



Diotima

In Praise of Love Adorned: Plato's *Symposium*

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0.1 Prologue

In the *Symposium* Plato imagines a drinking party in which the participants decide to forego drinking and get high by giving speeches in praise of passionate love (eros). Plato is constructing an ironic fiction in which the members of a drinking party were supposed to abstain from drinking wine, but would get high on speeches praising love. Eryximachus, the physician, proposed a speech contest in place of the custom of getting drunk. He made the rule that the celebrants were to refrain from drink for reasons of health and that each should give a speech in praise of Eros. The speakers were to dress Eros up to look his best, to adorn him in their speeches. Everyone kept the rule until a famous politician, Alcibiades, crashed the party already drunk and gave an exposé of Socrates, his former friend and then everybody, but the old philosopher ended up getting drunk. That is the basic story of the *Symposium*. But what does it have to do with philosophy?

Playing on the etymology of the name of the party's host, Plato says the speeches were given at the home of a young tragedian, Agathon whose name means "the Good." The speeches take place in the home of the Good. Agathon invites the company to his home to celebrate winning the prize for the best tragedy in the Dionysian celebration at the Linaea in 416 B.C.E. Aristodemus who went to the party with Socrates recalls the speeches for

Apollodorus who 12 years later (404 B.C.E.) recounts them to a companion on a walk into Athens. What is Plato doing with all these different time frames? There is the time of the party, the time of the first telling of the speeches by Aristodemus, the time of the second telling of Apollodorus, and the time of the reading.

Understanding the meaning of the *Symposium* requires it to be read on three levels: the exegetical-historical, the systematic, and the philosophical. The exegetical elucidates the meaning and implications of what each character says about love. The systematic explains the relations between the speaker's characters, the meanings of their speeches, and their personal fates. The systematic reading unfolds the underlying theoretical unity of the dialogue. The philosophical reading displays and works out the tensions and conflicts between the speakers, their speeches on eros, and the loves and life choices of the characters and ultimately of the reader.

Narrators	Times	Loves	Themes	Readings
Aristodemus	Happening-Past	Dionysian	Nature	Exegetic
Apollodorus	Telling-Now	Eros (Timetic)	Human	Systematic
Plato	Understanding-Future and Always	Apollonian	Divine	Transformational

Transformational Plato's irony turns the tables on the reader; for while he thinks he is judging the characters, the characters function as character types that become the criteria for assessing the reader's own character. If the reader can recognize the flaws in the characters of the speakers, he will come to recognize the character flaws in himself.

1.0 The Order of the Speeches

Thus a comprehensive interpretation of the *Symposium* must account for the interconnections between the characters and their speeches. Each character's speech discloses some aspect of love. How the speaker praised love not only reveals some aspect of the nature of love, but also reveals the kind of person the speaker is and how he is living his life.

Because the *Symposium* is a work of art, little is accidental in it. Since the order of the speeches is obviously a major feature of the dialogue, Plato placed the speeches in a particular order by design. No knowledgeable interpreter of Plato's dialogues would suggest such a major feature would be insignificant for understanding the dialogue as a whole. Though the order presents a conspicuous pattern, the reason for the order is not obvious. Eight characters speak: Phaedrus first, then Pausanias, Eryximachus,

Aristophanes, Agathon, Socrates, Diotima, and Alcibiades. Why do they speak in just that order? Is it that the participants just happened to be seated at table in that order? Highly unlikely! The question persists: why does Plato put the company in that order. There are clues in the dialogue itself that the order is both important and constructed. For the speakers are supposed to speak in their seating order, but Plato gives Aristophanes the hiccups so that Eryximachus and Aristophanes speak out of their seating order. There must be a reason why Plato reversed the order of their speeches. Nor does the dialogue represent an actual historical event that Plato is just recounting as it happened. For Plato could not have been present at the presumed event since he puts the dramatic date of the drinking party at the time of his childhood when he would have been 11 years old. The dialogue clearly does not portray the historical details of an actual dinner party. Rather Plato is suggesting a typical encounter between Socrates and his contemporaries. The order of the speeches must play a central role in the interpretation of the dialogue as a whole. But what role it plays requires an understanding of the dialogue as a whole. It requires an understanding of what the author meant by the dialogue.

2.0 Dramatis Personae

To understand the *Symposium* the reader needs to know something about the historical characters. Phaedrus is a student of Eryximachus, the sophist physician. He has a practical bent and is interested in political rhetoric because he finds it a useful tool to get what he wants. Pausanias is an old, retired, sophist teacher of rhetoric. He has been the pederastic lover of the young, handsome host, Agathon. The scuttle butt is that Agathon, recently famous, is about to dump him. Eryximachus is the scientific type, a successful physician who is sleeping with Phaedrus who is toying with the idea of becoming a physician. Aristophanes is the famous comic poet who in his play, the *Clouds*, written in 423 B.C.E. portrays Socrates as a super sophist representing the "New Learning" or as he called it, "the unjust account," that he believes is corrupting the young people of Athens. He is a popular playwright who is used to winning first prize in the theatrical contests. However he is disturbed by the fact that the judges gave him only a third prize for the *Clouds*. It is rumored that he rewrote the *Clouds* to polish it up and make the judges look bad. In the *Symposium* he tells a story tracing the origin of sexual love back to a prehistoric revolt of the humans against the gods. Agathon is a well bred, well-educated, effeminate young tragic poet. Though known for his physical beauty, he submitted himself to the aging and physically unattractive rhetorician, Pausanias. Aristotle tells us Agathon eschewed the custom of using traditional story-lines in his tragedies and was the first to create novel plots. Diotima is a holy woman from Mantinea, imagined by Plato to be Socrates' feminine shadow-self who is supposed to have taught him about divine love matters. Socrates is the notorious Athenian philosopher who went around Athens urging his fellow citizens to examine their lives in elenctic conversations with him because he

believed the unexamined life was not worth living. He was known for claiming that until human beings lived virtuous lives, they could not live well. Opposing all forms of power politics, he espoused a politics of personal and social conscientiousness. Alcibiades was middle aged, well-born, and wealthy at the top of his career. When he was a small boy, his father was killed in Boeotia while commanding an Athenian army. His guardian, the statesman Pericles, was too preoccupied with political leadership to provide the guidance and affection the boy needed when growing up. Alcibiades was strikingly handsome and keen witted but, at the same time, he was extravagant, irresponsible, and self-centered. He was impressed by the moral strength and the keen mind of Socrates who, in turn, was strongly attracted to Alcibiades' by his good looks, his native talents, and intellectual and political promise. They served together in the war against Sparta at Potidaea (432 B.C.E.) and Delium (424 B.C.E.). Yet before he was thirty he left the Socratic circle, abandoned the life of moral integrity Socrates stood for in favor of the rewards of the power politics Socrates rejected.

3.0 Alcibiades and Socrates

Why does Alcibiades rather than Socrates speak last? Most attempts to answer the question of the order of the speeches give an explanation that leads the reader to expect Socrates to speak last. Some interpreters (Isenberg) treat Socrates as having the last word even though Alcibiades gave the last speech because, they claim, Alcibiades praised Socrates in place of the god of love. This solution is not altogether satisfactory. Alcibiades does have the last word in the sense that he, not Socrates, gives the last speech on the nature of love. Moreover, Alcibiades does not unequivocally praise Socrates in his speech, a point often missed by interpreters. He reproaches Socrates for rebuffing his erotic advances towards him, and he condemns the philosopher for betraying *Eros* manifested in its human form. This is an important clue to the meaning of the underlying reason for the order of the speeches. It suggests the purpose Plato had for the dialogue's deep structure: to uncover the conflict between philosophical and power politics.

3.1 Alcibiades and Power Politics

At the beginning of the *Symposium* by alluding to a rumor that Alcibiades had secretly returned to Athens, Plato connects politics with philosophy. Before Alcibiades left as one of the commanding officers on the Syracusan expedition, he was accused of profaning the Elysian Mysteries and castrating the statues of Hermes guarding the city. After having honored him by making him one of the commanders of the expedition under the faint hearted Nicias and after the fleet had sailed for Syracuse, his enemies persuaded the citizens of Athens to recall him to face charges of blasphemy and treason. While returning home under arrest, Alcibiades escaped, defected to Sparta, and betrayed Athens to her enemy. After betraying Athens, Alcibiades took up residence in Sparta. There it was

said he became more Spartan than the Spartans. The rumor was that he had had a love affair with a Spartan queen, and she bore him a child whom she boldly named after him. Shortly afterwards he was forced to flee Sparta. He sought refuge in Persia under the protection of the ancestral enemy of the Hellenes.

So the dialogue opens with Apollodorus saying that someone had heard Alcibiades was back in town and was recently partying with Socrates. According to what Aristodemus says, the events of the dinner party had occurred at Agathon's as much as twelve years earlier. So the return of Alcibiades turned out to be the wishful thinking of his political supporters. Popular hopes had given rise to the rumor that Alcibiades might return to liberate Athens from the tyrannical rule of the Thirty. After the Spartans defeated the Athenians at Syracuse they occupied Athens and installed an antidemocratic government. The reference to Alcibiades early in the dialogue recalls the political crisis and collapse of the Athenian democracy (Empire?) caused in part by the defeat of two Athenian fleets at Syracuse under Nicias. The Syracusan Expedition was the beginning of the end of the Athenian Empire and of Alcibiades who was partly responsible for its downfall. Alcibiades necessarily plays a central role in a dialogue that begins with an early reference to him and ends with his speech on love. Why would Plato end the dialogue with a speech by a traitor to Athens, a demagogue and a power politician? Why would he give the last word to the man who persuaded the Athenian Assembly to embark on the tragic Syracusan Expedition that led directly to the final defeat of Athens? Why would he make Alcibiades' petulant speech against Socrates the last word in a dialogue on the meaning of love?



Eros Roman copy possibly by Praxiteles.

4.0 How The Speakers Praise and Adorn Love

In the dialogue each speaker represents a different form of love, type of lover and beloved. The type of eros the speaker praises reveals what kind of lover the speaker is, how that type of love determines the speaker's life, and the result of that type of love in the life of the beloved. The first three speeches present eros as a natural force. For Phaedrus love is the natural, animal desire enhanced by human intelligence in civil society. His view of love is egotistical and utilitarian. He speaks of the usefulness of love. His actual words are "εραστες χρηστος" = useful lover. ¹For him love is no more than enlightened self-interest.

In contrast to the naïve view of the student egotist, the egotistic teacher of rhetoric, Pausanias, argues that civilized talk is the basis of morality. He distinguishes an earthly lust from a heavenly love of refined things. The old pederast lusts after Agathon's body, but he claims Agathon's sexual submission is morally justified because he does it for the sake of his education. In his specious sophistic argument, the young man's sexual favors are the result of a heavenly love not an earthly lust.

Eryximachus, the technical egotist, combines the utilitarian views of the first two speakers in his theory of the body as the ultimate reality. The physician's art is at the service of biological life. He extols the animal side of human life making the body the

ultimate object not only of the sciences but also of the virtues. For him the powerful art of medicine allows human beings to procure the greatest carnal pleasure with the least bodily discomfort. Medical knowledge is divine wisdom because it is a technical knowledge of the body that makes it possible for humans to live a life of sensual pleasure with a minimum of pain and without too adversely affecting their health.

In his speech Aristophanes tells a story of human origins according to which the first humans are circle people who represent three sexual orientations: Male/Female or heterosexual, Male/Male or homosexual, and Female/Female or Lesbian. They are called circle people because they have two faces one in the front and one behind. They get around by tumbling gracefully like acrobats somersaulting on their four hands and four feet. Like circles they are perfect. In the story Aristophanes defines eros essentially as sexual desire which is determined completely by bodily conditions. He presents an image of eros as a result of a primordial human flaw. The Aristophanian myth of androgyne does not define the primordial sin but hints that human beings arrogantly appropriated to themselves divine attributes symbolized by the graceful movements of their circular bodies. In the story Zeus splits the circle-people in half because they present themselves arrogantly as equals of the gods. At Zeus' command the genitalia with the consequent eros are later added by Apollo to put an end to human self-destructive longing for their other half and to heal the split and remind human beings of their original act of injustice. In the story eros results from a divine punishment for human arrogance. Aristophanes' hidden agenda is the conflict between tribal and civil justice. For Aristophanes the creation of erotic human beings results in the establishment of an artificial civil society and the intrinsically impossible notion of civil justice.

Civilized life helps human beings adorn themselves so they can once again appear graceful and divine-like. The creation of civil society allows human beings to excel in intellectual matters, tempting them to believe themselves once again the equals of the gods. Erotic longing is the divine reminder of the ungod-like nature of human life. The myth of *Androgyne* re-introduces the theme of the unjust account, the bad argument that appears good, the theme of civil injustice, the central theme of the *Clouds* in which Aristophanes lampoons Socrates as a super-sophist.

For Aristophanes the final truth of eros, the desire of the human heart, is the return of the body from the city, its artificial home, to the earth, its natural home in death. For him the only genuine justice in human life is an inarticulate, tribal (natural) justice. Civil justice is necessarily defective because artificial. Reasonable accounts are always unjust because they are achieved by arguments that are no more than clever, sophistic word games. For Aristophanes human eros is the result of a conflict deriving from Apollo's construction, albeit at Zeus' command, of an artificial, civilized human being. Erotic love creates the illusion that with it humans can overcome death. For Aristophanes the hidden

desire of the heart is the love of fate which masks the human animal desire for death.

Aristophanes brings the first cycle of the speeches to closure: the natural cycle. Phaedrus defined life as a function and a commodity; Agathon will define it as a fiction and a style. Phaedrus commended love as a natural force; Agathon will celebrate it as divine power in the city. With Aristophanes the first love cycle, nature becoming human nature is complete; Agathon initiates the second love cycle: human nature becoming divine-like. For Aristophanes art was an epiphenomenon of nature, but for him art inevitably distorts nature; for Agathon nature is prologue to human nature which is the real work of art. For Agathon nature is not the genuine reality; human nature is because it itself is a work of art. Agathon tries to make the case for an autonomous poetry. His motto is: Art for its own sake. Once nature becomes human, Agathon thinks humans can make themselves into whatever they wish by images and words (poesis).

For Agathon beauty is the result of love and love is the result of making beautiful things, especially beautiful words in the theatrical performances that remake human life in the playwright's speeches. For him lovemaking and beauty-making are synonymous. The city is home to the young and the beautiful. The poet is the love-maker *par excellence* and makes all things young and beautiful. Love is the principle of renewal and creativity; it makes ordinary men poetic; it banishes the harsh, tribal world of necessity, and ushers in the subtle works of art that are possible only in cities. Love is drawn to urbane beauty and grace. In Agathon's world beauty and love are synonymous because man makes his world and himself: For him self-making is the essence of art. For the young poet novelty is identical with human creativity. The young, not the old, are the beautiful, beloved objects of eros. Like Narcissus he sees himself reflected in his own creations and falls head over heels in love with himself. For him poetry is the quintessence of life. He boasts that the poet creates the city and its gods in his own image.

Agathon's unrestrained praise of poetry is a challenge to philosophy's claim to be the noblest human endeavor. Diotíma does not deny Agathon's claim that poetry is the divine essence of life, but enters the counter claim that in fact poetry has no single essence. She points out that all forms of making are poetic. What the poet makes, its object, determines its beauty and its value. In the city poetry is controlled either of conservative or liberal power politics, on the one hand, or of philosophy on the other. Poetry is not autonomous. It is always overtly or covertly controlled by something beyond itself. If the poet does not attune himself to the god-ward movement of the love of wisdom, then the alternatives will be: either he will be controlled by the power elites who will use him for their own purposes or he will be caught up in an unrealistic romantic return to the tribal, ancestral religion. In the power politics of civil society the right will embrace ancestral religion and its appeal to tribal virtues in order to gain and hold political power while the left will use civil law and the appeal of civic, public welfare to legitimate its hold on political power. When poetry is

divorced from philosophy and enlightened religious practice, it easily becomes propaganda for those in power who use it to resist genuine moral and political reform.

Diotima's² speech is meant to bring human honor into line with divine honor. She is said to have helped bring an end to a terrible plague that was destroying the city of Athens by inducing the Athenians to offer propitiatory sacrifices to the gods. Diotima's speech is meant to correct and heal the damage done by the prior speeches. Her speech is meant to connect philosophy with poetry and reveal it to be the ultimate form of divine poetry that can reconnect nature to the city and the city to its gods.

Alcibiades is a politician who made power and poetry synonymous. The power politician exercises power as a sublime form of poetic expression. For him power is poetry, and power politics is poetic politics. Political glory comes from the recognition of the multitude whom he dominates. Alcibiades "praises" Socrates for the power he could have had over people. Alcibiades says Socrates cannot be dominated because he can be neither bribed nor intimidated: He cannot be bought by the power elites or flattered by the multitude. Only good arguments can move him. He fears nothing but doing what is wrong, and he desires nothing but living virtuously. Alcibiades concludes wrongly that Socrates' indifference to material things means he is a potential power politician like himself. He is not only indifferent to the seduction of things but also to power as an end to be pursued for its own sake. For Socrates the exercise of power over people is not justified unless it is used for the sake of bringing about what is really good and liberating for human beings.

Alcibiades says he is telling the truth to the company, but he is lying to himself and to them. He says he is going to praise Socrates, but he criticizes him and praises himself. He says he wanted to be Socrates' student, but he left his circle because he disagreed with Socrates on the one thing he thought was important: moral integrity. He says Socrates saved his life, but tells how he saved Socrates' life. He says Socrates is unique, but he means he is an oddball and out of step with both the aristocrat and the commoner. He says Socrates is more than human, but he means he is less than human. He says Socrates wants to seduce Agathon (poetry), but he himself wants to seduce him and make poetry serve his power political ends. Alcibiades wants the autonomy that comes from the practice of philosophy but without being morally accountable. He wants to excel without the virtues. He wants to turn philosophy into a technique for managing people rather than pursue it with his fellow Athenians as a way of liberating themselves by living well.

In the *Symposium* Plato presents philosophy in the guise of poetry. Diotima's speech is more poetic than philosophical, more exhortation than argument. The *Symposium* explores the connection between the aesthetic value of speech and its political consequences. Art expresses political aspirations and becomes an indispensable

instrument to achieve political ends. Human desire and the longing for immortality connect art, rhetoric, politics, philosophy, and religion.

5.0 Love and Political Rhetoric

Each speaker offers a different version of political speech based on his praise of love. Phaedrus reduces political speech to a commercial jingle by placing it in the category of a useful tool. Pausanias makes political speech into the rhetoric of sexual seduction. He makes political speech a psychological tool to achieve his erotic ends. He subordinates the common good to his erotic pleasures. The physician, Eryximachus, turns political speech into health talk and the technical skill that makes medicine a servant of carnal pleasure. He turns political practice into managing a healthy society based on hedonistic principles. If human beings are fundamentally a result of natural forces, politics is a complex form of natural science and the science of medicine becomes the most sublime science in control of human life itself.

Aristophanes describes love as the experience of desire. His story is more attuned to the experience of human love than its predecessors. Though Aristophanes thought human desire was essentially no more than the result of natural forces. He knew human desire had an inner life of its own. While he believed it was the source of all human illusions, he knew it could not be ignored. He grounds political speech in a myth that says human beings long for wholeness. For him that is nature's hidden desire for death. For Aristophanes political speech is a form of lying to one's self to hide from one's self the tragic truth of human finitude and death.

Agathon claims political speech is the fine art of divine self-creation. He transforms political rhetoric into the self-promotion of the literary aesthete. His speech presents the triumph in the city of art as propaganda over the plain truth. The power of poetry in the city is unlimited. It seduces and controls the multitude.

Socrates makes philosophical argument the highest form of political poetry, rhetoric, and practice. He argues that the self-knowledge resulting from the practice of the virtues is the basis for a genuine political speech that liberates human beings. Diotima proclaims political speech to be founded on religious ecstasy, an experience that takes the person beyond themselves. She transforms political speech into a divine revelation. For Diotima, political speech sums up the human longing for the vision of the Transcendent Beauty, the Divine Immortal and Imperishable Good.

Alcibiades claims by political speech the city is made in the image of a great man. His passions, aspirations, and ambitions are reflected in the city he rules. He turns political speech into a verbal tyranny of the ruler over the ruled. In contrast Plato proposes genuine political speech to be the making of the free citizen and the self-ruled city in the images of divinity reflected in men of moral integrity like Socrates. By embodying the

principles of philosophical and moral self-transformation in the image of Socrates and in the institutions of a free society, Plato hoped to turn political speech into a public dialogue beginning with the image of Socrates in the dialogues. His dialogues are imitations of genuine philosophical politics. The ongoing, public political dialogue is the substance of philosophical as opposed to power politics. It makes it possible for human beings to govern themselves well in political communities. In so far as public, philosophical dialogues continue, democratic societies can govern themselves and retain a measure of genuine liberty.

The *Symposium* insists on the union of the life of passion with a life of intelligence. Socrates is Plato's image of a passionate intelligence. He can appear arrogant to ordinary people because he believes that intelligence is the defining divine principle of human life. Human beings who do not cultivate their intelligence as the basis for self-rule make civilized life impossible. The conflict between a virtuous life of passionate intelligence and a disordered life driven by the desire for gaining and the fear of losing power distinguishes the philosophical politics of Socrates from the power politics of Alcibiades.

Alcibiades' speech is a thinly disguised criticism of his former teacher and, at the same time, a gross form of self-promotion. Plato is using his speech in conjunction with the other speeches to disclose the truth of philosophical as opposed to power politics. He is criticizing the misuse of philosophy by students like Alcibiades who would make politics into a technique for manipulating people. Like Socrates Plato wants his followers to think for themselves. Nevertheless thinking for yourself implies the ability to construct convincing arguments for the positions you take. There are objective conditions to be met before thinking for yourself has any meaning beyond expressing personal opinions.

Plato is not simply criticizing Socrates and agreeing with Alcibiades. While the speech of Alcibiades contains some truth, so do all the other speeches. Since human opinions mix the true and the false, the philosopher's task is to discover what is true and distinguish it from what is false in each speech and in each life-choice that comes under scrutiny.³

The *Symposium* ends with Alcibiades' personal indictment of Socrates for lacking what he deemed genuine human passion. According to Alcibiades Socrates had the unpardonable arrogance of ignoring his sexual advances when he was a young man. He criticizes, not Socrates' theory, but his practice. His complaint against him was based on the fact that the philosopher's life contradicted the life of a power politician. The conflict between Alcibiades and Socrates is a moral, political conflict that cannot be resolved without a radical change in his life choices.

For Plato love is the driving force in human life for good or for ill. For him the affective identification of one's self with the eros of the mind is a prerequisite for genuine

self-knowledge, the practice of philosophy, a life of moral integrity, and genuine self-government.

6.0 In Civil Society The Human Soul Becomes Mindful

Once civil society emerges from tribal life, human beings celebrate in public worship, in literary culture, and in the arts the triumph of intelligence over brute, animal instinct. Thus the first philosophers describe their experience of Mind, as a divine revelation.

In the theater of Athens the tragedies explore the conflicts in the lives of heroic men and women with divine aspirations and show how great men and women can become victims of a fate beyond their control. The comedies present ordinary human beings as no different from the great heroes because all human beings are limited and must die. In the comedies death is the great equalizer for both peasants and kings must die. Real human achievements result from the human passions to understand, to know, and to be involved in what is really worthwhile. The intentions of these passions are not limited, even though their results are. Other human passions are often in conflict with these passions that define humanity. Plato transposes the drama of the life of feeling and passion presented in the theater into the drama of the life of the passionate mind in his dialogues that are to be performed in the theater of the reader's mind. The dialogues of Plato were meant to be performed.

When the soul becomes mindful, the tragic chorus can no longer represent the will of the gods. In civil society the citizens of Athens can be guided no longer by the inarticulate, divine law of the tribe. Although the divine law must legitimate the laws in civil society, the right interpretation of civil laws requires a commitment to reasonableness and thus to mindfulness. Since the laws of civil society must be legitimated by reason expressed in good arguments, the political community and its members must commit themselves to reasonable argument and institutionalize that commitment in its legal procedures and its social and political institutions. Civil society measures itself, not by an inarticulate, unquestionable, traditional, tribal wisdom, but by its own standards of intelligence and good argument. Plato shows how civil piety and reason can be reconciled in a divine intelligence. In Plato's dialogues Socrates becomes the model for the civilized, political, free man of moral integrity.

The tragic chorus showed how the divine law was disclosed in the actions of the charismatic warriors of tribal society. But the law of the tribe did not require the warrior to give a public account of his actions. In civil society men have to be able to give a public account of their actions in good arguments in the public forum and in the law courts. For Socrates philosophy has to assume the task of presenting the case for genuine civil justice. For Plato civil laws are just when they reflect the divine law grounded in a divine intelligence that was grounded in a transcendent, divine Goodness. Civil laws should

reflect the divine, natural law when they were based on good arguments, moral integrity, and virtuous practice.

The *Symposium* recounts the erotic transformation of soul into mind, of tribal into civil society. Each speaker, while called on to adorn the god Eros, must also do justice to him. Each succeeding speaker tries to do more justice to him. But each, including Socrates, can do only partial justice to him. If Eros is a god or a demigod, then no human speech can really do full justice to him. As determined by its end in the Divine Good, Eros can be a source of justice. The *Symposium* suggests that an undisciplined eros which is often the source of human conflicts can, under certain conditions, become a co-principle with justice to overcome those conflicts. Just as in the dialogue named after Phaedrus Eros is not just the black horse of carnal desire, it is also the white horse of the longing for companionship, and the charioteer guiding the soul's movement through life. In the metaphor of the *Phaedrus* eros encompasses all the parts of the soul.

6.1 The In-Between Nature of the Human Soul and Mind

The *Symposium* discloses that a human being is neither a brute animal nor an immortal god. A human being is in-between nature and divinity; it is a daimonic being, a mortal who participates in immortality. Diotima shows how the theme of immortality is derived from desire as it moves through the hierarchy of life. Life begins with animal desire that seeks to procreate in beautiful bodies, then becomes the love of friendship in the political community, and finally comes to fulfillment in a vision of Divine, Transcendent Beauty. Beginning as brute desire, eros enters a human world and becomes the human desire to bring understanding, truth, and virtue to the minds of the young. Human desire as fellow feeling moves beyond nature to the passion to achieve the human good in the founding of political communities on moral principles. Eros as a human aspiration for the divine transcends the human and seeks to complete life in the contemplation of the Good as the Truth of Beauty. Diotima identifies Transcendent Beauty with the Divine Good. For Plato as for Socrates the divine must be the ground of moral integrity and moral goodness or it is not the divine but an idol.

7.0 Philosophy and Poetry

The *Symposium* explores the relation between poetry and philosophy. Socrates' female counterpart, Diotima, claims that poetry means *poesis*. Concluding that all activities of making are poetic, she makes poetry coterminous with love-making. In the *Republic* Socrates banned the poets from the just city for political reasons because in their stories and in their images they made injustice appear normal and, therefore, legitimate. Hence they tended to undermine justice in the city. Plato knew that in actual cities it was unrealistic to think poets actually could be banned. He thought, however they had either to be persuaded to encourage the practice of the virtues and become philosopher poets or

to be refuted publicly by good philosophical arguments. In a free society philosophers are necessary.

Because wisdom orders all things, the love of wisdom is the highest form of love. Philosophy is the most sublime form of poetry, the poetry of divine beauty. Philosophical poetry amounts to the human collaboration with the divine in the making of a universal community based on the practice of the virtues. For Plato men like Socrates are divine-human poets as well as the practitioners of the true art of politics. Philosophical poetry is a self-authenticating political poetry. Poetic excellence demands, not just aesthetic, but also moral standards. A poetry that fails aesthetically, philosophically, or morally would contribute in one way or another to injustice in the city.

8.0 Piety and Education

The meaning of piety and education in the city are the hidden master themes of the *Symposium*. Each speaker is either a teacher or a student or both. Each claims his own vocation in life represents the highest form of the Divine Eros. Insofar as each identifies himself with the divine, from that perspective each is a kind of atheist.

Characters

Presented

Prior Generation Teachers

Student	Teacher-Student	Teacher
Future	Present	Past
Phaedrus	Eryximachus	Protagoras
Agathon	Pausanias	Gorgias
Polis	Aristophanes	Homer
Alcibiades	Socrates	Plato
Plato / Socrates	Diotima	The Gods

8.1 Piety and Atheism

Phaedrus is a utilitarian atheist who uses the divine power for his own purposes just as he lets his teacher use his body sexually in exchange for medical knowledge. He confuses faith with belief. He pays lip service to the gods for his own purposes. He typifies the person who accepts religion just in case it might be true, but only so long as it is useful. Piety is commonly thought to consist in holding a set of religious beliefs without any obligation to understand what they mean and without a love of Divine things. Phaedrus quotes the ancient authorities not to find the truth about the divine Good because he loves it, but to justify his own hidden agenda of self-promotion.

Pausanias' self-indulgence puts carnal pleasure above the virtues. His pedantic atheism identifies theology with rhetoric. He uses rhetorical techniques to rationalize his pederasty and his hedonism. He makes rhetoric a tool of seduction to keep his hold on Agathon his student and pederastic beloved. Fancying himself a divine rhetorician, Pausanias, the sophistic "spin doctor," identifies his seductive rhetoric with divine power. He thinks anything can be accomplished by clever talk.

Eryximachus is a naturalistic atheist. He identifies the gods with physical forces, and thinks that with the proper techniques, he can manipulate the forces of nature for his own ends. If the physician can control nature and nature is identical with the divine, then the physician can control the divine and is superior to the gods. Medicine is the divine science for Eryximachus because he thinks human life results entirely from animal conditions. The physician is the keeper of divine wisdom and the dispenser of divine favors to humanity. The cosmic theology of Eryximachus is based on the idolatry of the body.

According to Aristophanes Eros is the greatest benefactor of mankind, but, he claims, the true nature of his beneficence is not appreciated. He agrees with Eryximachus that human beings are essentially animals but turns the Eryximachean theory into a more palatable story. For Aristophanes the human animal lies to himself by telling himself he is more than an animal. Although he tells a story about the gods, Aristophanes does not believe in the gods. Human beings cannot face the truth that life in civil society is unnatural and, therefore, it is impossible to achieve justice in the city. Aristophanes is a practical atheist: He thinks human beings must act as if the gods existed even though the cleverest humans know they do not. So the human animal tells stories about the gods to create illusions in which he can escape, if only for a time, from his sorry animal condition. In his story humans are animals, conceived in lust and destined for an animal's end in their return to earth in death. The Aristophanean storyteller pretends to be a god and places himself beyond the human condition. He is lying to himself because he is not beyond it. He is a sorry animal deranged by his own intelligence. If all stories are necessarily lies, then Aristophanes' story is a lie. He is caught in his own trap.

Agathon, an aesthete who pursues art for its own sake, is a caricature of the genuine artist. As a visionary poet he declares that the object of love is beauty. He thinks it obvious that love is beautiful. He identifies beauty with the divine, the divine with the poet, the poet with the poem, and the poem with himself. He worships the beauty of speech, not the beauty of truth or moral integrity. For him the beauty of speech consists solely in its elegance and charm. Agathon adorns Eros by making him a pimp. For him words adorn life the way clothes adorn a body; and like clothes, words can hide ugliness as well as accent beauty. This third generation student of Gorgias is completely taken with the externals of language. Style is everything. Poetic language is the soul of the beautiful body. Agathon wants to transform himself into a beautiful poem because he thinks that will

make him a god. He is an aesthetic atheist.

Socrates is accused of philosophical atheism. As Leo Strauss puts it Socrates does not believe blindly in the ancestral gods, that is, in the traditional way. Once civil society emerges from tribal, philosophical atheism becomes a halfway house between tribal religion and a civil religious faith. In the *Apology* Socrates suggests that religious belief is impossible without understanding. When told by Chaerophon that the Delphic Oracle claimed, "No one was wiser than Socrates," he asked what the oracle could mean when it said no man was wiser than he. He neither doubted nor believed the oracle because he could do neither until he understood what was being proposed for his belief. Understanding is not opposed to belief; it implies and is implied by it. Socrates is not a blind believer who assumes that religious belief is in conflict with intelligence. For the traditionalist, Socrates is an atheist because he does not blindly believe in the ancestral gods. He is not a practical atheist like Aristophanes because he does not believe in escaping in illusions. He is a philosophical theist like Diotima, that is he is a nontraditional theist because he interprets the stories of the gods in the light of the principle of a Divine Intelligence.

Alcibiades is a political atheist. Deriving his atheism from his power politics, he identifies the divine with the political life and political life with his personal quest for honor and glory. He believes that great men live for the power that confers personal honor and glory on them. He pursues political honor and glory as the way to self-divinization. He worships the idols of the city as power conferring images. His atheism makes political power the apotheosis of political life. For him the purpose of political power is to control human beings, to use them as a means for his personal glory. Not to help them control and direct their passions and lead them to become excellent citizens of fine character and moral integrity.

Reflecting on the *Symposium* leads the interpreter to a philosophical critique of the different forms of atheism. In the *Symposium* Plato subtly answers the charges of atheism and corruption of the youth brought against Socrates. Socrates was an atheist in so far as he was not a blind, traditionalist believer. His atheism amounted to his refusal to believe in the gods blindly. He cannot hold traditional beliefs when they are unintelligible or unreasonable by virtue of being inconsistent with the things he knows or reasonably believes. Civilized life demands explanations or, if explanations are not possible, then it requires reasonable beliefs. The unacceptable alternatives are a sophistic idolatry that turns intelligence into a tool of social manipulation or traditionalist blind belief that uses the unthinking ways of the majority to achieve power over them.

In tribal society belief in the gods cannot be based on a direct appeal to the principle of intelligence as divine. In civil society traditional belief in the ancestral gods becomes

blind belief. Socrates took an anti-traditionalist position on religious belief to make belief in the gods of the city again possible for intelligent and reasonable people. Socrates' civil theism appeals to intelligence as the divine principle of reconciliation. The alternatives to civil theism are either a sophistic secularism that rejects the gods as childish, tribal fictions or a traditionalist sacralism that attempts a return to a tribal, religious belief that is no longer possible in civil society.

The principle operative, but unexpressed, in tribal society was that divine intelligence was revealed in the tribal law. In civil society the principle had to be made explicit in the notion of civil law grounded in divine intelligence as ascertainable in reasoned out arguments. Traditionalism and sophism present opposing deformations of the meaning of the mutually implicating principles of intelligence and belief. The traditionalist and the sophist agree that religious belief and intelligence are opposed in principle. The traditionalist deforms religious faith by reducing it to blind belief which allows those in power to control the blind believers, while the sophist deforms intelligence by reducing it to a tool to manipulate and control people through their passions. Traditionalism and sophism are the two dialectically opposed forms of power politics.

8.2 Education and Philosophy

The *Symposium* shows how philosophy includes all forms of education. The knowledge each speaker espouses Plato takes seriously. He has each present an understanding of life that is apparently irreconcilable with the others. The order of the speeches provides the clue to the philosophical ordering of the different kinds of education. The explanation of the order of the speeches discloses the architectonic structure of the *Symposium*.

The dialogue reaches its poetic-philosophical climax in the speech of Socrates-Diotima. The speech unfolds the theme of the philosophical education of Socrates and his religious initiation into the mysteries of Love. It explores the meaning of *eros* as the bridge of life leading from ordinary human aspirations to the life devoted to philosophy as the closest thing to a divine life. For Plato the love of wisdom is *equivalent to the love of God*. The philosophical life begins with the *Eros* of the mind expressed in inquiry and gradually becomes a love of wisdom in the life of the good man or woman. The speech of Alcibiades is the practical climax of the dialogue. By presenting the life of Alcibiades, power politician, as the antithesis of the philosopher's life Plato discloses that the philosophical life consists in the personal integration of story, theory and practice in the philosophical politics of the self-governing city.

The *Symposium* locates the philosophical education of Socrates in a context of alternative forms of education: technical and practical (Phaedrus), scholarly and literary

(Pausanias), medical and scientific (Eryximachus), aesthetic comic and journalistic poetic (Aristophanes), visionary tragic-poetic (Agathon), and power political (Alcibiades). Philosophical education critically preserves the true and the good and eliminates the false and the disordered in all the forms of education. Education needs philosophy as much as the city does. Alcibiades' speech presents the reader with the choice of an education for power or for philosophical politics. Socrates completes his education by his choice of philosophy as his way of life. The *Symposium* challenges the reader to choose between Alcibiades and Plato's Socrates, between power and philosophical politics. For Plato if and only if philosophy is practiced in civil society in such a way as to enlighten and liberate the minds of its citizens, can the city be protected from the deleterious effects of power politics.

By contrast Plato thought that to educate human beings without seeking to achieve their philosophical transformation would lead to the dehumanization of life in civil society. He alludes to what has become of each of the speakers by the time the narrator tells the story of the drinking party, and in so doing, he places in the background of the drama the deformations of life that result from the failure to achieve the good life as the final intention of love (eros). His contemporaries knew what had become of each of the speakers at the banquet. At the beginning of the dialogue⁴ Socrates and Aristophanes were the only ones still living in Athens. Eryximachus, Phaedrus, Pausanias and Agathon had fled or were exiled from Athens in disgrace. Five years later for his practice of philosophical politics, Socrates was accused of atheism and corrupting the youth. At the dramatic date of the narrative of the dialogue the ruling junta in Athens in collusion with Spartan agents sent thugs to Phrygia to find Alcibiades and assassinate him. At his request his lover, Timandra,⁵ buried Alcibiades dressed in a woman's clothes. Twenty-four years later⁶ Aristophanes, the comic poet, who ridiculed Socrates and philosophy in his play the *Clouds*, quietly died in his bed.

¹ Symposium, 178, c

² Her name means through honor.

³ Dialectics. Cf. *In Praise of Philosophy*, E. Piscitelli, (2010)

⁴ 404 B.C.E. the dramatic date.

⁵ Timandra = Human Honor

⁶ 380 B.C.E