

Part II: Plato

4. The View from the Cave

The *Symposium* is a series of speeches in praise of Eros, the God of Love, which were supposedly made at a dinner (and drinking party) given by the tragic poet, Agathon, to celebrate his first victory in the annual dramatic contest (416 BCE). Sokrates turns everything upside down by telling us that Eros is not really a God; and then Alcibiades, who comes in late, insists on making his speech in praise of Sokrates instead. But, although the occasion was real, the speeches are entirely fictional. We hear them rehearsed, years later (about 401 BCE), by Apollodoros — whose name (Gift of Apollo, or Given to Apollo) securely identifies Plato himself. The composition is given to Apollo on his own part, and the *Symposium* is the “gift of Apollo” to us as his readers after his death.

Apollodoros is accosted by his friend Glaukon (Plato’s elder brother) as he is walking from his country home to the city. The occasion of the Drinking Party — and the speeches — are remembered for their association with Agathon’s victory, and for the participation of Sokrates and Alcibiades. Glaukon has heard of the affair indirectly from Phoenix, son of Philip.

This Phoenix is otherwise unheard of, but his name is significant. He is the bird that immortalizes itself by making its own funeral pyre and rising from the ashes. The funeral pyre here signifies Plato’s act of writing; and the resurrection is our act of understanding what we read. Phoenix’s father Philippos is “a lover of the horse”; and the horse probably represents the human body (as in the *Republic*’s myth of Gyges); or the embodied functions of the soul (as in the *Phaedrus*).

Apollodoros is a friend of Sokrates; but in a later time than that of Agathon (416 BCE). He has known Sokrates for *three years*. This present conversation, therefore, is supposed to be occurring in about 400 BCE — since Sokrates survives the *War* by four years approximately. This is surely how we ought to calculate the “three years” that are meant. Apollodoros-Plato was a child of 12 when the *Symposium* is supposed to have occurred, and a man of 28 or 29 when

Sokrates was put to death. He had certainly known Sokrates for longer than the three years; but it is the end of the War that he wants us to think of.

The story was told to Apollodoros by Aristodemos — the very one who also told Phoenix. His name means “Best People” or “Best of the People.” He makes us wonder whether Plato has just finished the *Republic* — the story of the *best demos*. Certainly the *Republic* and the *Symposium* came quite close together.

Best Demos is an *imitator* of Sokrates, but is not physically as strong as Sokrates: Sokrates, when we meet him, is fresh from the bath, with his best sandals on. These two, Sokrates and Aristodemos, are still awake at the end. They will *both* then go to the bath, and carry on through the next day — Aristodemos has slept, but Sokrates has not. It is Sokrates who invites Aristodemos to go along. In his view, the “best demos” can go to a “good man’s” feast (*Agathên* translates most closely as “Gooding,” *being good*) — rather than to the *lesser man’s* table as in Homer — because they both want to improve. Even Homer agrees, although the *proverb* claims that the worse man will welcome the better one. The meaning of Agathon’s name is underlined at this point (174B); so we are right to attend to the names we are given. Aristodemos insists that only the invitation of Sokrates — not the example of Menelaos in Homer — can justify *his* presence; and they agree to concert their excuse. But then Sokrates starts *thinking*, and falls behind. “Best Demos” goes ahead (because he is urged to do so); and he is welcomed by the victorious tragic poet on his arrival. He was always supposed to come (because he goes with Sokrates everywhere). But where is Sokrates? says Agathon. Aristodemos explains.

Aristodemos is assigned to share the dining couch of Eryximachos (the doctor). Sokrates is in a brown study nearby; and he does not heed the summons of a servant. Aristodemos says “leave him be,” because he knows this gadfly of the City from of old — that is why he let him lag behind in the first place. When Sokrates does arrive, he eats only half of his dinner — that being as much as he *needs*. Agathon takes him as a dining-partner. Agathon is clearly the best *looking* member of the group, as well as the “best poet” by popular acclaim — but if he is the voice of the “Best People” he will need improvement by the gadfly — and he duly gets it. Aristodemos is Agathon’s “double” — so there will be no need for us to hear his contribution; although that is one speech that he *can’t* have *forgotten*.

Sokrates has received *some* enlightenment on the way. What about? What *would* he be thinking about on the way to this poet's philosophical victory-celebration? Poetry surely; and the desire for the beautiful that drives it. Hence we shall find him discoursing to the two poets about poetry at the end (and saying, at the beginning, that "Love" is the one thing he understands). If wisdom were like water it would flow from the people's poet to him — since the poets do have wisdom, though they do not *understand* it. They can both make terrible mistakes (Simonides is Plato's main example in the *Republic*), and be disastrously misunderstood (Euripides is deliberately misinterpreted by Sokrates himself in the *Republic*). *Our* dialogue here provides "poetic wisdom" — but the wisdom won't "flow into us" unless we *Sokratize* it.

The "thirty thousand Greeks" (175e) who can bear witness to Agathon's wisdom, are not the living audience who applauded him, but all the good citizens, living and dead — for the number comes from Hesiod. These are the *daimones* in Hesiod who help Zeus to maintain justice on Earth. Plato's reading audience are bound recognize the reference, precisely because they *know* that there could not be 30,000 in the theater itself. Dionysos will soon judge between himself and Sokrates, says Agathon. (Actually Agathon goes to sleep drunk later, and Sokrates goes on his way.) But Dionysos is the God at whose festival Agathon has just been crowned. When Alcibiades comes in drunk, he will at first be intent on confirming the Wine God's verdict; but when he discovers that Sokrates is sharing Agathon's couch, he divides the crown between them (213e). This provides us with a plausibly valid interpretation of what Sokrates says about Agathon's wisdom and his own. Most of us assume (as Agathon did) that Sokrates is being ironic. Agathon, he says, has "wonderful wisdom," whereas he (Sokrates) has only an *image* of wisdom. This does have an *ironic* dimension; but when we read it in the light of the dialogue's main thrust, we can say that Agathon has the power of virtue in him — because the *beauty* of his work influences his audience; but Sokrates — who claims to know nothing — has the knowledge that is virtue. This knowledge itself, is not perfect, because — not having the power of the beautiful in his words — Sokrates cannot transmit virtue to others (and specifically he has not transmitted it to Alcibiades); his *knowledge* is just a dream (he *says*, but that *is* ironic). Plato's dialogue aims to unite knowledge with power, and make knowledge what it is in Sokrates himself — but this is even more *chancy* than the right interpretation of the dialogue as an image — which the *Platonic* Alcibiades will show himself capable of giving, but which did not influence the life-policy of the real Alcibiades.

When dinner is over, the drinking starts. They drink to the Gods Below (and especially, of course, to Dionysos among them); and they pour out the Gods' share on the ground as a libation. But that ceremony being done, they do not go on to more toasts. Pausanias stops them, and Aristophanes agrees. Eryximachos, as the acknowledged medical authority, proclaims (pompously) what everyone there knows by experience already: that getting drunk is bad for one's health. He also proposes that they should dismiss the flute-girl to play for her own pleasure, or for the womenfolk, as she chooses. This reference to the women supports the conventional view that "music" for women cannot be the higher rational-philosophical cult of the Muses that we shall participate in. The flute-girl can help *them* worship, as best they can; but we shall worship the Muses in a higher way.

Eryximachos proposes that a plan of *Phaidros* should be followed. The poets (says Phaidros, as reported) have never written hymns to *Eros*; the philosophers have produced encomia of Herakles (everyone will think of Prodikos here), and even of *salt* (this topic is appropriate for Eryximachos himself!) but never of *Eros*. With two poets and several philosophical minds present, they can surely do something to remedy this. Implicitly, Phaidros is already *placing* *Eros* among the intermediate *daimones*. For that is the rank to which Herakles belongs; Herakles was a "Son" of Zeus (as Sokrates, Plato, Agathon, Aristophanes and Phaidros himself surely, are "sons of Apollo")¹ who did many good deeds of a practical sort. Sokrates, in particular, is a *hero* of the mind. As the dialogue will reveal, he *is* the *daimon* *Eros*; and the *daytime* may be given to the following of Herakles, but the night is for the mental heroism of the "sons of Apollo" (especially the philosophers).

For Sokrates, "erotics" is the one thing that he *says* he understands. He doesn't generally say this elsewhere; but he shows it (in the *Republic*, for example). He does not say that he *knows* what Love is; so his claim does not formally violate his habitual insistence that he does not *know* anything. Agathon and Pausanias are bound to agree with the proposal, because they are "lovers of one another," and Aristophanes because he is a devotee of Dionysos and Aphrodite. The basis of Aristophanes' "devotion" to Aphrodite is unclear. But the speech that Plato *gives* him will justify the claim of Eryximachos.

¹Eryximachos, being a physician, is a "son of Asklepios," and a *grandson* of Apollo.

So Phaidros goes in first — as he should. He is at the opposite end of the table from Sokrates and Agathon. Thus when we come to them the project that he proposed will have been completed. Some speeches are left out; but Apollodoros has given us what he considered were the most important ones; and what this means, as we shall see, is that Plato has composed a complete picture that satisfies him.

The Speech of Phaidros

Love, says Phaidros, is a “*great God*”; and he *came into being* wonderfully. He emerged out of the dark gulf of *Chaos* together with Mother Earth. This was the view of Hesiod, followed by the early “theologian,” Akousileos. The philosopher Parmenides agrees with the poetic view that Love is one of the oldest Gods; but Phaidros calmly ignores the fact that Parmenides thought the work of Eros was theoretically and practically disastrous. Xenophanes had already argued that it is impious to talk of a God as “coming into being.” But Parmenides — who agreed in principle about that — thought that his Goddess “in the center” (herself first called a *daimon* — D.-K., B1, line 3, but *thea* [“Goddess”] at line 22) had “designed” Eros as the means by which as a *daimon* she could rule over “hateful birth and mingling” (DK, B12, 13). Love was the power that brings things together briefly, only for them to separate again; so Parmenides thought that Love was not the source of “goods.” The distinction between his Goddess (of Truth) and his *Daimon* (of Just Rule) that is implicit in the poem will take on central importance for Plato as our dialogue progresses; and the view that the most ancient “God” is not *simply* the source of “good” will be stated at once by Pausanias. This will give us a new “hypothesis” in place of the initial one proposed by Phaidros. Speech-making belongs to the Cave. But the sequence that we are offered will organize the Cave according to the *dialectic method* of the *Republic*.

Phaidros thinks there is no greater good for a “boy” than a gentle lover. He ignores the Love that mingled the sexes (in Hesiod and Parmenides) to produce that boy originally. He concentrates attention on the Love that is *educational* — and since we educate girls and boys equally (just as Plato wanted to in the *Republic*), we can simply ignore the homosexual theme in Plato’s vision. *Gentle* love is a *guide of life* — it produces a sense of *pride* in connection with good action; and of *shame* about bad action. A city or an army made up of lovers and their

“boys” would be ideal.² This military application of Phaidros’ theory implies that Love should be *reciprocal*; the ideal is a “beloved” who “loves back.” Achilles was the “boy” of Patroklos; and for Phaidros *his* case is the ideal (179e-180b). But Alcestis is the ideal *lover* (so the homosexual relation is, indeed, irrelevant). Alcestis was willing to die, and did die, in place of her husband Admetos. She went beyond his parents in *philia* (attachment or friendship); and the Gods rewarded her by restoring her to life. Pausanias — who is homosexually tied to Agathon — will decry “loving a woman” as degraded; but the *love of a woman for her man* is here set up as equal to any love of a man. This moment in Phaidros’ speech is unaffected by anything that happens later. Plato establishes at once that the sexes are equal.

Indeed, Plato revises the story of Orpheus by letting Phaidros suggest that he was torn to pieces by the Maenads, because he did not *really* love Eurydice. He brought *her* back to life only as an image. This is an implicit comment on the limit of what the poet can do. Plato’s dialogue will be a properly *resurrected Phoenix* only if *we* provide the hard thinking of Sokrates ourselves. Plato, like Orpheus, can only give us an *image* of Sokrates. He has himself contrived “to enter living into Hades.” But it is only an *eidolon* — a *shadow* on the cave wall — that he can bring back. Perhaps also we should notice at this point, that Alcibiades is “Orpheus.” He provides an *image* of Sokrates that is poetically marvelous; but Alcibiades is torn to pieces by the Maenads of Eros in the service of physical life — the life of the cave. The fact that Dionysos is the God both of the dramatic poets, and of the Maenads, is vitally important to the dialogue.

Achilles is the *absolute* Ideal: the beloved who dies for his lover, and is transported to the Isles of the Blest as his reward (not just brought back here, like Alcestis). Plato disagrees radically with the poet of the *Odyssey* who makes Achilles tell Odysseus that dying is a terrible disaster. It is true also that the poet of the *Iliad* did not *say* that Achilles and Patroklos were lovers; but for a reader (or hearer) in the classical period, the interpretation is natural; and so — upon the view which Plato wants to maintain that *Beauty* is the proper object of all love — the revision of Aeschylus by Phaidros is necessary. (Achilles is the “beloved”; but he *does* love Patroklos in return. The distinction is important in Greek theory. But for us, it seems to be more misleading than helpful.)

²P. Woodruff (translation, 1989, p. 10) draws attention to this reference to the Sacred Band of Thebes which was established in 378 BCE. The *Symposium* was presumably written after 378.

Phaidros ends his speech by stating the initial “hypothesis” of our discussion: “love is the most ancient God, most honored, most powerful in helping us gain virtue and blessedness, whether living or dead.” Aristodemos *says* that several other speeches followed. But we should notice that *Pausanias* ignores them and refers straight back to Phaidros. He aims to revise and develop the hypothesis stated above. (All of the cases discussed by each of them are to be regarded as illustrations of some aspect of this thesis.)

The Speech of Pausanias

Pausanias is known to everyone here as *the* lover of Agathon; but his place in the order is determined by the fact that, as a *philosopher*, he is a disciple of Prodikos. He proceeds to make *distinctions* in the types of Eros. His speech upset Xenophon, because he violates conventional opinion.

There are, he says, *two* types of *Eros*: Heavenly and Earthly (or common). We can see this because there are two myths about the birth of Aphrodite. In the earliest myth she is older than Zeus himself. Her father is Uranos, and she has no mother. (By implication this is the Eros of Hesiod and Parmenides, who comes into being at the same time as Mother Earth.) But (like Phaidros) Pausanias silently ignores the ugly side of this story in his sources. In Hesiod, Uranos is the “father” of Aphrodite, because she comes to be when he is castrated by his son Kronos, and his testicles fall into the sea. Aphrodite is “foam-born.” So the division of Aphrodite into two involves violence. The Common Aphrodite is daughter of Zeus, born of one of his *amours* (specifically with Dione). She comes *later*; and *her* birth involves the violation of the law of *marriage*.

On the basis of the double myth we can say that no action is in itself good or bad, honorable or shameful. Thus, in our choice on the present occasion, drinking and (listening to) singing, are not better or worse than conversing (in principle). They must be done rightly (“honorably”). And “Love” is only worthy of our praise when he produces noble sentiments. (The Sophist Prodikos probably took Bentham’s view that “quantity of pleasure being equal, pushpin is as good as poetry.”)

There are “higher” and “lower” activities, however. Love, as the Son of Aphrodite Pandemos (the common Aphrodite), is *indiscriminate*. It is Love for women or for boys, for

body or for soul. Pausanias has (for the moment) conveniently forgotten Alcestis, either as lover, or as object of *our* love. Heterosexual love, he sees as aiming only at children; and children are only bodily immortality. This distinction will become crucial in Sokrates' (Diotima) speech. The view of Pausanias is itself *pandemic* — the distinctions that he draws are only superficial *images* of the ones that are needed. Love does not become “heavenly” just by being homosexual. It is true enough that you can't be thinking of bodily immortality when you enjoy it. But the *orgasm* is the same however you induce it; and when you have that, you are not *thinking* at all. (Against the claim that he has *forgotten* Alcestis, we must point out that *she* was willing to leave her children motherless.)

When we read that the motherless Aphrodite is older and free of “lewdness,” we must think of the story of the oldest Goddess. Properly speaking, she has no parents at all. She *is* just the orgasmic experience of the sex organs by themselves. This is what came out of Hesiod's Abyss (or it is what the *daimon* of Parmenides “devised”). Even Pausanias recognizes that sexual intercourse can be quite “mindless” whoever the partner is; and so he insists that what makes boy-love “heavenly” is the *educational* dimension of it. For this reason the “boy” must be adolescent (at least). Pederasty itself ought to be legally forbidden. Good men (i.e. those who can think “nobly”) will not need this law, but there ought to be a law for those who can't (or won't) think about what they are doing. The younger partner must not be *seduced* into a relationship; and the relationships should be permanent (if they are to have the good effects that Phaidros ascribes to them). Pausanias lets us see how strong the conventional prejudice was, when he makes this limiting proposal; and the reaction of Xenophon to his speech, shows that conventional folk did not want “educational homosexuality” at all. He acknowledges the orthodox view at 183c — parents employ servants to guard against seductive overtures. (Xenophon did not distinguish between Phaidros and Pausanias.)

Athens and Sparta (says Pausanias) have the right sort of complex customs (but Xenophon shows us that the custom was controversial, not clear).³ Some barbarian communities (especially Persia), and even some Greeks, reject homosexuality as unnatural and wrong. Pausanias gives us a politically biased view of Persian custom; and an account of Elis and Boeotia that fits his own theory (they are “inarticulate” — and like Phaidros they cannot make the necessary distinctions). About Persia he is interesting; he ties homosexuality up with athletics *and* philosophy. *All three of them* are bad for tyrannical government, he says. But this

³On Greek attitudes to homosexuality see K.J. Dover (1978).

is just a Greek popular prejudice — for the supposed “lesson” learned by the Athenian tyrants, is a myth without foundation. Harmodios and Aristogeiton were not heroes of democratic freedom (as the readers of Thucydides would know — and Plato surely assumes that those who *read* his dialogue will have read the story of the War). But what *did not* happen in that case *could* happen. Loving relations *might* be harnessed to constitutional political commitment. In this respect too, Pausanias takes the Sacred Band (of Thebes) and the analogy of Phaidros a step further. One need not only die lovingly to maintain one’s constitution; one can also die lovingly to make it right.

An honorable love can and must be publicly declared. Pausanias is still half conventional about what makes it “honorable”: “good family, and accomplishment”; but he is passing beyond the convention about “beauty.” The beloved need not be physically beautiful. Lovers (of friends whom they can live with educationally) are praised for doing things that would be thought shameful if done out of a more selfish kind of love. But also a lover is readily forgiven by common opinion for not keeping pledges made in the heat of passion. It is generally recognized that “being in love” is a kind of madness; but loving commitment is “noble through and through.”

We have to record here that Plato himself did not accept the argument of Pausanias about *physical* homosexuality at all. He calls it *unnatural* in the *Phaidros* (250e);⁴ and he proposes a rigorous law against it in the *Laws* (636-7 and 838e). In spite of this political agreement with the peasant and bourgeois majority, however, Plato’s philosophical position remains completely open-minded (as we shall see). The position of Pausanias is that the confused and divided condition of public opinion can easily be clarified by a moral analysis of the kind that Prodikos set on foot. Simple pederasty is to be condemned; but “philosophical” homosexuality is fully justified. Whether a relationship is “noble” or not depends on what its object is. The beloved should submit “in any way at all” to one who makes him “wise and good.” But is this submission “in any way at all” wise and good? Pausanias clearly thinks it is. For he says that a young man who is *deceived* about the wisdom and goodness he expects to learn, has shown himself to be *noble* in his very willingness to submit. (This presupposes that the “boy” does not enjoy it, because then *that* aspect of the break-up when the deception is recognized is not painful. In the simple division of Heavenly from Earthly Love, Earthly Love is regarded entirely as a form of *servitude*; and Plato regards it like that in his political theory. But — even if he himself

⁴But Pausanias anticipates the view of the *Phaedrus* about “madness.”

had puritanical feelings about the *physical* expression of homosexual love — it is plausible to hold that Plato's theory of the ideal *philosophical* life, is founded on the view of sex proposed by Aristophanes.)

The Speech of Eryximachos

Eryximachos gets to be the next speaker by voluntary substitution. Aristophanes is next in line; but he has a bad case of the hiccups. So Eryximachos both prescribes for the hiccups, and takes his turn. Why does Plato give us this bit of by-play? From a literary point of view, it provides an opportunity to establish the characters. Eryximachos is a serious person, both pompous and science-minded, but kindly and a good doctor. Aristophanes is self-indulgent (he ate and drank too much, thinks Aristodemos) and a clown. But still, there should be a philosophical reason why this literary interlude is injected here. The fact that Aristophanes is properly next tells us that the next conceptual advance will be in his speech; but the speech of Eryximachos is a necessary “scientific” prelude that provides the context for what we might otherwise take to be just a comic interlude (and not an important conceptual advance at all). “Eryximachos” means “belch fighter.” This ties the literary and philosophical aspects together. For as a doctor he is exactly right for Aristophanes' problem; and as a philosopher he fights the rhetorical “belches” of Phaidros and Pausanias, by providing a scientific concept for what these poetry readers and rhetoricians have been saying. In the *Protagoras* (315c), he appears as an auditor of Hippias — the Sophist who knew everything (especially the sciences) and could do or make lots of things. Eryximachos and Phaidros are old friends (176d-e, 177a-d); they leave together when Alcibiades turns on the wine taps; and they were involved in the scandal of the Hermae (Andoc. 1, 15, 35; Allen, 26, n. 44).

With the speech of Eryximachos we advance out of “Shadowland” (as C.S. Lewis called it in *The Last Battle*) into the sphere of social “medicine.” What Hesiod says — and Dr. Parmenides agreed poetically — now receives its *scientific* interpretation. There is a “good” Eros and a “bad” one; but Eros is everywhere in Nature. Eryximachos clearly establishes that he is only out to provide a scientific basis for the position of Pausanias. But in so doing, he sets us up for the universal theory of Aristophanes; and he critically develops (or improves upon) Pausanias, just as Pausanias clarified and improved the position of Phaidros.

There is desire in the healthy body; and desire in the sick body. The desire of the healthy body is (basically) for *health*, i.e., for what is good for it. The diseased body (or mind) may desire what is shameful. Implicitly, Pausanias' claim that the beloved should submit "in any way at all" is contradicted; it is *not* the case that the body simply does not matter, so one ought not to do just anything that the lover wants one to do. As we might expect, a physician speaks up for physical health and physical needs. Physicians diagnose what is *needed*, and know how to produce the desire for it in his patient. Medicine, for the healthy, is the art of filling and emptying the body in a properly *measured* way. Making us want what is good for us at the right time and in the right amount is Medicine (as conceived by the *daimon* Asklepios). Thus, Medicine includes gymnastics and agriculture as subordinate arts (although agriculture is also the knowledge of what is *good for* the Earth's fertility). Herakleitos was mistaken about the importance of *conflict*; but he was right about the importance of the *tuning* of the tension between opposite poles. When they are tuned the opposites are not longer discordant. Music is the higher science that has Medicine (for the body) and Education (for the soul) as its species. Eryximachos, however, (like Hippias) simply classifies the sciences by their object-fields. (But in his view "Love" is the genus of the different species.)

The higher rank of "Music" is clearly implied by the way that Eryximachos expresses the doctrine of Pausanias by appeal to the *Muses*. The good Eros is the music of Urania; the bad is that of Polyhymnia. Polyhymnia gives us "what we like" regardless of whether it is good for us or not. Her music is not *bad*; but it must be employed with discretion. We are all different; and a good physician will give us each different doses of different medicines. Similarly, in our education we shall each make different music; we must be educated to make the best *musical* contribution that we can; and no contribution will be musical *at all* unless we *want* to make it. Hence, like the many forms of "pop" music, the Common Aphrodite is not to be despised or rejected. She is not *bad*, but only in need of educational guidance. Her place is like the place of cookery in relation to medicine. Wholesome food must be prepared and seasoned to the taste of individual eaters if it is to do them the most good; and right *diet* was the principal concern of Greek medicine.

Even in the natural order Herakleitos is wrong, and Anaximander was on the right track — but even he overstated his case. There is a proper order and balance in the cycle of the seasons. The opposites (hot, cold, dry, wet) must not go so far as to do "injustice" to one another; they must stay within the moderate range that is good for human health, and the health of the Earth (which is the concern of agriculture). The Eros of Phaethon was guilty of grave

injustice; and so is that of men at war. Epidemic plagues and diseases arise from this sort of injustice in Nature. All extremes of the weather (frost, hail, blight) are examples of the “injustice” that Anaximander was talking about.

Proper service of the Gods (sacrifice and prophecy) is the highest form of social medicine. The reference to the “seer’s art” (*mantike* — 188c) here is important, because Diotima is a *mantis* (and she comes from Mantinea — the City of Prophecy). That we should love rightly — and love the right things — is what the Gods want; and it is the right way for us to serve the Gods. *Loving the Gods* is the right criterion for deciding how we ought to love everything else. With Eryximachos, we have now moved from the nine Muses, to the twelve Olympians, and to sundry other Gods major and minor. But Aphrodite is *one* of the Twelve — and Eros is the *oldest* of the “others,” as well as the focus-point of all religion. All of this orthodox piety is appropriate to the Cave — and it is being visibly organized for us by someone who is not a prisoner of the Shadows. “Loving the Gods” starts with loving our parents, because an aged parent is like one of the “ancestors” — who were revered as divine. The love that results in harmony (not Herakleitean — or even Anaximandrian — conflict) is always “accompanied by temperance and justice”; it produces universal *friendship* even between Gods and men. By implication, justice and temperance must be socially established and maintained, precisely because “the Gods are stronger than we are.”

Aristophanes can now come in, because Eryximachos tells us that his hiccups have stopped; and he is *instructed* to fill in whatever Eryximachos has left out. He comments first, that he had to use the tickling/sneezing method to stop the hiccups. He wonders whether “bodily order” *requires* sounds and itches occasionally. (The implication would be that order in the soul needs the kind of low — and frequently scatological — comedy of Aristophanes. This is *not* what Sokrates argues in the *Republic*, but it is an open question — and one that Plato’s dialectic *leaves* open.)

The Speech of Aristophanes

Eryximachos warns Aristophanes that he must say something scientifically respectable about Love, not just make jokes; and Aristophanes retorts that he is not afraid of saying something funny, but only of looking ridiculous. He will make us laugh, but he should not be laughed at. There is a serious (“scientific”) point to his myth. He claims that Eryximachos and Pausanias have both missed the point. They have been so concerned with distinguishing “good” Love from “bad” Love that they have not made clear what a great God Love *is*. (Aristophanes

says that people do not perceive the power of Eros; but Eryximachos did not fail in *that* way; he failed to see that Love himself is a physician for the ills we humans are most happy to have mended. If we get Love in the right perspective we can see that *he* does not need a physician — as Eryximachos argues. He *is* one. This is the unifying theme of Aristophanes' Myth.)

The Myth says that “in the beginning” there were three kinds of humans: double-males, double-females and male-females. They were all “round shapes” with four arms, four legs and two sets of sex organs (which produced seed that germinated independently in the Earth). Sex was not (at this stage) a particular object of desire or pleasure. In Empedokles, from whom Aristophanes has borrowed these spherical “whole natures,” the condition existed *a long time ago*; and it will exist again *far in the future*, because the order of Nature moves in a great circle. But Aristophanes moves *his* story into the realm of *Platonic* Myth. In Plato's “stories” what is said to be true “in the beginning” is not claimed as true *historically* at all; the story expresses what is true *logically* (“Once upon a time” means “for always” — and it is up to you to figure out *how* this can be true).

The three kinds are “offspring” of the Sun (male, because the Sun's heat and light “begets” all life on Earth), of the Earth (female, because Earth is the “Mother” of all mortal life) and of the Moon (male-female, because she gives light, but it is only the reflected light of the Sun). In this way all of our mortal existences are *images* of the *immortal* order of Nature. The cycle of Nature is the “parent” of all our cycles. We got to be the way we are because we threatened the Gods as seriously as the Titans did in Hesiod. Homer says Otos and Ephialtes tried to pile Mount Pelion upon Mount Ossa in order to reach the Gods in Olympos. But it was really these Round Humans who did that. The Gods didn't want to wipe us humans out, because our worship and sacrifice is valuable to them (somehow); so Zeus decided to chop us in half, “weakening” us (and giving us something else to think about, before we try to take over the world, and do without religion and the Gods). Doing without religion and the Gods is what Zeus refers to as “being wicked” (190cd).

One viable interpretation of Aristophanes' story is clearly that we could plan our lives as self-sufficient “wholes”; but that we *shan't* do that. Zeus says “they'll be more profitable to us, because there will be more of them”; but that makes no sense, so we must ask ourselves thoughtfully why divided humans will be more profitable to the Gods; and the answer surely is that the divided humans are more *dependent* on their religion. (This is clear in the threat that if we don't behave we shall be split *again*, and have to hop on one leg. At the moment we can

hardly see how that could be possible or what it would mean; but if it took four of us to make a reproductive system, the natural drive to social co-operation would be reinforced. It would be harder “to run riot and not keep the peace” (190d); and the communal bonding produced by religious observances would be even more important than it is.)

So now we are only “half-humans.” Each of us needs the other half; and some need a hetero half, while others need a homo half. The story doesn’t say how many there are of each kind; but since “once upon a time” means “always,” this is our permanent nature — to need another half, because in ourselves we are only half of humanity. Aristophanes seems to suggest first that sexual desire is promiscuous: *any* hetero-half or *any* homo-half will do for the “completion” of the desirous whole. Freud (and Jung after him) are quite right about the basic position ascribed by Plato to Aristophanes.⁵ And (as we shall see) they are also right that this is *Plato’s* view of the sex-impulse *as such*. The ethical conclusions drawn by Aristophanes are less clearly Platonic, because Plato’s practical proposals after the *Republic* concede the position of the solid citizens about homosexuality. But it is only the *romantic-philosophical* implications of the story that will be radically revised by Diotima in the *Symposium*.

It is Apollo (father of Asklepios) who heals the wounded half-selves. (Later on it will be Hephaistos who offers to make us artificially whole.) This shows that the whole situation is properly eternal. We have always been divided, and the conscious need for “wholeness” is *natural* to us. The generation that was split in the story was in danger of dying out when Zeus (not Apollo) shifted the genitals to the cut-side so that intercourse would produce an imitation of natural wholeness. This, too, is only *logically* “later.” Love is “natural” to us, because we are only *halves* of a whole natural being; and love comes *naturally* in the three shapes: heterosexual and doubly homosexual.⁶

⁵See Freud, *Three Essays*, 1905, S.E., p. 136; *Pleasure Principle*, 1920, S.E. 57-8; *Outline of Psychology*, New York, 1949, 6n; Jung, *Psychology and Religion*, Yale, 1938, 68.

⁶Note the equality of the sexes. Since reproduction is a social *duty*, the *Republic* obliges everyone to have heterosexual relations on schedule. But homosexual relations are neither forbidden nor regulated in the *Republic*. It is clear in the *Laws* that Plato personally agreed with conservative opinion that physical homosexuality should be banned. But this personal opinion must be distinguished from his philosophical-logical position. It is also fairly clear, incidentally, that he was himself a homosexual, and that he favored the “blind eye” policy as long as public

The comment of Aristophanes that it is homosexual boys who grow up to be politicians is *ironic* — it looks forward to Alcibiades. But the *Republic* shows how homosexuality would make for *better* governors, because the absence of children would be good for the “justice” (the objectivity) of leaders.

Now we can come to the *spiritual* side of the Myth. *This* is what will need a lot of revision by Diotima. We are still in the Cave, but our story is now about the Intelligible World Outside. “Falling in love” (with the consequent focusing on a unique sexual object) is interpreted by Aristophanes as the discovery of the *original* “other half” from whom one was split. He insists that the commitment of the lovers to spend the whole of their life together *cannot* be interpreted as a matter of simple sexual attraction. But it *is* sexually based. Apollo (the father of medicine itself) would never offer to join us back together; he has done what is eternally *right* for us already. But we can imagine Hephaistos, the official husband of the ever-adulterous Aphrodite (who favors warriors herself) offering to seal the two halves together artificially (because he can *weld* anything); and the parties in love would accept — only to be very sorry later. These lovers want to share their whole lives and their whole selves — to become one “soul” here and in Hades. Diotima will show us why *that* would be a mistake. For our intellectual and spiritual development, we shall need to become part of a much larger whole. Most readers did not understand this; but this part of Aristophanes’ speech has probably been the most influential page in the whole dialogue for our cultural history. The Romantics agreed that — as Shelley put it in his translation — “The desire and pursuit of the whole is called love” (193a); and the relevant “whole” was a union with *one* other human person. (Shelley’s own unions showed how hopeless this great quest was.) The definition itself can be accepted, even by Sokrates and Diotima; but only in the broader sense implied by the immediately following remark about our presently scattered condition. Zeus has divided us “just as the Spartans divided the Arcadians” (in 385 BCE — more than thirty years later). That this comment is actually a *Prophecy* from the standpoint of 416 BCE *reinforces* the reference to Mantinea (the “city of

scandal was avoided. This strongly suggests that his ideal would be educational relations as conceived by Sokrates and Diotima *on an Aristophanic* sexual basis. Recognized marriage must be heterosexual. It is ordained first (as the *Book of Common Prayer* says) “for the procreation of children”; and the City may require it universally of citizens, or regulate it as the government thinks best in any specific situation.

prophecy” from which *Diotima* comes). It was Mantinea that the Spartans actually divided and scattered into villages. Plato uses the name Mantinea for the ideal city (“the city in the Heavens,” as Sokrates calls it in the *Republic*) in which philosophers, however scattered they may be upon Earth, do *all* really live. For all of us Mantinea is a “city of prophecy,” a city of the ideal future. It is for those who desire citizenship in that City, that “the desire and pursuit of the whole is (correctly) called Love.” This is what Diotima will tell us.

Aristophanes underlines his own philosophical meaning — and implicitly prepares the rejection of the Romantic *personal* interpretation — by saying, as he closes, that although Pausanias and Agathon fit his Myth — they are halves of one whole *man* — he does *not* mean *them*, but everyone. He commits himself to the Romantic interpretation; for being a *comic* poet, he must do this. There *has* to be a *finite* resolution for our troubles. If we say that Love’s *tragedy* is that Hephaistos *doesn’t* come to the lovers, the mistaken truth of that is that it would be a *greater* tragedy if he did; and the *comic* awareness of that is what is shown by giving this role to *Hephaistos*. So *Plato’s* Aristophanes knows *exactly* why Diotima will reject his comic resolution of our human problem — and it will be no surprise to find him wanting to say something in the hubbub after Sokrates finishes his speech. His actual conclusion here is *comically sensible*. We can’t achieve the Romantic ideal; and the next best thing is to meet with a beloved who is naturally like-minded and congenial (193c). That is the actual foundation stone of Diotima’s edifice. (Politics may dictate that homosexual unions should be frowned upon. But politics is not enough; the ordinary *polis* is yet another “whole” that is not “the Good.”)

The Speech of Agathon

Agathon signals the fact that we have arrived in the world of pure thought (the upper parts of the Divided Line) in two ways. First, he talks about method; and secondly he deliberately inverts the main hypothesis of the whole argument, as developed progressively so far. But it is through the Idea of Beauty that he makes the transition; and Beauty is precisely the Idea that is available (especially to poets) in the Cave.

About method, he remarks that so far everyone has praised Love by *thanking* him for the benefits he has conferred on us humans. No one has explained who Love is, or why he is able to confer these benefits. But that is the proper way to make a speech of praise.

He begins exactly where Aristophanes concludes. Love, he says, is the *happiest* of Gods; and he is the happiest because he is the most beautiful (and hence the *best*). Agathon sets up the close association — a virtual identity — between Beauty and Goodness. Beauty and Goodness are the crown of human endeavor; they are the last goals — the ones that we are able to strive for only when we are *free*, and not in bondage to some need or necessity of Nature. Hence all the speakers who have identified Love as the presiding power over Nature — all who have agreed that he is the *oldest* God — are mistaken. Love is the last and youngest of the Gods. (Only Aristophanes implicitly got this right, at the end of his speech — his Myth begins with Zeus and Apollo. It is *their* work in creating us as halves that brings Love into existence; and it is the Romantic view of the “other half” that brings *ethical* “beauty” into focus.

Agathon, however, is both physically beautiful and young; and Aristophanes has already criticized the bias that this produces, by insisting that he is *not* just talking about Pausanias and Agathon. The claim that “Love always lives with young people” we already know to be a mistake; it is a mistake produced by the insight that Love itself is *young* not *old*. Agathon is telling us another *myth* (when you are “in love” you are *always* “young”). But (like other poets) he is not expert at interpreting his mythical doctrine.

He does recognize, however, that Hesiod and Parmenides were talking about a compulsive, natural force, whereas he is talking about something voluntary, something that is expressed in spontaneous choice. His comparison of Love with *At* is important (195d), because Love can become obsessive; and when it is jealous, it becomes a form of *At*. *At* herself is another of the shapes of Love — perhaps the *ugliest*, here set against Agathon’s praise of the most beautiful form. Agathon himself would call *At* one of the forms of “necessity.” But he would be obliged to admit that it is akin to the Eros he wants to praise. He wants, for the present, to avoid the near relationship.

Homer says *At* walks on our *heads*; Agathon says that Eros has his home in our *characters*, and our souls. But only in good characters, not in the harsh ones that could nourish *At*. Thus Agathon’s speech has the same sort of relation to Aristophanes that the speech of Pausanias (Agathon’s own lover) bears to that of Phaidros. He is implicitly reintroducing the distinction between *good* and *bad* Love (which last he now identifies as *At*).

Love, Agathon admits, is *fluid*; it comes and goes. What Aristophanes tries to avoid, Agathon (tragically) admits. Love *does not last*. It is like a flower. It comes to full bloom, and then it fades. (Diotima will have to reinstate Aristophanes’ claim that Love can be for life, by

changing our view of its *objects*, and our view of its status as a relationship. For obviously what both of the poets say is *true* in appropriate paradigm cases; but they can only *both* be right if their views of Love himself are merely *partial*.

Love is “of the beautiful.” Between ugliness and Love there is unceasing war. Agathon means ethical ugliness, ugliness of character. After all, Sokrates (whom he *invited* to share his victor’s couch) is *physically* ugly. And at this very moment Agathon is about to argue that Love produces all of the great virtues in us, because Love has them himself. Love *is* virtuous. The ugliness that does injustice is *At*. Love neither causes nor suffers *injustice*. Violence cannot touch him. But surely, we may say at once, violence can put him to flight? Agathon ignores this. He claims that Love can never *use* violence (as *At* does if we ascribe the work of *jealousy* to her). Love is the principle of that voluntariness which ought to prevail as the highest form of justice, according to the ideal customs that are “kings of society.”

Even more paradoxical is Agathon’s claim that Love has the greatest share of *moderation* (*Sophrosyne* — “temperance”). For this implies that he is praising a God who does not go to passionate extremes. Yet it is *because* Love is the strongest passion — in those he inhabits — that he has control over all the others. But then he must (first of all) be in control of himself. It is precisely the absence of this self-control that produces *At* (which is a passionate blindness).

The courage (“manliness”) of Love is shown only mythically. Ares (God of War) fell passionately in love with Aphrodite (and was trapped in bed with her by her husband Hephaistos — see *Odyssey* 8). All the Gods came and laughed themselves sick. This is not the Love that is self-controlled — “moderate.” So Agathon has now contradicted himself, just as we must expect a Cave-Poet to do. Plato makes this *explicit* in his misquotation of Sophocles (196d). For Sophocles said that it is “Necessity” whom “Ares cannot withstand.” But this rhetorical failure does not really harm Agathon’s argument, because Phaidros has already proved his point for him more appropriately, by saying that a regiment of *lovers and beloveds* would be the bravest soldiers possible (178e). Agathon’s failure only shows that being a Cave-Poet, he does not know how to argue his case outside the Cave. He wants to get back from Pausanias to Phaidros; and he does it by distinguishing *At* as something quite different. But then Plato makes him give the game away over Ares.)

The *wisdom* of Love is shown by the fact that Love is what makes *anyone* a poet; and it is the poets who are our wise men. Aristophanes would be bound to agree; but Sokrates will show

Agathon that he is not wise; and then Diotima will show us where wisdom is to be found. The end of Agathon's speech is where further thought, and development, is most needed — just as in the case of Aristophanes. The difficulty is that the wisdom of poets is quite *unreliable*. (But, as we shall see, the wisdom of Sokrates is not more reliable. It only becomes *better* when *we* do our share of the thinking. The *best* we are going to get in this dialogue will be a *prophet's* wisdom — and we might perhaps call *her* a “philosophical poet.” The whole dialogue — even Sokrates' questioning of Agathon — takes place inside the Cave; and we get only a *poetic* vision of “the world outside.” We are always looking up toward the top of the Line from the bottom.)

Agathon's speech *ends* with a generalization of the theory of Love — to match what the scientific concept of Eryximachos, and the poetic myth of Aristophanes, require. Below the human level, there is animal life. Ascribing this to “Love's Skill” involves overlooking the presence of “Necessity.” For animals do *fight* over mates and mating. It is not *all* harmony; there is the blindness of *At* in it too. Here we must lose sight of Agathon's own revolutionary insight into the “youth” of Love. The divine power in the animals is mostly the Old God; but, after all, some animals are ideally Aristophanic — they do mate *for life*.

At the human level, what is true especially about poetry, is true (rather less obviously and strikingly) about the sciences and crafts quite generally. The *good* craftsman is the one touched by the finger of Love. One can get to be better than average by steady practice, even if one doesn't love what one is doing. But one will do one's very best, only if one really loves one's craft. The Gods are our models here. Apollo invented archery (scientific *war*), medicine (through his “son” Asklepios), and “prophecy” (through his Oracle at Delphi) because he *loved*. (What did he love? It seems by implication that he loved knowledge.) He is the leader of the Muses — who invented their cultural arts for the same reason that Hephaistos invented bronze work. Athena invented “women's arts” (but don't forget she is a War Goddess as well); and Zeus invented “government” out of love. (These are all topics that Diotima will come back to; and Zeus's invention won't be at the top of *her* list, though it will be quite high up.)

Finally Love settles the quarrels of the Gods themselves. Here Agathon returns to his beginning; but it is now obvious that the meaning of “youth” and “beauty” is philosophical. He *didn't* mean (literally) that Love lives only with the young; he meant that Love keeps life “young and beautiful.” The whole character of *life* changes when the spirit of Love takes charge, and replaces Force (“Necessity”). This was what became clear when the Olympians took over from the Titans. Love is “the most beautiful and the best”; and if anyone — including Zeus and

Company — is beautiful *like* Love, it is *because* of him. Poetry is what his beauty *needs* and requires. So Agathon ends with a poetic passage — two lines that *probably* come from a poem of his; and a passage that Plato wrote in his manner.⁷

The Dialogue of Sokrates

Agathon says he has tried to be both entertaining and serious in proper measure. (“Measure” is the sign that — as far as it is possible for us in our poetic-rhetorical mode — we have reached the upper part of the Line.) Now it is the turn of Sokrates; and at once he begins to make trouble about not being able to do what the others have done. Agathon has left him tongue-tied. Why? Because he thought that in order to praise something one has to tell the truth about it; and Agathon has not done that.

But, in fact, *several* speakers (and particularly Agathon) have begun by saying that their predecessors did not say quite what was true; or at least that they missed the point, and didn’t say what was most important. Agathon in particular said that Phaidros, and all who followed him, said what was *false* about Love being the oldest God. So all of the speakers have been trying to speak the truth (but failing). Sokrates can’t be excused from making his speech because of *that*. But they were all expressing their *opinions* about love. Sokrates claims that in order to praise Love one must *know* about him; and he can’t begin properly until he has shown Agathon that he (Agathon) does *not* “know” about Love. He has to be the Philosopher in the Cave.

In rhetoric (and even in his poetry) Agathon is a disciple of the Sophist Gorgias. (The last part of his speech is a *purple patch* in the Gorgias manner.) So Sokrates says that Agathon has sent the Gorgias Head to turn him (Sokrates) to stone. (That was what the *Gorgon’s* head did to people, according to the myths.) Plato regarded Gorgias as the great “philosopher” of the

⁷We should not “improve” the text. Where the manuscript reads “Gracious, good” (197d) we should not change this to “kindly.” “Gracious *to the* good” may be right (it does occur in an ancient *citation*) because of what follows about “the wise and the Gods” (who *are* the Good). “Love cares for the Good, and is careless of the bad.” The *repetition* may have upset Usener; but it is rhetorically appropriate to the importance of “the Good.” We should all sing in tune with Love’s hymn — the song that *enchants* the intellect of every God and man.

Cave, because he said that for political success it didn't matter what was *true*; it only mattered what was *likely* (or *plausible* — what people could be persuaded to *believe*). So Agathon's speech is to be shown up as "Gorgian." But this is *unfair*, because Agathon *does* care about what is true; his speech is entertaining, but it is *also* serious. Similarly, Sokrates' examination of him will be entertaining but serious; and the really serious aspect of it will only emerge from *our* responding to Sokrates on behalf of Agathon, better than that highly skilled user of language for poetic purposes can do philosophically. According to Sokrates, Agathon has not cared about the truth, but only about what will make Eros *look good*. We did see that this was true about the "courage" of *Eros* and also about Eros in the animals. But luckily Phaidros had already said what was necessary for him about *courage*.

We should notice that, even according to Sokrates, Agathon got something right. His methodical proposal was *correct*. We ought to say what Love *is*, before we say what he *does*; and although Sokrates will turn Agathon's account upside down, he does not dissent from the revolutionary claim that Love is the "youngest" (i.e. logically the *last*) of the Gods, not the oldest (or *first*).

Love, Sokrates says, is first the love *of* something (or someone) just as a father or mother is father or mother of a son or daughter. Then, he gets Agathon to agree to the following sequence of assertions:

1. **These (father, mother, etc.) are all relative terms.**
2. **Love *desires* whatever it is the love *of*.**
3. **One can only desire what one does not already have.**

(Desire is a state of *need*.)⁸

4. **So someone who is tall, doesn't *desire* to be tall** (because (s)he doesn't have to desire it. But notice that (s)he might think (s)he wasn't *tall enough* — or not as tall as someone else. So (s)he might still *desire* to be *taller*.)

⁸Notice how Sokrates jumps on, and rejects, the response "*not likely*" (200a). That is Gorgias talk. The answer has to be *logically necessary*; and it is vital that we should recognize that.

5. **One might still *desire* the stable continuance of some quality that one knows can change** — e.g. one may do regular exercises for the sake of *remaining strong*.

6. **So if you already have something, you can *love* it in the sense of wanting to *keep it safe*.**

7. **But always what one desires is something one does not have.**

Now the trouble starts, for Agathon said that Love makes peace among the other Gods. Coming last among them, he makes them desire that their life should be beautiful, because that is what he desires.

8. **Love must desire what he does not have.**

We can already see that this is a dangerously inadequate statement, because since Love steadily *desires* the beautiful, his life must be beautiful; and what he steadily *desires* is to keep it that way. The other Gods may fail sometimes because they have other desires as well as the desire for a beautiful life. So Love could still be the last of the *Gods* — just as Agathon says — even though, *in relation to all others*, Gods and men, he is a guiding *daimon* (as Sokrates will prove. But *nothing* says that Love can't be *both God and daimon*. Of course, there is also *At*, or the “oldest of the Gods.” But Agathon never allows that she is a proper God at all. Sokrates will find a proper place for her whereas she was simply a left-over problem for Agathon. If this piece of dialectic were meant to take us out of the Cave, that problem would have to be taken up.

9. **So Love needs beauty and does not have it.**

This is an invalid step — see step 6 above and the commentary on step 8.

10. **If something needs beauty, and does not have it, it is not beautiful.**

Now, we are bound to recognize that we have gone *wrong* somehow.

11. **[So Love is not beautiful.]**

Agathon does not *say* this, and Sokrates does not *make* him say it. Instead Agathon *gives up*, and says “I did not know what I was talking about.” But Sokrates gives him another chance to get on the right track. He says

12. Good things are *always* beautiful.

This is important because *no one* in this company will agree that Love is *not good*. So Love *must* be beautiful *somehow*; and Agathon ought now to ask Sokrates *how* — since even Sokrates must agree that Love is *good* — it can possibly be the case that Love is not beautiful. Diotima will tell Sokrates that to say Love is *ugly* or *bad* is impious. But her way of going *in between* being beautiful and being ugly is a *puzzle*; and she stops short of saying that Love is *not good*. It is important that step 11 above is *not uttered*; and Sokrates compounds the puzzle by saying (surely sincerely?) that Agathon made a *beautiful speech* anyway. (How can there be beauty in it, if there is no truth?)

Finally, without considering whether Love is itself good, Sokrates gets Agathon to agree that:

13. If Love *needs* beautiful things, then he *needs* good things too.

Now, in order to preserve the fiction that he knows nothing, and never teaches anyone anything, Sokrates tells the company how he learned about Love from Diotima of Mantinea.

The Dialectic of Diotima

Diotima is almost certainly a fiction. The fact that Sokrates makes her refer twice to the speech that Aristophanes has just made does not settle this, because she is a “prophetess,” and Plato wouldn’t mind letting her show knowledge of what was still in the future. But the claim that she foresaw the Plague is a clear warning not to take her existence literally. None of Plato’s first readers was going to believe that the actual Plague of 429 BCE (in which Perikles died) was not brought about by the War. To suggest that only Diotima stopped it from coming before the War began (431 BCE) is quite absurd. Whatever Plato means (perhaps that there might have been a settlement with Sparta ten years before 429 BCE?) the Plague had nothing to do with any “wise woman” from Arcadia.

Sokrates supposedly said to her the sort of thing that Agathon has said, and she twisted him into the same knot that he has made for Agathon. But (not being committed to praise Love when he was learning from her) he knew what to say next.

1. **If Love is not beautiful and good, then is he ugly and bad?**
2. **Of course not. There is a condition in between.**

But Diotima does not — she cannot yet — describe the “in between” condition with respect to Beauty. She *switches to knowledge*. Between knowledge and ignorance there is Right Opinion. One may be able to say what is right, yet not be able to explain why it is so.

3. **Love is “in between” Beauty and Ugliness like this. He is not a God.**

We should notice that the claim that Love “has *no share* in good and beautiful things” is not valid.

4. **Love is a *daimon*, not a God.**

Aristophanes was right about his “healing the wound of human nature” — but this healing is unity with the All, not just with another “half” like the self.

Diotima’s Myth

Supplier, son of Cunning (*Mtis*, the first marriage-partner of Zeus in Hesiod) was at the festival for the birth of Aphrodite; and Poverty came upon him drunk, and got herself pregnant. The child, thus conceived on the day that Aphrodite was born, was Eros. So Eros is always poor, but never quite without resources. (He always has tools and raw material for *making* beautiful things.)⁹ He doesn’t *look* beautiful, but he looks like Sokrates — tough, shoeless, etc. He is *between* Wisdom and Ignorance too — he *loves* Wisdom. The Gods don’t “love” it because they *have* it; but Love is a *philosopher*. Sokrates, Agathon and the earlier speakers all made the mistake of identifying Love with the *beloved* rather than the *lover*. (But surely, we may protest,

⁹As a craftsman, the *daimon* must have a vision of the Idea of Beauty. Thus the myth helps to confirm the claim that Love as an intermediate *daimon* belongs to the Cave-World. The *God* belongs to the World Outside.

Love is the union of both. Earlier speakers had one half of the truth, and Diotima is going to give Sokrates the other half. In any case Aristophanes was nearly right. “The desire and pursuit *of the whole* is called Love.” Desire, pursuit *and achieved experience* we might say. No wonder Diotima comments on Aristophanes — he is so close to her. But the others, talking of Love as *Lovable*, were not talking nonsense. Love comes and goes. This is something left out by those who say he is a God (for gods must not be capricious). Love is love for beauty. Why is beauty lovable? (If you can’t answer, try “why is good lovable?”)

When you achieve possession of “good” you are happy (*eudaimon*) — you have a good (or fortunate) *daimon* — and one cannot ask “Why do we want to be happy?” (if that is what the word means). Everyone loves “the human good.” So why don’t we say that everyone is in love? (Eryximachos *did* say that — but Diotima does not choose to remember him.) The answer is that we use “love” for a special kind of love, just as we use “poetry” for a special kind of making (even though *poiein* means *to make*, and *poiesis* is *making in general*). *Making* is causing something to pass from not-being into being. *Poets* do that with *words*. But we all want to make our own “happiness.” This is “Eros most great and treacherously wily for all” (205d). Our way to happiness may be *love of money*, or of *physical fitness*, or of *philosophy* (and only the last is not “treacherous”). But it is only when it is directed at another *person* that we *call* the desire *love* (simply).

The claim of Aristophanes that “the other half” is what we are in love with is a half-truth. The other half of a bad whole would be a bad thing to find. (We have to think all the time of Alcibiades here.) It has to be a good whole that we are seeking. (It is no wonder that Aristophanes is trying to make himself heard at the end of the speech. He would say that that was what he *meant*. But there is more to the whole that Diotima speaks of than another *person*. We are seeking “the good” of a whole life.)

The object of love is “to beget in beauty” — beauty is the “other half” of Love, and love *begets* offspring. Even ordinary sexual intercourse is a “divine affair”; there is a *God* involved, and Diotima will call the feminine half (Beauty) a “goddess.” But this Goddess of Birth is also called Fate and Lady of Travail. Surely she is not always beautiful? (think of what Alcibiades brought to birth). But birth releases the mother — or the maker generally — from pain.

Love does not seek “Beauty” then, but *begetting in beauty*; and there is good reason for saying that Eros is *not* “beautiful.” But what is begotten should be beautiful. So the begetting is *related* to beauty. Love wants to make the beautiful *life* immortal. We all love “happiness”; and

we love it *immortally*. Notice that in this context “Love must desire immortality” has to mean *not* personal immortality, but the *perpetual reproduction* of Beauty.

At this point Diotima appears to stop defining Love (but the appearance is deceptive). This is the end of one conversation. At the next meeting, when they start again, she wants to put the *forms of Love* in order. She starts with the *animal instinct*; and she insists that it is uncontrollable (like *At*). It has a direction (*not* homosexual); but it is like a *disease*. It overcomes self-preservation, because what matters is the preservation of the offspring. The species (that “whole round shape” of which Aristophanes spoke) must be *immortal*. But life itself is a perpetual *perishing*. Our bodies do not stay the same from one day to the next; nor do our minds (our customs or opinions). So what is *immortalized* at the animal level is just a life-cycle of change. Even our knowledge does not stay with us. We have to keep *studying* to bring it back. (There is an implicit criticism of the Socratic pursuit of *virtue* here. At least, we can see that the object of the pursuit must not be defined as *being good*, or *being virtuous*, because as mortal soul-bodies we cannot *be* at all.) But *through reproduction* we *participate* in immortality. It is the desire to do *this* that is Love.

Diotima proclaims *like a perfect Sophist* that we can be sure of this definition. But the comparison with the Sophists warns us that we must keep doubting and inquiring like Sokrates; and the claim that “the immortal has another way” reminds us that *our* perspective is one-sided. Love (after all) is certainly one of the *immortals*.¹⁰

The argument about *love of honor* that Diotima now puts forward is not satisfactory; and it is not *meant* to be, because Alcibiades will throw a glaring light on it. Lovers of honor *are* irrational. They value honor more than children. (Alcibiades did this, but not Sokrates.) Phaidros claimed that Alcestis died for the love of her husband; Diotima says that she died for fame. But surely this time Phaidros is right. Achilles and Patroklos is a more complex case, because Achilles gave up his own “wrath” to avenge Patroklos; but what he loved most was indeed “glory” (especially when Patroklos was dead); and he knew that he was doomed to *die* if he returned to the fight. The “love of honor” is “treacherous.” (Alcibiades will illustrate just *how* treacherous it is.)

¹⁰Diotima’s *sophistry* is taken up in the *Phaedrus*.

When Diotima returns to sexual reproduction, she begins to wind up her discourse. Now she is going to put the forms of Love in a logical ascending order. First, there is the bodily immortality achieved through physical children. But even this involves pregnancy of *soul*, because one must *educate* one's children, or they won't belong to one properly.

Diotima explicitly maintains that *all* poets “beget wisdom and virtue.” They get many things wrong, because the best they have is “right opinion” — and from some right opinions they draw wrong conclusions. We have seen how this happens in the speeches of Phaidros and Pausanias. But the *general* education, with which poets are concerned, is a higher activity than educating one's own children. Above the level of popular education — which must go on in all the Cave consciousness, even if the teacher has some defined and measured standards — there is the making of social laws and customs. Even the proper ordering of a household is a higher concern than personal virtue. One has people of several different kinds to deal with, and a *harmony* of different musical notes to aim at.

Plato is describing *himself* when he speaks of the “virgin” who wants to be creative at this political level. He began with straightforward political ambitions; and when he gave those up (after Sokrates was put to death) he “went about seeking the beauty in which he could beget” (i.e., he wrote the *Republic*). In this “beauty” — which is not ordinary practical political theory — he subsequently “begot” a series of political experiments of different kinds, ending with the *Laws*.

The next passage about founding a “beautiful body and soul” refers more obviously to Sokrates and Alcibiades. But in the *Laws* the Nocturnal Council (which runs things from behind the scenes) consists of older men (not actually in politics) who each choose a young colleague (who *is* active in politics). This is how Aristophanes' teaching about “the Whole,” has to be understood when Diotima is done with it. (Alcibiades will show us how easily it can fail. Sokrates tries to educate him; and Alcibiades “remembers the beauty” too — but it doesn't *work* for him. Love of honor *betrays* him; so that no “spiritual children” — except ugly ones — come to be born. The models that we ought to adopt, at this level of free practical life inside the Cave, are Lykourgos and Solon. But the *people* have to *ask* us to do what they did. How can we persuade them to let us? Plato gave up his practical ambitions in order to produce blueprints.)

We come now to the upper parts of the Divided Line; but we are still operating from the Cave level. Diotima herself is an inspired “poet” of sorts, and the whole of the *Symposium* is an

account of what the Divided Line looks like *from the Cave*. We are always looking up from the bottom. So we start with *aesthetic* experience, and with the Alcibiades relation. We move out of the Cave when we realize that all bodily beauties belong together. This is an image of the *conceptual* synoptic stage described in the *Republic*. The soul is more important than the body. What looks like *repetition* here reflects the fact that we are talking about the level of theoretical understanding (*dianoia*). The enjoyment of *one* beautiful body at this intellectual level has nothing *sexual* in it.

From the beauty of soul (virtues, etc.) as a theoretical object, we go on to the beauty of laws and customs (as in the *Republic*). From customs we move on to the kinds of knowledge. The most important of these (for the philosophers) are *mathematical*, and they are spelled out in the *Republic*. This movement from aesthetic beauty to intellectual beauty is the advance from slavery to freedom: the visible, physical world is slavery, and the intellectual world is freedom. But isn't the reading of the *Symposium* an experience of "freedom"? Yes, but it is only the "freedom" of the released prisoners, who are still in the Cave.

After working through the sciences (and putting them together) one may "all of a sudden" have a vision of the "Form" of Beauty itself. The Form of Beauty *is* absolutely beautiful; but also it is what tells the whole story yet again (210e-211e). Now (miraculously) we are looking at everything from the top; and since it is *Beauty* that *makes or causes* beauty, it is certainly not the *whole* truth about Love that he is a *daimon* — and it is not the truth that he is "not beautiful." Only what has beauty can cause it. Love *in us* (or in the world) *desires* beauty. "The Gods" possess it — and cannot be said to desire it. But the true "Gods" are the Ideas as *creative agents*; *why* the Form of Beauty creates all these lower images of itself, when it does not need them, is a mystery. But Plato is sure that it is so. This is the world of the Heavens outside the Cave; and it is the standpoint from which we ought to see everything. "There, if anywhere, should a person live his life" (211d). The "woman from Mantinea" prophesies to us that our life is a gift to us from creative powers that do not *need* us at all — though perhaps they *do* desire us; and we must use our life-world as a *ladder* to climb up to the awareness of them. She *contradicts* the argument that she made to Sokrates that Love = Desire = Need. The Forms need nothing; but they create desire in us; and they enable us to *create* the knowledge and the beauty that satisfies our desire. Through his fiction, Sokrates has returned to the standpoint of Eryximachos. Love in humans is an instrument to be controlled, a *daimon* to be well directed. But he is one of the Gods too, or we wouldn't be here at all.

Alcibiades

Alcibiades shows us the power of the Cave — the *treachery* of Love. Here, we shall see a battle of two *daimones*; and the “good *daimon*,” the philosophic happiness of Sokrates, loses the battle. Again, it is a mystery how this can happen; but it is a *fact*. In this dialogue the tragedy hasn’t quite happened yet. Alcibiades will go off to Sicily *next year*. But all of Plato’s readers know what did happen; and the fact that Alcibiades praises Sokrates — the *daimon* of philosophical love — only makes the coming event more dramatically vivid.

Amid the applause for Sokrates, Aristophanes is (no doubt) trying to say that he agrees that the lovers desire their common *good*; but Diotima has replaced that with the universal good simply. The “Good” is the “whole” of the ideal (or intellectual) world. So Aristophanes is quite rightly drowned out. “All of a sudden” a gang of drunks arrives. We are pitched out of the philosophical heaven where we ought to live, back into the Cave — from which we sought to escape by giving up wine at the beginning. One can *love* wine; and that love is a paradigm case of *treachery*. (Dionysos is the great God of life in our Underworld.)

Alcibiades has come to crown Agathon. Only a drunk would call him the wisest man in town; but he is (like Alcibiades) physically beautiful. We are now going to see how little that matters (in practical terms).

Alcibiades is *wearing* the crown himself; and he blinds himself with it so that he does not see Sokrates. He lies down between them, making a third on their couch; and when he discovers who is on the other side, he shares the crown between them. This is significant because Agathon has just won a victory in the Cave; while Sokrates has won the victory of reaching the World Outside. But Alcibiades thinks that Sokrates belongs with the *comic* poets. He is a joker, and his life is a joke — so Alcibiades would like to believe (as most Athenians do). But he can’t quite convince *himself*: “all of a sudden” Sokrates makes him see the vision of another world.

There is now some by-play about who it is that is jealous of whom. Sokrates admits to “being in love” with Alcibiades; and accuses him of being the jealous one (and he does seem to be annoyed about Sokrates getting next to Agathon). Alcibiades’ Love is physical (and possessive). *He* says that “Sokrates is so jealous that he won’t let me praise anyone else” (214d). But we shall see that *that* has a *philosophical* interpretation.

Alcibiades wants to get everyone as drunk as he is. He admits that he cannot do this with Sokrates. But we need not take that too literally. Sokrates *won't* get drunk because he is the committed philosopher. Plato pretends that he *can't* get drunk; but this is just a poetic way of representing the fact that he is the Philosopher in the Underworld. (No doubt he did have a very hard head, as well as being very tough and able to carry on physically for a long time.)

Alcibiades takes over the role of Master of Ceremonies. The gathering becomes a *Cave Symposium* properly. Of course, Eryximachos tries to get things back on track, but Alcibiades won't let him. He claims that Sokrates will not allow him to praise anyone else — even a God! That would be a wicked falsehood, if it were not, quite obviously, a joke. But Diotima has taken Sokrates out of the Cave; and she has defined Love as a *daimon*. Now, therefore, it is Sokrates, as the *daimon* of philosophical Love, who returns to the Cave. The subject under discussion only *changes* through further development. Sokrates is now offered to us as the *daimon* of *eudaimonia*. Even for Plato's first audience, the *man* Sokrates was dead; but the *daimon* is a *Phoenix*. (Alas, it is also true that Alcibiades will *mock* him; for he will show us how Sokrates *fails*.)

He begins with an image. Sokrates is like a statue of Silenos. Silenos himself is a *daimon* — a companion of Pan, the God of Nature. But Sokrates is also like Marsyas — because Apollo, the Sun God, has lifted him out of his skin, into the world of the Idea of the Good — the true Sun. In the Cave he is like a Silenos *statue*, because they were hollow, and full of small God-statues. (Sokrates, as Silenos, is an image of our access to the World Outside.)

Alcibiades compares Sokrates to Marsyas as a *musician*. But Marsyas entered a competition with Apollo, and so of course he *lost*. Sokrates is not in competition with Apollo, but Alcibiades sees him partly as an “enchanter.” He does understand the Sokratic flute-playing as revelation (in outer speech) of the “inner man.” This Marsyas plays *himself* in the *service* of Apollo. (The “music” of Sokrates is entirely in *prose*. It is the *dialectic*.)

Alcibiades goes on to claim that Sokrates has a tremendous effect on him. He thinks of what happens as *going out of his mind* like the ecstatic worshiper of the Mother Goddess.¹¹

¹¹The theme of philosophic “madness” is taken up in the *Phaedrus*. But Alcibiades assigns it to a source that makes *rejection* reasonable.

Plato and Sokrates see themselves as losing the consciousness of this Cave world. Sokrates has had more impact on Alcibiades than Perikles (so Alcibiades *says*); but the comparison shows how mistaken he is *about the effect*. He feels “trapped.” He has to admit that his life is not worth living, and his political career is a waste of time. Sokrates did not actually believe *that* (in principle); but he does think that *democratic* politics is a waste of time, if all that you can aim at is to persuade the people to let you lead them where *they* want to go. For Alcibiades the argument of Sokrates is a siren song; he has to get away from it; and as soon as he is out of earshot, it has no effect on him — except that he feels *ashamed*. But he does not long remember this; the Cave makes him forget.

He says that he is not the only one, by any means. That is a grim comment on Sokrates’ mission. But then the actual fate of Sokrates was grim enough; and this dialogue shows that Alcibiades’ claim is not the whole truth. Sokrates only *looks* like a Satyr. There is spiritual beauty inside. Alcibiades says he’s crazy about beautiful boys; but the way *Plato* tells it, Sokrates was not *physically* interested — and his Alcibiades will tell us *that* too.

Sokrates says that he knows nothing; but that is just his Silenos outside, because really he knows what virtue (and the good life) is. Alcibiades has seen the Silenos statue open — and so have *we* (in Diotima’s speech). Alcibiades believed that Sokrates really wanted a relationship with him. He thought he was the “other half.” But he found out by trying that this was not so. (Notice how his story follows the pattern of Pausanias.) But Sokrates cannot teach anyone anything; he only puts us on the road to finding the truth of our own life. If he is going to tell us what *he* sees, he needs a prophetess.

The point of citing the transformed proverb (There is truth in wine without slaves — *or with them*, adds Alcibiades — 217e) is that Diotima compared fascination with physical beauty to *slavery*. But here it is Alcibiades who becomes the slave, and Sokrates will show himself to be the freeman (compare 219e). Alcibiades misinterprets his “slavery,” however; for him it is philosophy that is like snake-bite — it gives you hallucinations and makes you do mad things. Sokrates forces Alcibiades to admit that he is offering “fool’s gold” in exchange for the real thing. (So much for Pausanias — and Phaidros. Of course, we must live life on *all* levels; but homosexuality has no *natural* function. It is not naturally *necessary* — as heterosexual relations are. We should never forget that this *ad hoc* argument of Sokrates is not the end of the question. It is only what was appropriate for him to say to Alcibiades at that moment.)

Sokrates does not accept the view that love is noble for the younger partner, even when he is *deceived*. He says “I may be no use to you; your *mind* does not see straight yet” (219a). This is prophetic, because he was no use, and Alcibiades never did see straight. But it underlines the sense in which Sokrates *cannot* teach anyone anything. One has to see the intellectual world with the eyes of one’s own mind. (That is the fundamental reason for speaking of it only *poetically* in myths.)

Alcibiades was born about 450 BCE (he is twenty years younger than Sokrates). Everything he has told us so far, happened by the time he was eighteen. Then he served with Sokrates in the campaign against Potidaea. Here Sokrates showed how well he could stand up against hunger (just as he had done against sex), although he enjoyed a feast better than anyone. It was the same with wine. He was also amazingly resistant to cold; and the other soldiers thought that he was showing off. Finally, he once stood *thinking* for a full 24 hours; and only stopped after a prayer to the Sun at dawn. (On this present occasion he stays up for at least 24 hours before going home to bed.)

Alcibiades won the award for valor on the Potidaea campaign. But it was Sokrates who saved *his* life. Alcibiades got the award because of his connection with Perikles;¹² and on the retreat from Delion (426 BCE — Sokrates was about 45 years old) when Sokrates’ life was in real danger, he behaved exactly as the Clouds see him doing in Aristophanes’ play (see *Clouds* 362).

Some people may be like Sokrates in some ways; but as a whole he is unique (and he doesn’t need the personal “other half”). Everyone else follows some path that has been followed before. The best I can do (says Alcibiades) is to say that he’s like the Silenos statues. Even his arguments are like that. They are all about everyday things. He makes us laugh at him, and at them. But the divine truth is inside them. My own sexual experience is not unique; he treated Charmides, Euthydemos, etc. in the same way — so take warning Agathon. (It certainly appears that Agathon was no more permanently affected than Alcibiades. The knowledge that *is* virtue, is hard to communicate.)

¹²Being orphaned early, Alcibiades was brought up by Perikles as a ward.

The End of the Dialogue

Sokrates now responds with an ironic interpretation of Alcibiades' speech. All that Alcibiades wanted, was to make trouble with Agathon — so Sokrates says. But we have seen through your satyr-play, he says.¹³

Sokrates speaks as if the new plan of each praising his neighbor is going to be adopted. But it seems clear that the speech-making did not actually continue. Another drunken crowd arrived — and everyone drank as much as they liked. Eryximachos and Phaidros — the ones who started the serious discussion — now left;¹⁴ and Aristodemos soon fell asleep. When he woke up (in the early morning) the two poets were discussing their dramatic arts. Sokrates was trying to prove to them that a tragedian ought to be able to write comedy (and vice versa). The dialogue demonstrates this both literally with its Satyr-Play, and philosophically — for Diotima's speech has a happy ending. Her speech is the *Human Comedy*; while the speech of Aristophanes is quite tragic, because we *don't* find our "other halves." Aristophanes — who is a great drinker — falls asleep first; and Agathon soon follows suit. Sokrates gets up (followed by Aristodemos) and goes about his normal daily routine. Only in the evening does he go home to sleep. (This completes Plato's own image of the man who made a big impression also both on Antisthenes the Cynic and on Aristippos, the Cyrenaic.)

The *Symposium* offers us a picture, designed for the liberated citizens of the Cave (liberated from sense-experience), of the whole journey of our minds to the intellectual source of

¹³A competitor in the Tragedy Contest put on three tragedies, and a comic satyr-play. The Symposium appears to contain only two tragedies (the first from Phaidros to Aristophanes, and the second from Agathon to Diotima). But the speech of Alcibiades is a tragedy for Sokrates, as well as being a satyr-play for Alcibiades; and the little comedy of Agathon changing places to put Sokrates in the middle underlines this, because it does not seem that Sokrates made any more difference to Agathon than he did to Alcibiades.

¹⁴This is quite an important pointer to the character of Phaidros. He is not taken quite as seriously as he ought to be in the study of his own dialogue.

our existence. Then, through the figure of Alcibiades, it justifies its own existence as a verbal *picture*. The *Republic* is driven and controlled by the conviction that through the dialectic pioneered by Sokrates, we can participate in the actual causal power of the moral Ideas. Plato's reflection upon the capacities and career of Alcibiades has made him aware that this participation is quite uncertain and insecure. For the Cave-dwellers it is more effective (though very unreliable) in the poetic — and especially the dramatic — use of language. Sokrates gave up the use of writing altogether; Plato will dramatize the reasons for this in the *Phaedrus*. But Sokrates' relation with Alcibiades showed that (for a philosopher with dramatic talents) there was no point in this surrender. The dedicated philosopher *can* go out of the Cave — and we must all try. But only life itself can show who is truly *dedicated*; and life (being embodied) remains always in the Cave. Inside the Cave no one can *teach* virtue. One can only *elicit* the virtue that is actually present; and one can do that best with *images*.

Notes