

Plato's *Symposium*: The Science of Love

Patrick Miller

Many philosophers consider the *Symposium* Plato's least philosophical dialogue. Instead of the premises and definitions, analogies and arguments, or refutations and puzzles so typical of other Platonic dialogues, the *Symposium* presents a series of speeches. Indeed, it is this very difference that has made the dialogue, scorned by philosophers, a favorite of philologists. To be sure, there is a short interlude after Agathon's speech during which Socrates examines him in his usual, analytical mode. And he repeats the similar examination that Diotima performed quickly on himself. For standard philosophical argument, however, this is it. The rest is drama, sophistry and speculation. Or so it has seemed to many.

One point of this paper will be to challenge this reputation. The *Symposium* is certainly a stage for impressive speeches, and it will no doubt continue to delight those interested in rhetoric, not to mention the intellectual culture of fifth and fourth century Athens. But it is also a serious work of philosophy, continuous with the rest of Plato's dialogues. For although Plato does not present analytical arguments, such as we find plentifully in his earlier dialogues, he does present a new sort of argument, a sort that he will use most deftly in his grandest dialogue – the *Republic*.

A full study of this new sort of argument would consider all the middle dialogues in order to explain why Plato makes this change and what he hopes to accomplish by it. However, our point here is not to survey the development of Platonic epistemology.

Rather, we aim to expose just one moment in that development, the *Symposium*. This dialogue is a good place to begin; after all, its neglect of the usual, analytic sort of argument is so nearly complete that its success as philosophy, rather than mere rhetoric or intellectual history, relies almost entirely on its success as another sort of argument.

What is this new sort of argument? To highlight its contrast with the old sort, let us call it synthetic. The nature of synthetic argument will only become clear once we have extracted an example of it from the dialogue, so let us begin our scrutiny of the *Symposium* with this in mind. Our method will be to notice similarities between, on the one hand, Socrates' (or Diotima's) speech about love, and, on the other, all the speeches that precede it. Once we have catalogued these similarities, a pattern should emerge according to which we can evaluate the success of what Socrates has to say about love – this time by a new, synthetic standard, as well as by the old, but by no means obsolete, analytic standard.

First of all, we must note that there are two main types of similarities between these speeches: method and content. Taking method first, Socrates' speech resembles nearly all of its predecessors by its use of mythology. For example, Aristophanes crafts a story of the genesis of human bodies and sexuality that mixes wit and myth (189d5 ff.). Socrates does the same when he tells a new story of the birth of Love from Want and Wit (203b ff.), a conception story that also resembles the speeches of Phaedrus, Pausanias, and even Agathon, since all begin with their own genealogies for Love.

Now, it would require another investigation altogether to explain these methodological similarities, charting the emergence of philosophical abstraction from the fabulous stories of gods and heroes. And such an investigation would be nothing less than

a history of early Greek philosophy. So let us overlook methodological similarities and focus instead on the similarities of content between these speeches. Not surprisingly, there are two types of content similarities, just as there are two types of things you can say about Love.

Agathon observes at the beginning of his own panegyric that anyone making a speech in praise of Love should say first what Love is, and then describe its effects (195a1-3; Pausanias also makes the point, albeit more crudely, at 180d2-3). We might say more generally: before praising anything or simply discussing its effects, it is paramount that we determine what exactly it is that we are discussing -- in other words, what is its nature? The point is thoroughly Platonic. Not only does Socrates agree with Agathon's distinction in this dialogue (201d7-e2), in another middle dialogue, the *Protagoras*, he urges his friends to examine virtue itself and to determine first what it is, before they proceed to inquire whether or not it can be taught.

Here in the *Symposium*, the content of Socrates' speech about Love is similar to the content of his predecessors' speeches in both sorts of ways. That is to say, he agrees with some of the effects they attribute to Love, and he also agrees with some of the things that they say about the nature of Love itself. We can deal quickly with the first sort of content similarity before dwelling at length on the second.

Obviously Socrates agrees with his predecessors that Love is a good thing. After all, were each speaker not in agreement on this point they wouldn't each be *praising* love. But there are three less obvious agreements about the effects of Love.

First, Phaedrus claims that Love inspires lovers with great courage (178e3 ff.), since a lover would rather die a thousand deaths than be seen by his beloved to flee the

battlefield. In a way, Socrates, or at least Diotima, agrees (207b3-4). For she observes that Love provokes lovers first to procreate, and then to fight any enemy, or undergo any sacrifice, to preserve their offspring. Socrates therefore agrees with Phaedrus that Love inspires courage. Notice, however, that he extends the point: Love inspires us with courage not only to preserve our honor before the beloved, but also to preserve the offspring we produce together.

Secondly, Aristophanes claims that the lovers of his story, once they had been made two halves from an original whole, clung together so ardently that they neglected food and all their other concerns so that they soon died (191a5-b1). Similarly, Diotima mocks Socrates, and through him all humanity, for the raptures we experience in the presence of physical beauty, since we are even content to go without food and drink while we behold a beloved – indefinitely, if that were possible (211d3-212a1). But she extends the point in light of the ontology of Forms: how much more, she adds, would we be content to contemplate the beautiful itself -- it is eternal, while bodies are perishable; it is in every way beautiful, while bodies are beautiful only in some ways or respects, etc.

Thirdly, Agathon claims that several gods learned their special skills under the tutelage of Love. Thus, Apollo learned archery, medicine and divination, the Muses literature, Athena weaving, Hephaestus metallurgy, and Zeus government – all with the instruction of Love. Characteristically, Agathon moves on to another point before explaining or even elaborating this claim, which has no precedent in other myths. Nevertheless, in his own way Socrates agrees. After all, Diotima has contrived a genealogy according to which Love is born of Wit, or Cleverness. With such parentage, it would come as no surprise if Love taught the other gods their skills.

When we come to the metaphysical portion of Diotima's speech, we learn that it is Love who lifts us up from the idolatry of one body, through the desire for all bodies, next to the spiritual realm, where we learn to desire first other souls, and then finally the institutions, morals, and articles of knowledge, or sciences, that are a prelude to a vision of the beautiful itself (209e5-211b7). Naturally, were this metaphysics true, and were the gods to climb a similar ladder at the prompting of Love, they too would acquire their skills by the tutelage Agathon claimed. Once again, therefore, Socrates accepts an effect of love claimed by one of his predecessors and extends it, this time by genealogical and metaphysical explanation.

So much for the effects of love. Three times we have seen Socrates adopting a point from a predecessor's speech but adjusting it – and in each case extending it -- in light of his own conclusions about the nature of Love itself. Let us turn, therefore, to what he has to say about this nature. Curiously, we find him exercising the same technique. Three times he adopts a point from a predecessor's speech and extends it, this time in light of the conclusions he has secured by his short examination of Agathon, that short interlude famous for being the only analytical – i.e., the only ostensibly philosophical -- section of the dialogue.

First of all, Pausanias claims that there are two types of Love. The first is noble, associated as it is with the Heavenly Aphrodite. The second is common, associated by contrast with Common Aphrodite (181a1-5). Moreover, the noble Love regards the soul of the beloved, seeking virtue rather than physical charm or wealth, things which common Love seeks above all. Eryximachus may disregard the details of this distinction,

preferring to talk instead of the love of healthy versus the love of diseased bodies, but he agrees with Pausanias all the same that there are two types of Love (186a ff.).

Socrates also agrees. By distinguishing between Love of bodies and Love of souls, the first producing mortal offspring (children), the second immortal (poems, for instance), Socrates distinguishes at least two sorts of Love (208e1–209e4). But the fully initiated lover moves beyond even the superior Love of souls, since he must next love institutions, morals, sciences, and finally the beautiful itself (209e5–211b7). This doctrine implies that there are several types of love, one for each object in the hierarchy of beloveds, starting with a beautiful body and ending with the beautiful itself. So Socrates has adopted an insight of one of his predecessors about the nature of love and, as we have come to expect, extended it.

Secondly, Eryximachus claims that Love is at work not only in the lives of humans but also in all the other animals and plants, in fact in all existing things (186a3–b2). Knowing how Eryximachus understands love helps explain why he expands its influence, although it is fruitless to expect too much rigor of his extemporaneous account (187c5–e6). As a doctor, and more generally a man of science, he defines Love broadly as the bringing together of disparate elements. These elements need not be human beings; or any other animate being for that matter; they can be something inanimate like the strings of a lyre.

At this point he introduces his distinction between two types of Love, although it appears quite forced: Heavenly Love harmonizes these elements in an orderly way, with an eye to virtue; Common Love, what he calls Polyhymnia, does this with disorder and debauchery. Whether it works for Eryximachus or not, we have already seen how

Socrates adopts something like it, extending it to include still other types of Love. We cannot fail to notice, in addition, how he agrees with Eryximachus and expands Love's influence, by means of the following analogy.

In Greek, the word *poiehsis* is ambiguous between the English meanings for "making" and "writing poetry". The craftsmen (*dehmiourgoi*) make things, just as the poets (*poiehtai*) write poetry – both are instances of *poiehsis*. And yet the poets alone are called *poiehtai*, poets or makers. Thus, only one group of those who are truly makers, or poets, are called poets. (205b8-c9). Socrates believes (following Diotima, as always) that the situation is similar with lovers. There are lovers of people, but also lovers of money, or wisdom, or whatever, and yet only the first group are called lovers. Love, he argues instead, is always of happiness, or what is good, different lovers expect to find these things in different objects, some in beloveds, others in money or wisdom.

Socrates has not so far matched Eryximachus' expansion of Love's influence to include all existing things, but now all humans are lovers -- not just those who court a beloved, but all humans -- inasmuch as we all desire that the good should be present to us, now and forever (205a5-7). Nevertheless, this is still an adoption of Eryximachus' point.

Since humans are mortal, the presence of our beloveds alone cannot satisfy us – they too will die. To perpetuate ourselves, then, we unite with them in procreation, whether of bodily or spiritual children, and these children become our new beloveds by extension. As Diotima observes, even the animals seem to experience these effects of love: a frenzy first to unite with each other, and then a fierce devotion to their offspring

(207a6-b2). She stops short of attributing such Love to plants or the whole cosmos, but Plato is doubtlessly nodding to Eryximachus here.

Notice, however, that he has once again extended the point. According to Eryximachus, we all experience Love (along with all creation) because we all experience disparate elements bound together, whether in harmonious order or cacophonous disorder. According to Socrates, similarly, we all experience Love because we all desire what is good -- or at least what we think to be good -- to be present with us always. After a little ontological inquiry (something Plato does not indulge here, as he has, for example, in the *Republic*), what is truly good turns out to be the beautiful itself, or the Form of the Beautiful. In the *Symposium* this is asserted without much argument, but the arguments are routine elsewhere.

At any rate, Socrates extends the universality Eryximachus introduced into speculation about Love by elevating the ultimate and only true beloved to a realm of eternal Forms. Neither animals, plants, nor inanimate things can behold this beloved because of their natural insufficiency; but Diotima at least hints that animals' zeal for procreation and the protection of their children perhaps exhibit an inchoate love of what they can never know. What Eryximachus tries vaguely to accomplish by restricting himself to the material realm accessible to this scientific inquiry, Plato achieves by introducing the realm of super-sensible Forms.

This brings us to the third and final content similarity about the nature of Love. This time it is Aristophanes with whom Socrates agrees. Aristophanes tells of the desire of each human to be re-united with his former half (191d1-5). This desire is so fundamental, it seems, that the re-united halves, locked in each other's embrace, cannot

even say what they seek (192c2-7). The desire is so strong that it cannot be for mere sexual pleasure. Unable to say for themselves what it is, Aristophanes imagines Hephaestus (blacksmith god, and therefore god of binding) asking them whether they wouldn't like to be bound together, fused forever. This is it. It is unity with our severed halves that we seek; our severed halves, that is, or at least some acceptable substitute.

Diotima at one point in her speech actually recalls this story (205d10-e1) and seems to reject it. After all, she adroitly observes that humans willingly suffer amputations when they know that the amputation will be good, since the amputated limb itself is bad. We do not wish to be united with anything bad, consequently, but only with something good (205e1-206a1). In fact, as we have seen, it is ultimately the beautiful itself – or, by a slight legerdemain, the good itself – which we love. As the object of our love, we wish to possess it forever. The ultimate possession, however, is unification, as we know from our experience of sexual love. As a result, everyone ultimately desires to be united with the beautiful itself, forever.

So Diotima does not reject Aristophanes' point at all. On the contrary, she accepts it with a modification. In keeping with what we have already discovered of Plato's philosophical technique in this dialogue, we should say she extends it. We do not seek unification with something valueless, even if it has been separated from us; rather, we seek unification with something valued, indeed, the most valuable thing in the world -- the good itself and the beautiful itself. That these Forms are equivalent cannot at this point be questioned, since Socrates has already secured an agreement with Agathon that they are (201c1-5).

By now it should be clear that a lot happened during that quick, and one might say lighthearted, exchange. We should summarize its progress, alongside the progress of the similar exchange between Diotima and Socrates himself, before cataloguing the synthetic harvest Socrates reaps from both in his own speech.

There are four stages of the exchange between Socrates and Agathon. In the first, Socrates demonstrates that love is a relational term – Love is love *of* something (199d ff.). Secondly, it is of beauty (200a8-10). Thirdly, since what is beautiful is what is good, it is also of good (200c1-5). If we make explicit the doctrine of Forms that lies just below the surface here, we can then add that Love is of the beautiful itself, or the good itself, which turn out to be equivalent. Fourthly, love seeks to have its object present to itself forever (200a-e). In sum, therefore, love is of beauty or goodness, which amount to the same thing, and it seeks to have them present to the lover forever.

We have already seen some of the parts of the exchange between Diotima and Socrates. In two logical exercises, she leads him by analogy to see what philosophers now call the mereological fallacy, on one hand, and the distinction between contraries and contradictories, on the other. Both analogies are significant.

We have already considered the first, without naming it as such (205b8-c9). We saw how, in Greek, poets alone received a name that properly belonged to all makers. More generally, the mereological fallacy here is the restriction of a name for the whole to only a part. Diotima wishes to convince Socrates, as we have seen, that the name for love has been restricted to only a part – the lovers of people – when it should be expanded to include lovers of anything.

To explain the distinction between contraries and contradictories, Diotima uses an analogy (202a-b5). There is a middle state between the two extremes of ignorance and wisdom, which she calls right opinion or true belief (*orthēh doxeh*). Therefore, ignorance is not a contradictory of wisdom, just as wisdom is not a contradictory of ignorance; they are contraries, since the denial of one does not entail the other. The denial of either one, in fact, might stem from the middle state, true belief. Technicalities aside, her point is that just because Love is not beautiful it does not follow that he is ugly. For beautiful and ugly, like wisdom and ignorance, are contraries, not contradictories. Thus, the denial of beauty to Love does not entail his ugliness. Instead, this denial might stem from the middle state, a neutral middle ground between beauty and ugliness. It is here, Diotima argues, that we actually find Love.

Now both of these analogies are significant – the one about makers and the one about true belief – because they not only elucidate the logical points, they contribute to Diotima's, or Socrates' argument in its own right. After all, Diotima will proceed to make a further point about makers: that there is spiritual making as well as corporeal making, and they are both manifestations of the same drive: Love and its quest for immortality.

Moreover, and this is most relevant to the thesis of this paper, none of the predecessors to Socrates' speech are ignorant, just because they were not wise. Rather, they lay on the middle ground: true belief. Indeed, their speeches fell short of wisdom, and achieved only true belief, because they inadvertently committed the mereological fallacy. In short, each took a part of love for the whole, attributing to all of love what was properly true only of the part that they grasped.

Let us consider our own analogy, a famous parable of our own time. Five blind men are holding onto an elephant by different parts and another man, who can see, asks them to describe the elephant. The first is gripping a leg and says that it is rough and cylindrical, like a big tree. The second grips a tusk and says, no, it is smooth and pointy. The third blind man has seized the elephant's tail and says, no, it is thin and flexible, like a snake. The fourth holds the ear and says, no, it is flat and floppy. The fifth has his hand in the open mouth, and contradicts everyone by saying that it is wet and hot.

Meanwhile, the man who can see observes them all, as well as the elephant itself. He observes how each of them is right, at least about the part of the elephant he grips. But each errs, of course, by trying to apply what he alone feels to describe the whole elephant. Each commits the mereological fallacy, so to speak, by taking a part for the whole. By contrast, the seeing man realizes that, in order to fully describe the elephant, he must incorporate all of their descriptions, extending each in light of the whole, a whole that he alone sees. Furthermore, he must extend these descriptions by taking account of the limits of each, recognizing the part that each has gripped, and its relation to the whole.

This is the situation of Socrates in the *Symposium*. Phaedrus, Pausanias, Eryximachus, Aristophanes, and Agathon are like the blind men of our elephant parable. Each one has seized upon a part of Love and has taken it for the whole. As a result, each has described a part quite accurately, but erred insofar as he took that description to apply to Love as a whole. Consequently, each has true belief and not wisdom. Wisdom is Socrates' alone, since he alone sees the whole of Love. Although there isn't enough analytical argument in the dialogue to guarantee that his account alone survives such an

examination, he can take some confidence from the fact that his account alone is consonant with the little analysis that the dialogue does provide.

Much more confidence comes from the fact that his account not only survives all the analytical examination that has so far been leveled against it, but it also explains the origins of the virtues and vices of each of its predecessors' accounts. It achieves this by bringing to bear the conclusions secured in the exchanges between Socrates and Agathon, on the one hand, and between Socrates and Diotima, on the other, as well as the doctrine of Forms, which receives no explicit defense in this dialogue, if only because it is amply defended in others.

In order to demonstrate this sort of explanation, which is exactly the sort of *synthetic* argument introduced elliptically in the introduction to this paper, let us conclude by reviewing the content similarities between Socrates' speech and those of his predecessors. Hopefully they will appear more clearly this time, considered in the light afforded not only by the conclusions Socrates and Diotima have dialectically secured, but also by the our parable of the elephant and the hints it gives as to the logic of synthetic arguments.

There were two main types of such content similarity, remember: the effects of Love, and its nature. In addition, each main type had three examples. Let us begin with the effect of Love.

First of all, Socrates adopted Phaedrus' point that Love inspires us with courage, but he extended it by showing how it gives us most courage in preserving our offspring. This extension stems, we can now see, from the analytical argument that Love seeks to keep its object forever, and that the closest we mortals can come to the forever of

immortality is procreation, whose offspring we therefore naturally guard with all our devotion.

Secondly, Socrates adopted Aristophanes' point that lovers contemplate their beloveds with such rapture that they neglect everything else, but he extended it by showing that the ultimate beloved for humans is the beautiful itself, by which, contemplating, or even, perhaps, with which, uniting, we will become completely content. This extension stems from elaborations and defenses of the doctrine of the Forms found in other dialogues, such as the *Meno*, *Phaedo*, *Republic*, and *Parmenides*.

Thirdly, Socrates adopted Agathon's offhand comment that the gods acquired their special skills under the guidance of Love, but he extended it not only by a witty new genealogy, but more importantly by a metaphysics that gives a proper object of love to all the gods: the Form of Beauty. This extension obviously also stems from the doctrine of Forms.

Now we can treat the nature of Love. First of all, Socrates adopted Pausanias' point that there are different types of love, indeed a hierarchy of loves, but he extended it by foregoing the arbitrary distinction of loves according to mythology (whether traditional or invented) in favor of distinguishing them according to their objects. In turn, he ranked them according to the dignity of these objects, from bodies at the bottom to the Form of Beauty at the top. This extension stems not only from that doctrine of Forms, but also from the analytical argument that love is by nature a relation.

Secondly, Socrates adopted Eryximachus' point that Love involves more than just humans for other humans, but while he did not go so far as discussing the love of plants and all existing things, in another way he did extend it by first showing that humans love

many things besides material goods (including, especially, wisdom), and that this can be best explained by their longing for a super-sensible Form of Beauty, something that Eryximachus' scientific materialism cannot accommodate. This extension stems not only from that doctrine of Forms but also from his discussion of the mereological fallacy in which he argued that all humans are lovers, if not always of other humans, then at least of money or wisdom or whatever.

Thirdly, Socrates accepts Aristophanes' point that each person is seeking unity, but he extends it by borrowing Diotima's argument, first of all, that we do not seek unity with anything unless we judge it good – even if it is our own – and, secondly, that the ultimate object of our desire is the Form of Beauty, with which we therefore ultimately seek unification. This extension thus stems from Diotima's little analytical argument and, one final time, the doctrine of the Forms.

We have seen how important the doctrine of Forms has been to the extension of nearly each one of these arguments. Returning to our parable of the blind men and the elephant, then, we can add that it is this doctrine which gives Socrates, or by now we should say Plato, the sight that distinguishes him from the other speakers in the dialogue, who grab a hold of Love in metaphysical blindness. It is interesting to consider why each is blind; that is to say, why each has neglected metaphysics. But it is more to the point to consider what part of Love each has seized upon in his effort to describe the whole.

Take the example of Eryximachus. He feels the universality of Love quite naturally, because of his occupation as a naturalist concerned as much with plants and animals as with humans, or, as a physician, concerned with the immaterial body to the

exclusion of the immaterial soul. But it is this very occupation that blinds him to the doctrine of Forms that, as we have seen illuminates the rest of Love.

Or consider Aristophanes. He feels the longing for unity, evidently, although it is harder to say what it is about the comic craft that makes this so natural. Comedy portrays human passions in extremes, and perhaps the comic playwright therefore finds this part of Love naturally. It is much easier to see how such an occupation distracts its practitioner from the study of Forms. There are good arguments in Book 3 and throughout the *Republic* to this effect.

These are just the two most colorful examples. A more detailed study of the *Symposium* along these lines would have to investigate the other characters as well, while filling in these speculative comments about Eryximachus and Aristophanes with evidence from the Hippocratic writings and, needless to say, the works of Aristophanes himself. The point of such a complete study would be to show that such occupations and characters really would predispose people to adopt the sort of positions about Love that they have adopted in the *Symposium*.

Should this be accomplished, we could legitimately conclude that Plato has defended the Socratic account of love by genuinely *synthetic* arguments: arguments which explain why a given observer was predisposed to provide the account he provided, and why this account has to have the virtues and vice that it does. These arguments are best called synthetic because they proceed by collecting the accounts of the best theorists so far, taking what is best from each, and extending these fragments in light of some superior distinction or metaphysics to remedy their shortcomings, cobbling together from all of this an account of the whole from several limited accounts of the parts.

Such is the method of the *Republic*, not to mention most of Aristotle's treatises; such has become the method of modern science, their intellectual offspring. While it is properly the subject of another paper, it is not absurd at this point, to claim that the *Symposium* is therefore the first document of genuine science. It would be ironic, given the subject matter – love, which is now considered the most subjective of all subjects.

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