THE EGOISM OF EROS: THE CHALLENGE OF LOVE IN DIOTIMA'S SPEECH

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Dull sublunary lovers love
(Whose soul is sense) cannot admit
Absence, because it doth remove
Those things which elemented it.

But we by a love, so much refin'd,
That our selves know not what it is,
Inter-assured of the mind,
Care lesse, eyes, lips, and hands to misse.

John Donne, "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning"

THE *SYMPOSIUM* IS A SERIES OF SPEECHES given at a drinking party in praise of the god Eros. Socrates' speech is unique in that he does not claim any originality for his views. Rather, Socrates explains that he will relate something "I once heard from a woman" (201d).[1] In the context of an all-male colloquium in which each guest offers an account of eros proper to his own training and profession, this is a rather inauspicious start. It was Diotima, a mystical seer with a quasi-divine status, explains Socrates, "who taught me erotics" (ἐμὲ τὰ ἐρωτικὰ ἐδίδαξεν).[2] The "perfect revelation" into which Diotima initiates Socrates is related in one of the most celebrated passages in the Platonic corpus, the ladder of loves.[3] After a brief overview of Diotima's teaching, I will explore and respond to two challenges presented in this Socratic account of love. I will argue that the criticism of the Socratic vision of love as self-absorbed and incapable of loving a particular person misses the mark. On the contrary, Diotima's account of eros is not so much egotistical, as ordered to an objective good. In the final analysis, eros is not grasping and acquisitive, but generous and diffusive. Further, I will argue that the

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[1] *Symposium* 201d. I have used the translation in *Plato's Symposium*, trans. Seth Benardete (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001).

[2] Ibid.

[3] *Symposium* 210a–212a.

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Socratic account of love is, in fact, especially well equipped to love the particular.

The ascent that Diotima lays out is an education in love that moves from the physical and fleeting to the immaterial and eternal.[4] First, Diotima counsels, the philosopher ought to love one young, beautiful male body, but what he soon comes to realize as he ascends the ladder is that the true beauty he loves is only poorly reflected in this particular boy because the boy is finite and quickly changes. Allan Bloom writes, "Men love the beautiful simply and wish to cleave to it always, whereas the flesh-and-blood individuals with whom one can actually copulate are only imperfect representations of the beautiful."[5] And so, the philosopher will no longer endow one body with his ultimate love, but will come to love many beautiful bodies, recognizing the one imaged in the many.

Diotima continues, "After this he must believe that the beauty in souls is more honorable than that in the body."[6] The philosopher now understands the immaterial and eternal to be much more significant than the material and temporal. Next, the philosopher comes to "behold the beautiful in pursuits and laws."[7] Such abstractions are higher than the human soul as they are universal; they are immaterial principles concretized in the just city. The philosopher proceeds next to love the beauty of science; he marvels at the immaterial logos that gives order and intelligibility to the material universe. With each step up the ladder,

[4] G. R. F. Ferrari describes a "displacement of attention" at each step of the ascent whereby the initiate steadily elevates his love. See G. R. F. Ferrari, "Platonic Love," in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*, ed. Richard Kraut (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 256.

[5] Allan Bloom, "The Ladder of Love," in *Plato's Symposium*, trans. Seth Benardete (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 147. Bloom goes on to argue that marital fidelity, so valued in Western civilization, is an attempt to maintain the immutability that eros desires, but which on account of mortality proves to be a mirage: "The fidelity of two lovers represents something that ought to be but cannot be in this kind of relationship." The Romantics prized the "permanent couple," explains Bloom, whereas the ancients recognized the futility of such a union: "The Romantics want to fix something that, according to the classics, cannot be fixed while remaining open to the truth." Bloom, "Ladder of Love," 148.

[6] *Symposium* 210b.

[7] *Symposium* 210c.

the philosopher comes closer to eternity.[8] The penultimate step the philosopher takes is "a permanent turn to the vast open sea of the beautiful."[9] Here the philosopher finds nourishment in the realm of the forms; he comes at last to see the sources of all beautiful things—the various forms that make things to be what they are and which cause fleeting things to reflect their eternal principles.

When one knows and loves immaterial forms, he comes at last "to the perfect end of erotics" (τέλος τῶν ἐρωτικῶν), explains Diotima.[10] At this point, the philosopher sees beauty itself. The beautiful is the highest, purest, single form, which contains all other forms.[11] To see, know, and become one with beauty is the reason "all the prior labors were undertaken."[12] Only this highest form fulfills and consummates the desire eros has for eternity, for this form is "always being and neither coming to be nor perishing, nor increasing nor passing away."[13] Diotima proceeds to give a philosophically momentous description of the relation of the one to the many: "[The beautiful] is alone by itself and with itself, always being of a single form; while other beautiful things that share in it do so in such a way that while it neither becomes anything more or less, nor is affected at all, the rest do come to be and perish."[14] Here we have a liminal account of the basic participatory Platonic metaphysic, that is to say, the real distinction between Being (which is participated in) and finite being (that which participates).

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[8] Bloom writes, "The philosopher's movement up the ladder of love is an ascent towards the things that are always, as opposed to those that come into being and pass away. . . . Philosophy is learning to become attached to these Forms, which are more real than the bodies that first attracted us." Bloom, "Ladder of Love," 150.

[9] *Symposium* 210d.

[10] *Symposium* 210e. Diotima twice describes the form of the beautiful as the *τέλος* of the ascent (210e and 211b).

[11] In this paper I will refer to the highest form as "the beautiful," "the good," or "the one." I recognize there is a rich discussion in the Platonic commentarial tradition of why Plato used distinct terms for this highest form as well as discussion regarding the relation between these terms.

[12] *Symposium* 211a.

[13] Ibid.

[14] *Symposium* 211b. ἀλλ' αὐτὸ καθ' αὑτὸ μεθ' αὑτοῦ μονοειδὲς ἀεὶ ὄν, τὰ δὲ ἄλλα πάντα καλὰ ἐκείνου μετέχοντα τρόπον τινὰ τοιοῦτον, οἷον γιγνομένων τε τῶν ἄλλων καὶ ἀπολλυμένων μηδὲν ἐκεῖνο μήτε τι πλέον μήτε ἔλαττον γίγνεσθαι μηδὲ πάσχειν μηδέν. This description finds rich exposition and development in Plotinus's treatise *On Beauty* (*Ennead* 1.6).

II

The character of the love of which Diotima speaks presents an intractable problem, one that has been a recurrent source of debate. The ascent entails a displacement of one particular object of love, which is invested with all one's amorous attention, by a love of many beautiful bodies.

Then, one ascends from loving many bodies to loving many souls. After this, one comes to love abstract concepts in laws and in science. Finally, one comes to love immaterial forms and the highest form of all, the beautiful. The purification of love is achieved by exercising and elevating one's love in the ascent—as Diotima explains, "using these beautiful things here as steps" (ἐπαναβασμοῖς).[15] The challenge lies precisely in the character of this "use." The lover abstracts from the sensuous particularity of the flesh-and-blood person in front of him. (To draw on T. S. Eliot—the eyes are not here; nor are lips that would kiss, nor the beloved trembling with tenderness.[16]) After all, the true Beauty sought by the lover is only imperfectly reflected in the face of his beloved. This love is—in Gregory Vlastos's evocative phrasing—nothing but a "projection of eternity on the flickering screen of becoming."[17] In short, Diotima's lover seems not to prize the person as a sufficient object of love; indeed, one might provocatively say that the lover steps on the particular person as he ascends in search of evermore rarified and abstract beauty.

Perhaps the most articulate and searing critique of Socrates' speech is offered by Martha Nussbaum in her 1986 volume, *The Fragility of Goodness*. We are wrong to read Socrates' speech as the culmination of the *Symposium*, she maintains. She notes that Plato gives the last word of the evening not to Socrates but to Alcibiades. It is the latter's speech, she suggests, that is a subtle correction—within the text itself—of the philosophic self-absorption represented by Socrates. As the title of Nussbaum's volume suggests, she proposes that Socrates' ascent to ever more rarified abstraction is an escape from the reality of human fragility, but that it is precisely such fragility that is the true locus of authentic love. According to Nussbaum, the boisterous reentry of

[15] *Symposium* 211c.
[16] T. S. Eliot, "The Hollow Men."
[17] Gregory Vlastos, "The Individual as an Object of Love in Plato," in *Platonic Studies* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1973), 33–34.

Alcibiades at the conclusion of the *Symposium* forces Socrates to confront a particular object of love, as Alcibiades, full-throated and drunk, avows his impassioned love (with sensuous particularity) for one man: Socrates.

The problem with Diotima's pattern of ascent, according to Nussbaum, is that it "escapes" from the particular and concrete nature of love and thereby also escapes the particular challenges that lovers face (distraction, passion, rejection, jealousy, death, and so on). It is a rejection of the "too too sullied flesh" of human existence: "The philosopher is free of all this. His or her contemplative love for all beauty carries no risk of loss, rejection, even frustration."[18] When one loves the "vast open sea of the Beautiful," the loss of one droplet of beauty can hardly make any difference at all. Nussbaum continues, "Instead of flesh and all that mortal rubbish, an immortal object must, and therefore can, be found. Instead of painful yearning for a single body and spirit, a blissful contemplative completeness."[19] The self-sufficiency of the philosopher's love is on full display in the sculpted description we are given of Socrates in the *Symposium*. He seems hardly human, always in control of himself, and seemingly perfect in virtue. While others are drunk, he holds his copious wine with ease; he is not in the least enticed by the sexual advances of those around him; he hardly sleeps, but is never tired. As morning dawns, Socrates is the last one standing, soberly opining on the nature of eros. All this suggests a "distance from the world," maintains Nussbaum: "Inside the funny, fat, snub-nosed shell, the soul, self-absorbed, pursues its self-sufficient contemplation."[20]

While Socrates is "excellent and deaf," he does not have the last word. Alcibiades comes in, drunk and loud, clamoring to see Agathon. Nussbaum describes the intrusion of Alcibiades: "From the rarified contemplative world of the self-sufficient philosopher we are suddenly, with an abrupt jolt, returned to the world we inhabit and invited (by the parallel 'all at once' [ἐξαίφνης]) to see this vision, too, as a dawning and a revelation."[21] Nussbaum demonstrates assiduous attention to the

[18] Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 181.
[19] Ibid., 183.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid., 184–85.

subtly of the narrative. Alcibiades is described as banging on the door and storming in "all at once" (ἐξαίφνης).[22] The description of the suddenness of Alcibiades' appearance is an echo of Socrates' description of the sudden appearance of the beautiful at the height of the ascent: At the "perfect end of erotics," the philosopher will "suddenly (ἐξαίφνης) glimpse something wonderfully beautiful in its nature."[23] Thus, in two very different ways, both Socrates and Alcibiades claim to reveal something "wonderfully beautiful in its nature." In the speeches of Socrates and Alcibiades, we witness two competing accounts regarding the final revelation of the beautiful, suggests Nussbaum: One abstract, unalloyed, pure, unaffected, and universal; the other sensuous, dripping with sweat, fragile, and particular. Both Socrates and Alcibiades make a claim about the nature of beauty and, strikingly, both desire to be led to see the good (ἀγαθὸν).

Traditional commentary on the *Symposium* has typically understood the last speech by Alcibiades to function for Plato as a study in contrast to that of Socrates; that is to say, Alcibiades is presented as a living model of a person governed only by his appetites, who cannot ascend beyond the first step on the ladder of loves. Nussbaum suggests instead that Alcibiades is held up as the embodiment of an alternate mode of knowing and loving, a mode that is more human. Unlike the other symposiasts, Alcibiades does not make a speech about the nature of eros but declares his particular and personal love for Socrates: "Alcibiades, asked to speak about eros, talks about one person. He cannot describe the passion nor its object in general terms, because his experience of love has happened to him this way only once, in connection with an individual who is seen by him to be like nobody else in the world. The entire speech is an attempt to communicate that uniqueness."[24] Thus, according to Nussbaum, Alcibiades functions in the *Symposium* as a critique of Socrates' speech and as an affirmation of the finite, fragile, particular, and sensuous character of love.[25]

Nussbaum offers a novel and thought-provoking account of the significance of Alcibiades in the *Symposium*; her rehabilitation of Alcibiades fits her broader critique of Diotima's speech. Careful

[22] *Symposium* 212c.
[23] *Symposium* 210e.
[24] Nussbaum, *Fragility of Goodness*, 187.
[25] For a different perspective see A. W. Price, "Martha Nussbaum's Symposium," *Ancient Philosophy* 11 (1991): 285–99.

attention to her critique reveals two distinct objections that I will engage with in turn: First, Diotima's eros is self-absorbed and egotistical—hers is not a love ordered to the good of the other but ordered to self-perfection. Second, Diotima's eros abstracts from the particularity of the embodied person—it is not love of a person but of a quality or a concept. It is fruitful to consider both objections in more detail.

III

"Self-absorption" is a word Nussbaum frequently invokes to describe Socrates and his understanding of love. Aryeh Kosman notes that some go so far as to describe Diotima's expression of love as "auto-erotic."[26] The charge that egoism animates Diotima's counsel has been levied especially from Kantian quarters: Does the ladder of love not, by necessity, treat people as means rather than as ends?[27] In Anders Nygren's influential thesis, one discovers a parallel theological tradition that opposes the Christian vision of love to the Platonic.[28] In this reading, Christian love is self-emptying and sacrificial; it lives life as a gift for the other—it is a love that "beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things."[29] By contrast, Diotima's account of love is egotistical because its primary impetus is the fulfillment of one's own desire for happiness. Richard Kraut states this position well: "Diotima's conception of Eros is a far cry from the self-forgetting kind of love that cares only for others and is devoid of all thought of oneself—the kind that does not care whether it is I who helps others but only that they be helped by someone."[30] And, it is true that the animating impulse of the ascent up the ladder of loves is the desire for the personal

[26] Aryeh Kosman, *Virtues of Thought* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014), 36.

[27] Kant's second formulation of the categorical imperative famously holds, "Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end." Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, 3rd ed., trans. James W. Ellington (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), 30.

[28] See Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, trans. Philip S. Watson (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953).

[29] 1 Corinthians 13:7.

[30] Richard Kraut, "Plato on Love," in *The Oxford Handbook to Plato*, ed. Gail Fine (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 292–93.

possession of the good or the beautiful. Self-interest seems explicit in the very definition of eros that Diotima advances: "Eros is of the good's (ἀγαθὸν) being one's own (αὑτῷ) always (ἀεί)."[31]

The charge of egoism is hardly new. The most trenchant articulation of this position (on which Nussbaum explicitly builds) is that of Gregory Vlastos, who criticizes the self-interest he perceives in Socrates' account of love:

> If A loves B, he does so because of some benefit he needs from B and for the sake of just that benefit. . . . No reason is offered why we could love anyone except for what we could get out of him. The egoistic perspective of "love" so conceived becomes unmistakable when Socrates, generalizing, argues that "if one were in want of nothing, one would feel no affection; . . . and he who felt no affection would not love." The lover Socrates has in view seems positively incapable of loving others for their own sake.[32]

The charge that self-interest and egoism animate Diotima's account of eros seems to bear weight because of the simple equation of eros with personal fulfillment.

IV

Is the eros of Socrates' speech auto-erotic and self-absorbed? Is eros incapable of transcending naked self-interest and "positively incapable of loving others for their own sake"? To consider this question fairly we have to attend more carefully to the nature of love taught by Diotima. It is certainly true that self-interest is critical to the definition of eros proposed ("eros is of the good's [ἀγαθὸν] being one's own [αὑτῷ] always [ἀεί]"[33]). The earlier premise, secured in Socrates' line of questioning of Agathon, is that eros is a desire to possess the good which one lacks.[34] Socrates' speech extends the analysis of love qua lack. Initially, eros was understood from the limited purview of romantic love (represented in the speech of Aristophanes), in which one desires the "other half," whom one lacks. In Diotima's speech, the character of this desire is enlarged to express a fundamental disposition of the human

[31] *Symposium* 206a.
[32] Gregory Vlastos, "The Individual as an Object of Love in Plato," 8–9.
[33] *Symposium* 206a.
[34] *Symposium* 200a.

person toward any good or beautiful thing perceived. Loving becomes synonymous with willing. We might say that love becomes a basic intentional orientation.[35] One seeks to acquire the good in order to achieve happiness.[36]

Werner Jaeger expresses the basic Platonic premise animating Diotima's speech:

> Diotima gives a genuinely Socratic interpretation of the desire for the beautiful (it being agreed that Eros is such a desire): she says it is man's yearning for happiness, eudaimonia. Every strong and deep urgency of our nature must ultimately be connected with happiness, and must be deliberately guided and controlled with reference to it. For it implies a claim and an aspiration to one ultimate possession, a perfect good—and indeed Socrates holds that every act of will necessarily wills the good. Thereby Eros, instead of being only a special case of the act of willing, becomes the most clearly visible and convincing expression of the fundamental fact of all Platonic ethics—that man can never desire what he does not think to be good for him.[37]

As such, we can note a shift in focus within Socrates' speech from the lover's desire (and lack) to the object desired.[38] We are asked to think in the first place about the character of the good and only secondly about the desire. The latent question lurking in Socrates' rejoinder to both Agathon and Aristophanes is whether something is good because I desire it or whether I desire it because it is good. As David Schindler asks, "Is the proper object of love good in an essentially relative sense, i.e., good because it corresponds to the desire of that which loves it, or

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[35] Robert Markus notes that for the *Symposium* as a whole "love is the universal principle of everybody's and everything's activity, defining, so to speak, the agent's orientation with regard to other things." Robert A. Markus, "The Dialectic of Eros in Plato's *Symposium*," in *Plato: A Collection of Critical Essays*, vol. 2, ed. Gregory Vlastos (South Bend, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1971), 224.

[36] Diotima underscores the finality of happiness, beyond which no further end (*telos*) can be sought: "The happy are happy by acquisition of good things; and there is no further need to ask 'For what consequence does he who want to be happy want to be so?' but the answer is thought to be a complete one" (205a).

[37] Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1944), 189.

[38] David Schindler puts this well: "The speech in praise of love thus becomes in some respect a speech in praise of love's *object*." "Plato and the Problem of Love: On the Nature of Eros in the 'Symposium,'" *Apeiron* 40 (2007): 207.

is it rather good in an absolute sense, i.e., independently of any particular (and therefore relative) purpose it serves?" [39] Both Aristophanes' mythic speech about romantic love as completing a lack and Socrates' initial questioning of Agathon suggest the former, namely, that the good is always relative—it is good *for me*—indeed the good is intelligible only as an expression of my lack.

It is admittedly the case that Diotima does not disregard the importance of the relative character of the good. After all, its relative character is critical to her definition of eros as the personal possession of the good as one's own (αὑτῷ).[40] Nevertheless, she first underscores the objective character of the good:

> 'And there is a certain account,' she said, 'according to which those who seek their halves are lovers. But my speech denies that Eros is of a half or of a whole—unless, comrade, that half or whole can be presumed to be really good; for human beings are willing to have their own feet and hands cut off, if their opinion is that their own are not good. For I suspect that each does not cleave to his own (unless one calls the good one's own and belonging to oneself, and the bad alien to oneself) since there is nothing that human beings love other than the good.'[41]

For Diotima, the good is objective and, when it is recognized, a person would even sacrifice his own personal finite goods to be cut off to achieve this highest good. In other words, Socrates' speech reveals that desire is secondary to and predicated on the primacy of the good, which the will cannot but desire. The charge of egoism is blunted when the object of love (that is, the good) is given primacy of analysis over the desire. Or, to be more precise, the object of love serves as the criterion that judges the appropriateness of the will's desire. Diotima has established that the good has an absolute character regardless of its relative goodness for me. Again, this is not to suggest that my desire for the good is not significant, only that it is secondary.[42] The desire "of the

[39] Ibid., 210.
[40] *Symposium* 206a.
[41] *Symposium* 205e–206a.
[42] David Schindler notes, "Diotima is not rejecting the relational aspect of goodness; instead, we could say that she is simply rooting its relationality in its absoluteness, and thereby reversing the direction, so to speak, of that relationality. . . . Goodness is not good because it is relational (good for me); instead, it is relational (good for me) because it is good." Schindler, "Plato and the Problem of Love," 212.

good,"[43] then, is not a desire for any indiscriminate object of desire, but for that goodness itself to which my will by nature is inclined and that, when possessed, fulfills what I am meant to be. Hence Diotima's explanation that "happiness" is the final end (*telos*) animating all desire for the good.[44]

If happiness is the possession of the good, the lack of the good, which Socrates maintains is constitutive of eros, is the opposite side of the same eudaimonistic coin. And, in parallel fashion, Socrates holds that eros is not simply a desire for something I want and do not have. Rather, it is a desire for something I lack (ἐνδεής). We might say, a desire for that which I lack and which I recognize as requisite for my human flourishing (eudaimonia)—necessary to achieve my *telos* as a human being.[45] This is the meaning Socrates intends when he explains that people love that which they need (ἐνδεής) and do not have[46] and when he insists that eros is a *de re* need (ἐνδεής) of beautiful and good things. [47] Framing Diotima's definition of love within this broader eudaimonistic account of human nature mitigates the charge of egoism: Eros is not some undefined want or a bald-faced assertion of egoism but a recognition of the good, which I ought to have as good for me.

V

The charge that Socrates presents an eros that is inherently egotistical fails carefully to attend to the transformation of eros that we can observe in Diotima's account. At its height eros is no longer lacking, acquisitive, and self-absorbed, but complete, generous, indeed, diffusive. The ascent moves from a particular boy to the love of the diversity of human flesh, and from love of a particular immaterial soul to the love of immaterial laws, concepts, and ideas and, finally, to the love of the beautiful itself. This ascent, far from becoming ever more

[43] *Symposium* 205a, 206a.
[44] See Terrance Irwin, *Plato's Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 32–33.
[45] See Kosman, *Virtues of Thought*, 34.
[46] *Symposium* 201b.
[47] *Symposium* 201c: Εἰ ἄρα ὁ Ἔρως τῶν καλῶν ἐνδεής ἐστι, τὰ δὲ ἀγαθὰ καλά, κἂν τῶν ἀγαθῶν ἐνδεὴς εἴη.

self-serving and narcissistic, becomes ever more expansive and inclusive.

It is fruitful to note the language of fecundity and generation—of "giving birth"—which becomes ever more pronounced as one ascends the ladder.[48] First, the lover of one beautiful body attempts to "generate" beautiful speeches (ἐνταῦθα γεννᾶν λόγους καλούς) in the object of his affection.[49] Loving the souls of the young, he attempts to "make the young better" through his speeches.[50] Next, leading (ἀγαγεῖν) his beloved to scientific logoi,[51] he comes at last to the "vast open sea of the beautiful." At this point, he "gives birth (τίκτη)—in ungrudging philosophy—to many beautiful and magnificent speeches and thoughts."[52] The "perfect end of erotics" (τέλος . . . τῶν ἐρωτικῶν) is the vision of the beautiful itself (τὴν φύσιν καλόν). It is in the presence of this vision that the lover "gives birth" (τεκόντι) to virtue, becomes a friend of the gods (θεοφιλεῖ), and immortal (ἀθανάτῳ).[53] But if the *telos* of eros is to become "a friend of the gods" and "immortal," then eros itself must be transfigured into something godlike—it sheds its privative, needy character for saturated completion and generosity.

To trace the development of eros in Socrates' speech is instructive. Eros is initially presented (both by Aristophanes and Socrates) as marked by privation and lack. Eros is rapacious, desirous of completion, and unabashedly egotistical. Diotima explains that this character is on account of Eros's generation as the offspring of Poros and Poverty—he is situated midway between the immortal and the mortal. Eros, we are told by Diotima, "plots to trap the beautiful and the good, and is courageous, stout, and keen, a skilled hunter, always weaving devices, desirous of practical wisdom and inventive, philosophizing through all of life, a skilled magician, druggist, sophist."[54] It is hard to see anything transcendent or godlike in this description. Upon reaching the *telos* of the ascent, however, Eros is transfigured; his previously perilous liminal

[48] See M. Dyson, "Immortality and Procreation in Plato's Symposium," *Antichthon* 20 (1986): 59–72; Elizabeth Pender, "Spiritual Pregnancy in Plato's *Symposium*," *Classical Quarterly* 42 (1992): 72–86.
[49] *Symposium* 210a–b.
[50] *Symposium* 210c.
[51] Ibid.
[52] *Symposium* 210d.
[53] *Symposium* 212a.
[54] *Symposium* 203d.

(and mortal) state is now completely reversed: rather than desirous of the good and the beautiful, eros is now described as the cause and source of all good and beautiful things. Indeed, we can say that the desire proper to eros is transformed. It is the nature of the perfect to overflow, to radiate its own goodness and beauty. It now has a desire to be fecund, generative, and self-diffusive.[55]

The criticism of Socrates' account of eros as self-absorbed fails to recognize the profound shift in the reconstitution of eros from the mortal (needy and acquisitive) to the immortal (complete and self-diffusive). In part, this is a failure to mark the hermeneutical fault line between the "Lesser Mysteries" and the "Greater Mysteries" in Diotima's speech.[56] After describing various human attempts at ersatz immortality

[55] Robert Markus articulates the transformation of desire in Diotima's speech: "It is desire to give rather than to receive, a kind of generosity rather than a kind of need. It culminates in togetherness with the object loved and in a creative bringing forth in its presence from the lover's superabundance." Markus, "Dialectic of Eros," 222. Markus continues, "This 'desire'—if we may still call it such—is now of a being already complete or 'perfect' (in a cosmological and etymological sense), indeed, complete to overflowing; no longer is it thought of as a lack. This 'desire' is not for something to be obtained—the beloved—but for giving something from itself." Ibid., 226.

[56] The distinction between the Lesser Mysteries and the Greater Mysteries likely derives from how this distinction operated in the Eleusinian Mysteries, an annual initiation into the cult of Demeter. The Lesser Mysteries attended to the sorrows of the soul while weighed down by the body, and the Greater Mysteries described the future joys of the soul when purified and divested of the body. See Hugh Bowden, *Mystery Cults of the Ancient World* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010); Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987); George Emmanuel Mylonas, *Eleusis and the Eleusinian Mysteries* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1961). The relation between the Eleusinian mysteries and Plato's *Symposium* is explored by Nancy Evans, "Diotima and Demeter as Mystagogues in Plato's *Symposium*," *Hypathia* 21 (2006): 1–27; Michael L. Morgan, *Platonic Piety: Philosophy and Ritual in Fourth-Century Athens* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1990), 94–96. F. M. Cornford observes, "Plato here borrows from the Eleusinian mysteries the language of the Sacred Marriage and of the final revelation, when the ancient symbols of divinity were disclosed to the purified initiate in a sudden blaze of light. The soul is united with the divine Beauty, and itself becomes immortal and divine. The offspring of the marriage are not phantoms of goodness like those images of virtue which first inspired love for the beautiful person. The child of Love and Beauty is true virtue, dwelling in the soul that has becomes immortal, as the lover and the beloved of God." F. M. Cornford, *Principium Sapientiae: The Origins of Greek Philosophical Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952), 86.

(through physical reproduction and bequeathing a cultural legacy), which constitute the Lesser Mysteries, Diotima presents a decisive shift and introduces the Greater Mysteries:

> Now perhaps, Socrates, you might be initiated into these erotics, but as for the perfect revelations—for which the others are means, if one were to proceed correctly on the way—I do not know if you would be able to be initiated into them. [Diotima subsequently relates the steps of the ascent.] Whoever has been educated up to this point in erotics, beholding successfully and correctly beautiful things, in now going to the perfect end of erotics shall suddenly glimpse something wonderfully beautiful in its nature—that very thing, Socrates, for whose sake alone all the prior labors were undertaken.[57]

The exposition of the "perfect revelations" into which Diotima initiates Socrates is prefaced by this marked distinction: the Lesser Mysteries are described as "means" (ἕνεκα) to the "end" (τέλεα). At the culmination of the ascent, Diotima is unequivocal that the "beautiful itself" (τὴν φύσιν καλόν) is loved as an end in itself; it is the τέλος . . . τῶν ἐρωτικῶν.[58] It is for this perfect end of erotics, explains Diotima, that all previous labors were but the necessary means (ἕνεκεν).[59]

The criticism that Socrates' eros is self-absorbed wrongly assumes that what Socrates describes as Diotima's sophistic speech[60] regarding the self-interest of those who strive for immortality in body and soul (the Lesser Mysteries) is continuous with her "perfect revelation" regarding the ascent of the philosopher (the Greater Mysteries). Harry Neumann, for example, maintains that the generative character of Eros at the height of the ascent is, essentially, no different from the earlier attempts at immortality through reproduction. In the Lesser Mysteries, those pregnant in body physically reproduce themselves, and those pregnant in soul spiritually reproduce themselves in a cultural legacy. So too, argues Neumann, in the Greater Mysteries the philosopher attempts to preserve himself through his pedagogy and thereby secure his immortality. Diotima's philosophy of ascent "has justly been condemned as sophistical," maintains Neumann, because the philosopher is more concerned with generating a legacy—his own

[57] *Symposium* 210a–e.
[58] *Symposium* 210a.
[59] *Symposium* 210e–211a. *Symposium* 211a: οὗ δὴ ἕνεκεν καὶ οἱ ἔμπροσθεν πάντες πόνοι ἦσαν.
[60] *Symposium* 208c.

fame—than with the truth or his students.[61] The charge is that, at the height of the ascent, eros does not rest in contemplative union with the beautiful, but uses the beautiful to generate virtue: "Even the vision of true, universal beauty is only a means to this reproduction."[62] Neumann concludes that, for Diotima, "knowledge, even of absolute beauty, is a tool for gaining undying fame."[63]

Neumann maintains that there is no distinction between the "Lesser" and "Greater" Mysteries because the vision of the Beautiful is not contemplative but reproductive.[64] He suggests the generative fecundity of the lover who in the sight of the Beautiful gives birth to true virtue is essentially no different from the previous attempts at self-preservation through reproduction. But this is to misread Diotima's speech. The previous mysteries were precisely that: attempts. They were unsuccessful chimeras of immortality and, indeed, self-absorbed. At the height of the ascent, the lover is authentically reproductive, and not in an egoistic and desperate attempt at self-preservation, but because it is the nature of the good to reproduce itself. Assuming that because the lover is reproductive he cannot also be contemplative is to posit a false binary. The lover's contemplative union with the vision beheld establishes him as a "friend of the gods" and "immortal" and thereby a participant in the self-diffusive and generative nature of the good.[65]

Diotima's teaching points to a profound transformation of eros from mortal, grasping, egoistic self-absorption to immortal, generous fecundity. This movement, which suggests the divinization of eros, entails that a simple identification of eros as egotistical misses its mark.

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[61] Harry Neumann, "Diotima's Concept of Love," *The American Journal of Philology* 86 (1965): 41.

[62] Ibid., 42.

[63] Ibid., 44.

[64] Ibid.

[65] *Symposium* 212a. Similarly see R. G. Bury, *The Symposium of Plato* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932), 44; F. M. Cornford, "The Doctrine of Eros in Plato's Symposium," in *The Unwritten Philosophy*, ed. W. K. C. Guthrie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1950), 77; Robert E. Cushman, *Therapeia: Plato's Conception of Philosophy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1958), 195; Walther Kranz, "Diotima von Mantinea," *Hermes* 61 (1926): 447.

VI

The second criticism of Socrates' speech forcefully articulated by Nussbaum and others is that whatever it is that is spoken of, it is not love, at least not love in any ordinary sense of the term. It is the beauty of the beautiful boy that is loved, and, when the lover sees such beauty equally apparent in many other bodies, the lover feels no compunction moving along from his first, particular object of love: "It is a great folly not to believe that the beauty of all bodies is one and the same."[66] The lover feels no compunction moving along from his first, particular object of love. Likewise, the beauty loved in many bodies is bypassed for the more rarified and pure beauty of science and laws. Finally, even this love is transcended when one comes to love the forms and beauty itself. Nussbaum maintains that the Socratic vision of beauty is not equipped to attend to a particular instantiation of beauty because all beauty is uniform, differing only in quantity. For this reason, the love of a particular boy can quickly be substituted when one recognizes beauty's presence in many beautiful boys. Soon one comes to realize that the beauty seen in human flesh is present to an even more substantial degree in science and laws. When one comes at last to the "vast open sea of the Beautiful," those previous beauties are recognized to be but droplets of this vast sea. In each case beauty is unvariegated and monolithic. Nussbaum writes, "Just try to think it seriously: this body of this wonderful beloved person is *exactly* the same in quality as that person's mind and inner life. Both, in turn, the same in quality as the value of Athenian democracy; of Pythagorean geometry; of Eudoxan astronomy."[67] The charge of this second objection is that Socrates' account of love escapes the particularity of the person.

This criticism is an expression of a broader rejoinder to Platonic philosophy in existentialist, phenomenological, and personalist ethics of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: What Diotima's philosopher loves is an abstract quality rather than a person.[68] Already in 1888, Eduard Zeller remarked,

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[66] *Symposium* 210b.

[67] Nussbaum, *Fragility of Goodness*, 180.

[68] Martin Warner writes, "In Christian and post-Christian cultures the most important forms of love are seen as essentially personal. . . . It is the person rather than his qualities which is said we ought to love." Martin Warner, "Love,

> Plato ascribes no specific value to the [particular]; the immaterial universal is alone, in his opinion, true and essential. The material and the particular can, indeed, lead up to this, but only in such a manner that we immediately turn away from the particular and leave it behind us. . . . [Plato] must degrade the beautiful phenomenon over against the shapeless concept as a subordinate and unimportant, even disturbing accessory.[69]

This charge bears prima facie weight. A love of the "beautiful in its nature" (τὴν φύσιν καλόν)[70] cannot help but disparage, or at least value as meager, this particular beautiful person appearing before me. As Diotima tells Socrates, "Should you ever see the beautiful itself, it will be your opinion that it is not to be compared to gold and garment and the beautiful boys and youths at whose sight you are now thunderstruck."[71] Here, too, Vlastos is decisive: Since one can never encounter perfection in another human—after all, no person is "wholly free of streaks of the ugly, the mean, the commonplace, the ridiculous"—one also can never wholly give oneself to another person in love. He writes, "This seems to me the cardinal flaw in Plato's theory. It does not provide for love of whole persons, but only for love of that abstract version of persons which consists of the complex of their best qualities. This is the reason why personal affection ranks so low in Plato's *scala amoris*."[72] Similarly, Irving Singer categorically remarks, "The Platonic lover does not love *anyone:* he loves only the Good, either in abstraction or in concrete manifestations."[73]

Self, and Plato's Symposium," *Philosophical Quarterly* 29 (1979): 333–34. Warner concludes, "The distinctively Christian conception of altruistic love (ἀγάπη) finds it difficult to retain a foothold here, for it is difficult to be altruistic on behalf of a set of qualities." Ibid., 339.

[69] Eduard Zeller, *Plato and the Older Academy* (London: Longmans, 1888), 506.

[70] *Symposium* 210e.

[71] *Symposium* 211d.

[72] Vlastos, "The Individual as an Object of Love in Plato," 31. Variations of this theme are legion in a post-Kantian ethical world. To take but one example: Harry Neumann writes, "Lovers are not in love with their beautiful beloved who only seems to attract them; their real object is their own good or happiness." Neumann, "Diotima's Concept of Love," 41.

[73] Irving Singer, *The Nature of Love: Plato to Luther* (New York: Random House, 1966), 87. In the same vein Singer remarks, "We cannot love another person for himself, but only as a vehicle and partial embodiment of what we really want—the Good. By seeing that this is the real object of his love, the Platonic philosopher disintoxicates himself from the interest in persons as

The challenge here proposed is felt poignantly because the person seems not to be loved qua individual, but for some quality possessed. It is a conditional love—we might even say mercantile. However, as Aryeh Kosman has pointed out, the converse—unconditional love—is not without its own challenges. Unconditional love is unable to love me on account of any particular virtues and beauties recognized in me. Unconditional love is—precisely on this score—also unable to give an adequate account for the love of the individual qua individual. As Kosman provocatively puts it, "I have become, so to speak, the recipient of an erotic lottery."[74] So we are stuck: We seem to be unable adequately to account for love of both the person and his qualities. Kosman writes, "We want a theory that will account for our prereflective paradoxical demands that love be charitable and unconditional, yet not independent of features of the beloved that the lover recognizes and values."[75] This challenge of the "paradoxical demands" of love should give us pause before charging Socrates too rashly. After all, the tension latent in Diotima's speech between the love of a quality and of a person is but a variant on the perennial Platonic dialectic between the universal and the particular. And it is not clear that, at least for Plato, the universal necessarily bypasses the particular.

Diotima presses the question, "What do I love in my beloved?" The answer is: the "good" (ἀγαθὸν) and the "beautiful" (καλόν). The absolute and transcendent character of this goal entails that the love of all finite approximations thereof are unsatisfactory. The ascent is both an ever more intense recognition and a love of particular beauties experienced, and an unsettled restlessness that desires to know more deeply the source of beauty in which the particular participates.

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such. For what is a person but a conglomeration of accidental properties that chance and nature have thrown together? No, Plato would say, to love anyone is really to love the goodness which is in him." Ibid., 72.

[74] Kosman, *Virtues of Thought*, 31.

[75] Ibid., 31–32. In a similar vein, David Schindler states the problem thus: "Do I love the person without any reference at all to her goodness? To say yes is to dissociate love and goodness in principle, which would not only generate a host of problems, but is clearly foreign to Plato. But if I love a person as good in some way, we must ask: as good simply in herself, or as good for me? . . . The utter selflessness of altruism paradoxically undermines the genuine goodness of the other, because it denies the other's goodness for me, a relative goodness that would necessarily follow from the absoluteness of that good." Schindler, "Plato and the Problem of Love," 217.

A look at a parallel Socratic discussion about the nature of love in the *Lysis* is revealing. In this dialogue, Socrates is even more explicit about love as "need." Socrates maintains that someone loves another because of a benefit needed, which he can procure from that person.[76] Thus, a sick person loves his doctor for the sake of health; a poor man loves a rich man for money, and a weak man loves a strong man for help. Socrates concludes that without need there would be no love.[77] What seems a bizarre conclusion is recalibrated for serious analysis when Socrates asks much the same question Diotima poses: "What do I love in my beloved?" If the sick love the doctor for the good of health, for what good do they love health? The question can be pressed back all the way to a "first love" (πρῶτον φίλον), which is loved for its own sake. It is this ultimate love that makes all previous loves lovable. Indeed, lovable things are loved "for the sake of" this first love, maintains Socrates.[78]

The πρῶτον φίλον that animates all love is the love for the good or the beautiful itself. The nature of loving a transcendent good invites us to rethink the analogy of the ladder proposed by Diotima. The objective and transcendent character of the good itself (to which the will is of necessity ordered) is, thus, not like any other good, and the possession of the good itself is not like the possession of any other finite good (say, a bottle of pinot noir). The good itself is noncompetitive; it does not run out when others participate in it. And so, the ascent does not entail stepping on earlier loves, because earlier loves are not in competition with the good itself. We might better say that earlier loves form the foundation of the ascent. Standing on the higher rungs requires, by necessity, reliance on the lower rungs—rungs that are not done away with, but seen from a higher vantage point. Lower loves are not kicked away as one moves up, but are now appreciated as partial instantiations of the beauty sought. In the words of Terrance Irwin: "Plato implies that he can explain a more specific love of persons, and in particular a more specific love of beauty, by appeal to this more general desire."[79] Thus, the particular boy who was the object of his lover's amorous affection

[76] *Lysis* 213e.
[77] *Lysis* 215b.
[78] πρῶτον φίλον, οὗ ἕνεκα καὶ τὰ ἄλλα φαμὲν πάντα φίλα εἶναι. *Lysis* 219c–d.
[79] Irwin, *Plato's Ethics*, 303.

at the outset of the ascent is not abandoned, but loved with ever greater detachment, we might say, loved in a nonpossessive manner.[80] The love of a transcendent good is by definition noncompetitive with a love of finite goods.

The earlier challenge of the paradoxical demands of love in which I am seemingly stuck between either loving my beloved conditionally, that is, because of her good for me, or unconditionally, that is, irrespective of any of her good qualities, is here resolved: I love the good itself in my beloved. If the proper object of eros is the good itself, as Diotima proposes, then this love is noncompetitive, that is to say, it is a love inclusive rather than exclusive of the particular goods loved.[81] Or, in Platonic terms, the universal is seen *in* the particular. Indeed, it is not too much to say that at the height of ascent the lover sees the incarnation of the good, as Kosman so marvelously puts it:

> If then we feel called upon to say [with Gregory Vlastos] that for Plato "the Idea, and it alone is to be loved for its own sake; the individual only so far as in him and by him ideal perfection is copied fugitively in the flux," we must remember that that fugitive copying, which other traditions have called incarnation, is the highest mystery. Understood, it reveals the deceptive fact that the luminous world of forms is this world seen aright.[82]

The lover is not some spasmodic philanderer always exchanging one object of love for a better one but a person who has cultivated the vision to see finite and material goods as partial representations, as participations, in the eternal good and who loves them on that account. Diotima's lover—the philosopher—sees the world and all the particular goods and beauties loved as the charged refulgence of the form of the good.

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[80] Kosman puts this well: "To recognize shining through this world the world of forms, to see the world aright through that discipline of philosophical κάθαρσις that is generated by and results in love of the world's true nature, this is according to Plato the task and goal of the philosopher." Kosman, *Virtues of Thought*, 40.

[81] See Schindler, "Plato and the Problem of Love," 218, and John Brentling, "The Nature of Love," in *Eros, Agape, and Philia: Readings in the Philosophy of Love*, ed. Alan Soble (New York: Paragon House 1989), 141–42.

[82] Kosman, *Virtues of Thought*, 41.

VII

Diotima's teaching about eros has come under particular censure in the post-Kantian philosophical world. This is understandable. At first blush, the ladder of loves seems a blatant violation of the categorical imperative never to treat people as means but always as ends in themselves. Among others, Martha Nussbaum has criticized the ascent passage in the *Symposium* for its self-interest—even egoism—in that the primary impetus for the ascent on the ladder of loves is self-perfection. This criticism is blunted when Socrates' speech is framed within its eudaimonistic account of human nature. In this case, eros is not so much egotistical as it is ordered to an objective good. Eros is a primary orientation to the good and a recognition that the good is good for me. The claim that eros is inherently egotistical also fails to attend to the complete transformation that eros receives in Diotima's speech. A marked shift within her speech distinguishes the mortal, acquisitive, grasping eros of the Lesser Mysteries from the immortal, generously fecund, diffusive eros of the Greater Mysteries. While eros uses beautiful things as means on the path of ascent, at its height it enjoys the beautiful as an end in itself.

The second criticism of Diotima's speech is that it displaces attention from a concrete particular object of love—a person!—for an abstract concept or quality. On further analysis, however, the distinction between loving a person or his qualities is not so clear-cut. What do I love when I love my beloved? Do I love a particular person regardless of her qualities? But such an unconditional love, which loves a person irrespective of her qualities, also fails to deliver a satisfactory account of the particular qualities I love *in* my beloved. Socrates' answer is that I love the good qualities in the person. It is precisely because I love a *transcendent* good—one that is, by definition, noncompetitive with finite goods—that I can love the beautiful in my beloved. For Plato, the universal is realized—one might say, incarnated—in the particular. As such the perceived tension between loving the person (the particular) or his qualities (the universal) becomes a false dichotomy.

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