

PLATONIC LOVE

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One of the most influential aspects of Neoplatonism on Western culture was Marsilio Ficino's doctrine of Platonic love.¹ Richard Hooker, Ph.D. writes,

While Renaissance artists, thinkers, and other cultural producers only picked up Neoplatonism in part, the doctrine of Platonic love diffused quickly all throughout the culture. It significantly changed the European experience of sexual love which, since antiquity, had always been closely related to erotics and physical attraction. Suddenly writers, artists, poets, philosophers, and women's communities began discussing sexual love in terms of spiritual bonds, as reflecting the relationship between the individuals and God.²

Continuing to today, the concept of Platonic love is widely understood as:

1. love of the Idea of beauty, seen as terminating an evolution from the desire for an individual and the love of physical beauty to the love and contemplation of spiritual or ideal beauty.
2. an intimate companionship or relationship, especially between two persons of the opposite gender, that is characterized by the absence of sexual involvement; a spiritual affection.³

The origin of the concept of Platonic love comes from Plato's Symposium, a dialogue set in an all-night banquet where the partygoers decide to discuss the concept of Love (Eros). The conversation produces a series of reflections by the all-male participants on gender roles,

sex, and sublimation of basic human instincts. After the other speakers introduce their theories about love, Socrates then shares what he learned on this subject from a woman philosopher — Diotima of Mantinea, who initiated him not only into the mysteries of love when he was young; she also taught him about Wisdom, Beauty, and the Good. The "seer" Diotima, an Arcadian priestess, represents the "mystical element in Platonism, and her discourse is a blend of allegory, philosophy, and myth."⁴

As we progress in our lives, Diotima told Socrates, we grow in our conception of love. First we are stirred by the beauty of the young body. Then we begin to see the beauty in all bodies. At this point we look to the beauty of the soul. As man [a person] is able to identify the beauty in all souls, he soon appreciates the beauty in the laws, and the structure of all things. Lastly we discover the beauty of the forms, the divine ideas. Love is important for it starts and continues us on our path.⁵

James Lesher, Ph.D., writes that the story that Diotima told concerned:

nothing less than the means by which a mortal being can achieve union with a perfect, eternal, and divine being... For many later writers, especially those engaged in defining Christian doctrine during its formative period, Socrates' speech provided a framework for understanding a truth of the utmost importance—that love is not simply an aspect of human life but the means by which mortal beings can ascend from the physical realm to become united with God.⁶



Professor Lesher continues:

What seems to be the main conclusion is a view that Plato will consider important enough to return to again and again in other dialogues: the best and most fully appropriate object of human desire is *philosophia*, i.e. a life devoted to the contemplation of a set of eternal, perfect, and unchanging realities.⁷

Below are some excerpts from Socrates' tale of Love from Symposium. Plato does not mention Diotima again.



And now, taking my leave of you, I would rehearse a tale of love which I heard from Diotima of Mantinea, a woman wise in this and in many other kinds of knowledge, who in the days of old, when the Athenians offered sacrifice before the coming of the plague, delayed the disease ten years. She was my instructress in the art of love, and I shall repeat to you what she said to me...

After explaining to Socrates that Eros (Love) is a great spirit, an intermediate between the divine and the mortal, Diotima says:

“The truth of the matter is this: No deity is a philosopher or seeker after wisdom, for he is wise already; nor does any human who is wise seek after wisdom. Neither do the ignorant seek after Wisdom. For herein is the evil of ignorance, that he who is neither good nor wise is nevertheless satisfied with himself: he has no desire for that of which he feels no want.”

“But who then, Diotima,” I said, “are the lovers of wisdom, if they are neither the wise nor the foolish?” “A child may answer that question,” she replied; “they are those who are in a mean between the two; Love [Eros] is one of them. For wisdom is a most beautiful thing, and Love is of the beautiful; and therefore

Love is also a philosopher: or lover of wisdom, and being a lover of wisdom is in a mean between the wise and the ignorant. And of this too his birth is the cause; for his [Eros's] father is wealthy and wise, and his mother poor and foolish. Such, my dear Socrates, is the nature of the spirit Love. The error in your conception of him was very natural, and as I imagine from what you say, has arisen out of a confusion of love and the beloved, which made you think that love was all beautiful. For the beloved is the truly beautiful, and delicate, and perfect, and blessed; but the principle of love is of another nature, and is such as I have described.”

I said, “O thou stranger woman, thou sayest well; but, assuming Love to be such as you say, what is the use of him to humans?” “That, Socrates,” she replied, “I will attempt to unfold: of his nature and birth I have already spoken; and you acknowledge that love is of the beautiful. But someone will say: Of the beautiful in what, Socrates and Diotima? – or rather let me put the question more dearly, and ask: When a person loves the beautiful, what does he desire?” I answered her “That the beautiful may be his.” “Still,” she said, “the answer suggests a further question: What is given by the possession of beauty?”

“To what you have asked,” I replied, “I have no answer ready.” “Then,” she said, “Let me put the word good in the place of the beautiful, and repeat the question once more: If he who loves good, what is it then that he loves? “The possession of the good,” I said. “And what does he gain who possesses the good?” “Happiness,” I replied; “there is less difficulty in answering that question.” “Yes,” she said, “the happy are made happy by the acquisition of good things. Nor is there any need to ask why a person desires happiness; the answer is already final.”

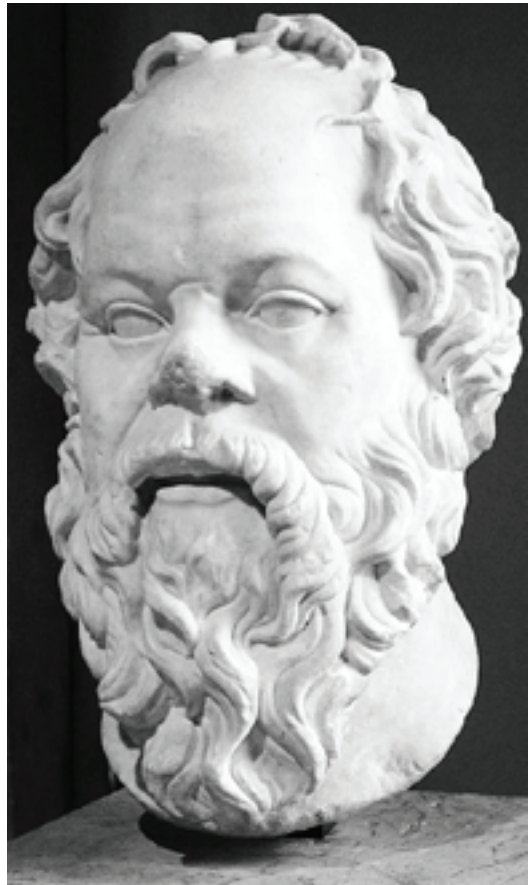
“You are right.” I said. “And is this wish and this desire common to all? and do all people always desire their own good, or only some people? – what say you?” “All people,” I replied; “the desire is common to all.” “Why, then,” she rejoined, “are not all people, Socrates, said to love, but only some of them? whereas you say that all people are always loving the same things.”

“I myself wonder,” I said, – “why this is.” “There is nothing to wonder at,” she replied; “the reason is that one part of love is separated off and receives the name of the whole, but the other parts have other names.”

Diotima and Socrates continue to discuss love, the good, and beauty. Diotima then says:

“Marvel not then at the love which all humans have of their offspring; for that universal love and interest is for the sake of immortality.”

I was astonished at her words, and said: “Is this really true, O thou wise Diotima?” And she answered with all the authority of an accomplished sophist: “Of that, Socrates, you may be assured; think only of the ambition of humans, and you will wonder at the senselessness of their ways, unless you consider how they are stirred by the love of an immortality of fame. They are ready to run all risks greater far than they would have for their children, and to spend money and undergo any sort of toil, and even to die, for the sake of leaving behind them a name which shall be eternal. Do you imagine that Alcestis would have died to save Admetus, or Achilles to avenge Patroclus, or your own Codrus in order to preserve the kingdom for his sons, if they had not imagined that the memory of their virtues, which still survives among us, would be immortal? “Nay,” she said, “I am persuaded that all humans do all things, and the better they are the more they do them, in hope



Socrates (469 – 399 BCE).

of the glorious fame of immortal virtue; for they desire the immortal.”

Diotima then offers that for most people, even the love of offspring serves mostly to preserve a person's memory, giving them the blessedness and immortality which they desire in the future.

“Who, when he thinks of Homer and Hesiod and other great poets, would not rather have their children than ordinary human ones? Who would not emulate them in the creation of children such as theirs, which have preserved their memory and given them everlasting glory? Or who would not have such children as Lycurgus left behind him to be the saviors, not only of Lacedaemon, but of Hellas, as one may say? There is Solon, too, who is the revered father of Athenian laws; and many others there are in many other places, both among hellenes and barbarians, who have given to the world many noble works, and



have been the parents of virtue of every kind; and many temples have been raised in their honor for the sake of children such as theirs; which were never raised in honor of any one, for the sake of his mortal children.

“These are the lesser mysteries of love, into which even you, Socrates, may enter; to the greater and more hidden ones which are the crown of these, and to which, if you pursue them in a right spirit, they will lead, I know not whether you will be able to attain. But I will do my utmost to inform you, and do you follow if you can. For he who would proceed aright in this matter should begin in youth to visit beautiful forms; and first, if he be guided by his instructor aright, to love one such form only – out of that he should create fair thoughts; and soon he will of himself perceive that the beauty of one form is akin to the beauty of another; and then if beauty of form in general is his pursuit, how foolish would he be not to recognize that the beauty in every form is and the same! And when he perceives this he will abate his violent love of the one, which he will despise and deem a small thing, and will become a lover of all beautiful forms; in the next stage he will consider that the beauty of the mind is more honorable than the beauty of the outward form.

“So that if a virtuous soul have but a little comeliness, he will be content to love and tend him, and will search out and bring to the birth thoughts which may improve the young, until he is compelled to contemplate and see the beauty of institutions and laws, and to understand that the beauty of them all is of one family, and that personal beauty is a trifle; and after laws and institutions he will go on to the sciences, that he may see their beauty, being not like a servant in love with the beauty of one youth or person or institution, himself a slave

mean and narrow-minded, but drawing towards and contemplating the vast sea of beauty, he will create many fair and noble thoughts and notions in boundless love of wisdom; until on that shore he grows and waxes strong, and at last the vision is revealed to him of a single science, which is the science of beauty everywhere. To this I will proceed; please to give me your very best attention:

“He who has been instructed thus far in the things of love, and who has learned to see the beautiful in due order and succession, when he comes toward the end will suddenly perceive a nature of wondrous beauty (and this, Socrates, is the final cause of all our former toils) – a nature which in the first place is everlasting, not growing and decaying, or waxing and waning; secondly, not fair in one point of view and foul in another, or at one time or in one relation or at one place fair, at another time or in another relation or at another place foul, as if fair to some and foul to others, or in the likeness of a face or hands or any other part of the bodily frame, or in any form of speech or knowledge, or existing in any other being, as for example, in an animal, or in heaven or in earth, or in any other place; but beauty absolute, separate, simple, and everlasting, which without diminution and without increase, or any change, is imparted to the ever-growing and perishing beauties of all other things.

“He who from these ascending under the influence of true love, begins to perceive that beauty, is not far from the end. And the true order of going, or being led by another, to the things of love, is to begin from the beauties of earth and mount upwards for the sake of that other beauty, using these as steps only, and from one going on to two, and from two to all fair forms, and from fair forms to fair practices, and from

fair practices to fair notions, until from fair notions he arrives at the notion of absolute beauty, and at last knows what the essence of beauty is.

“This, my dear Socrates,” said the stranger of Mantinea, “is that life above all others which people should live, in the contemplation of beauty absolute...”

“...what if humans had eyes to see the true beauty—the divine beauty, I mean, pure and dear and unalloyed, not clogged with the pollutions of mortality and all the colors and vanities of human life—thither looking, and holding converse with the true beauty simple and divine? Remember how in that communion only, beholding beauty with the eye of the mind, he will be enabled to bring forth, not images of beauty, but realities (for he has hold not of an image but of a reality), and bringing forth and

nourishing true virtue to become the friend of the Divine and be immortal, if mortal human may. Would that be an ignoble life?”

ENDNOTES

¹Richard Hooker, “Renaissance Neo-Platonism,” <http://hermetic.com/texts/neoplatonism.html>.

²Ibid.

³Random House Dictionary at Dictionary.com, “Platonic love,” (New York: Random House, 2012), <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/platonic+love>.

⁴R.G. Bury, *The Symposium of Plato*, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0090%3Atext%3Dintro%3Asection%3D4>.

⁵Chris Marvin, “Diotima of Mantinea,” The Window, Philosophy on the Internet, <http://www.trincoll.edu/depts/phil/philo/phils/diotima.html>.

⁶James Leshner, “Later Views of the Socrates of Plato’s Symposium,” from M. Trapp, ed., *Socrates in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century*, (Ashgate: Centre for Hellenic Studies, 2007), p. 61.

⁷Ibid.



Diotima of Mantinea.

