true purpose of Aristophanes’s account is to embarrass those who claim to follow the conventional idea of love and show that their true love is merely hidden by convention and politeness. The original form of humans, the circular cartwheeling beast, is used to make a mockery of the mythic idea of love, or to mock those that want to realize their oft-exaggerated affection with their lover. Its strange and comical form is enough to make

certain that lovers do not want to be “mended” by Hephaestus. Mending would instead be a source of embarrassment and an absurdity.

5) *Aristophanes’s Love*. Throughout the dialogue, Aristophanes identifies a certain deity as Love. He states that “people have failed to recognize the power of Love, since if they were to recognize it, I think they would construct temples and altars to him on the largest scale” (189c5-d1) and “we are to hymn the god who is responsible for that, we would justly hymn Love” (193d1-d5). It seems that Aristophanes did not explicitly name this god, or even give an account of his origin⁵, but we may not immediately assume that there is no evidence as to who the god is. Aristophanes claims that “if we for our part accord piety to the gods, he [Love] will establish us in our original condition and, by healing us, make us blessed and happy” (193d1-e1). Thus, it seems as though Love is actually the god Hesperaestus. This is another sure sign that this account is parody, since Hesperaestus is notoriously bad with love, who is both deserted by Aphrodite and failed to court Athena (Appolodorus, Library).

6) *Plato’s Criticism: Aristophanes’s role in the dialogue*. What is to be made of the Aristophanic mockery of love? Perhaps his point of view arises from his character or his passions. Aristophanes is speculated by Appolodorus to have stuffed himself in the banquet, hiccupping as a result of the gluttony (Trivigno, p. 59). Plato, through Socrates, describes Aristophanes as “his [Aristophanes’s] whole business is with Dionysus and Aphrodite” (177e1-e5)⁶. Aphrodite is often depicted as able to drive anyone, including her followers, such as Phaedra in *Hippolytus*, beyond reason and

⁵ I doubt that the Eros described has to be the one in Greek religion. Although an interpretation can be made for it, e.g. Eros is also irrational (thus one cannot reason as to why one feels it), I think that it is possible that Aristophanes is nevertheless using Hephaestus to subtly mock his interlocutors. It is, after all, Hephaestus that mends the lovers (in other words “establish us in our original condition, by healing us”), not Eros.

⁶ I also concede that it is possible that Aphrodite and Dionysus can promote socially acceptable sexual behavior. The point of this ambiguity is to not directly confront Aristophanes, but to joke about his behavior. The other descriptions link Aristophanes to the chaotic, unsocial sides of Love, such as his burping.

social norms by lust (Euripedes, *Hippolytus*). Dionysus is described by Isler-Kerenyi (2007) as typically followed by satyrs and dancers (p. 9, 16). Plato also uses the sexual allegory of the satyr to portray Aristophanes as a sexual fanatic, as satyrs are a powerful and comical portrayal of obsessive sexual desire (Dover, p. 97).⁷ His criticism of Aristophanes would be plain for his contemporaries: Aristophanes is hubristic. His denial of the origin myth of love is likely an affirmation for the real, natural condition of humans, without the divine myth, described as “[creatures who] because their desire to grow back together, they died from not eating or indeed doing anything else” and “Whenever, too, any of the halves died, leaving the other half behind, the half that was left looked for another half and locked itself together with that, whether it was a whole woman’s half it encountered... or a whole man’s” (191a5-b10). The description of the creatures holding and not necessarily facing each other is similar to depictions of sexual intercourse.⁸ His description of sexual desire as overwhelming and uncontrollable, being greater than the desire for survival or food or any other activity and is only temporarily satisfied each time with Zeus’s solution, “at least be satisfaction from their intercourse, and they would pause from their search, turning to their work and taking care of the other aspects of their lives” (191b5-d1), would have been readily identified as the vice of hubris by Plato’s contemporaries. The creatures group up with any half indiscriminately and constantly, even if it wasn’t their original half, which suggests no qualifications on the other was made⁹ (including any social norms). The attitudes of the time would suggest that behavior done for the desire of food or sex without regard to the firmness of character or strong will that

⁷ He describes Satyrs as “amoral creatures who obey their impulses. They masturbate constantly ... if no living being with a suitable orifice is available, but prefer horses, mules, or deer ... ; even the neck of a jar may be pressed into service”.

⁸ Their genitals are located opposite of where they are facing during the passage, so to join together (back-to-back) the first humans would be facing their genitals together.

⁹ Gender is considered by Aristophanes (191d5-192c1), though this does not save him from being hubristic, as the restriction does not distinguish good and socially acceptable from bad.

came with good character was a terrible thing (Dover, p. 67). This also presents the greatest possible condemnation from Plato, as all other characters are at least able to get to some concrete, albeit, specific or localized value of beauty, whereas Aristophanes, accused of hubris by 'his' description of human nature, indiscriminately finds lovers, regardless of physical beauty, and never reaches the first step on the path of ascension at all.

Plato suggests that despite the great critical spirit of the comic Aristophanes, he is unable to realize the importance of beauty and live a good life because of his lack of good passion. He, unlike Agathon, is therefore disregarded and not spoken directly to.

7) *Socrates and Agathon praise truth.* Socrates says that if he was to continue along the line of his predecessors, to "appear to be offering an enocium to Love, not that we should actually offer him one" (198e5-199a1), he "wouldn't have the capacity to do it" (199a5-b1). Socrates cannot bring himself to only praise Love without any understanding of Love. He states that "he [Love] will appear as beautiful and good as possible - evidently, to the ignorant sort of people (not surely, to those with knowledge); and the praise is attractive enough, even impressive" (199a1-5).

Socrates laments that he will be dismissed as a "laughing-stock" (199b1-5) and that he would rather give up his turn than speak (199a5-b1). The reason for this can be seen in his subsequent dialogue with Agathon, where Agathon dismisses his initial theory and is able to accept Socrates's theory because of his critical spirit, manifesting as concern for the truth, and his passion for the good.

Agathon's speech has interesting parallels with Socrates's speech. They both begin with the same kind of criticism of their predecessors, that they fail to give an account of the essence or nature of love and merely provide an account of some tangential attribute. For Agathon, the essence of Love is in its transformative power rather than mere (lesser) effects

and he complains that previous speakers have not given an account of Love's essence but rather "what sort of character he gave them" (194e5-195a5). Along with Aristophanes, the three of them make up the ones who outlast most other speakers towards the end of the symposium (223c1-d1). What is common among them is their boldness in criticism, as they are the only ones to criticize all of their predecessors. Socrates only attempts to enter into Socratic dialogue with Agathon, and only him, throughout the entire work, such as when he criticized him over his fear of shame coming from failure to impress the intelligent (194a5-d1), his critical technique (198b1-199c1) and his account of Love being good and beautiful (199c5-201d1), because of both his critical spirit and his good passions¹⁰.

8) *Socrates and Agathon on the value of truth.* The value of truth can be found in Socrates/Diotima's account of love.

In Diotima's speech, she describes lovers that are pregnant in their souls who encounter a "beautiful body and soul" as "immediately full of resources when it comes to things to say about virtue" (209b5-c1). She says that the soul-lovers try to educate their lover (209c1-5) and "by contact with what is beautiful [beautiful souls], and associating with it, that he brings to birth and procreates the things with which he was for so long pregnant, both when he is present with him and when he is away from him but remembering him; and he joins with the other person in nurturing what [virtue]¹¹ is born" (209c1-d1).

Therefore, Socrates's motivation for singling out Agathon is that he has a beautiful soul, unlike critical Aristophanes, that allows him to give birth in virtue by educating him about his virtue. The soul is described as in its components "its traits, habits, opinions, desires, pleasures, pains, fears - none of these things is ever the same in any individual, but

¹⁰ The good passions are discussed in essay II.

¹¹ I have interpreted what is born to be virtue. This is because Plato says that one wants to reproduce the good in themselves, not merely just themselves (205d10-206a10). Diotima also mentions that reproduction is for the good in 206e5-207a5, "procreation is something everlasting and immortal, as far as anything can be for what is moral; and it is immortality, together with the good, that must necessarily be desired"

some are coming into existence, others passing away” (207e1- 208a1). Diotima also describes the relationship between knowledge and memory as being “forgetting is the departure of knowledge, and going over something creates in us again a new memory in place of the one that is leaving us, and so preserves our knowledge in such a way as to make it seem the same” (208a1-b1). Therefore, Socrates argues that the lover, being in conversation with a beautiful soul, a beloved soul that has the correct passions and desires and is interested in genuinely, honestly discussing his (real, true) soul, not the mere appearance or fiction of his soul, and in proving the beauty of his soul, the lover can confidently instilling his virtue into his beloved’s soul through honest conversation¹², or as Diotima puts it, he “tries to educate him” (209c1-5). Therefore, the lover can sustain his good within the soul of another man. In conversing with his lover, he reminds himself of their shared good and can carry their shared good into the future. He can even sustain their good with the memory of his lover, a reflection of the good inside of him. The lovers thus serve as the justification of the good of themselves and each other.

- 9) The importance of criticism can also be shown in the way the talks progress. Far from being the usual linear ascent, the dialogue only moves to its essential message, Love as passion for virtue with an understanding of its relation to the human condition¹³, when *aporia* (“It looks very much, Socrates, as if I didn’t know the slightest thing about what I said then”, 201b10-c1) is reached and realized with Socrates’s criticism. Criticism and the mutually shared respect and understanding for truth allows Socrates to move Agathon, and not the other interlocutors, beyond his former position.

¹² Diotima says that one can only reproduce (virtue in this case) in beauty. In this case, the beloved’s soul is the beautiful object in which the lover produces his virtue. See Essay III, Sec. 7 for more details.

¹³ The human condition is discussed in Essay III, Sec. 4-7.

II

The Virtues of Pathos

I will describe different virtues of passion in Socrates and Agathon's accounts. I will also highlight the importance of those virtues.

- 1) *Eros as rational and passion-driven.* Eros is regarded by many as intelligible and rational, but also involving passion. Sheffield argues that “if this desire [eros] had no relationship to intelligibility then it should not be a resource capable of being deliberately and actively employed by philosophical practice” (p. 130) She also argues that the myth of Eros “makes it plain that eros is not just a blind drive, or passionate yearning: it is a cognitively informed state of desire, or motivation that [has] some kind of deliberation about how to remedy that lack” and “an experience of eros is complex and cognition-involving“ (p. 130-1). It will be useful to specify in which way eros can be classified as rational, or a product of thinking, and which ways eros can be seen as passion-driven.

The myth of Eros describes Eros as the child of Poverty and Resource. He is described as “passionate for wisdom and resourceful in looking for it, philosophizing through all his life” (203d1-e1). Love being described as passionate for knowledge and very capable of finding it shows that he is passion-driven and rational. Furthermore, his father makes him “a schemer after the beautiful and good, courageous, impetuous and intense, a clever hunter” (203d1-e1). His scheming must involve some planning, which suggests rational thinking that involves thinking through actions and their effects. The myth of Eros suggests Eros is both related to the passions and to rationality.

- 2) *Descriptions of the ascent of beauty.* In other descriptions of eros, he is described as both rational and passionate. The love of beauty is first described as a yearning not as

a reasoned argument (207d1-d5). The ascent that Diotima describes from the initial yearning, or to “fall in love with a single body and there procreate beautiful words” (210a5-b1). It then progresses to “beauty of outward form”, then to “consider beauty in souls more valuable than beauty in the body”, then to activities and the law, then to “observe the beauty that belongs to kinds of knowledge”, then to the form of beauty, which “always is,... neither comes into being nor perishes, neither increases nor diminishes, not beautiful in relation to this but ugly in relation to that” and “in its own company, uniform” (210e5-211e1). None of this describes a wholly rational conception of beauty, because it also includes a virtuous passion for openness or a passion for loving a wider and wider range of things, including rational knowledge.

Diotima describes the turn from loving one body to loving bodies as realizing that “the beauty that there is in any body whatever is the twin of that in any other” (210a5-b5) and being able to “relax this passionate love for one body, despising it and considering it a slight thing” (210b5-c1). While ‘despising’ may suggest turning away from the one body completely, Diotima still suggests that he consider it a slight thing and love for it is not extinguished but relaxed. All this seems to suggest, not abandoning the minute beautiful thing, but an ability to set aside the myopia that one may have when they are infatuated with one body, as suggested when she says that “gazing now towards a beauty which is vast, and no longer slavishly attached to beauty belonging to a single thing” (210c5-d5). However, to recognize that two things are equal, or that something is “the twin of that” is to have characterized beautiful objects under concepts that allow for that equality, which means the ascent is also a rational process¹⁴.

3) *Descriptions of beauty and the form of Beauty.* She describes the science of beauty by describing its reward: “life is worth living for a human being, in contemplation of

¹⁴ For example, to say that two balls are equal is to say, among other things, that their shape, a concept of a sphere is shared between the two. This is the case for all things that are equal.

beauty itself” (211c5-d5). The ability to contemplate beauty does not mean that beauty itself is rational, just that it is able to accept (one/many) rational categorizations.¹⁵

The esoteric nature of the form of beauty also suggests that it is to some degree arational, for if it was rational it could be described with traits, conditions and boundaries, which would make it easily teachable, instead of allowing Diotima to doubt if it can be taught or not.

Furthermore, Diotima’s description of the ascent of beauty does not exclude removing rational concepts that were placed on beauty. For example, a rational conception of beauty that focuses on a certain object may cause a fixation on a certain object. This would prevent one from reaching wider fields of beauty and thus would require removal.

Seeing that each stage of the revelation opens up new areas to find beauty and dismantles the previous concepts of beauty that fix a certain boundary around the beautiful, the ascent also involves dismantling some rational concepts that were put into Beauty. It is also not the case that these rational concepts are dismantled purely through thinking and realizing contradictions. This can be seen within the structure of the work and Plato’s criticisms of characters other than Socrates.

The structure of this work is substantially different from works from the same period. It has almost no dialogue (the exception being between Socrates and Agathon) but is instead a collection of speeches. The structure of the dialogues can be compared with Symposium to find important differences in which Symposium distinguishes itself from the rest of Plato’s work.

In some of Plato’s dialogues, like Lysis, a rigid structure is proposed and exhausted (ending in aporia). In Lysis, it is that love is between people which are similar, dissimilar or

¹⁵ I mean that irrational objects can have rational concepts put into them. For example, the concept of confidence can be put into the general feeling that one has of that emotion, e.g. the concept that includes feelings like a sense of strong will, etc., which in itself is not rational.

neither, of which Socrates dismisses all the options. In some of his other dialogues, like *Euthyphro*, a concept is given by the interlocutor, which is dismissed as inconsistent or unacceptable (on the basis of the beliefs of said interlocutor). The interlocutors in *Symposium* often suggest inadequacies through arguing that their predecessors lacked certain components or prioritized the wrong thing, not on the basis of inconsistency (excluding Socrates's examination of Agathon). They criticize naivety or myopia instead of an outright error of inconsistent ideas. In Pausinias's speech, he corrects Phaedrus, not because he was inconsistent, but did not take into account the differences in the two kinds of Love, Heavenly and Common Love (180c1-181a1). As argued before, Aristophanes is dismissed by Socrates for hubris instead of inconsistencies in his argument. Plato criticizes Aristophanes's position as being of poor taste, indiscriminately wanting both the good and the bad, instead of being inconsistent.

- 4) *Eros and Lacking, according to Diotima, applied to Agathon.* Agathon's similarity with Diotima's Eros provides a reason for taking his account seriously.

Diotima characterizes Love as "between the mortal and immortal" (202d10-e1), being an entity that has "a lack of good and beautiful things" which "makes him desire the very things he lacks" (202d1-d5). Love is thus not immortal because "all gods are happy and beautiful" (202c5-10). He is also not mortal, because he does the "interpreting and conveying things from men to gods and from gods to men" and "being between both, it fills in the space between them, so that the whole is bound close together". This is the only way that gods and men can be joint since "God does not mix with man" (202e1-203b1). Diotima clarifies that Love has both a desire for resources and wealth and the lack of these things. Love is also characterized as being "neither resourceless at any moment is between wisdom and ignorance" (203e1-204a1). Diotima describes people without Love as those who "doesn't

think he lacks something” and “certainly won’t desire what he doesn’t think he lacks” (204a5-b1).

Agathon is questioned by Socrates on the reason for his shame in regards to disappointing the intelligent. Agathon states that “You [Socrates] surely don’t think me so full of theatre that I actually don’t know that to an intelligent person a few sensible people are more frightening than a lot of stupid ones” (194b5-c1). Socrates acknowledges that he is “perfectly well aware that if you met some individuals you thought to be clever, you’d care more about them than you would about ordinary people” (194c1-c5). Despite playful banter about each other’s intelligence, Agathon and Socrates both acknowledge each other’s respect for wisdom. Agathon acknowledges Socrates’s wisdom when he says, “It looks very much, Socrates, as if I didn’t know the slightest thing about what I said then” (201b10-c1), in response to Socrates’s criticism of his account of Love. His acceptance of criticism also shows his serious dedication and respect to the arguments of the intelligent, in this case, Socrates. Agathon’s mistaken characterization of Love prevents him from obtaining a clear understanding of Love. This is mirrored in Socrates’s conversation with Diotima. Socrates also believed the same things as Agathon when he was questioned by Diotima, stating that “I myself [Socrates] was saying to her other things of pretty much the very sort that Agathon was saying to me just now, that Love was a great god, and was of beautiful things, and she then set about examining me by means of the very arguments I was using with Agathon”. Socrates also acknowledges Agathon’s misunderstanding to be “a pretty reasonable thing to say” (201a5-a10). Socrates shows that Agathon’s acceptance of criticism mirrors the improvement and advances in wisdom that he experiences in his youth, validating both Agathon’s desire and capabilities for wisdom.

This shows a parallel between Agathon and the Eros myth. The awareness of his own lack of knowledge and the desire of knowledge frames Agathon as a genuine character of

Eros. This indicates that his account of Love should be taken seriously, in the sense that his virtues of pathos may have validity, despite possible rational errors. By characterizing Agathon as desiring wisdom and lacking it, Socrates positions Agathon as being capable and worthy of education. He is unlike the equally critical Aristophanes, who share in their critical spirit, but lacks the passion for wisdom and beauty that Agathon shares with Socrates.

Furthermore, emphasis is placed on the passions of Agathon because Plato depicts his account with rational errors. Hence, it is elsewhere, particular in his desires and passions, that he succeeds.

- 5) *Agathon on Pathos and Love*. Agathon's account of Love is worthy of investigation because Socrates's insistence on interrogating Agathon directly and his admitted similarities to Agathon. There are more similarities in their accounts than previously mentioned, particularly virtues of pathos. They suggest a quality beyond rationality (which cannot be the quality in question because Agathon's theory is not coherent).
- 6) *Virtues of Pathos from Socrates and Agathon*. He describes Love as a unifying defining force that allows a person to keep his good character, he says that "no pleasure is stronger than Love; but if they are weaker, then they will be mastered by Love" (196c5-d1), similar to Diotima's account. He also argues that "certainly everyone who is touched by Love turns into a poet", "it is Love's wisdom by which all living things come into being and are born" and "whoever that has this god [Love] as his teacher turns out noted and conspicuous, but whoever does not feel Love's touch stays in obscurity" (196e1-197b1), which indicates that he is aware of Love's ability to make someone creative, both in mind and in body, and able to propagate themselves. This is similar to Diotima's description of the creation of beautiful words upon meeting something/someone beautiful. Socrates is separate from Agathon in the sense that Socrates is aware of the problem that arises from human nature and its

necessary solution, in contrast to Agathon, which only seems to be vaguely aware of the motivations and passions required for loving wisdom and good¹⁶.

Most significantly, he claims that “Love is ... a poet skilled in all kinds of creation in the sphere of music; for the sorts of things one either doesn’t have or don’t own, one can’t give another person or teach anyone else” (196e1-197a5). This claim is interesting because it is similar to Diotima’s description of the form of Beauty, she claims that “as for those aspects relating to the final revelation ... I don’t know whether you would be capable of initiation into them” and she describes the realization of the form of Beauty not as a product of understanding, but immediate, akin to sensation, as one has to “catch sight” (210e1-5) of the form of Beauty rather than understanding it or knowing it. Although Diotima does not outright reject the idea that it is possible to teach the form of Beauty, she is skeptical. Both authors do claim that the object of Love, be it poetry or the form of Beauty, is known immediately through love and is not taught through concepts.

- 7) The importance of Socrates’s respect both for criticism and the right kind of passion are present in his account of Love and in his actions. Just as some of the previous speeches can be seen as lacking critical spirit, they can also be seen as lacking the passion towards beauty in all of its various manifestations. In the case of Eryximachus, his theories not only lack rigour, but also fail to bring any good to his life, or the life of any other (his cures don’t seem to work and he does not follow his own advice), so it is hard to see what motivation it can bring to any life. Some do not have the passion for Love because they simply do not have the good passions at all (Aristophanes). In Socrates’s account, he places passions as an important requirement for ascension and his account of passion can help understand the special role that Agathon plays in the dialogue.

¹⁶ To see why propagation and reproduction is virtuous, see Essay III, sec. 4-7

8) *An account of the virtues of Pathos.* The ascension of Beauty is by no means a purely rational process in which one contradiction gives rise to another concept. But rather, the rational concepts can be coherent and are not dismantled by reason itself, but by a certain courageous and bold passion for good.

III

The Cowardice of Egoism

1) *Socrates and the Form of Beauty*. It is important to know which account Plato actually endorses to make sense of the dialogue as a whole. Socrates seems to be able to contemplate the form of beauty in the text, which is important for interpreting whether or not Plato endorses Diotima's description. If Socrates is capable of contemplating the form of beauty, it would show that Plato believed that it exists in reality and, given his description of the form of Beauty as central to life, would also endorse attaining it and attempting the ascent.

Prominently in the beginning of the dialogue, he was "wrapped up somehow in his own thoughts, and got left behind [by Aristodemus]" (174d5-e1). Diotima describes the value of the form of Beauty as "[it is the Form of Beauty], if anywhere, that life is worth living for a human being, in contemplation of beauty itself" (211d1-5). This may explain Socrates's ability to lose track of his friend and abandon him despite agreeing to "work out what we'll say" (174d1-5). The importance of his friend is minute compared to the form of Beauty, which is central to life's worth. A similar incident is also mentioned in Alcibiades's praise of Socrates. Alcibiades says that "he was at daybreak with something on his mind, standing and reflecting on it; and when he couldn't make progress with it, he didn't give up but stood there looking for a way forward ... until dawn came [tomorrow] and the sun rose; then with a prayer to the sun, he went off" (220c1-e1). Alcibiades's praise of Socrates is said by Alcibiades himself to be the truth (214e5-10). Furthermore, the account is verified by Socrates, for Alcibiades asked Socrates to "break in on me then and there if you like" if "ever I [Alcibiades] say anything that isn't true" (214e10-215a5)¹⁷.

¹⁷ It is possible that Socrates merely doesn't take Alcibiades's account seriously and does not refute it. However, he does refute his accusations before (214d5-10), which suggest this is not the case.

2) *Signs of ascent.* Alcibiades describes the earnest inner soul of Socrates to have statues inside that are “so divine, golden, so outstandingly beautiful and amazing, that I had to do ... whatever Socrates told me to do” (216e5-217a5). Alcibiades also describes Socrates’s thoughts as “the only ones, of the things one hears, that have intelligence within them ... the highest degree divine, contain within them the greatest number of statues of virtue, and have the greatest reach ... to everything that is appropriate for a man who means to be a person of quality to consider” (221e5-222b1). This would suggest that Socrates is capable of beautiful thoughts. These beautiful thoughts are transformed into words, which are then spoken to Alcibiades, who finds them beautiful. He praises Socrates for those words by describing his power as “used to charm people ... by the power that came from his mouth” (215c1-5). Notably, beautiful thoughts and beautiful words are lower portions of the hierarchy of Beauty. Socrates is also described being able to ignore great physical and emotional strain, which allows him to take part in beautiful activities. Beautiful activities are a stage in the ascent to the form of beauty (210c1-5). Alcibiades describes his physical feats, such as eating and drinking as little or as much as he would like (219e5-220a5). He is also described as being able to weather the cold, wearing only a himation instead of the many layers that others wear and crossing ice barefoot for a better grip (220b1-c1). He is said to be calm in battle, “observing people on our own side and on the enemy’s in the same calm way” (221b1-5). Socrates also resisted the advances of beautiful Alcibiades (219c1-d5), for which he is praised as being a “truly superhuman and amazing man” (219c1-5). Furthermore, his ability to drink is also mentioned in the beginning of the dialogue by Eryximachus (176c1-d1).

The initial stages in the ascent of beauty are mentioned as things that Socrates is involved in. He is involved in the beauty of activities, the appreciation of beautiful souls and

their dialogues,¹⁸ and beautiful knowledge and words. His involvement in the initial stages shows the readers that he is qualified for the form of Beauty.

- 3) There are two prominent ways in which Plato can be seen as depicting Socrates without experience of the form of beauty: Diotima's doubt and Alcibiades's description of Socrates struggling with an idea, which is implied to be the form of Beauty. This is because Diotima argued that the contemplation of the form of Beauty is the only possible thing worthwhile in life and because it seems to be the only thing mentioned that can cause one to think at such an extraordinary length. I will evaluate the evidence for these cases as possible counterexamples.

Diotima tells Socrates, "I don't know whether you would be capable of initiation into them [aspects relating to the final revelation]" (209e5-210a5). Beautiful thoughts precede the final revelation (210c5-e1), the form of Beauty. Thus, it seems entirely possible that Socrates is merely struggling to get past beautiful thoughts, which consume him for prolonged periods of time. Hence, he could be seeming to but not actually contemplating the form of Beauty. This can also be seen in Alcibiades's description of Socrates's thinking, "something on his mind, standing and reflecting on it; and when he couldn't make progress with it, he didn't give up but stood there looking for a way forward" (220c1-e1), which suggests some difficulty in his contemplation. This does not describe the form of beauty, which is beautiful unconditionally and immediately experienced ("catch sight").

Socrates's experience of the form of beauty seems possible but is not directly confirmed in text. This could have been an intentional choice. If Plato wanted to confirm his abilities, he could have just had Diotima confirm it, or have Socrates admit that he has experienced the form of beauty.

¹⁸ See Essay II for Socrates's appreciation of Agathon's mind.

However, I think it is possible to accept the ambiguity as a consequence of the esoteric and incommunicable nature of the form of Beauty.

Furthermore, I think that Diotima's doubt is likely due to her understanding that the form of Beauty is difficult to attain. Thus, she has doubts that Socrates may attain it, especially given the errors in his description of Love he gives in the beginning of their conversation. I think Alcibiades's description of Socrates as struggling is a misunderstanding on Alcibiades's part, as to contemplate the form of Beauty is described to be a life-affirming and enjoyable activity and therefore the duration of thought is not because of its difficulty but because of its importance for life and the delight it brings the contemplator.

The esoteric nature of the form of Beauty prevents Socrates from proving he is able to see it by preventing him from communicating or describing it, leaving his experience of the form ambiguous. The esoteric nature of the form of Beauty is cryptically described to both Agathon and Alcibiades.

Socrates tells Agathon that it is not possible for the knowledge of the form of Beauty to flow from one person to another like "water in cups which flow from the fuller into the emptier through the thread of wool" (175d5-e1). Socrates is referring to knowledge of the form of Beauty because Agathon was asking about the "bit of wisdom of yours, the bit that came to you in the porch" (175d1-5), where he had previously been described as forgetting Aristodemus to stand and think there for a prolonged period of time (175b1-5).

Socrates urges Alcibiades to "take a better look" as he doubts Alcibiades actually sees his beauty. He comments that "The sight of the mind ... first sees sharply when the sight of the eyes starts to fade from its prime ... you are still far away from that" (219a1-b1), which suggest that Alcibiades may be mistaken about Socrates's Beauty, even if he can see past physical beauty and partially enjoy the beauty of words and ideas. Thus, Alcibiades can be mistaken about Socrates struggling with his thoughts or any higher objects of beauty.

Furthermore, Alcibiades is aware of Socrates's beautiful words and thoughts (215c5-d5), which only leaves the last stage, the form of Beauty, left for Alcibiades to be ignorant of. When comparing the form of beauty to his other objects of Beauty, the other objects would be comparatively nothing¹⁹. Thus, Socrates's suggestion that it is possible for Alcibiades to mistake Socrates for being "nothing" can only make sense if Socrates himself thinks that he has seen the form of Beauty.

Though it still is ambiguous that Socrates has the form of Beauty or not. The evidence points towards Socrates having interacted with the form of Beauty by the time of the Symposium.

- 4) *Composite and ephemeral selves*. Diotima describes the human desire for immortality when she stated that "All human beings... are pregnant in body and soul, and when we come to be of the right age, we naturally desire to give birth" (206c1-c5).

She explains the desire by describing human nature as "mortal nature" that "seeks so far as it can to exist for ever and to be immortal", it "can achieve it only in this way, through the process of coming-into-being, because it always leaves behind something else that is new in place of the old" (207d1-d5). She even applies this to living individuals, as she says "even during the time in which each living creature is said to be alive and to be the same individual ... and yet, if he's called the same, that's despite the fact that he's never made up from the same thing, but is always renewed ... in the case of the soul, too, its traits, habits, opinions, desires, pleasures, pains, fears - none of these things is ever the same in any individual, but some are coming into existence, others passing away" (207d1-208a1). Diotimia reveals that the human self is merely a composite of mental and physical things, of which all can pass away if not reproduced. Diotima also states that living creatures desire to reproduce only good things (205d5-206a5). Thus, Diotima is not merely arguing that there is a certain fear of

¹⁹ Diotima describes the higher objects of love making the lower objects seem like nothing, see Symposium lines 210b5-c1.

death and that one would try to live forever, but rather, human beings will desire the permanence of their virtues.

- 5) *Coming-into-being and ephemerality.* If the self is in a constant state of coming-into-being, humans need to reproduce themselves in every instance to sustain themselves. The self is a composite of the material body and the soul, which is itself a composite of “traits, habits, opinions, desires, pleasures, pains, fears” (207d1-208a1). Thus, knowing that all of those elements that make up the self are in a constant coming into being, the self too must be in a constant coming into being that needs to be reproduced to be sustained.
- 6) *Mortal goods compared to immortal goods.* The mortal good is but a brilliant flash. It is cherished for a moment and never again, nor before. Subjectless from then on, for the shifting subject is not guaranteed to remain receptive to its goodness, the mere mortal good may not even qualify as a good memory²⁰. Apparent to all good men, the immortal good with duration, or a little immortality, is immeasurably better than its mortal equivalent. For whatever fleeting good without duration cannot inspire confidence and love of life in the future and thus cannot inspire the will to live for any being. Afterall, why should one commit to anything, knowing that it could be valueless to him in an instant. Life itself becomes impossible with mere mortal goods. Diotima describes love as “of procreation and giving birth in the beautiful” (206e5-207a1), making it clear that lovers do not love the beautiful, but rather love what they create in the beautiful, in other words, they love their goods carried into the future by beauty.
- 7) Plato’s hierarchy of beauty seems to be quite strange to those who look upon it too keenly. The valuation of the mind over the body is built upon a strange foundation. It

²⁰ The self is subject to change and thus can become different enough to not perceive their previous goods as goods.

is based upon Diotima's comment that ideas are of "a more beautiful and more immortal kind" (209c5-d1), because ideas, "provide them [the lover] with immortal glory and remembrance because they are themselves immortal" (209d1-e1). Diotima cites poets, Hesiod and Homer, and lawmaker, Solon, whose ideas have been immortalized and worshiped like gods by cults, unlike the body, who is not worshiped (209d1-e5).

Ideas must be seen as altogether different from my common, lower, embodied view. For it seems to me that ideas are just as capable as bodies in their ability to fade from memory, as Diotima says (207e5-208a5). Most ideas, thought, read or heard, are forgotten nearly immediately after they are experienced. The same can be said of most bodies, which barely catch the eyes of observers and deserve little attention. When comparing the prime of the body and the prime of the mind, are they not comparable? Cults of the body exist alongside cults of the mind. Royalty and aristocracy are cults of the body, where the right to rule is inherited upon their birth. It may last as long as any ideological or religious cult. Is it also not possible that one can gain their virtuous pathos by being born virtuous instead of cultivating it?

Not giving proper weight to these facts seem to make Socrates's motivations suspect. So why does Socrates insist upon a higher valuation of the mind than the body? Is this not a product of resentment over the philosopher's infamously ugly appearance²¹? This is not an indictment of the personal nature of the passion, for the other products of beauty are personal too.

Socrates's account has a connection with the personal on almost every level, as shown when Diotima relates that the love for fame is a kind of love that sustains the self. She states

²¹ Nails, Debra. "Socrates." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Stanford Center for the Study of Language and Information, 2018, plato.stanford.edu/entries/socrates/. Citing in particular: "The extant sources agree that Socrates was profoundly ugly, resembling a satyr more than a man—and resembling not at all the statues that turned up later in ancient times and now grace Internet sites and the covers of books."

that “you’d be surprised at their irrationality ... if you don’t think about it, and reflect on how terribly they are affected by love of acquiring a name for themselves” (208c1-d1). She cites the motivations and actions of poets and lawmakers as examples of that behavior. She argues that when one finds someone with a “beautiful body and soul” and educates him, and “by contact with what is beautiful... he brings to birth and procreates the things with which he was for so long pregnant” (209c1-5). Diotima also describes love as being “for the sake of immortal virtue and this sort of glorious reputation that everyone does everything, the more so the better people they are, because they are in love with immortality” (208d5-e5) and in the case of those that are interested in the body, “a memory of themselves, and happiness, as they think, for themselves for all time” (208e1-209a1). This seems to suggest a deeply personal connection with the beautiful things in every stage described by Diotima.

The question lies instead in whether it gives rise to a passion that inspires a genuine attempt to spread his virtue.

- 8) *Socrates on physical beauty*. Socrates seems to reject physical beauty for no good reason, despite his endorsement of passion for wider ranges of beauty²². Possible reasons for rejection are because he is tired, he does not think that Alcibiades is beautiful or he thinks that Alcibiades can be educated in a higher beauty. None of the possible reasons apply when he rejects the physical beauty of Alcibiades.

Socrates is following the view of Diotima, who is “the very person who taught me too [along with postponing the plague] about erotics” (201d5-e1). She endorses physical beauty, albeit as having lower value than beauty of the mind (210b5-c1).

Socrates shows little signs of wariness in discussion or anything else. He had an entire night of discussion during the night of the Symposium and did not sleep afterwards. Hence, sleeping is not necessarily what would have been good for him.

²² See Essay II, section 2

A good reason for Socrates to not engage with Alcibiades's physical beauty may be because it prevents Alcibiades from realizing his potential for higher beauties. We may charitably assume that it is better for Alcibiades and Socrates if Socrates could elevate Alcibiades to a higher stage of beauty and that would explain Socrates's abstinence. None of the telltale signs of that possible alternate elevation are present. They did not engage in conversation and instead "lay there all night long" (219c1-5). Furthermore, Alcibiades himself claims that he is not capable of accepting instruction, as "whenever I [Alcibiades] leave him [Socrates], I'm giving in to my desire for the honour that comes from ordinary people" (216-b1-c1). While they do engage in dialogue (217d1-e1), Socrates doesn't show much of an interest in the conversation. He "wasn't quick to accept this [dinner] invitation from me" and "wanted to leave immediately after dinner [the first time]" (217d1-d5). Thus, elevation is not a reason for not engaging in his beauty.

Socrates may have also accepted his invitation and spoke to Alcibiades only out of politeness and had no interest for Alcibiades's physical beauty. Therefore, he does not resentfully deny himself the beauty of Alcibiades because Alcibiades is not actually beautiful. But that does not seem to be the case, Socrates does think Alcibiades is beautiful. He does not interrupt Alcibiades when Alcibiades says that Socrates claimed Alcibiades has "fine looks" (218e1-5) and remarked that Alcibiades has "apparently beautiful [goods]" (219a1-5).

So neither is it the case that there is a greater beauty to be had nor that there was no beauty at all in the activity that they would engage in. So why does Socrates reject the proposal, despite Alcibiades's beauty and Alcibiades's willingness? The only explanation seems to be that Socrates is envious of Alcibiades's beauty and refuses the enjoyment of beauty, his prerogative, out of spite. He is unable to leave his personal vices behind as Diotima suggested (205d10-206a5). Thus, Plato seems to have an inconsistency in his treatment of physical beauty. His treatment of physical beauty is altogether inconsistent to his

general valuation of beauty, as depicted in Diotima's account. In the account, the ascent to the form of Beauty involves reaching to evermore abstract and far-reaching ranges of beauty without rejecting completely, the lower objects of love.

9) *Malice*. When describing the esoteric nature of the form of Beauty, he sarcastically said that he believed his own wisdom was inferior and illusory, whereas physically beautiful Agathon's wisdom was obvious to his audience (175e1-10). In doing so, Socrates is implying that wisdom as interpreted by the crowds was not obviously wise and in fact illusory, compared to his own wisdom. He is unlikely to think that his own wisdom is actually inferior, illusory or non-existent. Nor will Agathon's comment about his remark, rebuking a sarcastic comment make sense, since Socrates would not be making an absurd point if he actually believed his knowledge was illusory. Agathon is depicted to have taken offense to this statement, and accuses Socrates's accusations of being "downright criminal" and says that "[they will] take our rival claims to wisdom to court" (175e5-10). Furthermore, he seems unjustified in criticizing Agathon so fiercely (198b1-e1), given the similarities in critical methods and their account of Love.

Similarly, Socrates tells Alcibiades that in trying to swap beauties, he is attempting "to get hold of truly beautiful things in return for only apparently beautiful ones" (219a1-a5).

Notably, Plato seems to gleefully describes Alcibiades's misery arising from his beauty being disregarded. He places into Alcibiades's mouth: "this man so much got the better of me, looked down on me, laughed at my beauty, treated it criminally - and it was just in that respect that I thought I was something" (219c1-d1). The characterization of Alcibiades as having no ability to gain the beauty of ideas, due to his weakness in resisting pressure from the crowds, and yet not able to appreciate the beauty that he does have, suggest endorsement of Socrates's unnecessary disregard of Alcibiades's beauty. While Socrates lack of interest in

physical beauty may suggest poor passions in regards to (physical, in this case) beauty, the combination with the description of Alcibiades's pain seems to suggest malice by the writer, Plato. Furthermore, Plato's malice is targeted especially toward the beautiful men of the group, suggesting they are targeted because of their physical beauty.

10) *Plato's shortcomings*. It will seem that despite Plato's emphasis on good passions, illustrated most notably through the role of the passions in the ascent and Socrates's choice of Agathon as a dialogue partner, there remains elements of bad passions within the dialogue itself, insofar that they prevent the appreciation of beauty in many fields. Given the value of beauty stated by Diotima, as important for maintaining the good in life, this shortcoming is an important flaw in Plato's account of Love.

Furthermore, Plato also seems to hide the reason for his malicious passions, envy over physical beauty, contradicting the valuation of honesty as described in essay I.

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