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978-1-107-11005-2 — Plato's Symposium
Edited by Pierre Destrée , Zina Giannopoulou
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Introduction

Pierre Destrée and Zina Giannopoulou

The *Symposium* is one of Plato's most admired and widely read dialogues. At once a philosophical drama that enacts abstract ideas in a lighthearted and often humorous way, and a literary masterpiece, it has exerted an influence that extends well beyond the confines of philosophy. At a banquet in honor of the young tragic poet Agathon who has just won his first prize for a tragedy, six speakers – Phaedrus, Pausanias, Eryximachus, Aristophanes, Agathon and Socrates – propose competing accounts of *erōs*, and a drunken Alcibiades offers a dazzling encomium of Socrates as impersonating *erōs*. The speeches cover all aspects of desire, from the physical to the metaphysical, from pederasty to love of Beauty, so that the *Symposium* is the most comprehensive treatment of *erōs* in the Platonic corpus. And since *erōs* may, and probably should, also be understood as a metaphor of philosophical research, the *Symposium* is at the very core of Plato's reflection on philosophical method. Moreover, since Beauty can, and perhaps should, be taken as a metaphor for the human good, i.e. happiness, the *Symposium* must also be read within Plato's eudaimonistic perspective. The *Symposium* is thus at the center of Plato's work. Yet as the continuous flow of literature shows, this is one of the most difficult Platonic dialogues.

The difficulties are of various kinds. Perhaps the most obvious and thorniest is the importance of each speech and the relation(s) among them. The structure of the dialogue seems relatively uncontroversial and yet it generates puzzles. The introductory material with its intricate narrative structure and parade of narrators may seem a mere anteroom to the inner chambers, but it is unclear how it connects with them. The first four speeches are meant to serve as a kind of prelude to Diotima's speech, which is followed by Alcibiades' speech, itself a kind of follow-up to Diotima's. It thus seems that Diotima's account constitutes the core of the dialogue against which all the other speeches of the *Symposium* must be evaluated. But how exactly? What sort of prelude are the first four

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speeches supposed to be? Are they offering radically mistaken views on *erōs*? Or are they rather first answers – or perhaps *endoxa*, as Aristotle might have called them – that need to be refined or properly rechanneled? More specifically, what role is each of the first speeches supposed to play in the broader structure of the dialogue? And how are the speeches linked to one another? In particular, the first two (Phaedrus' and Pausanias') sound rather serious, while the following two (Eryximachus' and Aristophanes') are meant to be funny, at least up to a point. But up to what point? Does Eryximachus defend a proper thesis about *erōs* or is his rather pompous speech meant to be a sheer parody? If it is a parody, what is its object? What of Aristophanes' speech, one of the most artfully composed speeches of the dialogue with its marvelous tale on the origin of sexual *erōs*? Is it just a piece of comic and philosophically empty entertainment or is it meant to convey a more sophisticated message – perhaps a sort of "warning" before we get Diotima's message (where Aristophanes' speech is explicitly referred to)? And how about Alcibiades' speech, which is strikingly different in tone from the rest of the speeches – it is, among other things, a jealousy scene that combines a eulogy with harsh criticisms of Socrates? What is it supposed to add to Diotima's speech? From a literary perspective, it may be seen as a satyric drama (as Socrates calls it), which follows Diotima's account, an arguably "tragic" speech due to its elevated tone. Indeed, some parts of Alcibiades' speech have been seen as parodying Diotima's presentation – for example, the so-called seduction scene, which unmistakably parodies the description of the ascent. But is the speech simply parodic? Or is it rather meant to serve as a confirmation of points developed by Diotima, as a profound modification of them, or even as a deep rejection of them?

If we now turn to Socrates' speech, we see that its first part develops a typically Socratic elenchos of what Agathon has just said in his eulogy of *erōs* that paves the way to the rather different presentation of *erōs* by Diotima. Agathon's speech has usually been neglected, if not completely dismissed, as if he were solely the host of this philosophical gathering. But if so, why does Plato make Socrates refute him first, the Socrates who confesses to have held the very opinions Agathon has just passionately defended? Finally, Diotima's speech, the Platonic core of the dialogue, remains deeply puzzling. What does the philosophical conception of *erōs* exactly amount to? What does this repeated expression "begetting in beauty" mean? Or what sort of immortality does Diotima have in mind when she has Socrates admit that *erōs* ultimately amounts to the desire for immortality? How are we to take the conclusion of her description of the

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highest mysteries of *erōs* according to which contemplation of Beauty is the very moment that makes life "worth living for a human being" (211d)?

All the essays collected in this volume are original studies of the *Symposium*, which shed new light on the dialogue's artistic and philosophical richness. Almost all of them in various ways relate their particular topic of inquiry to Diotima's account of *erōs*. This approach stresses the dialogue's unity by showing that the introduction and the speeches prior to Diotima's are not independent accounts of desire but anticipate Diotima's speech – its themes, images, and metaphysical concerns. Another feature of this volume is the engagement of many of its essays with the apparent tension between, on the one hand, mortality and human fallibility, and, on the other, divinization or the process of becoming as much like god as possible by gazing at Beauty. Sometimes this engagement leads to intertextual readings between the *Symposium* and other dialogues, while at other times it invites reflection on the local meaning and possible resolution of this tension, as well as its intellectual and ethical implications for human life. Yet another feature of this volume is that some of its essays give different answers to similar questions and thereby point up the irresoluble complexity of the dialogue. For example, does Aristophanes' speech offer a pessimistic account of *erōs* as an irrational urge incapable of being satisfied or an optimistic one by alluding to our original spherical nature and thus to our godlikeness? Does Diotima defend the ideal of a contemplative life or that of a perfect ethical-*cum*-political life? Does Plato hold that human *eudaimonia* is the ultimate standard for a good life or that such a standard must be of a higher level?

In Chapter 1, "Narrative Temporalities and Models of Desire," Zina Giannopoulou looks at the preface in light of Diotima's speech. She divides the passage into two parts, the frame (172a–174a) and the prologue (174a–175c), and examines primarily their use of time and its philosophical implications. Giannopoulou argues that frame and prologue use time antithetically, and that this use of time prefigures philosophical ideas of Diotima's account of *erōs*. The frame's regressive temporality subtends a possessive model of *erōs* that receives emphasis in the first part of Diotima's speech (204d–206a) and treats the object of desire as something to be had. By contrast, the prologue's progressive temporality supports a procreative model of desire that prevails in the second part of Diotima's speech (206b–212a) and is especially potent in the notion of "begetting in beauty" (206b).

Jeremy Reid's intertextual reading in Chapter 2, "Unfamiliar Voices: Harmonizing the Non-Socratic Speeches and Plato's Psychology,"

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highlights parallels between the speeches prior to Diotima's and the goals of the early education in the *Republic*. Reid argues that in both dialogues, Plato is concerned with educating people through (1) activating and cultivating spirited motivations; (2) becoming lawful and taking virtue as a goal; (3) harmonizing the opposing forces in their soul; and (4) minimizing the appetites and making them orderly – features that are prominently defended in, respectively, Phaedrus', Pausanias', Eryximachus', and Aristophanes' speeches. In the *Republic* this moral education is necessary for intellectual ascent, and in the *Symposium* training our character adequately is necessary for climbing the ladder of love. The importance of this moral education is dramatized at the end of the *Symposium* through Agathon's amicable refutation by Socrates on the one hand, and the drunken entrance of Alcibiades on the other.

The next four chapters focus on the three main speeches that serve as prelude to Diotima's. In Chapter 3, "A Doctor's Folly: Diagnosing the Speech of Eryximachus," Franco Trivigno sets out to (1) formulate the different senses in which the speech may be considered serious; (2) examine which senses of serious are compatible with comedy; (3) establish criteria for what would count as comic; and (4) articulate a philosophical justification for the use of comedy. Trivigno argues that Eryximachus' speech plays two distinct roles in the dialogue: it is intended by Plato both to advance the level of discourse on *erōs* beyond what was presented by the previous two speakers and to expose Eryximachus as a pretender to philosophical wisdom. The speech may also be connected to Diotima's account: insofar as it instantiates a higher level on the ladder of love, it presents a serious position that is "on the way" toward appropriately philosophical *erōs*; insofar as it offers a physicalist view of the universe, it presents a rival to Diotima's philosophical vision.

In Chapter 4, "Aristophanic Tragedy," Suzanne Obdrzalek counters two common readings of Aristophanes' speech: instead of seeing it as a comic fable of little philosophical merit, she contends that it advances a view of *erōs* as a state of lack and a corresponding desire for completion, which is the starting point for Diotima's subsequent analysis; and instead of regarding it as an appealing and even romantic treatment of love, she argues that it contains a profoundly pessimistic account of *erōs*: far from being an appreciative response to the individuality of the beloved, Aristophanic *erōs* is an irrational urge incapable of satisfaction. This irrationality precludes Aristophanes' lovers from achieving the partial satisfaction of erotic desire that is open to their Socratic counterparts through their relationship to the Forms.

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By contrast, in Chapter 5, "Divinization," David Sedley reads Aristophanes' celebrated tale of human origins as a comic debasement of Plato's own account of human origins in the *Timaeus*. This connection does not require dating the *Timaeus* before the *Symposium*. Rather, it requires that we recognize that the *Timaeus* includes a cosmologically inflected synopsis of Plato's philosophical system, all or much of whose content will have been the shared property of the Academy even before it found its way into the dialogues. Sedley locates further Timaean themes in the *Symposium*. In particular, since Plato invites us to contrast Diotima's lesson in erotics favorably with that of Aristophanes, we can read her culminating description of human immortalization in light of the *Timaeus*' account of human immortalization. The upshot of this analysis is that if the Timaean account is fundamentally intellectualist, it provides further backing for an already plausible reading of Diotima's speech in similarly intellectualist terms.

In Chapter 6, "Why Agathon's Beauty Matters," Francisco Gonzalez rehabilitates philosophically Agathon's speech by claiming that it introduces various points to which Socrates' own speech will prove indebted, notably the attempt to define the nature of *erōs*. Yet Socrates' critique of Agathon targets what the latter admits to be the purely playful parts of his speech and assumes an opposition between beauty and goodness in the context of *erōs* that Socrates' speech will bring into question. The reason is that the beauty promoted by the poet is not so easy to separate from the goodness pursued by the philosopher. The critique must therefore be qualified by Socrates' wish at the end to praise Agathon. Though this wish is frustrated, Agathon is the last one to stay awake in discussion with Socrates. The kinship between Socrates and Agathon thus proves much closer than it is usually taken to be.

Foregrounding Diotima's speech, in Chapter 7, "*Erōs* and the Pursuit of Form," Frisbee Sheffield examines the nature and structure of erotic desire in an attempt to explain why *erōs* is a uniquely appropriate term to characterize the philosopher's pursuit of Forms, appearing most strongly in dialogues where Forms feature prominently. She makes a fourfold argument. First, *erōs* involves an evaluative judgment of its object as *kalon* or *agathon* in some respect, and the object in question is desired under that description. Second, the mode of valuing involved in *erōs* is one in which one attends to the object in its ideal state. Third, objects pursued with *erōs* are desired as goods whose pursuit we consider, above all else, to make life worth living. Finally, the asymmetry, lack of reciprocity, and characteristically "reproductive" action of this desire make *erōs* a uniquely appropriate

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term with which to characterize action for the sake of an end perceived to be of supreme value and divine.

Since philosophical *erōs* is linked with eternal Forms and the divine, it is only natural, if for us rather obscure, that *erōs* must also be thought to be the desire of something eternal and divine – the desire of immortality. In Chapter 8, "The Mortal Soul and Immortal Happiness," Andrea Nightingale examines flux and change as characteristics of the soul. Diotima places great weight on the changing and fluctuating soul, using discourse that we associate with the body and the realm of becoming. These changing and finite humans desire ongoing goodness and immortality. However, mortals can achieve immortality only through genesis – by "giving birth" to new things that will carry on one's lineage after they die (207d). These offspring may be children, poems, laws, or (in the case of the philosophers) virtues, fine discourses, and ideas (210d). We have, then, a theory that features a fluctuating and finite soul that can nonetheless contemplate the everlasting Forms. Can a soul that dwells in the realm of becoming grasp and apprehend Being? If we reject this position, then we must ask (again) whether Diotima's account is truly Platonic. If not, then how do we interpret her speech?

In Chapter 9, "A Fetish for Fixity?", Christopher Shields adopts a similar starting point while targeting Plato's ideal for humans in the *Symposium* "to see Beauty absolute, pure, unmixed" (211e), which associates the mortal viewer with the divine and invites him to become immortal as much as is humanly possible. Against this ideal Shields lodges a familiar criticism: why should creatures who live and love in a world of change and impermanence embrace a conception of the culmination of human life that may seem to them not its apotheosis but rather its abnegation? He responds that the criticism is valid only within a partial and decontextualized understanding of Plato's motivation for characterizing the ascent toward Beauty. Once its roots in Plato's ideal of a process of *homoiōsis theōi* – a being made like unto god – are appreciated, the criticism gives way to the perfectly legitimate, albeit less stinging question: why should humans wish to become like god?

In Chapter 10, "Generating in Beauty for the Sake of Immortality: Personal Love and the Goals of the Lover," Anthony Price concludes the series of chapters devoted exclusively to Diotima by posing two questions about how best to interpret the contribution to the *Symposium* that Socrates pretends to derive from Diotima: (1) within the Lesser Mysteries, is the *erōs* that is being defined and characterized, with appeal to the notion of "generation in beauty," a generic *erōs* that is equivalent to Socratic desire

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in general or a specific *erōs* that is erotic in our sense? (2) Within the Greater Mysteries, is interpersonal *erōs* maintained or supplanted? Price claims that neither answer to (1) is unproblematic but argues that either can be reconciled with the text while both leave open the interesting questions. In answer to (2), he concedes that there are radical shifts of focus but concludes that it is most likely that interpersonal *erōs* has a continuing role in, eventually, making the lover worthy of "becoming dear to the gods and, if any man can, immortal himself also" (212a).

Diotima's Greater Mysteries with their emphasis on immortality are followed by the unexpected arrival of Alcibiades, a man notorious for his mortal desires and the profanation of the mysteries. In Chapter 11, "Alcibiades the Profane: Images of the Mysteries," Radcliffe Edmonds reads the final episode of the drunken Alcibiades from the point of view of mystery rituals. He argues that Plato deploys the imagery of mystery rituals and the idea of Alcibiades as a profaner of mysteries to provide at least a partial answer to the problem of the spectacular failure of Alcibiades. Far from being fundamentally unfit for philosophy, Alcibiades engaged in his weird relation with Socrates precisely because he was, as a brilliant youth full of potential, able to perceive the beauty in Socrates. But because he failed to understand that the beauty he perceived was not a possession of Socrates (or even something that could be possessed), he tried to take possession of that beauty for himself, just as he tried to appropriate the Mysteries of Eleusis for himself. Thus, Alcibiades's speech is first of all to be read as the description of a total misunderstanding of what philosophical mysteries should consist in.

Yet as Pierre Destrée argues in Chapter 12, "How Does Contemplation Make you Happy? An Ethical Reading of Diotima's Speech," Alcibiades' speech can also shed more positive light on Diotima's. Threading together the practice of virtue and godlikeness, Destrée focuses on Diotima's final words: the man who is contemplating the Beautiful "will give birth not to mere images of virtue but to true virtue, because it is not an image that he is grasping but the truth. And when he has given birth to and nurtured true virtue it is possible for him to be loved by the gods and to become, if any human can, immortal himself" (212a). What does this "virtue" amount to? And what might it mean to "become immortal" in this context? Destrée argues that contemplation of the Beautiful is the cause of the virtue – i.e. moral virtues – and that happiness essentially consists in the practice of such virtues. Alcibiades' speech confirms this point by emphasizing the moral education Socrates is supposed to give him and the moral virtues Socrates himself displays, both resulting from his contemplation of

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the Beautiful. Becoming "loved by the gods" is the expected consequence of such a virtuous life, while "becoming oneself immortal" refers to that virtuous life: thanks to the contemplation and the *mathēma* of the Beautiful, true virtue, which makes perfect *eudaimonia*, can be enjoyed forever.

Eudaimonia is one of the key words in Plato's philosophy and lies at the center of the *Symposium*. Yet Richard Kraut boldly asks in the last chapter, "Eudaimonism and Platonic *erōs*," whether Plato is a eudaimonist. That is, does he hold that one ought to have a single ultimate goal that informs one's life, namely one's own *eudaimonia* (and no one else's)? It is widely held that this is Plato's guiding assumption not only in the *Symposium* but also in many other dialogues. But eudaimonism, Kraut counters, conflicts with the deepest idea that guides Plato's ethical thought, i.e. that one should live one's life in response to something superior to oneself. Eudaimonism says that nothing should be of more importance to a human being than his or her own good, whereas Plato thinks that each of us is of little importance when compared with what is outside us – the polis, the cosmos, the gods, the Forms. The policy of always acting for the sake of one's happiness will never lead one astray – that is the grain of truth in eudaimonism. But that does not make one's happiness the most valuable object there is; it is not the ultimate standard of good practical reasoning.

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