

The Platonic Concept of Love:  
The Symposium  
by Dr. David Naugle

*Pondus meum amor meus; eo feror quocumque feror.*  
*St. Augustine, Confessions, 13. 9. 10.*

Because of the centrality and power of love in human experience, men and women throughout the ages have felt the compulsion to sing songs, to write verse, and to tell stories about this ineffable and mysterious force which leads them to the peaks of felicity, and to the depths of despair. Love indeed is an ultimate, if not the ultimate, human concern. It is the universal principle undergirding all human activity, the object of all human striving, resulting, naturally, in the need to examine and discuss it carefully. Plato's *Symposium* is one such example.<sup>1</sup> The venerable author in this ancient treatise records the speeches of some six prominent Athenians who employ both story and verse to convey a variety of myths and motifs about the nature and function of love (*eros*).

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<sup>1</sup> Most commentators on the *Symposium* agree that its subject matter is love. John Brentlinger believes that by giving an account of the nature of love in the *Symposium*, "Plato means a description which classifies love (as a kind of object-directed desire) and proceeds from this to characterize and relate the objects desired" (8). R. A. Marcus asserts that "the dialogue as a whole . . . presents in a dramatic way Plato's view of love" (133-34). In a bit more descriptive manner, F. A. Cornford contends that the purpose of the "*Symposium* is to explain the significance of Eros to the lover of wisdom" (120). Thomas Gould's view of the *Symposium* is also a bit more philosophical. He writes: "The subject of the *Symposium* is just that: the identity of the pursuit of the truly desirable and the comprehension of the truly real—the identity of desire and learning, of love and philosophy" (23). Noting that others have proposed rather strange views on the central subject matter of the *Symposium*, Martha Nussbaum asserts forthrightly that "The *Symposium* is a work about passionate erotic love—a fact that would be hard to infer from some of the criticism written about it" (167). An example of what Nussbaum is complaining about is James A. Arieti who flatly says that the *Symposium* is not "about the nature of love; it is, rather, about the process of making pronouncements about the gods," that is, "offhand claims about reality that have no basis in argument or good sense" (107-08).

Nestled together like Chinese boxes, these stories about love, given their rhetorical power and sublime content, have stirred the thoughts and captured the imaginations of countless readers for centuries. This unique literary work is certainly one of Plato's masterpieces, written on one of his most basic themes at the height of his powers as a philosopher and author.<sup>2</sup> The Platonic doctrine of

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<sup>2</sup> A symposium (from the Greek  $\sigma\upsilon\mu\upsilon\sigma\iota\omicron\mu\iota\omicron\nu\omicron\mu$  meaning "to drink together") was both a social activity, and a literary genre the substance of which was a description of the ancient soiree itself. As a social event, a symposium was a drinking party that followed the evening meal. Hymns were sung, libations poured, and the drinking of wine, diluted by water, took place according to a planned procedure. Though some might choose not to imbibe, others would display considerable dissipation. The participants wore garlands and many were perfumed. In addition to bibulous activities, a symposium included the singing of drinking songs, conversation, the telling of riddles and fables, and the recitation of verse from the classics, or recent drama. Games were also played, and there were flute-players, dancing girls, hired mimes, and acrobats. Homosexual activity between men and young boys seems also to have been a part of symposaic activities as demonstrated on vase inscriptions presented by K. J. Dover (R200; R283; R295).

As a literary genre, "symposium literature" focused on a description of the conversation and activities that accompanied symposia. Precedents to "symposium literature" are found in Homeric descriptions of banquets, but the masterpiece of the genre is certainly Plato's *Symposium*. Here, of course, the setting is a drinking party at which the invited guests, shunning alcohol for this one evening because of the previous night's excesses, share a series of dialectical speeches on the topic of erotic love, only to be interrupted by an uninvited guest, Alcibiades, at the very end. Xenophon also composed a "Socratic symposium" after Plato's in which multiple topics are discussed, and the evening's entertainment is extensively described. Aristotle wrote a symposium, but it is generally identified with his  $\sigma\upsilon\mu\upsilon\sigma\iota\omicron\mu\iota\omicron\nu\omicron\mu$ s. Also the Academics and the Peripatetics wrote dialogues referred to as symposia which served as a context for philosophical discussion as did Epicurus whose *Symposium* was criticized for its lack of style. Others who wrote symposia include Aristoxenus on musical problems, Heraclides of Tarentum on the medical effects of food and drink, and Maecenas whose *Symposium* included a meeting of Virgil, Horace and others. Plutarch's *Symposiaca* are miscellaneous topics discussed on several occasions. Later symposia include the *Deipnosophists* of Athenaeus and the *Saturnalia* of Macrobus. The serious philosophical symposium was parodied by Menippus and by Lucian in his *Symposium* (taken from Coffey 1028-29). Michel Despland cites a French work written by Florence Dupont entitled *Le Plaisir et la loi* (1977) which offers insight into the banquet as a literary genre (237, note 149 discussed on 351). She argues that banquet lit-

eros, the *locus classicus* of which is the *Symposium*, and the biblical conception of agape love have joined together like tributaries to form a mighty and deep river from which the Western world has drawn its primary conceptions of love. As Irving Singer contends in his magisterial study on the nature of love, the philosophy of love in the Western world “stems from two principal sources: on the one hand Plato, his followers, and his critics; on the other hand Christianity arising out of Judaism and merging with Greek philosophy begun by Plato” (42).<sup>3</sup> Given, then, the contribution of Plato and the *Symposium* to Western thought about love, the goal of this essay will be to analyze and interpret its content. In particular, I will argue that while Plato navigates the abyss of love quite well and offers

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erature offers the promise of a reconciliation between pleasure and law, body and soul, engendering a freedom that brings happiness to the participant and also to the city. The banquet, by separating drinking from eating, makes a distinction between daily necessities and elevated noble desires. Yet endemic to banquet fetes is a rowdiness that is difficult to squelch (à la Alcibiades).

<sup>3</sup> Singer’s general hypothesis, which takes him three volumes to test and explain, is that the fusion of Platonic and Christian conceptions of love originally gave it a distinctively otherworldly cast in which the goal of love was to transcend nature and the merely human. This “medieval orientation” spurred the rebellion of both courtly and romantic love in their attempts to satisfy human beings who “wanted to live in nature, to exercise their fullest [erotic] capacities, to love one another authentically as human beings.” Hence, in an attempt to restore love to its naturalistic origins, courtly love became “the humanization of Christian and Platonic love” in which “not God or the Good but other men and women became the object of devotion” (43). Romantic love also carried out the same agenda of revolt, though in a different context. To make the story complete, it was the unrealistic idealization of romantic love that engendered yet another critique in writers like Freud and Proust, who reduced the impulse exclusively to physical categories. Their efforts, along with others, have culminated in today’s sexual revolution. Given, however, the disastrous effects of the sexual revolution on both body and soul (as seen in sexually transmitted diseases, the AIDS crisis, and in wide spread psychological breakdown), a “postmodern” critique of the philosophy of love is certainly needed. In any case, a dialectical interplay between transcendental and naturalistic conceptions of love has dominated Western thinking and experience on this topic. A lasting, substantive synthesis between these two unfortunate extremes is clearly needed.

astounding insights into its nature, in the final analysis, his doctrine of eros, typically criticized as egocentric in nature and apathetic towards others, is, for other reasons, seriously destructive to human persons who desire a comprehensive understanding of love, and who seek to love others (and God) authentically.

In comparison to other Platonic dialogues, the *Symposium* is atypical in many ways. First of all, it is concerned with what some might consider a frivolous topic for serious philosophical reflection, namely personal opinions about love, rather than, say, conceptions of justice (as in the *Republic*), or the constitution of reality (as in *Parmenides*) or the nature of knowledge (as in *Theaetetus*). In comparison to these weighty concerns, love seems to be a little out of place, simply too sentimental, a topic best reserved for poets or theologians. However, Plato constructs a bridge between love and philosophy, and demonstrates that eros is the handmaiden of his philosophy. Though he may not offer a comprehensive theory of human love, one thing is certain: he takes traditional understandings about love and exploits them for specific philosophic ends and metaphysical purposes. As the *Symposium* demonstrates, eros is central to Plato's philosophic project.

A second distinguishing feature of this dialogue is its uncharacteristic lack of Socratic dialectic showing virtually no concern for the precise definition of words or the analysis of concepts. This factor is mildly abated in the brief exchange between Socrates and Agathon, and in Socrates' report of the speech of Diotima in which he himself serves as the interlocutor. Nonetheless, what we find in the *Symposium* are several personal encomia on love, the contrasting content of which provides the only real dialectical movement in the dialogue. As G. K. Plochmann observes, "The *Symposium* depicts a situation in which encomium rather than analysis or exposition is to be the aim of the discourse,"

and if any dialectic is to be noticed, it must come from “the sequence of characters and incidents of the piece” (330).<sup>4</sup>

A third unique trait of the *Symposium* is that Socrates is not heard as the definitive voice on the matter under consideration, but rather the voice of a woman, a stranger, a prophetess, Diotima, who *instructs him* in the lesser and greater mysteries of love. Platonic dialogues typically convey to readers either the views of the historical Socrates, or the mind of Plato through his Socratic mouthpiece. The deployment of a woman for this task, a woman who in one place is labeled a “perfect Sophist” (208c) is highly unusual. Standard Platonic censure of sophistry, even in the *Symposium* itself where Socrates criticizes Agathon’s “sophistic” address, amplifies the anomaly of Diotima.

All these features contribute to the mystique of the *Symposium*, revealing not only its eccentricities, but also its “great style.” Noting the *Symposium’s* unique features like the ones described above, Stanley Rosen believes that every phrase in following quotation from Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Götzen-Dämmerung* applies to and is unusually helpful in understanding the “great style” of this work.

The highest feeling of power and security come to expression in that which has *great style*. The power that needs no further proof, that disdains to please, that answers severely, that feels no testimony about itself, that lives without consciousness of the opposition to which it gives rise, that

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<sup>4</sup> Plochmann takes the literary nature of the *Symposium* quite seriously and believes that Plato was making anew and profound point about the identity of true philosophy and poetry. He writes: “. . . the *Symposium* is neither a statement of philosophy with a delightful background, a ‘drama of ideas,’ . . . nor is it a drama of persons who happen to be talking theory, but rather it is a new form, which makes the two sorts of drama wholly integral one with another.” In other words, “. . . for Plato, *real* philosophy . . . and *real* poetry . . . are precisely the same” (332).

rests in itself, fatalistic, a law among laws: that speaks of itself as great style (quoted by Rosen xvi-xvii).

Plato never explains or apologizes for what he does in the *Symposium*; rather he simply presents it as it is without defense or proof as a “law among laws.” Plato’s *Symposium* speaks for itself, is self-authenticating, and thus it needs no justification or explanation for, indeed, its fresh, atypical style and its literary structure are great.

The literary structure of the *Symposium* is certainly noticeable and significant (Bury lii-iv). G. R. F. Ferrari believes that Aristophanes’ case of the hiccups (185d-e) to be the chief structural marker. In addition to whatever else they may signify, the hiccups do force a change in the order of the speakers. Eryximachus the medical doctor (whose name means “hiccup or belch fighter”) now speaks in Aristophanes’ place. According to Ferrari, this was Plato’s strategy because he wanted the reader to recognize that Eryximachus’ speech belongs to the first group of speeches while Aristophanes’ properly belongs to the second category. As he explains it,

In short, the hiccups seem to divide the speakers into two groups: Phaedrus, Pausanias, and Eryximachus, on the one hand; Aristophanes, Agathon, and Socrates on the other. And the substantive issue that distinguishes them is this: The speakers of the first group draw a fundamental distinction (Phaedrus implicitly, the others explicitly) between a good and a bad variety of love, while those of the second group do not. This development comes to a head with Diotima’s teaching that love in any of its manifestations is directed toward the good (250).

Ferrari’s point is provocative, for it highlights one of the fundamental tensions between the *Symposium* and other Platonic writings, especially the *Republic*. In the *Republic* (and elsewhere), Plato divides the human soul into

three parts—reason, spirit, and appetite—and maintains that the appetites inflamed by the desires or aspirations (*eros*) of the body are maddening and irrational, and must be subordinated to the rule of reason if one is to live a balanced and good life. No such teaching about the soul is found in the *Symposium*. Here, the tripartite, hierarchical, regimented Platonic soul seems negated, and erotic love is perceived as the proper, motivating force prompting the soul, especially reason, to ascend the metaphysical ladder in pursuit of true beauty and the highest good. Appetitive love, rather than thwarting the hegemony of reason, actually assists it in its quest for transcendental truth. “The world’s most annotated case of hiccups” (Arieti 101) may indeed serve as a structural indicator, signaling what amounts to a new vision or understanding of the role of *eros* in the Platonic paradigm.<sup>5</sup>

John Brentlinger understands the structure of the *Symposium* differently, but in a helpful way. He argues that this dialogue is composed of two major divisions each containing four speeches. Though he does not mention it, these two divisions are sandwiched by both a prologue and an epilogue. The division between the two parts is created by the dramatic episode of the hiccups, and more importantly, by Agathon’s rebuke of his fellow toastmasters whom he

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<sup>5</sup> Terence Irwin has wrestled with the puzzles about love in the *Republic*, the *Symposium*, and the *Phaedrus*, and has come up with convincing solutions which reconcile the tensions. Here I will only cite his conclusion. He writes: “The *Republic* already suggests the importance of correct division [of the soul]; while we might be inclined to oppose desire (*epithumia*) and pleasure to reason, Plato insists that a specific type of desire and pleasure belongs to the rational part of the soul, and that the other two parts have different types of desires and pleasures (*R.* 580d7-8). He adds that the different desires of different parts make people lovers (*philo-*) of different things (581c3-4); he does not claim that different people have different sorts of *eros*, but that claim would be a natural way to connect the division in the *Republic* with the account of *eros* in the *Symposium*. This connexion is made clear in the *Phaedrus*” (304). See his recently published work for details (302-06).

criticizes for having spoken about the benefits of love rather than about the nature of love itself. The second set of speeches, then, are re-directed at the proper and well-defined topic, namely love's nature as well as its effects.<sup>6</sup> Brentlinger has diagrammed his understanding of the text of the *Symposium* in the following manner (7).

<u>First Sequence</u>	<u>Second Sequence</u>
( <i>The Effects of Love</i> ) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Phaedrus</li> <li>• Pausanias</li> <li>• Eryximachus</li> <li>• Aristophanes</li> </ul>	( <i>Love's Nature and Effects</i> ) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agathon</li> <li>• Agathon and Socrates</li> <li>• Socrates</li> <li>• Alcibiades</li> </ul>

With these preliminary matters about the *Symposium* in mind, I would like now to turn my attention to text of the work itself in an attempt to exegete the content of each speech clearly and concisely.

In the prologue to the *Symposium*, Apollodorus is asked by an unnamed friend to give to him an account of the dialogues on the subject of love that had been delivered at a party at Agathon's house many years ago (c. 416 B.C.E.). The gathering had been occasioned when the neophyte thespian Agathon won the prize with his first tragedy at a local drama contest. Though Apollodorus was not in attendance at the party that night, he certainly was a reasonable person to ask about it. Not only had he recently repeated the substance of the dialogues to another inquirer (Glaucou), but he was originally informed of that evening's

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<sup>6</sup> The propriety of defining as precisely as possible the nature of the subject to be discussed is certainly a familiar Platonic notion prescribed with particular force in the *Phaedrus*. It connects to this discussion directly. With regard to a twofold method of reasoning about a topic, we read "the first method is to take a synoptic view of many scattered particulars and collect them under a single generic term, *so as to form a definition in each case and make clear the exact nature of the subject one proposes to expound*. So in our recent speech on love we began by defining what love is. That definition may have been good or bad, but at least it enabled the argument to proceed with clearness and consistency" (81, italics added).



discourse by an eyewitness, Aristodemus, and also had his understanding of their discourses confirmed by Socrates himself. Apollodorus' friend had received a garbled account from a less reliable source (from Aristodemus, to Phoenix, to another, to him), and thus he wanted a more accurate rendition of this celebrated event. Apollodorus complied with his friend's request and recounted to him what Aristodemus had told him. The sum and substance of the *Symposium* is what Apollodorus himself had learned from Aristodemus, and this he conveys to his inquirer.

Aristodemus, who had not originally been invited to the soiree, unexpectedly encountered Socrates who had bathed and put on sandals in preparation for this special occasion. When Socrates invited Aristodemus to come along, at first he demurred, but finally agreed to join the festivities. In route to Agathon's house, Socrates fell into one of his characteristic trance-like or demonized states, and delayed his arrival until the meal was already in progress. When he finally arrived, he took his place on the couch besides Agathon. Because the guests were still hung over from the previous night's revelry, all in attendance decided that sobriety would be the best course of action, and they even chose to dismiss the flute girl as the evening's entertainment. Eryximachus then made a proposal that they spend their time in conversation. Under the burden of Phaedrus' complaint that everything from Hercules to salt had received more attention than love, Eryximachus suggested that they spend the evening delivering competitive speeches in praise of the neglected god of eros. In keeping with symposaic protocol, the order to be followed in giving their orations was from the right to the left beginning with Phaedrus.

What is the significance of this prologue? Does it serve any substantive purpose other than as a literary introduction? Perhaps so if the analysis of Helen Bacon and John Brentlinger are cogent. They contend that since the retelling of

the dialogue occurs some ten years after it originally took place (not to mention the fact that it was not composed by Plato until about 385 B.C.E), the reader or listener is forced to contemplate the fate of the symposiasts who were in attendance that auspicious night. In particular, the prologue gives Glaucon, Apollodorus and the unnamed friend the opportunity to reflect upon the outcome of the participant's lives to see how their aspirations or love (*eros*) had directed them and to what end it had brought them. Though at the time of the celebration all were enjoying abundant prosperity, their loves led most of them to folly and disgrace. Agathon became an infamous tyrant driven by ambition; Alcibiades became a traitor and adventurer; Phaedrus and Eryximachus had been exiled for allegedly participating in the mutilations of many of the stone Hermae in Athens. Only Socrates and Aristophanes remained. The majority of those attending apparently had failed to learn the lessons about love they should have that fateful night. According to Brentlinger,

This spectacle of young, talented aristocrats ruined by the very energy and power which might have brought them greatness gives to the question of love—the proper character of man's aspirations—a tremendous urgency and relevance. Glaucon and Apollodorus—boys at the time of the banquet, now entering manhood—suggest the beginnings of a new generation and new hope, but only—Plato seems to say—on condition that they learn more of love than did those at Agathon's house that night in 416 (5).

The introduction to the *Symposium*, therefore, should cause readers and listeners to pause, to reflect upon the outcome of the lives of the participants, and to consider the consequences of failing to learn the Socratic lessons about the power of love presented in the dialogue.

The prologue not only challenges individuals in this manner, but also has implications for the body politic. The power of love not only determines the personal eschatology of individual men and women, but also regulates the destiny of cities. It is a commonplace in Platonic thought that the state is man "writ" large. Therefore, what applies to the individuals attending Agathon's symposium is also relevant to Athens and other communities. In the case of Athens, however, the eros of her leaders and citizenry led to her desolation as it had to Agathon's guests. The content of the prologue implies that the effective retelling of this story about love would enable future leaders (philosopher/kings) and citizens to avoid the same tragic mistakes that had sunk their progenitors.

By the time of Apollodorus' telling of the story the political ruin of Athens is complete, and we are thus exposed to the vast social and political dimensions of misguided Eros. The mention of Glaucon, in the opening remarks of the *Symposium*, serves further to strengthen the political implications of the discourses on love, and suggests the possibility of social rebirth in the philosophical state (Brentlinger 6).

The prologue of the *Symposium* suggests, then, that the fate and fortune of individuals and nations is determined by love; it is much more than just a mere literary proem to the text itself. It suggests that the lessons about this formidable, life-determining force discussed in the *Symposium* must be heeded, especially that of Diotima and Socrates. Let the speeches, then, begin, and he who has ears to hear, let him hear.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> In the spirit of Søren Kierkegaard, these speeches seem to present the various stages of psychological and personal development along life's way. As Stanley Rosen points out, "In different terms, the *Symposium* portrays the 'stages on life's way,' or the fundamental modifications of the human psyche, as represented by the various speeches at Agathon's banquet as well as by the prologue to that banquet . . ." (lxiii). Certainly Diotima's ascent passage conveys the movement from an aesthetic through an ethical to a final religious stage of

Phaedrus commences by extolling Love as a great god, marvelous in the way he came into being, and wonderful in the way he treats other gods and men. According to the poets and thinkers (Hesiod, Acousileos, Parmenides), Love is one of the most ancient gods having been created after chaos and earth, for his parents have no place in poetry or legend. Since Love is ancient, he also gives the greatest goods, in particular the gift of a young boy to a gentle lover, and the gift of a gentle lover to a young boy. The love expressed in this kind of homosexual relationship provides guidance (“a sense of shame at acting shamefully, and a sense of pride in acting well”-178d), for neither the lover nor

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existence. J. M. E. Moravcsik has noticed how this transcategorical movement, which may or may not be causally related, can also be seen as stages on life’s way. He writes: “Aesthetic appreciation turns into appreciation for moral qualities, and that, in turn, is transformed into appreciation of the beauty of abstract intellectual systems” (289). The notion that the different speeches convey different stages of personal, moral, and religious development is reinforced by the observation of many that the theories of love presented by the various symposiasts implicitly convey their own experiences and levels of development. John Brentlinger states, “There is harmony between the content of the theory and the person who creates it” (20). M. Werner agrees and says: “The differences in their accounts derive from the diverse intellectual, imaginative, and emotional capacities of the symposiasts, informed by their distinctive experiences; that is, from their differing sensibilities” (329). James A. Arieti makes a significant point of this observation. He thinks that each of the speeches is self-serving in that “each speaker has made the god of love after his own image or as a promoter of his own interests” (102). Basing his thesis on two quotes from Xenophanes to the effect that human beings create gods in their own images, [“The Ethiopians say that their gods are snub-nosed and black, the Thracians that theirs have light blue eyes and red hair” (Xenophanes, Fr. 16). “But if cattle and horses and lions had hands, or were able to draw with their hands and do the works that men can do, horses would draw the forms of the gods like horses, and cattle like cattle, and they would make their bodies such as they each had themselves” (Xenophanes, Fr. 15)], he believes that “. . . in the *Symposium*, the god of a dandified tragic poet is a dandified tragic poet, the god of an Empedoclean-trained physician is an Empedoclean physician, and, too, the god of a barefooted impoverished philosopher is a barefooted, impoverished philosopher” (107). In other words, autobiography determines love’s theory and love’s deity, and the speakers have betrayed the stage of life to which they belong by the contents of their speeches.

the beloved would want to be caught doing something wrong or shameful by the other. Furthermore, if a city or an army could be composed of men and boys so related, “theirs would be the best possible system of society, for they would hold back from all that is shameful, and seek honor in each other’s eyes” (178e). Certainly an army made up of men and their boys would be unstoppable, for the nature of their love would instill bravery and offset any form of cowardice to prevent embarrassment. Furthermore, only genuine lovers will die for one another, as the stories of Alcestis and Achilles demonstrate. On the other hand, those like Orpheus who dared not die for Love’s sake will be punished. The truth is that the gods honor virtue most highly when it belongs to Love. Phaedrus sums up his paeanistic account of Love by affirming that “Love is the most ancient of the gods, the most honored, and the most powerful in helping men gain virtue and blessedness, whether they are alive or have passed away” (180b).

Appropriately, the one who complained the most that Love was the disregarded deity speaks first. Drawing on the works of poets and philosophers as well as the Greek mythological tradition, Phaedrus makes a number of points, two of which are particularly salient. The first has to do with Love’s genealogy. To say that he is one of the oldest gods is to say that Love is virtually eternal, that there has never really been a time when Love was not, and did not preside over the affairs of humankind and the world. His eternal presence makes Love venerable, and imparts a kind of cosmic comfort to all of life and existence.

Second, Love is the source of the greatest gifts, and stands “at the heart of every noble deed and every act of generosity” (Gould 26). This is especially true in the relationship of a gentle lover and a young boy. Love is the motivating power need to win and maintain this kind of relationship. The value of this greatest of all gifts does not necessarily lie exclusively in the provision of erotic satisfaction, but also in the development of virtue and character in both partners.

Guidance in daily life, courage in warfare, justice in cities, as well as the elimination of cowardice, dishonor, and shame are Love's gifts. Because Love breathes might into every genuine lover, it overcomes danger, and engenders the kind of sacrifice that even blood relatives are unwilling to make. Love enables one to die for another even if the other's course of life is nearly over. Love gives the greatest gifts, motivates high and noble actions, and has beneficial effects on the lives of men. For these reasons, Phaedrus offers his words of praise to this ancient, benevolent deity.

Phaedrus' praise of Love is unmitigated, and focused on a single god. In Pausanias' understanding, however, there were two goddesses with the name Aphrodite, and thus there were also two kinds of love: Heavenly Aphrodite and Common Aphrodite. Hence, Pausanias wants to know which of the two is the proper subject of their discussion, and which of the two ought to be praised?<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, he is quick to point out that as human action in and of itself is neither honorable or shameful, so Love is not in himself either noble or ignoble (Phaedrus presupposed the former); that depends on whether the sentiments and actions produced by Love are worthy or not.

The Love of Common Aphrodite produces ignoble sentiment. This is the Love felt by the vulgar; it is bisexual, including a taste for women as well as boys; it focuses on the body rather than the soul; it is attracted to the least intelligent partners, and is primarily concerned about completing the sexual act. On the

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<sup>8</sup> James Arieti compares Pausanias' theology with Phaedrus, and makes these interesting comments. "Pausanias's theological innovation is quite striking. He posits two gods of love. Of course, in positing a good god and a bad god he raises the theological question of whether there can in fact be a bad god . . . . Pausanias does not accept Phaedrus's pronouncement about the genesis and origin of Love, for he makes theological claims quite at variance with those he has heard a few minutes earlier. His remarks must be quite consciously meant as a corrective to Phaedrus" (101).

other hand, the Love of Heavenly Aphrodite is homosexual, focused on a love for boys. Though some within this group inappropriately pursue pre-pubescent lads, the ideal beloved is a young boy approaching manhood, one whose mind is beginning to form, and one with whom the lover could spend the rest of his life.

After asserting that there ought to be a law in Athens prohibiting affairs with younger boys, Pausanias surveys the attitudes of neighboring provinces regarding such liaisons. In places like Elis and Boeotia, tradition straightforwardly approves the taking of a boy-lover in every case. By contrast, domains like Ionia and the Persian Empire always consider the securing of a male lover disgraceful, primarily for political reasons. But in Athens things are ambiguous and more complex. In short, taking a lover there can be honorable or dishonorable depending on how it is done. Because the well-being of citizens, and the stability of the political order is at stake, established customs specify how to obtain a young, male lover in the proper manner. Pausanias discusses about eight guidelines that governed this procedure in Athens. First of all, Athens considered it more honorable to declare one's love than to keep it a secret, especially if one was in love with a youth from a good family. Second, a lover was encouraged in every possible way to secure his beloved even by abject methods which were not considered humiliating (though such actions would provoke ridicule if done to secure money, power, or position). Third, for one to give oneself to a vile man was considered vile, whereas to give oneself to a good man was considered good. The vile lover was the vulgar lover who cared only about the body; the good lover was the heavenly lover who cared for the soul and was committed for life. Fourth, a beloved should not yield too quickly when pursued, for the passage of time provided a good test in relational matters. Fifth, a boy should not yield to a lover for the sake of money or power, for such attractions, along with the relationship, would soon fade away. Sixth, a young lad's total and willing

subjugation of himself to his lover's wishes in performing any service for him was considered neither servile nor reprehensible. Seventh, the older lover ought to help the young man become wiser and more virtuous in exchange for the favors rendered by him. Eight, it was considered shameful for a boy to be deceived by the overtures of an allegedly rich lover who turns out to be poor; but it was not considered shameful for a boy to be deceived by the overtures of an allegedly good man though he turns out to be debauched. The former was deceived for the sake of money which was disgraceful, whereas the latter was deceived for the sake of virtue which was shameless.

Pausanias points out that these guidelines are designed to separate the wheat from the chaff, the proper kind of love from the vile. Surely, Pausanias would urge, this heavenly specie of Love as regulated by Athenian custom was the true topic of their symposium, and should be the proper object of their praise.

The striking thing about Pausanias' story of Love is its overt support of Athenian homosexuality, suggesting at the same time that heterosexual love is at best a trait of Common Aphrodite. His speech, as Arieti points out, is a justification of his own way of life, for he is a lover of boys (Agathon in particular; 100). He praises at length the sexual relationship between a man and a boy—pedastry—and he seeks to justify it by his claim that such a relationship is not for sex alone, but ought to contribute to the moral education of the youngsters. It can be questioned, as Bury does, whether Pausanias is really not more concerned about justifying the sexual dimension of the relationship rather than encouraging the impartation of virtue (xxvi). Indeed, his comments appear to be self-serving, and his speech an example of special pleading.

In any case, Pausanias points out that Athens held a rather ambiguous attitude toward male friendships in contrast to backwater communities which approved of them insouciantly, and over against territories under dictatorships



which prohibited male love because of its perceived threat to their tyranny. Recognizing that “love can be the best and the worst thing for the state” (Gould 27), Athens opened the door to pederasty, but only within the confines of strict custom and procedure. Fathers abhorred the thought of pleasure-seeking males stalking their young, tender sons, and sought to protect them accordingly. However, if a relationship did develop through extravagant courting procedures (which seemingly carried over into the courtly and romantic traditions), it must be with a youngster come of age, and it must be a lifelong union.<sup>9</sup> Ideally, it was the relationship of a teacher and student, each contributing to the relationship reciprocally, either by supplying bodily pleasure or by contributing to cultivation of the mind.

An older man, who is virtuous and wise, and a boy physically in his prime but in need of wisdom and virtue, are the ideal lovers. For each has what the other needs. This, according to Pausanias, is a perfect social arrangement; bodily needs are satisfied and yet at the same time turned to a socially productive end—that of education and the creation in the state of permanent relationship among men (Brentlinger 10-11).

Pausanias is primarily concerned to deliver an apologetic for Athenian homosexuality, as well as to consider how such relationships contribute to human happiness, and to the social and political welfare of the state. The kind of love relationship envisaged in Phaedrus’ deliberations was homosexual as well (a gentle love and a young boy). In both of these orations, this kind of erotic passion serves as an adumbration of a crucial theme in the *Symposium*, namely

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<sup>9</sup> Thomas Gould notes that “The approved method of pursuing a boy love, as Pausanias describes it, turns out to be remarkably like the extravagant behavior expected of a young man courting a girl in Hellenistic or Roman literature—and indeed in Courtly Love and the ‘Romantic’ novel” (28).

the significance of homosexual love for philosophy. K. J. Dover in his noted book *Greek Homosexuality*, explains the significance of homosexual eros for Plato's overall philosophy of love by noting that in both the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*,

Plato takes homosexual desire and homosexual love as the starting-point from which to develop his metaphysical theory; and it is of particular importance that he regards philosophy not as an activity to be pursued in solitary meditation and communicated in *ex cathedra* pronouncements by a master to his disciples, but as a dialectical progress which may well begin in the response of an older male to the stimulus afforded by a younger male who combines bodily beauty with "beauty of the soul" (Dover 12).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Later in his book, Dover elaborates on the significance of homosexual eros for Plato's overall philosophy of love with these comments: "Philosophy, as understood by Socrates, was not the product of solitary meditation, to be communicated by a spell-binding orator (or guru) to a throng of silent disciples, but a co-operative process involving question and answer, mutual criticism and the eliciting of perceptions by one person from another. The climactic section of Diotima's speech in the *Symposium* envisages the 'procreation' of rational knowledge of the world of Being by an elder in a young male (209b), a process of 'procreation in a beautiful medium' (cf. 206b) of which the literal begetting of progeny by heterosexual intercourse is the gross and material counterpart (206c). The erastes tries to educate the eromenos (209c; cf. Xen. *Smp.* 8. 23), and 'paiderastein rightly' (211b) is philosophical education" (164). All of this raises the question of Plato's own sexual orientation, and why he employed this approach to his philosophical program. Plato himself was indeed a homosexual, and Dover believes that his use of homosexuality in his philosophic program was either (1) because of the Athenian ambiance and acceptance of this practice, or (2) because "his own homosexual emotion was abnormally intense and his heterosexual response abnormally deficient" (12). Furthermore he cites two epigrams attributed to Plato which establish his homosexual orientation. "Among the epigrams attributed in antiquity (though not unanimously) to Plato, one (10) addresses the dead Dion in extravagant terms, 'O Dion, who drove my heart insane with eros!', and another (3) represents the poet as all but expiring with joy when he kissed Agathon (not the dramatist) on the mouth. . ." (59). These epigrams coincide with G. Vlastos' opinion of Plato's sexual preference. He

The lectures on Love by both Phaedrus and Pausanias set the context for the philosophical exploitation of homosexual eros in the quest for true being which will be developed in detail by Diotima in her address. The way is being paved at this point for Plato's larger purposes, "for in that portion of the work [the *Symposium*] which constitutes an exposition of Plato's own doctrine of eros the response of a male to the beauty of another male is treated as the starting-point of a co-operative philosophical effort to understand ideal beauty" (Dover 81).<sup>11</sup>

Meanwhile, the scene in the *Symposium* shifts to Eryximachus the physician who speaks in place of Aristophanes who had developed a severe case of the hiccups. This malady no doubt had begun, humorously, during the last portion of Pausanias' self-serving, high-minded sermon (Nehamas and Woodruff xvi).<sup>12</sup> The starting point for Eryximachus' recitation, which is rather

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writes: "He was a homosexual, a mystic, and a moralist" (25). In confirmation of the first of these three points, he states in a footnote: "The evidence tells strongly against classifying Plato as a bisexual . . . . In every passage I can recall which depicts or alludes to the power of sexual desire the context is homosexual. For some examples see . . . (R. 474D-E and 485 C . . .); also *Symp.* 211D, and *Phdr.* 250Dff" (25, note 74). See his appendix entitled "Sex in Platonic Love" in which these matters are treated further (38-42).

<sup>11</sup> Of course, the real paradox in Plato's thought regarding homosexuality is how he denounces it "with the ferocity of a church father" (Armstrong 109) in the *Laws* 836a-839d.

<sup>12</sup> George Kimball Plochmann in his cleverly titled article "Hiccups and Hangovers in the Symposium" offers this rather specious explanation for the origin of Aristophanes' hiccups. He states: "Oh yes. We were talking earlier about hiccups. Why did Aristophanes have them when he had not a drop that night, and why was Alcibiades free of them, though he was far gone in his cups? This would be a question for Socrates to answer, not Eryximachus. Aristophanes was hiccupping from a surfeit of *speeches* from which Alcibiades had fortuitously stayed away" (341). John Brentlinger helps us to envisage the real humor of this scene by painting it vividly for us from this palette of words. "To appreciate Plato's artistry here we must dramatize the scene to ourselves: imagine hiccups growing louder and more frequent in the latter part of Pausanias' speech, and then while Eryximachus unveils his cosmic scheme, the various attempts at a

pedantic in style, is Pausanias' division of Love into two species. His intent is to expand upon this fundamental bifurcation and carry it through to its logical conclusion. In brief, Eryximachus' essential notion is that Love occurs not only in the human soul, but is omnipresent throughout the universe. The good which occurs is the effect of that Love which is noble, whereas the evil which transpires is the consequence of ugly and disgraceful Love. Here is Eryximachus' primary thesis which he, as an Asclepiad, gleaned from his own study of medicine.

. . . Love does not occur only in the human soul; it is not simply that attraction we feel toward human beauty: it is a significantly broader phenomenon. It certainly occurs within the animal kingdom, and even in the world of plants. In fact, it occurs everywhere in the universe. Love is a deity of the greatest importance: he directs everything that occurs, not only in the human domain, but also in that of the gods (186b).

Love permeates the warp and woof of existence, both human and divine. In medicine, for example, noble love engenders health, whereas ugly love manifests itself in disease. What, then, is medicine according to Eryximachus? "In short, medicine is simply the science of the effects of Love on repletion and depletion of the body, and the hallmark of the accomplished physician is his ability to distinguish the Love that is noble from the Love that is ugly and disgraceful" (186d). The same holds true for music which, according to Eryximachus is "the science of the effects of Love on rhythm and harmony"

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cure: Aristophanes holding his breath, reddening to the point of explosion, the gasping for air followed by more and louder hiccups; gargling wine, but still more hiccups; finally, he tickles his nose with a feather, sneezes and blows—which should coincide with the climax of Eryximachus' speech (188d)—and achieves success. This counterpoint of lugubrious theorizing and clowning should be staged to be appreciated—it is worthy of Molière or indeed Aristophanes himself" (13).

(187c). Love even manifests itself positively or negatively in the seasons of the year, in the weather, and the harvest.

When the elements . . . —hot and cold, wet and dry—are animated by the proper species of Love, they are in harmony with one another: their mixture is temperate, and so is the climate. Harvests are plentiful; men and all other living things are in good health; no harm can come to them. But when the sort of Love that is crude and impulsive controls the seasons, he brings death and destruction (188a-b).

Even in the domain of divinity, Love is the regulating principle: “Divination, therefore, is the practice that produces loving affection between gods and men; it is simply the science of the effects of Love on justice and piety” (188d). And what is true of medicine, music, agriculture, weather, divinity and so on is also true of physical education and poetry. As Eryximachus puts it, “these two species of Love. . . are, indeed, to be found everywhere” (188a). Because Love is omnipresent, and his power is absolute, its two species must be attended to with every possible care, for when Love is rightly directed, happiness reigns supreme. As Eryximachus concludes, “Yet even so it is far greater when Love is directed, in temperance and justice, toward the good, whether in heaven or on earth: happiness and good fortune, the bonds of human society, concord with the gods above—all these are among his gifts” (188d).

While Eryximachus maintains Pausanias’ basic theological dualism, he significantly expands its scope of operation and sphere influence. “As any scientist, especially a doctor, knows, love is also the principle behind all bodily phenomena—not only the bodies of plants and animals but the very elements themselves, and indeed everything in the universe” (Gould 29). *Eros* becomes the regulative *Logos* of the entire *Cosmos*. Eryximachus’ world view is rooted in pre-Socratic philosophy (which, according to Ferarri, he may parody

unconsciously in his speech; 251). Heraclitus had taught that harmony was the product of resolved tension (“being at variance with itself is in agreement with itself” “like the attunement of a bow or a lyre,” 187a) and Empedocles believed that Love was the mythical agent which bound all things together, whereas Hate and Discord tore all things apart. Additionally, Pythagoras taught that the health of the body depended upon the balance of its basic components including hot and cold, dry and moist, bitter and sweet (Brentlinger 11). Drawing on these traditions, Eryximachus suggests that if one is to have metaphysical and scientific insight into the nature of things, one must see the force of Love at work which creates both balance and imbalance, and is the unitive and disruptive principle in the universe. Even the love spoken of by Pausanias between older men and younger boys, the wise and the foolish, the body and the soul, would find reconciliation in this model. Fierce competition presumably exists at the highest reaches of reality between a good and evil Love which attempts to direct everything that happens. The scientific or philosophic study of the universe, then, is ultimately the study of eros which lies behind all things. Love is the ultimate force to be reckoned with, perhaps propitiated, and one would think, heartily pursued.<sup>13</sup>

Eryximachus solves not only the riddle of the universe in his doctrine of comprehensive Love, but also restores harmony to Aristophanes’ diaphragm

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<sup>13</sup> Though Eryximachus does not mention it specifically, Love would also be the force either uniting or dividing the state as well. An ideal society, like the *Republic*, would be a political community held together by the bonds of fraternal love (Vlastos 11). Thomas Gould also notes that to posit Love as the regulative principle in the universe is to imply a thorough-going teleology for all phenomena. He writes: “By ‘teleology’ I mean explaining events not by antecedent events but by goals apparently being striven for—not by efficient causes, in other words, but by final causes [Love]. It is the principle behind the vision of Aristotle, Aquinas, Dante, and Spinoza” (30).

which had been disrupted by the hiccups induced, no doubt, by an ugly Love. The feather-tickle-under-the-nose and sneeze technique enabled him to vindicate his namesake as the “hiccup-fighter!”

Aristophanes brings the discussion back down to earth by placing Love once again into the category of human relations. We move from Eryximachus’ vague metaphysical abstractions to a delightful mythological explanation of the origin and nature of Love. According to Aristophanes’ tale, human beings were originally of three sexes: male, female, and the androgynous male/female. In their physique they were rotund with twice as many hands, legs, faces, and organs as they have today. When they ambitiously made a fatal attempt to overthrow the gods, Zeus determined to cut them in half in order to punish them. Such punishment decreased their strength and increased their humility before and service to the gods. In due course their genitals were also moved around to the front of their bodies allowing for interior reproduction by the man in the woman (at least for the heterosexuals). This myth, according to Aristophanes, explains the origin of human love. “This is the source of our desire to love each other. Love is born into every human being; it calls back the halves of our original nature together; it tries to make one out of two and heal the wound of human nature” (191d).

Not only does this narrative explain the origin of Love, but it also provides an etiology for sexual orientation as well. Men who were originally sliced off from other men now seek to reunite with men homosexually; women who were originally sliced off from other women now seek to reunite with other women as lesbians; and men who were originally sliced off from women and women who were originally sliced off from men now seek each other heterosexually.

And so, when a person meets the half that is his very own, whatever his orientation, whether it’s to young men or not, then something wonderful

happens: the two are struck from their senses by love, by a sense of belonging to one another, and by desire, and they don't want to be separated from one another, not even for a moment (192b-c).

When the question is asked: "What is it you human beings really want from each other?" (192d), the answer is to become parts of the same whole as near as can be and never to separate day and night. This desire to merge as one person eternally, though now impossible, is explained by the fact that the two were originally one. And thus Love "is the name for our pursuit of wholeness, for our desire to be complete" (193e). Humans must obey and respect the gods or else they will find themselves divided again; if they treat them with reverence, and if Love becomes their guide, then they will be blessed, and most especially, the older men shall find the younger men that were meant for them and win their love, though few are this fortunate (193b). This is the ideal love: that each man win the favor of his very own young man, so that he can recover his original nature. Therefore Love must be praised, and if he is praised and reverence, he will restore the true nature of humans, heal them, and make them blessed and happy.

Aristophanes begins the second series of speeches in which the focus of the discussion is now on the nature of love, rather than on its human benefits. This rather playful and enchanting story told by a comic dramatist, could have Hindu or Babylonian origins, according to Irving Singer. As he says, "it recounts a primordial Golden Age, an Age of Heroes, when men were supermen, double their present condition. In shape they resemble Indian deities with their multiple limbs and faces; for all we know, the myth may once have represented a struggle between Eastern and Western cultures" (51).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> The comic aspects of Aristophanes' *mythos* about *eros* are captured nicely by Martha Nussbaum as she describes the spherical appearance of pre-



The content of the narrative can be analyzed into the three-part pattern of creation, fall, redemption. In the beginning, human beings as originally formed were whole and powerful. They also had great pride, and in their arrogance assaulted the throne of heaven. Because of their original sin, they were subject to the punishment of the gods. Not wanting to annihilate them entirely, Zeus chose to divide them in to two parts, decimating both their power, dissolving their pride, and, most importantly, destroying their sense of wholeness. Redemption is available in their lapsarian condition, but not mandatory. The choice is theirs: to seek wholeness through love, or to renew their attack on the gods, and risk the possibility of further reduction (Singer 51-52).

What is most important for the argument of the *Symposium* is Aristophanes' definition of love: the pursuit of wholeness, and the desire for completion. Love is not sexuality per se. Sexual union with another (even a young boy) is at best the means by which the end of wholeness may be obtained. The primordial desire for completion is really the source and significance of the sexual act, but this is rarely noticed (Brentlinger 14). Love, consequently is psychological rather than physiological in nature. It is desire, yearning, need—all of which prompts human beings to soothe their painful sense of isolation, to overcome their desperate loneliness by uniting in love with another human being in order to be whole once again. Love is not sundered into the good

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fallen humanity, replete with excessive appendages, and capable of locomotion by the most unusual methods (rotating as well as walking!). The comedy continues in the post-fallen state when, as she points out, those who wanted to be gods now spend their time seeking their other half and yearning to insert parts of their bodies into the openings of the bodies of others. "They want to be gods — and here they are, running around anxiously trying to thrust a piece of themselves inside a hole; or, perhaps more comical still, waiting in the hope that some hole of theirs will have something thrust into it" (173). How is it that this could be a matter of deepest concern, she asks? "And, yet, we are aware that we are those creatures"! (Ibid.).

and the bad (a la Pausanias and Eryximachus), but is a single aspiration common to all people and directed at the same ultimate object: wholeness (Ferarri 251-52). The recovery of original wholeness, the pursuit of inner healing for a very old outer wound, therefore, is the essence of genuine love which, in turn, is the only, true redemption.<sup>15</sup>

The major contribution of Aristophanes' speech to the overall argument of the *Symposium* comes when he defines love as desire or aspiration in need of fulfillment. This is the essential range of meaning of the Greek term eros. Plato will take this vulgar understanding of eros, combine it with the recognition that all men are in an erotic state, that is, in a state of perpetual desire and need, and transform and transcend these notions to fit his philosophic purposes. Indeed, it will eventually stand for a desire or aspiration for the perpetual possession of the Good. But Aristophanes establishes the fundament point that love is desire. The

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<sup>15</sup> The motifs of wholeness and healing, Thomas Gould believes, lends Aristophanes' myth its power of attraction. He writes: "the myth must draw some of its vividness and power from the fact that it touches something which we earnestly believe to be true. What moves us, essentially, is the definition of love as 'the desire and pursuit of wholeness' (33). This notion of love is echoed by many a psychologist and psychiatrist including Erich Fromm who in his book *The Art of Loving* speaks of "separation anxiety" the overcoming of which is the deepest need in man. He writes: "The deepest need of man, then, is the need to overcome his separateness, to leave the prison of his aloneness. The absolute failure to achieve this aim means insanity. . . . Man—of all ages and cultures—is confronted with the solution of one and the same question: the question of how to overcome separateness, how to achieve union, how to transcend one's own individual life and find at-onement" (9). A bit later he continues in the same Aristophanic vein: "This desire for interpersonal fusion is the most powerful striving in man. It is the most fundamental passion, it is the force which keeps the human race together, the clan, the family, the society. The failure to achieve it means insanity or destruction—self-destruction or destruction of others. Without love, humanity could not exist for a day" (18). There may be more wisdom in Aristophanes' myth than we might be inclined to think!

question becomes: what does and what should love desire? Sexuality? Virtue? The cosmos? Other human beings? Beauty? Or that which is the ultimate good?

Phaedrus and Pausanias have told us what love can do for sexuality and virtue; Eryximachus has told us what love can do for the cosmos and natural science; Aristophanes has now told us what love can do for relationships (which is what most people think love is all about);<sup>16</sup> Agathon will now tell us what love can do for the appreciation of beauty (Ferarri 261).

The theme of Agathon's lecture on Love is that Love is beautiful—beautiful in what he is, and beautiful in what he does (though Socrates demonstrates to him in the follow-up conversation with a rhetoric more **sophisticated** than Agathon's that his thesis was false!). Agathon begins with a critique of the previous speeches. In his estimation, the discourses about Love have focused on his gifts, rather than on himself, on what he gives, rather than on who he is. He proposes to do otherwise, to "praise him first for what he is and afterwards for his gifts" (195a). In describing the nature of Love, he begins by noting that of all the gods, Love is the happiest, the most beautiful and the best. His focus is initially on Love's external beauty which consists of several qualities. Contrary to Phaedrus' opinion, Agathon argues that Love is youngest of the gods because he flees old age, hates old age, and resides with the young (195a-b). Second,

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<sup>16</sup> As Nehamas and Woodruff opine, Aristophanes' speech "actually anticipates more romantic versions of love, particularly the idea that love draws together two unique individuals to join as one person" (xvii). Aristophanes' themes also call to mind the biblical story in Genesis 2 of the creation of woman and marriage where the teaching is essentially that male and female relationships are divinely designed for the purposes of companionship, completion, and unity. "Then God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make a helper suitable for him'" (v. 18). "For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother and shall cleave to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh" (v. 24).

Love is delicate, “for he makes his home in the characters, in the souls, of gods and men” (195e). Third, Love has a fluid, supple shape, and his graceful good looks (including his skin color) demonstrate that he is also balanced and fluid in his inner nature, one who dwells only where flowers bloom (196a-b).

Agathon then shifts to a discussion about Love’s moral character (αρετη). First of all, Love is neither the cause nor the victim of any injustice; he does no wrong to the gods, or to men, or they to him. Second, Love has the biggest share of moderation (σοφροσυνη) which is the power over pleasures and passions, and Love, as the strongest pleasure and passion, controls all other pleasures and passions! Third is Love’s courage or bravery (ανδρεια) which Ares, the god of war, cannot even match! Finally, Love possesses consummate wisdom (σοφια), defined by Agathon as technical skill or proficiency (τεκνη). His technical capacity is seen in his ability to impart the gift of poetry to the most unpoetic, proving the thesis that “you can’t give to another what you don’t have yourself . . .” (196e). His skill is also manifested in the production of animals, and in the craftsmanship of artists and professionals like Apollo, the Muses, Hephaestus, Athena, and Zeus who have Love as their teacher. Finally, Love’s *techne* is demonstrated in his service as mediator among the gods among whom he settles quarrels and to whom he gives gifts (including mankind).

Overcome spontaneously by the need to say something in poetic meter, Agathon concludes his encomium with this rhetorical *tour de force* about the beauties of Love who—

*Gives peace to men and stillness to the sea,  
Lays winds to rest, and careworn men to sleep.*

Love fills us with togetherness and drains all of our divisiveness away. Love calls gatherings like these together. In feasts, in dances, and in ceremonies, he gives the lead. Love moves us to mildness, removes us

from wildness. He is the giver of kindness, never of meanness. Gracious, kindly—let wise men see and gods admire! Treasure to lovers, envy to others, father of elegance, luxury, delicacy, grace, yearning, desire. Love cares well for good men, cares not for bad ones. In pain, in fear, in desire, or speech, Love is our best guide and guard; he is our comrade and our savior. Ornament of all gods and men, most beautiful leader and the best! Every man should follow Love, sing beautifully his hymns, and join him in the song he sings that charms the mind of god or man (197c-e).<sup>17</sup>

In the follow-up discussion, Socrates questions Agathon and challenges his thesis about Love and beauty. His argument is as follows. Love is always a love of something rather than nothing; if it is the love of something, then that something Love does not possess. Nonetheless, people love things they already possess, so that when they say they love them, what they mean is that they want the things in the future that they have in the present. Love is a primarily a desire for what is not at hand, of what is not present, of what is not possessed, and of what it is not, and that of which it is in need. So love is a love of something, and of something which is needed, but not possessed. Love loves and has a desire for beauty, but if Love loves or desires beauty, Love needs beauty and does not possess it. So, in the final analysis, Socrates has shown Agathon that Love cannot be beautiful if Love loves beauty and does not possess it. Agathon admits that he really did not know that of which he spoke, even though he spoke of it so well!

Agathon (whose name means “good,” and who is the most beautiful person and the happiest person at the party—he just won the drama contest!)

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<sup>17</sup> This poetic declaration to and about Love is reminiscent of the well known encomium on love by the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 13.

would seem to agree with Aristophanes that Love is a desire, a desire, however, not for completion in another human being, but rather for the beautiful, the fine, or the good (καλλος). “He cannot but think,” so it would seem, “but that the god of love must be just like himself, happy, beautiful and good” (Gould 35). For Agathon, Eros *is* beautiful and good, and *does* the beautiful and the good, and that good and beautiful which Love *does is* like him. But not only is Love beautiful or good, and not only does Love do the beautiful or the good, but *Love also loves* the beautiful and the good (he flees old age, resides in gentle souls, inspires poetry and crafts). Eros not only desires wholeness, but also desires the good. Love not only seeks completion, but also seeks after the beautiful. “And this is to reinstate the message of Aristophanes’ tale: that love is above all a search for what has been lost. Aristophanes only misidentified the loss: it is not our other half, but of our good . . .” (Ferarri 253). All Love is therefore good (contra Pausanias and Eryximachus) in its search for the good, even if some of the goods after which some lovers search are in fact inferior to the superior good.

Agathon himself is a case in point, and that is Socrates’ primary complaint with his speech. Love is beautiful and good and desires the beautiful and good, but Agathon, having portrayed himself as the beautiful and the good, is also the object of his own passion and love. As Brentlinger points out, “The real point of the speech . . . lies in the *self-glorification* Agathon is able to achieve in it—in his ability to speak of love while really praising himself, *his* youth, his beauty, and wisdom. . . . He gets precisely the wanted result: a blurring of the boundaries between himself and the god. . .” (18). Agathon is the very incarnation of the self-loving, self-celebrating Dionysian spirit, a veritable Narcissus in love with his own beautiful and benevolent reflection. Since his love for goodness and beauty failed to rise above himself, his theory of love, or at least the application of his theory of love, proves to be insufficient in the eyes of Socrates. While Socrates may agree

with him in principle that Love is a desire for the good, he certainly disagrees with Agathon in making himself the good which he should desire. Another theory of love is therefore needed that will enable Love to rise from the terrestrial realm to the celestial sphere, from a focus on the human Agathon to the heavenly *αγθος*, his transcendental counterpart. Thomas Gould summarizes this argument nicely.

The real objection is simply that Agathon's myth is a dead end for reflection. Because it does not separate beauty itself from the desire for beauty, it leaves love in the realm of exquisite sensual self-satisfaction. It rests at the dead center of all our memories of the most wonderful civilizing joys we have felt, without offering any clue as to the precise connection between these joys and the rest of life. For that we shall need a new myth, using as its central figure not the most beautiful of the company, but the ugliest (36).

The preceding populist narratives which forged connections between Love and [homo]sexuality, virtue, science, desire, and the beautiful, will now be assimilated into a master story in which the truth about Love finally emerges. The voice of instruction, strangely enough, is not Socrates, but rather an acquaintance of his, a wise prophetess named Diotima from Mantinea. She is the one, he says, who taught him the art of love (*τα ερωτικα*). She also corrected his original understanding of Love which was like Agathon's, for Socrates, too, believed that Love was a great god and belonged to beautiful things.

The first thing that Diotima taught Socrates was that Love was neither beautiful nor good, but at the same time neither ugly or bad. For just as there is a half way point between wisdom and ignorance in the notion of correct judgment (= "judging things correctly without being able to give a reason," 202a), so there is a middle level between the beautiful and the ugly and the good and the bad. In application to Love, Diotima says, "It's the same with Love: when you agree he is

neither good nor beautiful, you need not think he is ugly and bad; he could be something in between,” (202b) though she does not say exactly what.

Diotima also persuades Socrates that Love is not a god as he previously believed. The gods, she argued, are both beautiful and happy. But she just proved to Socrates that Love is neither good nor beautiful. The point is, how could Love be a god if he lacks good and beautiful things? Q. E. D.—Love is not a god either. What is he, then? Similarly as before, Diotima argues that he is an intermediate between the categories of the mortal (humans) and the immortal (gods). “He is a great spirit,” she states. “Everything spiritual, you see, is in between god and mortal” (202e). And Love, as one of these spirit beings, serves as a mediator between man and the gods: “Being in the middle of the two, they round out the whole and bind fast the all to all” (202e). When Socrates inquires as to Love’s origin, Diotima launches into her discourse about the nature of Love itself, beginning with a discussion of his character and parentage.

Love is the offspring of Poros (resource) and Penia (poverty), conceived on the very day that Aphrodite was born. For this reason Love follows and serves Aphrodite, and is also a lover of beauty since Aphrodite herself is beautiful. Love bears the traits of both his mother (impoverished) and father (resourceful), and is by nature neither mortal nor immortal. Love is also placed in between wisdom and ignorance. The gods do not love wisdom because they already possess it; the ignorant, on the other hand, do not love wisdom because of their ignorance. In a telling clarification, Diotima says, “For what’s especially difficult about being ignorant is that you are content with yourself, even though you’re neither beautiful and good and intelligent. If you don’t think you need anything, of course, you won’t want what you don’t think you need” (204a). Of course, the people who love wisdom are those who fall in between the extremes of wisdom and



ignorance, and Love is one of these! For Love loves the beautiful, and wisdom is very beautiful!

Now Diotima explains to Socrates his major mistake about Love. He had thought of Love as Love for beautiful things. He believed that Love was *being loved*, but the truth is that Love is *being a lover*, not being the receiver, but the giver of Love. If human beings are not the object but rather the subject of Love, of what use is Love to people?

Diotima continues with these arguments. Assuming his own definition of Love, she asks Socrates: "What is the point of loving beautiful things?" (204d). The lover of beautiful things certainly has a desire, and thus the question becomes, What does the lover desire? To put it in other words, "What will this man have when the beautiful things he wants [desires] have become his own?" (204d). Diotima makes the question easier for Socrates by substituting the word good for beautiful: "What will he have when the good things he wants have become his own?" (204e). Socrates' answer is that he will have happiness (*ευδαιμονία* = well being, and the good life), for happiness is possessing good things. This happiness is the final end of all desires, is common to all, and is pursued forever. Diotima's idea seems to be that the Love or desire for beautiful and good things is ultimately the Love and desire for what the intermediately good and beautiful can provide, namely, ultimate happiness, though most people do not recognize this. The conclusion which Diotima draws from these things is the fact that, "everyone is in love . . . since everyone always loves the same things," namely, the beautiful and the good, and ultimately, lasting happiness (205a-b).

On the basis of an analogy with poetry, Diotima then explains why everyone is not referred to as a lover. Just as the word poetry (*ποίησις*) literally refers to works of creativity in general, and yet only one set of creative workers

are called poets (namely, those who work with melody and rhythm), so it is with Love. All people love and have the desire for good and beautiful things (whether those things are money, sports, or philosophy). But we do not refer to such people, in general, as lovers. The words “love,” “lover,” and “in love,” like the word poet, are reserved for people who are devoted exclusively to a certain kind of love, presumably Aristophanic love, or erotic love for another person.

Diotima continues to build her argument by referring to Aristophanes’ myth in which lovers seek their other half for the sake of wholeness. But as she points out, a lover would not seek the other half unless he was convinced that the other half was also good. People, therefore, only love the good, and, naturally, want that good to be theirs, to possess it, indeed, . . . *forever*. In a phrase, then, Diotima defines love in this way: “Love is wanting to possess the good forever” (206a).

If love’s teleology is the desire to possess the good forever, then what is the sign or signal that people have this kind of love? What do they do, how do they act? What is this love’s purpose? Socrates is unable answer these questions, so Diotima does. Her answer is: “It is giving birth in beauty, whether in body or in soul” (206b). She explains this mystery by saying that all people are pregnant in both body and soul, and all have the desire to give birth to what is in them. But such physical or intellectual parturition is stimulated and carried out only in the presence of beauty because of its harmony with the universe. Ugliness, on the other hand, because of its disharmony, is repulsive and retards the creative process. On the basis of the preceding remarks, Diotima, with precision, makes the distinction that “what Love wants is not beauty” per se [this is what Agathon and Socrates believed originally] . . . but rather “reproduction and birth in beauty” (206e).

Now love which desires to possess the good forever demonstrates itself by seeking to give birth in beauty, to reproduce offspring, for in the production of offspring of various kinds, love seeks to perpetuate itself forever. If Love wants to possess the good forever, then it must desire immortality along with the good. Love desires not only the good, but also the immortal.

Implying Eryximachus' conception of the omnipresence of eros, Diotima says that even the mortal animals, plagued by the disease of Love, seek, like human beings, to overcome their mortality through physical reproduction because "it always leaves behind a new young one in place of the old" (207d). Human beings, though they remain ontologically identical to themselves throughout their existence, are in a continuous process of depletion and replenishment, not only in their minds and bodies, but also in their manners, customs, opinions and so forth. Through the process of renewal, whether it be through nourishment, study, or personal development, people attempt to preserve the mortal, and to share in immortality. So Diotima tells Socrates that he "shouldn't be surprised if everything naturally values its offspring, because it is for the sake of immortality that everything shows this zeal, which is Love" (208b).

To confirm this, Diotima has Socrates consider how human beings seek after glory and honor. As she puts it, "I believe that anyone will do anything for the sake of immortal virtue and the glorious fame that follows; and the better the people, the more they will do, for they are all in love with immortality" (208d-e). Neither Alcestis nor Achilles, she contends, would have died for their loved ones if not for the promise of immortality and glory. The heroic deeds of courage and character are egocentrically motivated by nothing other than a quest for personal perpetuation and fame.

But Diotima wants to make herself clear. There are two ways to give birth in beauty, and one is higher than the other. Some, she says, are pregnant in

body, give birth in the body, and seek immortality through physical offspring. This is a distinctively inferior means to immortality. On the other hand, others are pregnant in their souls, and these give birth to what is fitting for a soul to give birth to, especially wisdom, virtue, beautiful deeds, laws, poetry and so on. The offspring of the pregnant soul are far superior to the offspring of the body. As Diotima says: “Everyone would rather have such children than human ones, and would look up to Homer, Hesiod, and the other good poets with envy and admiration, which, because they are immortal themselves, provide their parents with immortal glory and remembrance” (209c-d). Even Socrates, Diotima thinks, could be initiated into these rites which are the lesser mysteries of Love. Whether or not Socrates can ascend to the final and highest mystery of Love remains uncertain, but she will seek to explain them to him anyhow.

At this point we have reached the *pièce de résistance* of Plato’s *Symposium*, the famous ascent passage which presents the *Scala Amoris* —the scale or ladder of Love. The ascent begins in the days of youth when a young man devotes himself to beautiful bodies, to one body at first (which gives birth to beautiful ideas), and then, recognizing universal beauty in all bodies, he devotes himself to many bodies, thus becoming a lover of all beautiful bodies (Don Juanism?). Next the lover passes from the beauty of the body to the beauty of the soul which is far more valuable. The contact with the beauty of the soul produces ideas to make young men better. The result of this encounter with beauty forces the lover to gaze at the beauty of activities, laws and customs which are so transforming that he will think “that the beauty of bodies is a thing of no importance” (210c). Next comes the encounter with the beauty of knowledge, not just a single example, but rather the whole sea of beauty which also gives birth to many ideas and theories in an unquenchable love of wisdom. Finally the lover who has beheld beautiful things in the right order will come to the true goal

of Love by seeing something ultimately beautiful, namely BEAUTY itself. Here is Diotima's description of the form of BEAUTY.

First, it always is and neither comes to be nor passes away, neither waxes or wanes. Second, it is not beautiful this way and ugly that way, nor beautiful at one time and ugly another, nor beautiful in relation to one thing and ugly in relation to another; nor is it beautiful here but ugly there, as it would be if it were beautiful for some people and ugly for others. Nor will the beautiful appear to him in the guise of a face or hands or anything else that belongs to the body. It will not appear to him as one idea or one kind of knowledge. It is not anywhere in another thing, as in an animal, or in earth, or in heaven, or in anything else, but itself by itself with itself, it is always one in form; and all the other beautiful things share in that, in such a way that when those others come to be or pass away, this does not become the least bit smaller or greater nor suffer any change (211a-b).<sup>18</sup>

Ideally, life is to be lived with this Beauty firmly beheld in the mind's eye. Once this beatific vision is experienced, all other forms of beauty vanish and are insignificant, even that of beautiful boys. To behold beauty and to be with it

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<sup>18</sup> William Fleming in his book *Art and Ideas* suggests that the symbolism of Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* can be traced back to Plato's *Symposium*. Venus herself is the symbol of Plato's concept of ultimate beauty described in the *Symposium*. He writes that Botticelli's philosophical inspiration "is the Plato of the *Symposium*, which deals with the nature of love and beauty. Human beings, according to Plato's theory, have drunk of the waters of oblivion and forgotten their divine origin. Falling in love with a beautiful person reminds them of their natural affinity for beauty. From physical attraction and fleeting loveliness, they are led to thoughts of the lasting beauty of truth and, finally, to the contemplation of the eternal verities of absolute beauty, truth, and goodness. *Venus is, of course, the image of the transcendent beauty, and the way to approach it is through love*. The eternal feminine, as Goethe was later to say in his *Faust*, draws us ever onward" (283, emphasis added).

means giving birth, not to images of virtue, but to true virtue, which, if nourished, enables one to possess immortality, if anyone can.

This is Diotima's speech, and Socrates, having been persuaded by it, seeks to persuade others of it, too. Beholding the beautiful is the goal of life, and Love is the key to obtaining this final vision of beauty. As Socrates put it in his conclusion, ". . . human nature can find no better workmate for acquiring this [Beauty] than Love" (212b). Love truly is placed in service to Socrates' philosophy, and because of this service, Socrates himself says he honors and practices the rites of Love and commends them to others.

I would like to stop here for a moment to discuss Diotima's concept of Love and what she, through Socrates, says it can do for philosophy. Underlying the notion that Love can do something for philosophy is what I believe is one of the deepest and most profound themes in the *Symposium*. It is this: that Love is the universal principle, energy, or motivation for everybody's and everything's activity. Love generates the passions and desires which animate human life; the passions and desires which animate human life are Love. Love is the *élan vital* of all human activity. We are carried here and there by the weight of our Love. As St. Augustine said, "*Pondus meum amor meus; eo feror quocumque feror*" — "My love is my weight: wherever I go my love is what brings me there" (*Confessions*, 13. 9. 10.). This, I think, is the general understanding of Love that Plato adheres to and expounds in the *Symposium* (Marcus 137-42). In her story about Love, Diotima via Socrates unpacks the meaning of this principle in at least three ways. First of all, she suggests that Love is the weight that causes us to seek the good. Second, she proposes that Love is the weight that drives us to obtain immortality in the presence of beauty. Finally and most importantly, she teaches that Love is the weight that should lead us to the philosophical life and to

the encounter with ultimate BEAUTY. I will discuss each of these at this point before returning to my synopsis of the *Symposium*.

First, then, is the notion that Love is the weight that causes us to seek the good. Building on the notion that Love is desire, Diotima draws on Aristophanes' myth which presents Love as the desire for wholeness or completion in another person. She emends this account by adding that a person would not seek completion in another unless that other person or state were *good*. What everyone loves is nothing other than the good, she says. Diotima then adds one other qualification to her thesis, namely, that the good that they love they want *forever*. Hence, "Love is desire for the perpetual possession of the good" (206a). Irving Singer says, "In these few words all Platonic wisdom resides" (53).<sup>19</sup> Perhaps so. The first three words of this epigram are certainly suggestive, for they teach that all people are in a continuous state of desire or need. Such is the human condition, for the basic requirements of survival—food, clothing, shelter—are needed and desired in their own way. Furthermore, people, given their acquisitive nature, are constantly seeking for the things that will fulfill and satisfy. The human mind, heart, spirit, and body, are hungry, thirsty, weary, and in need of satiation and rest. This seems to be the ultimate category of Plato's anthropology: man striving, yearning, needing, desiring, aspiring, longing, and craving for things that will satisfy, and bring happiness (ευδαιμονία).<sup>20</sup> It is in this sense that all are persons in Love, for Love, as desire, is common to all people.

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<sup>19</sup> The following material is a gloss on Singer's discussion (53-54).

<sup>20</sup> Old Testament biblical anthropology, curiously enough, suggests that one of the fundamental meanings of the Hebrew word for "soul" (*nephesh*) is that of desire. H. W. Wolff in his excellent work *Anthropology of the Old Testament* writes: "But still more frequently *n*. [*nephesh*] means man in his ardent desire, which is like a parched long of the man who is dying of thirst. This is how the *n*. thirsts in Ps. 42.1f. . . ." (17). This biblical understanding is an interesting parallel with Plato's own view of human psychology.

But Diotima qualifies her notion of Love as desire by saying that it is always for the good. No one desires anything that is bad, or what one thinks or believes is bad; those things that are bad or thought to be bad will be shunned by sane individuals. Even if the bad is sought or done, it is because those who sought and did the bad thought that good would somehow come from it (criminal activity, for example). Consequently, human beings only desire the good, or at least that which they think or believe is good, even though it may not be. Even when people make wrong choices, or act compulsively, their wrong choices and compulsions are in pursuit of what they perceive to be a good thing. As Singer says, “Whatever anyone does, whatever he desires, whatever he strives for, Plato will always explain it as a direct or circuitous means of acquiring goodness” (54). Furthermore, the real purpose of the attempt to acquire good things is to obtain yet another end. Good things, though they may be good in themselves, are not desired for themselves or for their own simple goodness, but are sought and acquired as the means to a final end, which is happiness. Love is the first cause, and the hoped-for final cause is εὐδαιμονία. Hence the definition of Love that was proposed above needs a slight improvement: “Love is desire for the perpetual possession of the good *for the sake of happiness.*”

Thus, Diotima has shown us that all human activity is energized by Love. Since Love pervades the entire cosmos, not just humanity, but all things, the entire universe is in Love. Love, literally, makes the world go round (Singer 54).<sup>21</sup> The problem, according to Diotima, is that few individuals know what is truly good, so their lives and Love are squandered on many lesser goods which may

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<sup>21</sup> Even as Dante concluded the *Divine Comedy*, there is a “Love which moves the sun and the other stars” (Paradise, Canto XXXIII).



provide some good, but certainly not the greatest good. The greatest good is obtained only by embracing the object of supreme good and beauty.

Meanwhile, Love, like a weight, causes us to seek, not only the good, but immortality also, for Love is a desire for the *perpetual* possession of the good (for the sake of happiness). At the very end of her speech, Diotima says that “if any human being could become immortal” (212a-b), it would be the one who has encountered absolute beauty. This is the *only way* to truly possess the good *forever* (note the exclusivism here). Presumably, all other attempts at immortality are only temporarily successful, and ultimately futile. Be that as it may, Love carries people about like a weight motivating them to pursue a kind of immortality, a form of self-perpetuation, through the offspring of their minds or bodies, through cultural contributions or children. This points to another fundamental characteristic of the human spirit: the desire for continued existence which is forever threatened by the oblivion of death. Though death-wishes and self-destructive tendencies may manifest themselves occasionally, the basic drive of humanity, rooted in a sense of the goodness of being, is to continue existing in some way at any price. The will to survive is deeply embedded in the human psyche, and Diotima taps into this structure of human thinking with her doctrine of immortality. In her teaching, the quest for immortality is motivated by love, prompted by beauty, and accomplished by acts of creation in either body or soul.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> A. W. Price writes: “What is love? . . . love is of immortality, and hence . . . of generation and ‘birth in beauty’. . . . By giving birth I hope . . . to live on in the memory of my descendants, or in the admiration of future generations. . . .” (27). See also Terence Irwin’s discussion on Diotima’s concept of immortality and his distinction between what he calls the “interpersonal propagation” of the body, and the “intrapersonal propagation” of the soul (306ff).

The connection between Love, an awareness of bodily beauty, and the activity that leads to reproduction is well known. By its mysterious power of attraction, beauty in the body draws a lover to itself for the purpose of union, leading to the act of creation. Beauty is a vision which creates a longing for a merger with itself, though the intention to create, much less the desire for immortality, are not a matter of concern at the time! Frequently, the deeper meanings of human action, in this case procreation and the quest for immortality, remain undisclosed to the participant. Nonetheless, the production of children is one means of gaining immortality.<sup>23</sup>

The quest for an immortality through the offspring of the soul is less familiar to us. Gregory Vlastos, in commenting on Plato's achievement, draws the elements of this conception together in a profound way. He notes that Plato was the first Western man to realize how intense and passionate is our attachment to abstract things like social reform, art, poetry, science, philosophy, etc. This attachment to the products of the mind or soul is as intense as the attachment that lovers have for their bodies. Indeed, the attachment is so great that this kind of abstract eros "may reach a mad obsessive intensity which is commonly thought peculiar to sexual love" (Vlastos 27). What creates the power of the attraction to the products of the soul is their luminous beauty. Whether it be the elegance of a deduction, the tidiness of an argument, or the power of a theorem

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<sup>23</sup> In the *Laws*, Plato discusses marriage regulations and speaks of childbearing as a means of obtaining immortality. He writes: "It is a man's duty to marry, remembering that there is a sense in which the human race by nature partakes of immortality—a thing for which the desire is implanted in man in all its forms; for the desire to be famous and not to lie nameless in the grave is a desire for immortality. The race of man is twinborn with all time and follows its course in a companionship that will endure to the end; and it is immortal in this way—by leaving children's children, so that the race remains always one and the same and partakes of immortality by means of generation" (721b).

to explain a mass of facts, Plato “sees that the aesthetic quality of such purely intellectual objects is akin to the power of physical beauty to excite and to enchant even when it holds no prospect of possession” (27). He goes further and ascribes the attractiveness of beauty, not to the power of lust, but rather to the desire or need to create for the sake of immortality. The desire to create for the sake of immortality is what we seek to satisfy in every creation of the soul propelled by beauty. Beauty sets up in us a longing to merge with it, and thereby to create, either in the body or soul, and in either case the offspring of such a union is the hope of immortality. This is a thesis that has considerable explanatory power. As Brentlinger says, “Life is creative struggle, man is a poet, a maker, a craftsman. The diversity of human concerns can be unified under the single theme: creating in the beautiful” (23).

Diotima finally shows how Love’s greatest service is to philosophy, for the weight of Love should carry us up the ladder from beautiful bodies to ultimate beauty itself. The primary theme in this story about the ascent soul to the empyrean in quest of a *vita nuova* is the “education of desire.” The ascent passage in Diotima’s speech is truly a “*paideia* proposal” for Love. Eros must be taught about the good and the beautiful, and how to seek it. It must be taught that all desire is ultimately a desire for the good and the beautiful, and that the good and the beautiful are found in every category of human experience. But certain expressions of the good and the beautiful are higher than others, and to rest satisfied at any level in which the good and the beautiful reside, short of the absolute good and beautiful, is to fall short of the greatest good and the most beautiful. Hence, desire must be taught that there are indeed stages on life’s way, moving from an aesthetic stage (beauty in all bodies), through an ethical stage (beauty in the soul, customs, and knowledge), to the final religious (or metaphysical) stage of existence in which the good and the beautiful are

encountered directly. At each stage the good and beautiful are revealed, but in each case, that stage must be transcended for the sake of an even greater beauty until the top is reached.<sup>24</sup> This ascent to the top is not the result of grace but of works. Human beings, if they are lucky, will discover this knowledge, possess the virtue necessary to pursue it, and not be thwarted by temptation to stop at any lesser level until they pull themselves up to the final peak of enlightenment and felicity. The ultimate reward is the philosophic life. The task is hard earned, and few there be that find it (maybe only Socrates and Plato, and maybe not even the former).

But behind the ascent to the philosophic life is the motivating power of eros which must be properly trained or educated. This is absolutely crucial. Plato develops his philosophy of love using the term eros, but revolutionizes its meaning in a significant way. “. . . Plato makes the word *eros* bear a burden far in

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<sup>24</sup> This statement raises the question as to whether progress up the ladder of beauty entails the complete abandonment of the previous stage. Is the previous stage dethroned but not destroyed, or destroyed altogether (to use Kierkegaardian language once again). J. M. E. Moravcsik discusses this matter in these terms: “. . . whether the progress achieved is a matter of more and more inclusive aspirations or of a complete change in general aims in life.” The answer is found in a choice between an inclusive and exclusive interpretation of the ascent. “According to the inclusive version our eros widens as we make progress from stage to stage; we do not abandon physical and aesthetic love for the love of spiritual beauty, nor do we jettison the latter in favor of love of the sciences. . . . [We keep] “the former interests and adding to these newer ones. According to the exclusive interpretation the former objects of aspiration are not kept but are totally replaced by the new objects” (293). This is an exceedingly important issue, for it determines the amount of dualism, if you will, that is a part of Plato’s final synthesis. At this point in my understanding and within the context of the *Symposium* alone, I adhere to the exclusivist interpretation in light of the speech of Alcibiades and his description of a very non-human, transcendental Socrates. Moravcsik partially agrees. In his conclusion he states: “. . . we need to say only that the lower types of desire cannot remain the dominant aspiration in the life of the man who traverses the path described by Plato” (293). For the symposiaist Socrates, it seems they were not an aspiration at all.

excess of anything it had ever been made to bear; and the 'love' which he goes on to portray strains the language of *eros* almost out of recognition" (Marcus 137). On Plato's anvil, Love must no longer understand itself as a desire which directs all human activity in quest of its own satisfaction through various goods such as sex, money, knowledge, for the sake of happiness. Rather, Love must learn that it is the principle that should *direct* all passions, desires and impulses toward their proper objects. Love is not passive, but active; it does not merely seek to receive, but to give. Love should *direct desire* toward the perpetual possession of the ultimate good! Love is still the directive principle of all human activity, but it must understand itself as the lover rather than as being loved! This was the fundamental lesson that Socrates needed to learn. Eros should *lead* him to the Good.

If this new understanding of eros is correct, then, in reality it has become logos or reason (which would fit nicely with Plato's formulations elsewhere in the *Republic* and the *Phaedrus*). Irving Singer seems to understand it this way. To him, Platonic Love is not emotional or sentimental, but intellectual, and its goal is to obtain knowledge. Love is an abstract science or a rational activity, and the metaphors of sight and sound, rather taste, smell, or touch, expresses its activities (72-73). Anachronistically, this is Plato's "Copernican Revolution" with regard to the definition of eros. R. A. Marcus summarizes the nature of the transformation in these terms.

The nature of *eros* has undergone the preliminary transformation required in order to talk about love for, desire for *αυτο το καλον* [the beautiful itself], the absolute subsistent beauty in which all other beautiful things participate. We know by now that desire for this is desire in a very queer sense: 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. At the end of its gradual ascent through dim and fragmentary intimations the soul is united with the perfect archetypal beauty in a blaze of light wherein it beholds "the things that are" (to borrow the language of *Phaedrus*—249E); and the offspring produced in the union is wisdom and true virtue (140).

The same eros which manifests itself at the lower levels of the ladder as the desire or instinct for physical gratification, generation, and glory is now transformed as the energy that carries the soul through various stages to its ultimate destination so that the eye of the mind might directly behold reality (Cornford 128). This kind of metaphysical eros would seem to care for very little else other than beholding the form of the Beautiful, having intercourse with true reality, and giving birth to true virtue and wisdom.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> This point raises a hotly debated issue in the study of Platonic love: is it egocentric and forgetful of others? Irving Singer argues that it is egocentric and reductionistic. His understanding is that in Plato's scheme of things, only the philosopher possesses true love in his love for the truly good. All other forms of love are inferior. He singles out one form of love, the love of wisdom or the truly good, and negates the rest. Thus he writes: ". . . Plato's position seems to reduce sexual love, married love, parental love, filial love, love of humanity to mere imperfect approaches to the philosopher's love. In neither event does Platonic love really explicate the nature of love itself. The philosopher has simply affixed the honorific term 'true love' to that variety which matters most to him" (84). This objection Singer believes leads on to others including this one. "Plato emphasizes that love for another person is primarily a desire for the goodness which is in him. In other words, it is not the other person as a person that the Platonic lover cares about. He loves his beloved, not in himself, but only for the sake of goodness or beauty. The Platonic lover does not love anyone: he loves only the Good, either in abstraction or in concrete manifestations" (84). In the Platonic understanding, if someone loves someone else it is really for the sake of the Good rather than for that person's sake, or for that person as a person. This seems to be St. Augustine's position as well for he argues that one ought not to love another or oneself for the other's sake or for one's own sake, but only for the sake of God who is the only worthy object of love (see his *On Christian Doctrine* 1. 22. 20-21). G. R. F. Ferrari recognizes the same problem in Diotima's speech. He notes that Eryximachus in his tour of the erotic universe seemed to bid

Not all people possess *this kind* of erotic love. Alcibiades is a case in point as the narrative of the *Symposium* in its final scenes suggest. With a clamor at the door, Alcibiades swaggers in along with his party, and the scene shifts, literally, from the sublime to the ridiculous, from the Beautiful to the debauched.

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farewell to interpersonal love. Diotima he believes in her metaphysical ruminations about love is in danger of doing the same thing. "Diotima," he writes, "threatens with a description of great breadth to lose sight of the love that one human being conceives for another," though he does believe she recognizes the problem (252). In agreement with Singer and Ferrari is Gregory Vlastos who offers a detailed discussion about the egocentric aspect to Platonic love (6-11). Platonic concepts point the way to an authentic spiritual achievement, but at too high a cost. In his words, "Beyond those limits the vision fails. Plato is scarcely aware of kindness, tenderness, compassion, concern for the freedom, respect for the integrity of the beloved, as essential ingredients of the highest type of interpersonal love" (30). Vlastos also feels that this constitutes the essential tragedy of the *Republic* as well. He states: "The fashioner of this utopia has evidently failed to see that what love for our fellows requires of us is, above all, imaginative sympathy and concern for what they themselves think, feel, and want. He has, therefore, missed that dimension of love in which tolerance, trust, forgiveness, tenderness, respect have validity. Apart from these imperatives the notion of loving persons as 'ends in themselves' would make no sense. No wonder that we hear of nothing remotely like it from Plato. . . . On the terms of that theory, to make flesh and blood men and women terminal objects of our affection would be folly or worse, idolatry, diversion to images of what is due only to their divine original" (32). On the other hand, Terence Irwin in his discussion of this same problem comes to a different conclusion which can only be represented here. He counters by saying "Still, this ascent of desire from bodies, through souls, characters, knowledge, and so on, to the Form of Beauty does not lead away from concern for persons. Diotima insists that we all seek our own happiness as our ultimate end and that when we are properly enlightened, we will express our self-concern through interpersonal propagation. Since we want to propagate what is valuable about ourselves, our view about what we want to propagate reflects our view about what is valuable; and the ascent of desire to the Form changes our view about which traits we want to propagate. But a change of view on this question gives us no reason to abandon our concern for persons; for since we are persons, nothing that we can affect can embody the traits that we value in ourselves as well as a person can" (310). This note does not settle the issue at hand, but it does provide some idea about the terms of the argument. I incline toward the position of Vlastos and others who see an essential egoism and apathy as an unfortunate component in Plato's philosophy of Love.

As one commentator put it, when Alcibiades arrives “all hell breaks loose” (Gould 42). Alcibiades greets the symposiasts with a warble: “Good evening, gentlemen. I’m plastered!” (212e). After taking his seat in between Agathon and Socrates, and crowning them both with ivy, Eryximachus informs Alcibiades about their presentations on Love, and invites him to give one as well. He refuses, partially because he is so drunk, but primarily because he says he fears Socrates’ rancor if he praises anyone else in his presence. Eryximachus suggests that he offer an encomium to Socrates, a proposal which Alcibiades accepts.

Alcibiades begins by comparing Socrates to two images: he is like the statue of Silenus and the satyr of Marsyas. Though Socrates may resemble these two in appearance, the comparison is really much deeper. The powerful music they make with instruments, Socrates makes with his words. Alcibiades has experienced the overwhelming effect of his words such that when Socrates had rebuked him for neglecting his shortcomings, he felt deeply ashamed, that his political career was worthless, and that his life really was not worth living. That is the kind of effect Socrates’ words, like a satyr’s music, had on him. But this, according to Alcibiades, is the least of his powers. He continues to inform his fellow drinkers about what Socrates is really like.

On the outside, Socrates puts on a good show, seemingly attracted to boys, declaring himself to be ignorant, and so on. But that is just one big game of ironic appearance in which he tries to make himself seem human. On the inside, however, Socrates is more like a god—sober and temperate. A glimpse of his inner being reveals that he is “so godlike—so bright and beautiful, so utterly amazing . . .” (217a) that Alcibiades had to do whatever Socrates told him because his authority was so great.

Alcibiades’ vanity led him at one point to believe that Socrates wanted him as his lover, and he made every attempt to provide Socrates with an opportunity



to do with him as he pleased. The first time when they were alone, nothing happened. “Socrates had his usual sort of conversation . . . and at the end of the day took off” (217b-c). When they exercised, even wrestled together, Alcibiades got nowhere. At private dinner parties, Socrates failed to respond, even when Alcibiades directly invited him to take him as his lover. Socrates was unhappy with the inequitable offer and told him: “you offer me the merest appearance of beauty, and in return you want the thing itself, ‘gold in exchange for bronze’” (218e-219a). Even when Alcibiades slipped under Socrates’ cloak, and spent the entire night with his arms wrapped around him—nothing happened. Socrates spurned Alcibiades’ beauty and turned him down. To Alcibiades, Socrates was utterly unnatural, a truly extraordinary man. Though Alcibiades was deeply humiliated, he could not help admiring Socrates’ natural character, his moderation, fortitude, one whose strength and wisdom were inconceivable. Try as he may, Alcibiades could not hate him, nor could he lose him as his friend.

Alcibiades continues to itemize more of Socrates’ godlike traits, especially those he manifested in battle. He withstood hardship, hunger, and the cold better than any other soldier. He could drink the other soldiers under the table, and yet never get drunk. He was exceedingly brave, and single-handedly saved Alcibiades’ life. He was calm in the midst of battle, more so than his commanders. He was also a marvel to observe when he would fall motionless in contemplating some problem until he figured it out. In Alcibiades’ final analysis, Socrates is simply incomparable.

. . . he is unique; his is like no one else in the past and no one in the present. . . . There is a parallel for everyone—everyone else, that is. But this man here is so bizarre, his ways and his ideas are so unusual, that, search as you might, you’ll never find anyone else, alive or dead, who’s even remotely like him. The best you can do is not to compare him to

anything human, but to liken him, as I do, to Silenus and the satyrs, and the same goes for his ideas and arguments (221c-d).

What is true of Socrates as a man is also true of his ideas and arguments which are like the hollow statues inside of Silenus. Though at first his elenchus may be unimpressive, “if you go behind their surface, you’ll realize that no other arguments make any sense. They’re truly worthy of a god, bursting with figures of virtue inside. They’re of great—no, of the greatest—importance for anyone who wants to become a truly good man” (222a).

This statement concludes Alcibiades’ encomium of Socrates. After Alcibiades and Agathon exchange petty rivalries over Socrates, and they all change places at the table, a another large drunken troupe enters and the symposium dissolves into chaos. Several of the original guests depart, and only Agathon, Aristophanes, and Socrates continue talking. Socrates tries to prove to them that authors should be able to write comedy and tragedy, and that the skillful tragic dramatist should also be a comic poet. When his friends fall asleep, Socrates gets up and leaves. He goes straight to the Lyceum, bathes, spends the rest of the day as he always did, and when evening came, only then did he go home to rest.

What is the meaning of the speech of Alcibiades, or more precisely, the meaning of Alcibiades himself to the argument of the *Symposium*? “What is the interpretation of the image that Alcibiades is, as he presents himself before us?” (Nussbaum 193).<sup>26</sup> His “all of a sudden” (212c), rambunctious arrival signals something significant. We are brought down from the thin, rarefied air of Socratic abstraction to the real world of daily habitation in all of its sensuality and

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<sup>26</sup> The discussion which follows is a summation of the essential features of Martha Nussbaum’s treatment of Alcibiades’ speech in her book, *The Fragility of Goodness* (1986). All page numbers are from her work.

baseness. No doubt Alcibiades' arrival, like Diotima herself, will serve the purpose of "a dawning and a revelation" (185). The light of this revelation may be discovered by juxtaposing Alcibiades and Socrates to see the embodiment and reflection of two species of eros—the regenerate and the unregenerate—and their outcomes. An examination of Alcibiades and Socrates in parallel will lead to a choice between the two—their two loves and their two lives—as an exemplar for one's own life.

Alcibiades is an aesthetic man, a man of the flesh—dionysian to the hilt. His state upon entering the symposium is a good indicator of his persona: "very drunk and very loud" (212d). His intoxication and boisterousness are excelled perhaps only by his vanity and pride; humility was no virtue in his sight. He flaunted his sensuality. His incomparable good looks made it exceedingly difficult for him to be rejected, especially by Socrates. As he himself put it, "He spurned my beauty, of which I was so proud" (219c). His battle field heroics earned him medals for courage (even though the honor really was Socrates). His speech was sweet and persuasive as an accomplished orator. His ambition was overweening; he was trying to prove his worth to any and everyone. Alcibiades was proud, contemptuous, self-sufficient. But his love was unregenerate; his focus was on the particular, not the universal; he had been bitten by the viper of philosophy, but it never overcame his lusts; he remained imprisoned in the cave of this world. Alcibiades acted like a hoodlum defacing statues in Athens, and eventually he became a traitor to the city he loved so much. His life ended in tragedy. "His story is, in the end, a story of waste and loss, of the failure of practical reason to shape a life" (166). Alcibiades was very human and very flawed. His encomium of Socrates suggests, however, that his fatal flaw was his

failure to rise above even the first level of love, the love of beautiful bodies, in this case, Socrates' own.<sup>27</sup>

Socrates, on the other hand, is a study in contrasts, but no more attractive or inviting in his person than Alcibiades. Socrates is a god and not a man. He is like superman: his alter ego, like Clark Kent, appears relatively normal, but once he steps into a phone booth (or the Lyceum), there emerges a divine-like figure possessed of superhuman powers. His inner being is godlike, bright, beautiful, utterly amazing. He can drink voraciously and never be affected. He is impervious to heat, cold, hunger and thirst. His courage is unlimited, his sense of

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<sup>27</sup> G. R. F. Ferrari's understanding of Alcibiades in this final episode of the *Symposium* is very close to the one being developed here. Of Alcibiades, he writes: "Instead of loving wisdom, he falls in love with the wisdom lover—exactly the danger Diotima attempts to exclude from her ladder of love by banishing individuals from the center of attention when the rung of philosophy has been reached. Socrates, good student of Diotima that he is, had attempted to tap the energy of Alcibiades' love and channel it away from himself and toward philosophy (218d6-b2). But it is a volatile force to tap, and the saga of Alcibiades' disastrous political ambitions waits in the wings of this dialogue to testify to the difficulty of the task (cf. 216b5)" (262). Similar is John Brentlinger's interpretation of Alcibiades. He writes: "Alcibiades epitomizes in its extreme form what Plato believes to be the greatest danger to man—what we might with appropriate qualifications call excessive love of self" (29). R. A. Marcus sees in the last third of the dialogue the dialectic of love between Socrates' form of *eros* and Alcibiades' form of *eros* displayed in the concrete. Here is his explanation. "What the discussion began with is the passionate love exemplified in Alcibiades. This is the love—the love which Socrates finds a burden—which conforms most precisely to the literal meaning of *eros* and its analysis by Aristophanes: and not the 'completeness' of Socrates which Alcibiades feels as an impact not only soliciting his reference for Socrates, but as challenging his own sort of *eros*, and as a demand for his own integrity. And yet, it is Socrates' 'indifference' which Plato is presenting to us as an instance—as *the* instance—of the 'love' which finally emerges from the dialectic of the *Symposium*" (140). These various citations suggest that Alcibiades and Socrates are the chief protagonists of the *Symposium*, and that their diverse, indeed dialectical, understandings of love are at the heart of the dialogue. The contrast between them should cause the reader to weigh their differences carefully and then pursue their own lives in light of that evaluation.

calm unshakable, his words and ideas nuclear in power. With temperance and moderation, he can successfully resist the stoutest of temptations. He is continent even in the presence of the consummate desirability of Alcibiades. He is truly unnatural, highly extraordinary, utterly unique in every respect, beyond human parallel, so much so that he is bizarre and unusual. He, in other words, is like the forms he worships.<sup>28</sup>

Socrates in his ascent towards the form, has become himself, very like a form—hard, indivisible, unchanging. His virtue, in search of science and of assimilation of the good itself, turns away from the responsive intercourse with particular earthly goods that is Alcibiades' knowledge. It is not only Socrates' dissociation from his body. It is not only that he sleeps all night with the naked Alcibiades without arousal. There is, along with this remoteness, a deeper impenetrability of spirit. Words launched like bolts have no effect . . . . But Socrates refuses in every way to be affected. He is stone; and he also turns others to stone. Alcibiades is to his sight just one more of the beautifuls, a piece of the form, a pure thing like a jewel (195).

Socrates models in himself what a person would look like once the ascent to the forms is made. Socrates is what others will and should strive to become as they, too, ascend to the true, the beautiful, and the good. The only problem is: Socrates is not human. He transcends the earthly and humanly spheres in an escape from his creatureliness. A giant gulf separates him from natural reality, a

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<sup>28</sup> As Terence Irwin observes, "This eros explains why the philosopher who is aware of the Forms will imitate them; imitation is the natural result of 'admiring intercourse'" (501c6) (302).

domain from which he has willfully dis-associated himself. Socrates is a dualist.<sup>29</sup> “Socrates is weird” (184).

Is this the kind of life and character one would want for oneself? Or would Alcibiades be preferable? Socrates seems to be guilty of an overweening of the soul or of reason; Alcibiades of the body. The dualism is severe, and therefore the choice is painful. There is deep sacrifice (of soul or body) in either direction. Neither option is attractive, at least not by most standards. But the fact is that Plato’s *Symposium* calls for a decision: Socrates or Alcibiades! “And now, all at once, *exaiphanes*, there dawns on us the full light of Plato’s design, his comic tragedy of choice and practical wisdom. We see two kinds of value, two kinds of knowledge; and we see that we must choose” (198).

I can choose to follow Socrates, ascending to the vision of the beautiful. But I cannot take the first step on that ladder as long as I see Alcibiades. I can follow Socrates only if, like Socrates, I am *persuaded* of the truth of Diotima’s account; and Alcibiades robs me of this conviction. He makes me feel that in embarking on the ascent I am sacrificing a beauty; so I can no longer view the ascent as embracing the whole of beauty. . . . I can, on the other hand, follow Alcibiades, making my soul a body. I can live in *eros*, devoted to its violence and its sudden light. But once I have listened to Diotima, I see the loss of light that this course, too, entails—the loss of

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<sup>29</sup> In a very helpful comment, Gregory Vlastos asserts that the Platonic conception of love, like all aspects of his philosophic scheme, is affected by his dualistic orientation. In his words, “. . . Plato’s speculation structures love in the same way s it does knowledge in epistemology, the world-order in cosmology, the interrelations of particular and universal, time and eternity, the world of sense and the world of thought in ontology. In each of these areas the factors of the analytic pattern are the same: the transcendent Form at one extreme, the temporal individual at the other, and, in between, the individual’s immanent characters, projections of eternity on the flickering screen of becoming. And everywhere Plato gives the Form preeminence” (33-34).

rational planning, the loss, we might say, of the chance to make a world. And then, if I am a rational being, with a rational being's deep need for order and for understanding, I feel that I *must* be false to *eros*, for the world's sake (198).

The fact that these are the only two possible alternatives from which to choose makes the *Symposium* now seem to us "a harsh and alarming book" (198). It is an ancient version of Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*. Any choice, in the final analysis, is damning. Alcibiades cuts off the transcendent; Socrates eliminates the immanent. Alcibiades negates the soul while exalting the body; Socrates negates the body while exalting the soul. Both are severely reductionistic, and thus destructive of one aspect of love and thus a complete human life.

There is a profound need for another alternative, one that combines the earthiness of Alcibiades and the transcendentalism of Socrates. One that recognizes a legitimate place for love in both the soul and the body. One that is celestial and terrestrial in scope. A formulation is needed that successfully combines all these factors into a wholistic synthesis. This synthesis is not hard to find. It was succinctly stated by a new Socrates, Jesus Christ, who said.

And you shall love the Lord your God with all of your heart, and all of your soul, and all of your mind and all of your strength. And you shall love your neighbor as you love yourself (Matthew 22: 37, 39).

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