

Recollecting The Stages of Ascension:
Plato's *Symposium* 211C3-D1

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In Plato's *Symposium*, Socrates tells us the meaning of *eros* or "love" according to the instruction he received long ago from Diotima, the female prophetess from Mantinea. That recollection of a conversation unfolds the doctrine that *eros* characterizes human nature; our fundamental condition is constituted by being *endeos*, "lacking," we are incomplete.¹ The Socratic encomium, in the form of a dialogue, recounts the steps by which human beings ascend to grasp the nature of Beauty in-itself (*kath' hauto*); it is this pursuit in which our erotic nature seeks completion, the overcoming of lacking. As one ascends the steps on a stairway, so Socrates recollects the steps of progress outlined by Diotima, at *Symposium* 211C3-D1.²

...from one [beautiful body] to two, and from two to all beautiful bodies; and from beautiful bodies to beautiful institutions, from beautiful institutions to beautiful learning (*mathemata*), and finally from learning to that particular learning which is no other than that of beauty itself; so that finally one comes to know the very essence of beauty.

Concerning this passage I would like to make three points: (I) the dialectical ascent bears a very similar structure to the ascent presented in the Divided Line at *Republic* 509Cff;³ (II) the stages or steps of dialectical ascent are represented precisely by the order of speakers--each step is presented successively by Phaedrus, Pausanius, Eryximachus, Aristophanes, Agathon, (and Socrates); and (III) it is curious to note that since Socrates claims to be merely recollecting these instructions from long ago, and these instructions exactly parallel the successive contributions by the symposiasts, we wonder just what Plato was up to by employing this sort of literary device in which Socrates recollects precisely what has proceeded him, although he makes no such pretense.

I

There can be no doubt that the *Republic* and the *Symposium* are closely related and frequently draw upon each other. One connection which has not been vigorously pursued in the scholarly literature is the relation between the stages of ascent in the *Symposium* and the Divided Line of the *Republic*.

The Divided Line, as I have discussed elsewhere,⁵ enumerates a certain

structure of reality. That structure has two main divisions, each of which is further subdivided. The main division is between the "Sensible" and the "Intelligible"; some objects of experience are grasped by and through the senses, other objects are grasped by the intellect alone. Of the object grasped by the senses, some are mere images while others are the physical objects which cast the images. Of the objects grasped by the intellect, some are discursive objects like triangles and circles, while others are Forms or Ideas, the essences of these intellectual projection, such as triangularity, circularity, and so on, which are unitary. The distinction between the objects of Intellect and the objects of Sense consists in the difference of temporal status. The objects grasped by the intellect are not changing; they are never physical or material objects, or their projection in images. And these distinctions between objects are seen within the context of varying faculties or modes of apprehending these objects. As one ascends from the lower-order or sense-knowledge to the Form-itself, a transformation is required in our mode of access to objects. The experience of different objects runs parallel to the employment of different sorts of conscious states.

The Divided Line, when represented graphically, appears as follows:

	(Faculty)	(Object)	Level
Intelligible	<i>Noesis</i> (Intellection)	Form or Idea(<i>eidos, idea</i>)	4
	<i>Dianoia</i> (Thinking)	Objects of Learning (<i>mathemata</i>)	3
Sensible	<i>Pistis</i> (Belief)	Physical Objects (<i>zoa</i>)	2
	<i>Eikasia</i> (Imagination)	Images (<i>eikones</i>)	1

This paradigm, which is essentially epistemological, recognizes that stages of ascension, whereby increasingly richer values of objects are exposed, are made possible by corresponding changes in the structure of cognition. The mechanics of this transformation are beyond our considerations here.

The ascension in the *Symposium* agrees, to a substantial degree, with the structure outlined in the *Republic* but adds steps of transition between the four levels, hence:

		(Level)
pursuit of Beauty alone	Beauty itself	4
beautiful institutions	<i>Beautiful learning</i> (<i>mathemata</i>)	3
two beautiful bodies	Beautiful bodies	2
	(one) Beautiful body	1

For now, all that I want to say is that if we begin by noting a correspondence

between the awareness of Beauty itself and the awareness of the Form itself--both are level 4--the next level down is characterized by *mathemata* in both models. Level 1, the grasping of one beautiful body is clearly the grasping of a "sensible" object, as is the apprehension of all beautiful bodies, level 2. The move from one beautiful body to all beautiful bodies is made by way of viewing more than one beautiful body, namely "two" and recognizing that one and the same name, "beauty," can be applied to more than one object. This is the transition to the first stage of comprehending One over Many. The transition from beautiful bodies to beautiful objects grasped by the mind, that is beautiful objects of learning, is made possible by the recognition of institutions and customs, none of which are bodily but are conceptually grasped by reflecting upon bodily actions. Institutions and customs are intelligible objects; they exhibit the set of rules by which bodies are organized and guided. Finally, the transition to Beauty itself, level 4, from the intellect's grasp of many beautiful (discursive) thoughts, marks the last stage of ascension.

Having set out, in a rudimentary fashion, some basic structural similarities in the stages of ascension, I will proceed to consider these structures in the context of the dialogue.

II

The instructions for dialectical ascent given by Diotima to Socrates at *Symposium* 211C3-D1 turn out to be a terse summary of the order of progress made by the succession of speakers. Phaedrus' cosmogonical encomium begins by introducing the notion that *eros* is "one."⁶ That this is the case is clearly shown by the opening remark of Pausanius whose speech is presented next. Pausanius corrects Phaedrus' speech by noting that it would be all well and good if there were only one *eros*, but since there are "two" we must first determine which ought to be praised and why.⁷ Eryximachus, our next speaker, is the physician who represents the medical *techne*; he espouses the view that love, like disease, is bodily and the cure is always physical.⁸ The first three speakers, all avowed homosexuals, attempt to defend their erotic appetite in a manner which regards the human condition as fundamentally physical. Since, as all the speakers agree, there is something lacking in the human condition, the overcoming of lacking is restrictedly physical. Their purely material view of reality, at the same time, prohibits their generation of anything physical; homosexuality--the attraction of Likes--evidentially does not lead to progeneration.⁹ As such, these first three speeches project for us the dilemma of the "Sensible" world removed from the context of the "Intelligible."

Aristophanes speaks after Eryximachus; like Moses, he can see the promised land but cannot enter it. Aristophanes can see the intelligible, but his sensible appetite prohibits him from gaining any more than a vision at a distance. In this respect, Aristophanes marks the transition from the sensible to the intelligible.

Originally scheduled to speak after Pausanius, Aristophanes changes the conventional order of succession due to an unexpected occurrence in nature: Aristophanes comes down with a case of the hiccoughs. Immediately before, Pausanius distinguished between two kinds of correctness: what is correct by "convention" and what is correct by "nature." Pausanius wants to change the legal conventions which impose harsh restrictions on the practice of homosexuality, a practice which he believes is sanctioned by nature. So, by an act of nature, Aristophanes comes down with a case of hiccoughs; the hiccoughs arise from his gastronomic indulgence, the very indulgence which obscures his vision. Still with a hangover from the night before, the gluttonous Aristophanes is cured by the medical *techne* of Eryximachus. But, in the process, the conventional order of speakers is changed, resulting in Aristophanes speaking after the physician Eryximachus (whose name means "fighter of hiccoughs"). This change of convention, however, puts together those who belong together by nature: Phaedrus, Pausanius, Eryximachus. Aristophanes praises the Olympian gods, the gods of the city whose decrees underlie the conventional laws of the polis, laws which acrimoniously oppose homosexual practices. The first three speakers praise the pre-Olympian or Uranian gods who arise from an *eros* that has no parents (Phaedrus' speech),¹⁰ and is properly in the form, not of a woman but, of a young boy (Pausanius' speech).¹¹ Aristophanes, unlike the physician who treats the human condition--our "lacking" which is dis-ease--in an exclusively bodily manner, foresees the gods, not man, as the power that cures our alienated condition. In promulgating the doctrine of the *androgynē*, that the original human condition being whole underwent a transformation at the hands of the surgeon Apollo, resulting in our being cut in half, by nature Aristophanes belongs with Agathon and Socrates in forming the second trilogy. It is the appeal outside of our bodily perspective which provides the hope of overcoming our human sickness. The illness diagnosed as alienation; we are not whole, we are cut off. *Eros* or love names the project of becoming whole again, if it is possible, of overcoming this constitutive "lacking." Unfortunately, Aristophanes, the glutton, has been infected by the very bodily limits which prevents his ascension to the promised land. Nevertheless, he can see outside the merely sensible to intelligible value of objects.

Agathon properly reveals himself as the spokesman for *dianoia* in his opening words. There he says, first I am going to tell you what I am going to tell you about, and then I am going to tell you.¹² Agathon distinguishes between form and content, precisely the character of *dianoia*. When the distinction between form and content has been made apparent, the transition to isolating the "Form" is clearly the next order of business. The transition to the Form, the thing in-itself (*kath' hauto*) is Socrates' contribution; the transition is effected by re-collecting the stages of progress and bringing it all together, for only then can we grasp One over Many.

The discovered unity is the thread which holds many things together. The more things coherently held together, the greater the discovery of unity.

Now, in summary, if we characterize the four levels of the Divided Line (from lowest to highest) as (1) Mythic: an image or likely account; (2) Technic: a knowing-how; (3) Dianoetic: a knowing-what; (4) Noetic: a knowing-why; the model of ascension in the *Symposium* can be accommodated as follows. Phaedrus first presents us with the Mythic view, the cosmogony of *eros*. Eryximachus, the physician and practitioner of the medical *techné*, speaks on behalf of all those with know-how, those who practice a skill or art. The transition from Mythic to Technic levels is made by Pausanias who straddles the fence between the correction of Phaedrus' cosmology and the physicians' *techné* natural law; Pausanias wants to change the law to bring convention in touch with nature (as he sees it), the specific project of all *techné*. Agathon, distinguishing between form and content, is the proponent of *dianoia*; Aristophanes marks the transition to that level by recognizing that there is something other than content which illuminates content--there is something outside our material condition. Finally, Socrates brings together the preceding stages of transition stages of transition and displays something of the discovery of Form by the discovery he shares which is not only something in-itself (*kath' hauto*) but the very something which the earlier speakers sought.

	<i>Symposium</i>	<i>Divided Line</i>		Level
Socrates	Beauty itself	Noetic	Intellection: Form	4
Aristophanes	Agathon	Dianoetic	Thinking: <i>Mathemata</i>	3
Pausanias	Eryximachus	Technic	Belief: Physical objs.	2
	Phaedrus	Mythic	Imagination: Images	1

III

What remains for us now is the final weaving together of these strands; we wonder why Plato chooses to have Socrates recollect instructions about *eros* which at the same time recollects the stages of ascent of the previous ascension of speakers.

Plato's *Symposium* is a dialogue presented to the reader as the overhearing of a recollection of a recollection; the object of recollection is a symposium which takes place in 416 B.C. the evening after Agathon won the victory at the dramatic contests. The dialogue that we overhear is set not earlier than twelve years after the event or 404 B.C.¹³ If, as is likely, the symposium depicted was not factual, that is, an historical event, then what is the purpose of attempting to recollect the details of an event which never transpired? And if Plato merely wanted to set out a theory of *eros* or love, then why not tell us directly? The historical date is set so clearly, the

topic is quintessentially important, so why the convoluted structure of the dialogue?

The dialogue on *eros* is a statement that the human condition is one constituted by lacking; we are all *endeés*. In terms of the dialogue, each speech presents something vital for our ascension but each is "lacking" (N.B. The Alcibiades speech which follows that of Socrates reminds us of the deficiency of Socrates' speech as well). In the human condition, we are "lacking" but we are not lacking something outside of ourselves, but something "inside" as it were, which somehow has been forgotten and needs to be recollected. The *Symposium* seeks to show us the movement, the ascension to a discovery by which human beings overcome an essential lacking. We are cut-off, not from the historical events, but as odd as it may seem, from something deep within ourselves, native to us, to which we have a natural right or claim, and yet (if we do have such a hidden nature) we evidently have forgotten it. The business of the *Symposium* is not merely to speak of ascension, that is to progressively recollect our own nature which we have somehow forgotten, but to show that process of recollection to us. Socrates' speech purports not merely to recollect a conversation long ago but at the same time instructs us of the unity which binds together the previous speakers, and illustrates for us that the discovery consists in the realization of our own internal dialogue--on this reading, "Diotima" whose name means "the honor of Zeus" is as fictional a personage as is the historicity of the dinner party. But, it is the engagement of the male (Socrates) with the female (Diotima) which makes the transition possible. Our search for a hidden self is the search for what is *Like* and *Unlike* us: like us for all who else is it but *me!*, and unlike us for if it were my present awareness I would already remember and so would not seek this "other self" because I would not lack it. It is the awareness, however vague, that something "other" remains to be recalled, that something is yet lacking, which gives us the *modus operandi* in the ascension of this self-overcoming. Insisting on a dialogue, then, as the means for unearthing the meaning of *eros* or love, Socrates resorts not merely to dialogue but a recollection--which provides the pedagogical method--and the content of that recollection is not only the stages of ascension but also a set of stages by which Plato mirrors, by re-collection, the stages of ascension in that dialogue: a whole within a whole.¹⁴ For all those who see the Platonic enterprise as the search for the knowable Form which determines material content, so here we have more evidence for the importance of the study of the dramatic "form" as instructive for the philosophical content.¹⁵

NOTES

1. Cf. the important article, L.A. Kosman, "Platonic Love," in W.W. Werkmeister, ed., *Facets of Plato's Philosophy*. Supplementary vol. II, *Phronesis*. Assen: Van Gorcum, 1976, pp. 53-69. Cf. also my review of this book, *The Journal of the History of Philosophy*, vol. XIX, no. 2, April 1981, pp. 242-245.

2. Plato, *Symposium*. 211C3-D1.

3. Cf. the more detailed account in my article, "A Note on Plato's Divided Line," in *The Journal of the History of Philosophy*, vol. XXI, no. 2, April 1983, pp. 235-237.

4. On the philosophical issues of literary style, cf. V. Brochard, "Sur le 'Banquet' de Platon," *Etudes de Philosophie Ancienne et de Philosophie Moderne*, Paris, 1954; R.G. Bury, *The Symposium of Plato*, Cambridge, 1932; G.D. de Vries, "Apollodore dans le 'Banquet' de Platon," *Revue des Etudes Grecques*, 48 (1935); K.J. Dover, "The Date of Plato's Symposium," *Phronesis* 10 (1965); P. Friedlander, *Plato: The Dialogue, Second and Third Periods*, vol. 3, Princeton, 1969, pp. 3-34; R.A. Markus, "The Dialectic of Eros in Plato's Symposium," *Downside Review*, LXXIII (1955); H.G. Gadamer, *Platos dialektische Ethik*, Leipzig, 1931; K. Gaiser, *Platons ungeschriebene Philosophie*, Stuttgart, 1963; H.J. Kramer, *Arete bei Platon und Aristoteles*, Heidelberg, 1959; S. Rosen, *Plato's Symposium*, New Haven, 1967.

5. Cf. note 3; also "Material Causality, Non-Being, and Plato's hypodochē: A Re-View of the *Timaeus* in terms of the Divided Line," in *Apeiron*. vol. 27/2 1979, pp. 103-111.

6. Eros is the oldest of the gods, on Phaedrus' view; the appeal is to the pre-Olympian or Uranian gods, whom Phaedrus believes preserves the permissibility of his passive homosexual practice. The opening sets *genesis* against *generation* [178a6-b3] Phaedrus, the "father of the *logos*" [177d6], is hardly a "father" in the physical sense. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates notes that he has generated more discourse than anyone except perhaps Simmias of Cebes.

7. *Symposium*, 180c7-8. Since there are two Aphrodites, there must (!) be two eroses. There is little compelling in this logic. Following the lead of his teacher, Prodicus, author of the *Choice of Herakles* in which virtue is praised and vice condemned, he transforms the two women of Prodicus' analysis into two boys, bi-sexual and homosexual eros. Like Phaedrus, his encomium seeks to defend his erotic homosexual appetite, not by praising the antiquity of eros but by arguing in favor of changing the laws, in order to permit his sexual practice. Like Prodicus, he contrasts nature with convention and desire, by linguistic contrivance to support "pre-Olympian" nature in order to change the legal convention.

8. Curiously enough, Eryximachus, the lover of Phaedrus, seeks to commend the doctrine like loves like, although his cure of Aristophanes' hiccoughs, as Aristophanes' notes, is based upon the harmony of opposites, or like loves unlike [189a1-6].

9. Phaedrus' speech ends with the word *teleutesasin* [180b12], "departed." The natural consequence of an exclusively homosexual love is the annihilation of the entire species. I take this to be Plato's radical critique of homosexual practice. Cf. the treatment in the *Laws*, where homosexual practice is declared contrary to nature, "a crime caused by the failure to control desire" [636a-c], it undermines "courage" [836d-e], and is directly connected with murdering the human race [838e-839b]. Cf. the detailed examination in K.J. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*, Harvard U.P. 1978, esp. II,C,5.

10. *Symposium* 178b2.

11. *ibid.* 181c3-4.

12. *ibid.* 194e3-4.

13. I am convinced by M. Nussbaum's argument. Glaucon, the businessman, wonders about the "symposium" in which Agathon, Socrates, and Alcibiades were present, as if it could be a recent event. Alcibiades dies in 404 B.C., and we could expect that the community of Athenian businessmen would surely know of this event, as soon as it became public knowledge. Since Glaucon does not know, nor is the a statement to this effect from Apollodorus, a guess of ca. 404 B.C. shortly before Alcibiades' death seems like a good one indeed. Cf. M.C. Nussbaum, "The Speech of Alcibiades," in *Philosophy in Literature*, vol. 6/3, pp. 131-172.

14. The dialogue is recollected for us by Apollodorus, whose own declarations make it clear that he does not understand what he is saying. Engaging in philosophy has made Socrates happy, but not Apollodorus who considers himself in the most wretched state of all, and Glaucon seems to agree [173c-e3]. Apollodorus recollects the recollection of Aristodemus who, although present, does not speak; Xenophon, in the *Memorabilia* shows Socrates criticizing Aristodemus for his deficiency in public piety. Aristodemus is an atheist, no wonder he fails to praise divine eros [book I, ch. 4]. We are continually reminded that the encomia we overhear are not memorized precisely, and so the recollections are themselves deficient—esp. 174a, 178a, but elsewhere as well. I am supposing that the deficient recollectors forgetfulness leads to the reader's self-recollection. In forgetting the supposedly factual, we are drawn to the truly actual.

15. For a different but valuable approach cf. J. Moravcsik, "Reason and Eros in the Ascent Passages of the *Symposium*," in J. Anton and G. Kustas, eds. *Essay in Ancient Greek Philosophy*, Albany, 1972, pp. 285-302.