

With one clear exception, prior to the arrival of Alcibiades, Eryximachus' left-to-right order is followed until all those present have spoken (214c2). The clear exception is Aristophanes.²⁶ He should have spoken after Pausanias, but he got the hiccups, and so yielded his turn to Eryximachus, who praises orderly, harmonious, pious, temperate love, while condemning "the Pandemotic Eros of the many-tuned Muse Polyhymnia."²⁷ Comedy, which Aristophanes represents, is thus presented as a backward turn, a step in as anti-philosophical a direction as the "satyr play—or rather Silenus play" of Alcibiades (222d3–4). As in real life, so in the *Symposium*, neither Aristophanes nor Alcibiades is a true friend or lover of Socrates.

I said at the beginning that Alcibiades' portrait of Socrates is the theatrical apogee of the *Symposium*. That we find it so is a measure of how interesting we find Socrates as a person, and "human affairs" more generally—how much we like laughter, intoxication, disorder. It is an interest that aligns us with the anonymous friends of Apollodorus whose desire to hear about what happened at Agathon's house results, as we are invited to suppose, in our interest being gloriously satisfied. Yet the *Symposium*, of which the story of Apollodorus and his friends is a part, diagnoses that interest as dangerously un-philosophical, as potentially an interest in the wrong things. It isn't Socrates we should be interested in, but philosophy and the forms. Alcibiades' speech is filled with human interest. There is no doubt about that. Yet, as neither *euporōs* nor *ephexēs* nor *epi dexia*, it is the work of an unreliable narrator—the product of a life which, torn between shame and the desire for the approval of the masses (216b3–6), self-confessedly does not itself run well (*ēporoun*, 219e3). In part because of the conceptual-density of the term *agalmata* and the skill with which Plato exploits it, however, there is a reading of the speech in which the image it presents of Socrates is uncannily correct. Socrates and his arguments do have *agalmata* of virtue in them. Just not ones that, like a randy lover's embryo-containing semen, are there for the easy taking. To get hold of *them*, you must change your life.

²⁶ The unclear case is Aristodemus, the narrator, who, because he is lying next to Eryximachus (175a3–5), should presumably have spoken after him had Aristophanes not take his turn.

²⁷ Note *kosmos* at 187a5, d5, 188a3, c3, 189a3.

Seven

Where is Socrates on the "Ladder of Love"?

Ruby Blondell

On the Road

WHERE IS [SOCRATES]?" Agathon asks Aristodemus, when the latter shows up at his house a couple of pages into Plato's *Symposium* (174c12). Later Alcibiades tacitly likens Socrates to Odysseus (220c), the archetypal wanderer, thus obliquely raising the question of where he is in his larger "travels."¹ Travel language runs through the *Symposium* from the first sentence (or more accurately, the second) to the last, when Socrates' intellectual and physical wanderings end at a (temporary) point of rest. Diotima's famous image of the "ladder of love" forms, as it were, the climax of this system of imagery.² In Greek texts generally, and Plato in particular, such images carry a complex set of associations, ranging over intellectual discovery, the sequential steps of an argument or narrative, education, the struggle for virtue (often on an uphill path), and the course of life itself.³ Travel with

¹ For Plato's Socrates as a wanderer, like the Homeric Odysseus, in search of his true "home", see Blondell 2002:158–159; cf. also Montiglio 2005:151–155. Alcibiades' particular allusions, to *Odyssey* iv 242 and 271, would suggest that Socrates is far from reaching home, since they both refer to events at Troy. The first reference is particularly suggestive in the context of the *Symposium*, since it tells of Odysseus disguising himself with a beggar's ugly exterior, which only one person (Helen) can see through (*Odyssey* iv 240–250). Socrates himself alludes to the *Odyssey* at 198b–c (cf. Rosen 1987:204).

² On the "ladder of love" as a mystic's journey, see especially Nightingale 2004:83–86. "Love" is an inadequate translation of the Greek *erōs* (see Halperin 1985:161–163). Moreover the ascent is more like a staircase than a ladder, since it leaves room on each step for company (which suits the Socratic model of "leadership," as we shall see) and suggests ascent to a temple and thus to divinity. But the traditional phrase remains more euphonious than "staircase of passionate desire."

³ See Montiglio 2005. As Nightingale has recently argued (2004), the theoric journey is of particular significance for philosophical inquiry. For the "path" of dialectic, cf. Nightingale 2004:108–

companions may also serve as a metaphor for various kinds of human relationship. The *Symposium's* pervasive travel imagery therefore sensitizes us to questions of metaphorical placement, intellectual or ethical progress, and philosophical relationship, questions that center especially on Socrates.

Like many Platonic dialogues the *Symposium* opens with a literal journey.⁴ In the frame dialogue Apollodorus recalls his trip from home to town in the company of Glaucon (172a–173b). This journey becomes a metaphor for interpersonal relationships and the pursuit of ideas, in part by becoming an opportunity to seek out and reiterate the ideas of others, most notably Socrates. It raises all the most basic questions that one might ask of such a journey: who is in front, who behind, who is moving, who is stationary, who wants to know and who can tell him, who is interested in philosophy and, above all, who is intimate, or even “in love,” with Socrates. The structure of this journey is a simple one. The follower catches up with the leader, and the two of them proceed together, the leader giving the follower a narrative of past events. There is an explicit contrast between this kind of orderly pursuit of a *telos*, which characterizes the philosophical life, and the random “running around” of the non-philosopher (172c–173a).⁵

This preliminary journey introduces the next one: Socrates' journey to the house of Agathon in the company of Aristodemus. Like Apollodorus' opening journey, but more fully and subtly, this too is a metaphor for human relationships and philosophical progress.⁶ This time, since Socrates is actually present, we receive a sketch of the philosopher as fellow traveler, one that underlines his autonomy both in choosing a destination and in proceeding towards it. Thus Socrates chose not to be present at yesterday's gathering, a decision illustrating his independence from social convention (174a). Similarly, by “spoiling” the proverb about party-crashing (174b–c) he shows a light-hearted disrespect for traditional wisdom, and by bringing along an uninvited guest he challenges symposiastic exclusivity and decorum,⁷ as Aristodemus' nervousness and embarrassment make clear. Socrates tries to

enroll Aristodemus in his own independent ways, suggesting that the two of them proceed autonomously (αὐτόματοι 174b5). Though he initially tells Aristodemus to “follow” him (174b2–3), he quotes Homer to suggest collaboration as equals: “going along the road together as a pair, we'll plan what we shall say” (174d2–3; note the dual). This cooperative approach to life, and discourse, is typical of Plato's Socrates.⁸ Aristodemus, however, will “follow” mechanically until the very end (223d10; cf. 172c5–6). Here in the prologue he refuses to take responsibility for himself, saying he will do whatever Socrates “orders” (174b2) and warning him that he will have to take responsibility for “leading” him to Agathon's (174c7–d1). Despite his enthusiasm for things Socratic, Aristodemus lacks his idol's chutzpah and is dubious about Socratic autonomy and collaboration as equals. These character traits are echoed in his inability to follow Socrates intellectually (cf. 223c6–d1).

Despite his collaborative proposal, however, Socrates ends up obliging Aristodemus to strike out on his own, upsetting the leader-follower hierarchy by falling behind and “ordering” Aristodemus to go on ahead (174d). Aristodemus will prove laughably bad at this enforced exercise in Socratic autonomy and unwanted leadership, failing to notice that he has left Socrates behind and feeling ridiculous upon arriving without him (174d–e). When he is “led” in by a slave (174e3) Agathon asks him why he is not “leading” Socrates (174e8). Aristodemus has apparently failed as a “leader,” since unbeknownst to him, Socrates is not “following” (174e10). Though “left behind,” Socrates has not become a follower in the way that Aristodemus expected. Whatever role he takes, he handles the situation on his own terms, proceeding autonomously even when Aristodemus is leading the way, and at the same time “leading” Aristodemus by suggesting a destination and then encouraging him to strike out towards it on his own.

For a brief period no one knows where Socrates is—a slave must be sent to find him (174e–175a). Only then do we find out that he has been standing in a neighbor's doorway, resisting any invitation to come in (175a7–9), with his mind (*nous*) only on himself (174d). He has stopped moving, standing still on the road as he sometimes does, according to Aristodemus (175b). The situation is *atopos*, “strange,” or more literally “out of place,”⁹ at least in the view

110. The “journey” of narrative is also of particular interest in the context of the *Symposium's* complex narrative structure (cf. e.g. διελθεῖν x 3 at 201d–e).

⁴ Cf. Blondell 2002:64. On the opening journey of the *Symposium* and its relevance to the ascent, cf. Osborne 1994:86–90.

⁵ Cf. also the “going around” and random encounters of the non-philosophical lover (209b), and Alcibiades' “going around” in a state of *aporia* after Socrates rejects him sexually (219e). On the interplay between directed travel, wandering, and rest in Plato, see Montiglio 2005:163–179.

⁶ Cf. Lowenstam 1985:87; Osborne 1994:90–91, 97–98 (though their interpretations differ from mine).

⁷ On which cf. Stehle 1997:218.

⁸ Cf. Blondell 2002:120–121. At *Protagoras* 348d–e he uses the same quotation from Homer to express both kinds of cooperation.

⁹ Though *atopos* primarily means “strange”—having lost most of its spatial sense—Plato reactivates its association with (intellectual) wandering by linking it with Socrates' signature state of mental *aporia*. See further Blondell 2002:73–74; Nightingale 2004:105–107; cf. also Montiglio 2005:154–155, 170.

of Agathon, who wants to put a stop to it by sending someone (presumably a slave) to fetch him (175a10–11). Aristodemus warns that Socrates must not be “led in” by another (175a–b). He must be left to come in of his own volition. Aristodemus *thinks* he will arrive at some point (175b2–3), but cannot be certain. Nevertheless, Agathon keeps wanting to send for him (175c2–4). He wants to do away with Socrates’ strangeness, his odd location, and *place* him in a conventional space and conventional set of relationships: he should be at dinner with his friends, not lurking solipsistically in doorways. When Socrates does finally arrive, in his own good time, it is half way through dinner (175c). This shows not only his general lack of interest in bodily needs and appetites, but a willingness to participate in social institutions, to follow others and respect conventional destinations, only on his own unconventional terms.

This opening scene, with its literal journey to Agathon’s house, foreshadows questions that we will want to ask of Socrates in connection with the more profound, figurative journey of the “ladder of love.” We will want to know not only where he is, but where he is going (and whether he will ever arrive), who (if anyone) is leading him, and whom (if anyone) he is leading. The journey to Agathon’s also adumbrates answers to such questions: Socrates covers a good deal of ground, but is sometimes in an unknown (and potentially unknowable) place; he is equally capable of leading, following, collaborating and proceeding autonomously; whatever role he may take, he goes only where he pleases, and encourages others, such as Aristodemus, to do the same; in the end, he arrives; but although the location of his body can (eventually) be determined at any given moment, the location and activity of his mind or soul cannot—at least not always.

Just as Socrates plays several roles on this literal journey, he also takes on the whole range of identities associated with Diotima’s ladder. The most important of these is, of course, the role of the *erastēs*—the one who proceeds “correctly” in such matters. The perfect *erastēs* is presumably to be identified with the anthropomorphized Eros, in so far as the latter is a lover, as opposed to an object of desire (204c). Diotima’s Eros notoriously resembles Socrates himself,¹⁰ thereby suggesting that he too is ascending the ladder as an ideal *erastēs*. This is clearly adumbrated in the opening scene, in which Socrates proceeds on the road towards beauty and goodness as embodied in the beautiful Agathon, whose name means “good.”¹¹ But Socrates is also the beautiful human

object of desire. He has made himself “beautiful” by bathing and donning sandals, thus inviting comparison between his own beauty and Agathon’s (174a). We even hear that on the previous day he “escaped” from Agathon, like a beloved fleeing his pursuer (174a),¹² again signaling his desirability and hinting at the reversal of erotic roles with Alcibiades that is to come.¹³

Diotima’s ladder also involves a third person, the mysterious leader.¹⁴ As we saw, Aristodemus’ opening narrative dramatizes the difference between Socratic leadership and the kind that calls for a passive, dog-like follower. Socrates’ attitude towards his companion there foreshadows his response to Alcibiades when the latter tries to seduce him: “planning in the time to come we shall do whatever seems best to both of us” (219a8–b2; note the dual, echoing 174d2). In contrast to the passive education exemplified by tradition and the sophists, Socrates’ “leadership” is a collaborative enterprise in which the leader encourages the follower to figure things out for herself.¹⁵ Qua embodiment of Eros,¹⁶ he “leads” by means of dialectic, as exemplified in his elenchus of Agathon. This—not personal authority—is the means by which he exerts “compulsion” (216a4–5; cf. 201c, 216b3–4, b6), even on those like Alcibiades who cannot “follow” him properly (223d3–7).¹⁷ This dialectical compulsion evokes the “compulsion” that drives the ascent (cf. 210c3). This too is collaborative. When Diotima declares that the lover will “go or be led” (211c), the “or” is not exclusive.¹⁸ Rather, the right kind of “leading” results in “going” of one’s own accord and volition, as with the combination of discipline and autonomy in the higher education of the guardians in the *Republic*.¹⁹

Alcibiades will speak of Socrates’ resistance to being led or won over erotically (προσαγαγόμεν 219d8), and of his autonomy over his own movements in defiance of “normal” behavior (cf. 220b4), both features that we

¹² The diction (διέφυγον) suggests this connotation (cf. e.g. Sappho 1.21).

¹³ On Socrates as the beautiful *erōmenos*, see especially Lowenstam 1985:98–100.

¹⁴ Referred to variously as the ἡγούμενος (Step 1 in my summary below), “leader” (implied at Step 5 and in the reprise) and *paidagōgos* (Step 7, 210e3).

¹⁵ Blondell 2002:95–101; cf. also Burnyeat 1977:9. On the Socratic character of the guide, see Sheffield 2001a:17–18.

¹⁶ In Aristophanes’ speech Eros is the ἡγεμὼν and στρατηγός (193b1). In Agathon’s he is a leader and teacher (197a), the ἡγεμὼν whom we should all follow (197d–e). For Phaedrus, Eros implants the sense of shame that should lead us (178c).

¹⁷ Alcibiades’ misunderstanding of Socrates’ collaborative proposal (219b) betrays an intellectual passivity that parallels that of Aristodemus: he views Socrates’ advice as “ordering” (216b4, 217a2) and desires simply to “hear” his inner wisdom (217a5).

¹⁸ Pace Ferrari, who thinks the leader is optional (1992:257). This seems most unlikely considering the heavy emphasis on the “leader” throughout the ascent (cf. Rowe 1998a:ad loc.).

¹⁹ See Blondell 2002:214–216.

¹⁰ For the textual evidence, see Bury 1932:lx–lxii. The equation has been much discussed (see e.g. Robin 1908:194–196, 1958:ci–cviii; Anderson 1993:101–103; Osborne 1994:93–101; Hadot 2002:42–50). But Socrates also differs from Eros in significant respects, as we shall see.

¹¹ There are many puns on his name, the most overt of which is at 174b4.

have seen foreshadowed in the opening scene. Yet these traits do not prevent him from himself “following” the right kind of leader in the right kind of way (cf. 210a4). He seeks out Diotima for enlightenment, just as others such as Aristodemus seek him out, impelled by *erōs* (173b; cf. 206b).²⁰ She adopts a bossy tone appropriate to a *paidagōgos* (esp. 204b1; also 201e10, 202a5–6). But despite her commanding style (and slightly acerbic tongue),²¹ her mode of “leadership” turns out to be uncannily similar to Socrates’ own pedagogical methods.²² He even seems to have learned from her the most characteristic of those methods, as exemplified in the elenchus of Agathon (201e). She supposedly “taught” him through question and answer, showing him his own ignorance just as he shows Agathon his.²³ In another familiar Socratic move, she even places herself in the position of learner (along with Socrates), vis à vis an imaginary and more knowledgeable questioner (204d), suggesting that she has attained her exalted wisdom in part by learning from others dialectically, in the same way that Socrates learns from her, and others such as Agathon learn from him. Socrates’ self-substitution for Agathon in his conversation with Diotima signals that he too is one who can both lead and be led, as he demonstrates by jauntily switching roles to suit his purpose (201d).

It seems clear enough, then, that Plato encourages us to identify Socrates with all the roles connected with the ladder, which in turn echo the relationships sketched in the literal journey to Agathon’s house. But the main focus of Diotima’s attention—and of Plato’s—is the *erastēs*. Socrates is clearly to be identified with this figure. But just how far should we take him to have progressed in his ascent? At the time of his acquaintance with Diotima he has obviously not attained the vision of the Form of Beauty; but certain moments in his speech manifestly provoke us to speculate how far he may have proceeded in the twenty-five years between their conversations and the dinner party at which they are recalled (cf. 210a, 211d3–4, 212b).²⁴ In short, Plato strongly invites us to put the question of my title to his text, and scholars have not

²⁰ Note the suggestive verb φοιτάω, which can be used as a euphemism for sex (cf. e.g. *Republic* 390c).

²¹ Cf. Blondell 1992:130; Rutherford 1995:192.

²² She incorporates aspects of both the elenctic and the constructive Socrates (cf. Blondell 1992:129–130; for the terminology, see Blondell 2002:10–11).

²³ Like an elenctic victim Socrates (as “Agathon”) starts with the beliefs held by “everyone” (202b) or the many (203c7).

²⁴ The reference to the plague (201d) seems to indicate that Diotima was in Athens around 440, from which most commentators infer that her conversations with Socrates are imagined to have taken place around that time (whether or not the relationship is entirely fictional, as I take it to be). Anton 1974 speculates on Socrates’ erotic/philosophical development over this period of time.

been slow to take the bait. I therefore turn now to examine this central question in greater detail.

Room at the Top

I begin with an analysis of the steps of the ladder as outlined by Diotima at 210a–212a, with the reprise of 211b–d interwoven into the summary (and also summarized separately beneath it). I have highlighted the linguistic markers that underpin my analysis of the ladder’s structure.

STEP 1 (210a4–8): The one going correctly (ὀρθῶς) towards this matter must (δεῖ) begin while young to go towards beautiful bodies, and FIRST (πρῶτον), if the one leading him (ἡγούμενος) leads correctly (ὀρθῶς), be in love with (ἐρᾶν) one body and there give birth to (γεννᾶν) beautiful λόγοι. [Reprise A: start from the beauty of one body (211c3).]

STEP 2 (210a8–b6): NEXT (ἔπειτα) he must [δεῖ] recognize (κατανοῆσαι) for himself²⁵ that the beauty of any body at all is twin (ἀδελφόν) to the beauty of any other body, and that if one must (δεῖ) pursue (διώκειν) what is beautiful in form (εἶδει), it is great foolishness (ἄνοια) not to consider (ἡγεῖσθαι) the beauty of all bodies to be one and the same, and realizing (ἐννοήσαντα) this, he must [δεῖ] become (καταστῆναι) an ἐραστής of all beautiful bodies, and slacken from that vehement *erōs* for a single body, despising it (καταφρονήσαντα) and considering it (ἡγησάμενον) something slight (σικρόν). [Reprise B & C: from beauty of one body to two, and from two to many (211c3–4).]

STEP 3 (210b6–c3): AFTER THIS (μετὰ ταῦτα) he must [δεῖ] consider (ἡγήσασθαι) the beauty in souls more precious (τιμιώτερον) than that in the body, so that (ὥστε) if someone (τις) who is even reasonably attractive (ἐπιεικής) in soul has even a slight [bodily] bloom, this suffices for him and he is in love with and cares about (κῆδεσθαι) [that person] and gives birth to (τίκτειν) and seeks²⁶ λόγοι of a kind that will make young men better (βελτίους) ... [This step absent from the reprise.]

STEP 4 (210c4–6): ... SO THAT (ἵνα) NEXT (αὖ) he may be forced (ἀναγκασθῇ) to gaze upon (θεάσασθαι) the beauty in activities and νόμοι and see (ἰδεῖν) that this is all akin (συγγενές) to itself, so that (ἵνα) he may consider (ἡγήσεται) the beauty that concerns the body to be something slight (σικρόν). [Reprise D: from beauty of bodies to beauty of activities (211c4–5).]

²⁵ See Rowe 1998a:ad loc. for a defense of this interpretation of αὐτόν.

²⁶ For defense of the text here, see Sier 1997:276; Rowe 1998a:ad loc. (and cf. his note on 210d4–6).

STEP 5 (210c6–7): AFTER (μετά) activities [he] must [δεῖ] lead [him] (ἀγαγεῖν) to the [various] kinds of knowledge, so that (ἵνα) he may see NEXT (αὖ) the beauty of kinds of knowledge... [Reprise E: from beauty of activities to beauty of kinds of learning (211c5–6).]

STEP 6 (210c7–d6): ... and AT THIS POINT (ἤδη) looking towards beauty that is abundant, may no longer be worthless (φαῦλος) and petty (σικρολόγος) in his servitude, feeling affection (ἀγαπῶν) like a slave, for the beauty of some individual boy or other person or single activity, but being turned towards the great sea of beauty and gazing at it (θεωρῶν) may give birth to (τίκτει) numerous beautiful and magnificent (μεγαλοπρεπεῖς) λόγοι and thoughts (διανοήματα) in unstinting philosophy ... [This step absent from the reprise.]

STEP 7 (210d6–211b5): ... UNTIL (ἕως) strengthened and increased there, he catches sight of (κατίδῃ) a certain kind of knowledge which is one, whose object is beauty of the following kind ... For whoever is guided (παιδαγωγῇ) until this point concerning τὰ ἐρωτικά, gazing (θεώμενος) at beautiful things in order (ἐφεξῆς) and correctly (ὀρθῶς), coming now (ἤδη) to the end/goal (τέλος) of τὰ ἐρωτικά will suddenly catch sight of (κατόψεται) something amazingly (θαυμαστόν) beautiful in its nature, the very thing for the sake of which all the previous labors [were undertaken] ...; and beauty will no longer appear to him (φαντασθήσεται) like some face or hands or anything else that the body shares in, or some λόγος or some kind of knowledge, nor as being in anything other [than itself], such as an animal, the earth or the sky, or anything else ... [This step absent from the reprise.]

STEP 8 (211b5–c1; 211c7–d1; 212a2–7): When someone going up away from these things by means of correct παιδραστεῖν begins to see *that* beauty, the END/GOAL (τέλος) is pretty much within his grasp. For this is to approach τὰ ἐρωτικά correctly (ὀρθῶς) or be led by someone else ... [omitting reprise A–E] ... [reprise Γ]: from kinds of understanding to end up (τελευτῆσαι) at the kind of understanding that is the understanding of nothing other than that very beauty, so that he may understand (γνῶ) in the end (τελευτῶν) what beauty itself is ... There alone will it happen to him, seeing beauty with the kind of vision with which it is visible, to give birth (τίκτειν) not to images (εἰδωλα) of excellence, since he is not grasping an image, but to true things, since he is grasping truth; and after giving birth to (τεκόντι) true excellence and rearing it (θρεψαμένῳ) it is his to be god-loved, and himself immortal as far as any mortal can be.

REPRISE (211b7–d1)

- A One body (211c3)
- B Two bodies (211c3)
- C All bodies (211c5)
- D Activities (211c5)
- E Kinds of learning (μαθήματα) (211c6)
- F The μάθημα of beauty itself (211c6–d1)

On which of these steps does Plato envisage Socrates as standing? I shall examine each in turn, beginning with the summit (Step 8), the climactic level at which the successful lover gazes upon the Form of Beauty itself. Since the form exists outside space and time,²⁷ it is not comparable to, or on a level with (κατά), beautiful objects or people (211d3–5). It is perceptible only with the mind or soul (212a3). Those who can gaze upon it by such means (θεάομαι 211d2, d7, 212a2; cf. 210c3, e3) will give birth to true *aretē*, not mere images of it, and become “god-loved” and as immortal (i.e. divine) as a human can be (212a). The successful lover is alone at the top.²⁸ The leader has evaporated, since the destination has been attained. The love-object is now the Form itself (cf. *Republic* 490a–b, 501d), which has replaced all previous objects of desire. The lover no longer has need of other human beings—or indeed of anything in the material world—to inspire his procreativity. The metaphor of raising a child is carried over from its initial appearance in the “lesser mysteries” (210a6; cf. 209c), but there is no longer any sign of a second human parent (or foster-parent).²⁹ Moreover since the lover is now producing true *aretē*, instead of mere (verbal) “images,”³⁰ he no longer needs anyone to listen to his words. Accordingly, there is no sign of discourse at the summit.³¹ Presumably, “true” virtue is a state of soul that causes one to act virtuously with full and complete understanding of the “beauty” and excellence of one’s deeds. Since the philosopher cannot exist permanently in the contemplation of the

²⁷ Cf. Rowe 1998a on 211a7–b8.

²⁸ I am all too aware that this claim will not meet with universal agreement. Rowe and Price, for example, believe that the individual beloved boy remains a presence all the way up the ladder to the top (Rowe 1998b:257; Price 1997:52–54). But *pace* e.g. Rowe 1998a:ad loc., Price 1997:48, 259, the word παιδραστεῖν (211b5–6) does not show the continued presence of a human love-object as such (cf. Sier 1997:150n10, 287). See further Sier 1997:149–151.

²⁹ The other parent, if there were one, would have to be the Form on whose beauty the lover now gazes. On the awkwardness of this, see Pender 1992:82–85. For the lover’s need to “nurture” his *aretē*, see Nightingale 1993:129–130.

³⁰ Poets, craftsmen, and lawgivers were previously said to produce *aretē*, including *phronēsis*, in deeds as well as words (209a–c, e), but these likewise now turn out to have been mere images.

³¹ Cf. e.g. Ferrari 1992:259–60.

Forms,³² and must descend to interact with his fellow humans, such virtue will produce collateral benefits for others.³³ But any such benefits are side-effects of the successful lover's relationship with Beauty, not its purpose. The purpose of his affair with the Form is to generate his own virtue for his own sake, not to benefit others *qua* love-objects.

The placement of Socrates at Step 8 is by far the most popular among commentators, for a wide range of reasons.³⁴ Socrates' role as philosophical "leader," and his endorsement of Diotima's teachings, may suggest that, like Diotima, he has some authority deriving from a vision of the Forms. The intervening twenty-five years have given him plenty of time to develop his intellectual vision (cf. 219a). Moreover he notoriously tells us that he *knows* τὰ ἐρωτικά (ἐπίστασθαι 177d8)—a remarkably strong claim for Plato's Socrates. Perhaps this "knowledge" is equivalent to the "single knowledge" that is of the Form (210d7; cf. 211c6–d1).

Many specifics of Socrates' behavior are also strongly suggestive of the summit. His contempt for wealth and conspicuous display (216d7–e4), for example, resembles the outlook of the successful lover (211d). His *unique* indifference to the bodily effects of alcohol, food (or its lack), temperature, and other hardships (219e–220a)—not to mention sexual temptation—also suggests that he is obsessively in love with something transcending the material world (cf. 211d). The emphasis on his endurance is particularly significant, in so far as the ladder metaphor implies struggle,³⁵ as is his uniqueness, since it is clear that few—if any—have made it to the top. As for his virtues, they too are manifested at a level that is extraordinary to the point of uniqueness. In addition to his incredible *sōphrosunē* he deserves the *aristeia* for courage more than Alcibiades (220d–e) and the crown for *logoi* more than Agathon (213e).³⁶ His remarkable behavior may plausibly be understood as a manifestation of the virtue that is inside him, here expressed as actions rather than *logoi*—

the real thing, not mere images. This virtue results in benefit to others, e.g. through his military courage and his continuing efforts to engage Alcibiades in philosophy (cf. 219a8–b2). But these benefits are not inspired by personal *erōs* for those benefited.³⁷

As many commentators have observed,³⁸ Socrates actually resembles the Form of Beauty in a number of ways. Like the Form he shows up "suddenly" (213c1; 210e4). He convinces Alcibiades that his present life is not "livable"—recalling the summit of the ascent (211d1–3)—and that he should spend the rest of his life in his company (216a), as the successful lover does with the Form (cf. 211e4). Like the consistent and unchanging Form he is always the same (221e; cf. 213e4). The Form is "amazingly beautiful in its *phusis*" (210e) and brings us as close as possible to divinity (212a). Similarly, Socrates is not only ironically and externally "beautiful" on this particular occasion (174a), but himself opens the door to the possibility that he possesses a "true" and "golden" beauty, as opposed to the "bronze" of mere opinion (218e). Moreover Alcibiades asserts that he contains interior *agalmata*, sacred images of gods that are utterly beautiful (216e; cf. 215b3).³⁹ His words too are "most godlike" and contain *agalmata* of virtues (222a).⁴⁰ Alcibiades' admiration for his *phusis* (ἀγάμενον 219d4), may also pun on the word *agalma*.⁴¹

Above all, Socrates, like the Form, is "amazing" (θαυμαστός)—a key word in Alcibiades' speech.⁴² Most amazing of all is his uniqueness. He cannot be compared to any human being—just as the Form is not comparable to anything in the human world (211a5–b2, d3–5)—but only to the quasi-divine satyr (221c–d), than whom Socrates is even more amazing (215b8). This strangeness makes him, like the Form, the inadvertent, detached object of other people's amazed gaze (θαυμάζω 220c6; θεάομαι 220e8, 221a6). Alcibiades' allusion to Socrates' theatrical appearance in the *Clouds* (221a) draws further attention to his body and looks, accentuating the appearance and demeanor that make him both different from ordinary people and a source of fascination to them. For many of these viewers—Alcibiades, Agathon, Aristodemus, Charmides,

³² Cf. the difference between human and divine nature at 208a–b. On the impossibility of dwelling permanently in the presence of the Forms, see especially Nightingale 2004:98–100.

³³ So rightly Lowenstam 1985:94; Price 1997:50–52. But Price is wrong to identify those so benefited with "an individual ... as an object of love" (1997:53). The "object of love" is the Form of Beauty.

³⁴ See e.g. Robin 1908:196–198; Burnet 1928:140; Stannard 1959:125; Taylor 1960:232–233; Gagarin 1977:27–28; Lowenstam 1985:92–93; Nussbaum 1986:183–184; Price 1997:49; Gill 1990b:80; Blondell 1992:128; Lear 1998:164; Hadot 2002:48.

³⁵ The metaphor of an (ascending) path towards virtue standardly implies hardship and struggle (cf. e.g. *Protagoras* 340d). Compare Nightingale 2004:113–114 on the difficulty of the path of dialectic in the *Republic*. Cf. also the struggles directed towards lesser forms of immortality in the *Symposium* (207b, 208c–d).

³⁶ Their rivalry is also configured as a contest of *sophia* (175c8–9; cf. 212e7–8).

³⁷ The discussion usually revolves around Alcibiades, but Laches (221b6–7) is presumably no love-object.

³⁸ E.g. Nussbaum 1986:195; Hunter 2004:19.

³⁹ The connotations of the word *agalma*, in Plato and elsewhere, have been much discussed. See most recently Nightingale 2004:163–164 (and *passim*).

⁴⁰ They also serve as a diagnostic test for those who stand in need of divinity (215c5–6). That Alcibiades views Socrates as bordering on divinity is further suggested by 214d.

⁴¹ According to Chantraine the words could be connected but there is no evidence (1968:s.v.). Either way, there is probably a Platonic pun.

⁴² 213e2, 215b8, 217a1, 219c1, 220a4, c6, 221c3, c6, 222e8.

Euthydemus, and other unnamed *erastai*—he is also the *telos* of erotic and/or philosophical pursuit (173b, 222b). Like his famously ugly features, his weird demeanor underlines the paradox of Socrates as love-object. This strange and ugly body, with its extraordinary magnetism for the Athenian social and intellectual elite, radiates the power of a transcendent beauty that is invisible to the physical gaze but irresistible to the eye of the soul.⁴³

All this suggests that Socrates has a special kinship with the Form, reinforcing the impression that he has communed with it and given birth to the true virtue that results from such intercourse. Alcibiades is, to be sure, an unreliable witness.⁴⁴ Indeed, his fundamental error may be that he confuses Socrates with the Form as the ultimate object of desire. He treats Socrates as if he had brought “true” virtue back down from the summit to be purchased by the likes of himself with no more effort or expense than a one-night stand. There is thus good reason to be suspicious of his purported insights into Socrates’ inner nature. This is not true, however, of the facts Alcibiades reports about Socrates’ behavior, whose truth is strongly authorized by Socrates’ tacit assent (cf. 214e, 217b, 219c), and corroborated in some cases by the witness of others. These facts include, most importantly, Alcibiades’ account of Socrates’ virtuous actions and his strangeness. We cannot see inside his soul, but we can see the visible behavior for which he deserves the *aristeia* for courage and the crown for *logoi*.

The most important evidence, however, for Socrates’ arrival at the top of the ladder consists in those dramatically powerful moments when he turns inward, in solitude, abandoning the physical gaze entirely in favor of the intellectual. Intellectual perception is required on lower rungs of the ladder too, of course (cf. e.g. 210c3–5). But only when the Form itself is sighted does all need for other people for such activity—whether as participants in philosophy or as the recipients of improving *logoi*—come to a full stop. Only when his journey is at an end does the lover’s relationship to the human world become utterly insignificant. Socrates’ isolation from his fellow mortals at such moments is strongly marked dramatically. There is also heavy emphasis on the fact that he is standing still, as if at the *telos* of his journey (175a8, b2, 220c4, 5, 7, d3).

Those internal witnesses who interpret Socrates’ mental state at these times—Agathon, Alcibiades, and the soldiers at Potidaea—assume that he is engaged in the kind of mental activity they expect from him or understand

from their own experience: grasping a transmissible piece of wisdom, seeking an answer or trying to solve a problem (175c–e, 220c).⁴⁵ But none of these people is a reliable interpreter of Socrates’ inner processes.⁴⁶ And in so far as Socrates, throughout Plato’s dialogues, treats philosophical inquiry as something to be undertaken through verbal interaction with other human beings, what he is doing in the doorway *cannot* be “seeking,” or solving a problem, since it entails neither words nor other people. If he is no longer “seeking” then, according to Diotima, he is no longer philosophizing (cf. 204a). It seems plausible to infer that he is, instead, gazing on the Form of Beauty. The fact is, however, that we do not know what is going on in Socrates’ soul when he stands in that doorway, or stands in the cold all night at Potidaea.⁴⁷ These incidents are opaque to us.

This opacity bespeaks a Platonic attempt to represent the unrepresentable by dramatic means. Plato can show us only Socrates’ exterior, since Socrates cannot use *logoi* to express the state of mind at the top of the ladder without descending to the level of mere images. Accordingly, no *logoi* are produced in immediate consequence of Socrates’ episode in the doorway. He avoids giving Agathon an account of what happened during that interlude, and goes out of his way to ascribe the birth of his *logoi* at the *symposion* to a different occasion, and indeed a different author. Likewise the incident at Potidaea generates no *logoi* except for a prayer to the sun (220d), a divinity clearly suggestive of the godlike Form. If Socrates has indeed been gazing on the Form of Beauty, the offspring he produces will be not *logoi*, but interior virtues. Such virtues may, however, be manifested in action. That this is true of Socrates is hinted by the artful disorder of Alcibiades’ speech, in which the account of Socrates’ exceptional courage, for which he deserves the *aristeia*, follows immediately on the incident at Potidaea.

All this adds up to a compelling case for placing Socrates at the very top of Diotima’s ladder. Yet many have seen this placement as essentially unsocratic, owing to Socrates’ strong and obvious resemblance to the personified Eros who is a seeker after wisdom but never attains it, fluctuating between

⁴³ Many commentators have followed their lead (e.g. Dover 1980:ad loc.; Allen 1991:86).

⁴⁴ Socrates himself repudiates Agathon’s account of what happened in the doorway (175c–d). Cf. his warning regarding Alcibiades’ interpretation of his inner beauty (218d–219a). Only Aristodemus is wisely cautious enough to remain an exterior observer of Socrates’ behavior (175b). His inability to see past Socrates’ external appearance and behavior makes him deficient as an imitator of Socrates (cf. Blondell 2002:107–109). At the same time, his respect for Socrates’ exterior saves him from interpreting his interior in ways that may be quite misleading.

⁴⁷ Cf. Hunter 2004:32.

⁴³ It is, of course, hard to attain this kind of vision. The ordinary soldiers cannot see Socrates’ inner beauty, so they become hostile (220c1), foreshadowing his death.

⁴⁴ On this I completely agree with Nightingale 1993:119–127. Cf. also Belfiore 1984:141–143; Halperin 1992:115; Lear 1998:159; Hunter 2004:100.

euporia and *aporia* but never becoming *sophos* (203b–204a)—an image that maps onto numerous representations of Socrates in Plato's dialogues. Much of the evidence I have discussed can be reinterpreted from this perspective. Perhaps when Socrates stood in the doorway he was engaged not in contemplation of the Form of Beauty but in an interior dialogue, as per the definition of thinking in *Theaetetus* (190a). And if Alcibiades really did see into Socrates' soul, what he saw there might have been the (potential) virtue with which Socrates was already pregnant prior to beginning the ascent, as opposed to the kind of virtue that one gives birth to and "nourishes" at the summit (212a5–6). Socrates himself casts Alcibiades' assessment of his "true" beauty into question, warning that he may actually be "nothing" (219a). As for his extraordinary claim to "know" erotics (177d; cf. 198d), this may very plausibly be taken to mean that he understands the process of philosophizing, which, paradoxically, entails understanding that one does *not* have determinate knowledge or "wisdom."⁴⁸

Nevertheless, I do not think we are warranted in dismissing the strong case for locating Socrates on Step 8. I would argue, rather, that both aspects of the text are clearly present and should be taken equally seriously. The deeply felt disagreement among commentators reflects Plato's success in suggesting that Socrates, though in his essence a seeker, has also been to the top. He personifies the unresolved tension within the dialogue, and within Plato's works more generally, between achieved (divine) wisdom as a human aspiration and the human condition which prevents us from attaining it.⁴⁹

This tension is perceptible in several key passages of the *Symposium*, such as Socrates' warning to Alcibiades that he may actually be "nothing" (219a). Like any mortal, Socrates is "nothing" compared to the Form, yet he may still have attained the fullest knowledge of it that is available to a mere human.⁵⁰ His wording leaves either possibility open, leaving it up to Alcibiades to look into the matter for himself (σκοπέι 219a2). Similarly, his claim to "know" erotics is explicable in standard Socratic terms,⁵¹ but also allows us to grant his understanding of Eros a privileged status, leaving us to figure out what he

may mean by it and assess the status of this "knowledge" in relation to the ladder and the wisdom attained at its summit. His "knowledge" of erotics may, in typically paradoxical fashion, turn out to be *both* an acknowledgment that humans are doomed to remain seekers, and *also* equivalent to the "single knowledge" (210d7) that is of the Form: to understand the Form is (in part) to understand that mortals must constantly strive to remain in its presence by means of philosophy.

The identification of Socrates with Eros the seeker is also ambiguous, for it is by no means precise or complete. For example, Socrates is not nearly as rootless and grubby as the personified Eros—especially on the present occasion. Unlike that unshod divinity, he sometimes gets cleaned up and puts on shoes to attend a party.⁵² Unlike Eros, he is, on this occasion, "beautiful" (174a), and will turn out to be an *erōmenos* as well as an *erastēs*. Moreover unlike Eros (203d1) he has a home. This fact is sometimes downplayed,⁵³ but it should not be dismissed, since we are told in the last two words of the dialogue that he went there to rest (ἀναπαύεσθαι). This is an unusual moment of even temporary closure for a Platonic dialogue, evoking the "rest" (ἀνάπαυλα) of the philosopher who reaches the end of the dialectical journey in the *Republic* (532e).⁵⁴ To judge from Plato, Socrates' home is a place where his daily travels—both physical and philosophical—come to an end. But it is also a place where he seems to spend very little time. My point is thus not that Socrates should *not* be identified with Eros as the philosophical seeker—clearly he should—but that we should not limit ourselves to this identification or insist on disambiguating the mixed messages that Plato sends our way. As so often, Plato wants to have his cake and eat it, to situate Socrates as the philosophical seeker while simultaneously hinting that he is the wise man who has arrived.

Stairway to Heaven

If Socrates has indeed made it to Step 8, this has certain consequences that have not, to my knowledge, been addressed by the many scholars who would locate him there.⁵⁵ For Diotima emphasizes strongly that one can reach the top of the ladder only by proceeding "correctly" up all the steps in orderly sequence

⁴⁸ See Gould 1963:44; Lowenstam 1985:94–98.

⁴⁹ On this tension in the *Symposium*, see Scott and Welton 2000. The paradox becomes even more acute if we ask whether Eros himself ever reaches the top. For Eros *qua* permanent seeker, the answer must be no; for Eros *qua* ideal *erastēs*, however, and communicator with the divine, the answer would seem to be yes.

⁵⁰ In Belfiore's formulation, he may be simultaneously indispensable and unnecessary (1984:148).

⁵¹ Elsewhere he makes similar claims, with varying degrees of strength (cf. *Theages* 128b, *Phaedrus* 257a, *Lysis* 204c; Xenophon *Memorabilia* 2.6.28).

⁵² Socrates' uncharacteristic wearing of shoes in the *Symposium* has been much discussed (e.g. by Osborne 1994:96–100). Whatever else it means, it clearly distinguishes him from Diotima's Eros (cf. Gagarin 1977:26–27; Rosen 1987:234).

⁵³ E.g. by Osborne 1994:91.

⁵⁴ Cf. Nightingale 2004:114.

⁵⁵ Scott 2000:33 is a partial exception.

(210a2, 4, 6, e3, 211b5, 7). Even if Plato does not actually *show* Socrates to us at every level, he must at least make it seem plausible that he has trodden each step in turn on his way to the summit.⁵⁶ I therefore swoop down now to Step 1, to see if we can find any evidence that Socrates has passed that way. While the *Symposium* itself will, of course, be my primary focus, other dialogues may also be useful for establishing a supporting context.

At Step 1 a young man (véος) is in love with a single beautiful body—or at least with one at a time⁵⁷—and there gives birth to beautiful *logoi* (210a). It is a fact well known from *Charmides* that Plato's Socrates is not immune to strictly physical desire for the body of an extraordinarily beautiful individual (*Charmides* 154b–d, 155d).⁵⁸ Within the *Symposium* itself, obsession with the physical beauty of an individual *paidika* is a condition that Diotima attributes to Socrates, along with “many others” (211d).⁵⁹ If his conversations with Diotima are supposed to have occurred around 440, then Socrates would have been about thirty years old—a little younger than both Agathon and Alcibiades at the time of the party, and still (barely) a véος, as the first rung of the ladder requires.⁶⁰ Socrates is, of course, situated in an Agathontic role here in relation to Diotima, who serves as his “leader.” Plato may have had a number of reasons for temporarily putting him into Agathon's sandals in this fashion.⁶¹ One such, I would argue, is that it allows us to envisage a Socrates at the very bottom of the ladder—a place from which a young and gifted Agathon,

with all his potential for growth (175e4), might himself ascend if he proceeds “correctly.”⁶² If Socrates can (supposedly) see his younger self in Agathon, perhaps Agathon (and others like him) can see themselves in this imagined early-model Socrates. This playful conjuring of what he might once have been links the extraordinary Socrates—who is also the extraordinary lover of the ascent—to our ordinary (Agathontic) selves.

Many scholars take the “beautiful *logoi*” generated at Step 1 to be conventional discourses in praise of the beauty of the *erōmenos*.⁶³ But in so far as Eros is a philosopher, and a Socratic philosopher to boot, we would expect the “correct” lover to produce encomia of a Socratic nature, privileging moral education, as in *Lysis*, and truth, as here in the *Symposium* (198d–199a).⁶⁴ The physically gorgeous Agathon is very keen to be praised by Socrates, who in turn desires (ἐπιθυμῶ) to praise him (222e–223a). But we may surmise that this hypothetical encomium would look very different from the norm. The beauty of an individual body might also be the starting point for the Socratic “what is x?” question, which could plausibly be involved in the transition to Step 2.⁶⁵ Socrates' elenctic discourses are—notoriously—not beautiful in any ordinary sense (cf. 221e); but they are certainly *kalos*, ‘fine’, and Plato gives us reason to believe they are both beautiful and erotically effective in a way that trumps the superficial beauty of oratory like Agathon's.⁶⁶ Socrates has no objection to the original project of praising Eros “as beautifully as possible,” and implies that he will not speak himself if he thinks this project has been successfully fulfilled (177d–e). As for his revised species of encomium, he grants that his speech will be less beautiful than Agathon's but also implies that it will be as beautiful as is consistent with the truth (198d). This may actually make it the most beautiful speech possible since it will not be marred by the ugliness of falsehood (cf. *Theaetetus* 194c).

⁵⁶ More generally, he must have visited all the steps below whatever step he *has* attained, and done so in sequential order. For why all the steps are necessary, see Sheffield 2001a:22–24.

⁵⁷ I see no reason to rule out serial obsession with particular individuals, provided that the lover in each instance thinks of the boy in question as the sole object of his desire. The apparent idealization of lifelong monogamy in male couples by Pausanias (181d) and Aristophanes (192d, 193b) is highly unusual (contrast Xenophon *Symposium* 8.2, where Socrates says he cannot remember a time when he was not in love with someone or other). Besides being culturally appropriate, serial obsession would also provide a natural foundation for the transition to Step 2.

⁵⁸ Cf. Patterson 1991:198. Xenophon's Socrates appears to acknowledge physical desire for a woman (*Memorabilia* 3.11.3).

⁵⁹ That this *erōs* is based on external or bodily beauty is clear from the mention of gold and clothing in the same breath as beautiful boys, plus the emphasis on gazing at the beloved. That it is directed towards an individual (at least as long as this particular infatuation lasts) is clear from the desire to be with the beloved and gaze at him forever. Cf. the obsessive desire for one's individual complement in Aristophanes' speech (esp. 191a).

⁶⁰ A man is a véος until about the age of thirty (Garland 1990:242). Alcibiades and Agathon are probably both in their early thirties (see Nails 2002:s.v.), but still notional “youths” because of their desirability as love-objects (cf. 198a2).

⁶¹ The most commonly given, but scarcely sufficient, reason is that Socrates is sparing Agathon's feelings (cf. Sier 1997:9). A more significant factor is the part the substitution plays in revealing the Socratic pedigree of Diotima herself, as we saw earlier.

⁶² Agathon is the *erōmenos* of Pausanias, rather than an *erastēs*. But an attractive male of his age might be simultaneously *erastēs* and *erōmenos*, provided this was not in relationship to the same person (cf. 222c–d). (Dover [1989:1n1 and 87] cites Xenophon *Symposium* 8.2 where the person in question is Charmides, at about age twenty-four) Socrates himself embodies the fact that philosophically speaking, one may be both a lover and an object of desire.

⁶³ So e.g. Price 1997:41; Ferrari 1992:256. Agathon—with whom Socrates at this stage is equated—does something of the kind in praising Eros *qua erōmenos*.

⁶⁴ Cf. Patterson 1991:211–214. On *Lysis* see Nightingale 1993:114–116.

⁶⁵ Cf. Socrates' efforts to lead Hippias beyond the idea that τὸ καλόν is a beautiful girl (*Hippias Major* 287e–289d). I cannot address here the question of how one proceeds from step to step. In my view this is radically (and provocatively) underdetermined, but clearly depends on philosophical activity of a kind associated with Socrates.

⁶⁶ Cf. 213e, 215b–216a, 221e–222a, 223a, and Patterson 1991:197n3.

On to Step 2. The lover has now progressed from serial to simultaneous admiration of beautiful bodies, with a concomitant weakening of desire for any one individual. It is not difficult to see in Socrates an admirer of all beautiful bodies, and even one who regards the beauty of all such bodies as “the same.” His general interest in physically attractive young men is notorious.⁶⁷ This is not contingent on beauty of soul. In *Charmides* he inquires after youths with beauty of body or wisdom, or both (153d), and claims that all young men of a certain age look beautiful to him (*Charmides* 154b–c; cf. *Republic* 474d–e). A similar outlook is taken for granted in the *Symposium* (cf. 194d, 213c–d). Alcibiades claims that Socrates constantly behaves like someone “in love” (ἐρωτικῶς κεῖται), that he is visibly and “always” smitten with beautiful people (216d; cf. also 192b7, 222b, 223a).⁶⁸ Socrates himself acknowledges that he desires proximity to any beautiful person (213c–d), and manifests this desire by flirting—successfully—with Agathon (222c–223a). Alcibiades’ language (ἐκπέπληκται 216d3) suggests the intensity of Step 1—an intensity supposedly abandoned by Step 2 (210b5)—and echoes Diotima’s admonishment to the untutored Socrates (ἐκπέπληξαι 211d5). But this behavior is (now) directed at many beautiful young men (216d, 222b). If we can believe Alcibiades—and his appeal to the assembled company as witnesses suggests that we can (216d)—then Socrates behaves like someone who has arrived at Step 2 without losing the intensity of a Step 1 lover.

Alcibiades, of course, claims that Socrates’ apparent attraction to καλοί is deceptive (216d3–5). But recent scholars have argued effectively that he is wrong about this.⁶⁹ He equates Socrates’ “true” indifference to the beautiful young with his lack of interest in such things as money and honor (216e1–2). But Socrates never pretends, even in play (cf. 216e4–5) that he cares about money or status, and often makes his lack of interest in them perfectly clear.⁷⁰ Alcibiades, however, thinks extremely highly of his own bodily beauty (217a5–6, 219c5; contrast 219a2). He is quite willing to use it as a currency comparable to money, and therefore infers that it is as contemptible as money in Socrates’ eyes (though he should know better, cf. 219e1–2). Socrates’ alleged “contempt”

for (Alcibiades’) physical beauty clearly evokes Step 2 of the ladder (216d8, 219c4; cf. 210b5–6).⁷¹ But Alcibiades is wrong to declare that Socrates thinks nothing of the καλοί themselves (216e2–4); rather, like the Step 2 lover, he thinks little of their bodily beauty as individuals.⁷² This does not mean he does not honestly admire and seek out the company of those beautiful in body. His external behavior speaks the truth.

In fact the whole of Alcibiades’ discourse regarding Socrates’ “hidden” interior seems in an important sense misbegotten, since all Socrates’ virtues are open to view. Alcibiades says his interior is “stuffed with *sōphrosunē*” (216d). But in what sense does his *sōphrosunē* lie concealed in his interior? His behavior is manifestly *sōphrōn* on the outside, and this external (albeit private) behavior is Alcibiades’ own evidence for his alleged interior view.⁷³ Socrates does not actually *hide* anything.⁷⁴ Why then should his pleasure in the company of beautiful bodies be judged deceptive? Alcibiades makes this mistake because he thinks an attraction to beautiful bodies must cause one to seek sex,⁷⁵ that it is incompatible with *sōphrosunē*, and therefore that Socrates’ self-control shows up his manifest attraction as a “deception” (222b). But if Socrates really does not care whether someone is physically *kalos* (216d7), then why does he habitually and notoriously hang around with people who are?

The multiple-body-lover of Step 2 will no doubt encounter some love-objects who also have beautiful souls (cf. 209b6)—perhaps those who respond well to an elenchus arising from their physical beauty—and come to realize that they are the most attractive to him. This brings him to Step 3, where a reasonably attractive (ἐπιεικής) soul outweighs even the most exceptional physical beauty, provided the body it inhabits exhibits “a slight bloom” (210b8). Beauty of soul is more precious (τιμιώτερον) than that of the body, presumably because it is less contaminated by mortal “rubbish” (cf. 211e1–4). The Step 3 lover will therefore be satisfied with only slight bodily beauty. He clearly does care personally about his object of desire.⁷⁶ But the vague τις (210b8) does not

⁶⁷ Cf. *Lysis* 204b, *Meno* 76c, *Phaedrus* 227c, 257a, Xenophon *Symposium* 8.2. Xenophon emphasizes the physical basis of the attraction (see Gould 1963:193n28; Vlastos 1991:38n65).

⁶⁸ καλῶν at 216d2 is of course ambiguous (it could be neuter), an ambiguity no doubt intended by Plato, but not by Alcibiades.

⁶⁹ See Vlastos 1991:40–41 and cf. Friedländer 1969a:139–142; Price 1991:297–298. I do not agree with Vlastos, however, that Alcibiades is using the verb εἰρωνεύω in a “modern” sense (so too Nightingale 1993:120n28).

⁷⁰ Socrates’ lack of interest in money is notorious. For status cf. 174a6–7, 220e5–7.

⁷¹ Cf. also 220c1, where the soldiers think Socrates has contempt for them. This time Alcibiades can see they are mistaken because it is not his vanity that is being challenged.

⁷² Cf. Nightingale 1993:n29.

⁷³ Note that his vision of Socrates’ interior is a mere *doxa* (216e7). He clearly has not “seen” Socrates’ virtues for what they truly are, since he thinks of them as something that can be traded for sex.

⁷⁴ Xenophon insists on Socrates’ openness, as Nightingale interestingly points out (1995:124–125). This defensive maneuver implies that Alcibiades was not the only one who found Socrates baffling, if not actively deceptive.

⁷⁵ Cf. Price 1991:297–298.

⁷⁶ The verb κηδεσθαι (210c1) is often used for the kind of concern that is due to family members.

rule out serial or even plural relationships,⁷⁷ and the plural νέους (210c3) is not confined to the τις in question.⁷⁸ The lover may spend considerable time at this level,⁷⁹ but there is no indication that he raises intellectual progeny in an exclusive relationship rather than developing all and any ideas in any partnership that will help him to progress to the next step. His general appreciation of beauty of souls (plural) presumably makes plural or serial relationships more likely.⁸⁰

This broad scope well suits Plato's Socrates, with his wide interest in beautiful souls and bodies and his lack of an exclusive or committed life-long relationship with anyone—his special relationship with Alcibiades notwithstanding.⁸¹ Most importantly, Step 3 fits Socrates' marked preference for beauty of soul over that of the body. Even the truly exceptional Charmides' physical beauty takes a back seat to his psychic charms (*Charmides* 154b–e).⁸² In *Alcibiades I* Socrates claims to love Alcibiades for his burgeoning beauty of soul, despite his fading looks (131c–d).⁸³ And in the *Symposium* itself he makes it clear that interior beauty is “more precious” than that of the body, with his wry reference to the Homeric exchange of gold for bronze (218e; cf. 210b7). Not surprisingly, the placement of Socrates on this step is quite popular with commentators.⁸⁴

At the same time, Socrates' interest in bodily beauty exceeds that of Step 3 by a considerable margin. His preference is not merely for the non-ugly, as per Step 3,⁸⁵ or the reasonably attractive, but for the stunningly beautiful,

the supermodels of Athenian culture: the gorgeous Alcibiades and Agathon, the extraordinary Lysis, and the super-beautiful Charmides. Alcibiades adds Euthydemus son of Diocles, another conspicuous beauty,⁸⁶ to the list of Socrates' boytoys (222b). Socrates' attraction to these stunning beauties seems, on its face, to distinguish him from the Step 3 lover. Yet a continued passion for extremely beautiful bodies is presumably not ruled out at this level, provided the *erastēs* is fortunate enough to find well-endowed souls in the bodies of supermodels. Certainly these gorgeous youths all seem to have substantial philosophical potential as well as, and possibly in proportion to, their physical beauty.⁸⁷ We might therefore speculate that Socrates prefers to spend time with the super-beautiful in body because he thinks they are more likely to have beautiful souls. This would be entirely concordant with Greek tradition and aristocratic ideology, which tends to see physical beauty as reflecting and complementing nobility of character or soul.⁸⁸ Bodily beauty is, after all, an excellence, and the best person will have as many excellences as possible. But Socrates never makes such a claim, and even if he did, his predilection for stunning beauties would remain in tension with the main emphasis of Step 3.

Overall, Plato shows considerable ambivalence on this matter. Bodily beauty is regularly downplayed in comparison with the soul and sometimes becomes utterly insignificant. Theaetetus, who strangely resembles Socrates' notoriously ugly self, is the most beautiful in soul of all his young interlocutors (*Theaetetus* 143e, 185e), and Protagoras' wisdom is so beautiful that it eclipses the body of Alcibiades even in his prime (*Protagoras* 309b–c).⁸⁹ Clearly physical beauty is unnecessary for those beautiful in soul. But the corollary, that beautiful bodies may house ugly souls, is never acknowledged: the dialogues feature no stunningly beautiful fools. As for the *Symposium* itself, the ladder's transition away from physical beauty is remarkably discreet.⁹⁰ Diotima never

⁷⁷ So too Rowe 1998b:256. Price argues on the basis of 210d2 and 7 that it is more exclusive (1997:39n38). But in both the passages he cites the word τις is made more exclusive by the presence of ἐνός and μίαν respectively.

⁷⁸ There is a marked contrast with the singular and lasting obsession of the non-philosophical lover when he encounters a beautiful soul in a beautiful body (209b–c). On the difference between this lover and the “correct” lover, see especially Sheffield 2001a:2–11.

⁷⁹ It is unclear how long it is supposed to take to proceed up the ladder to the top, but the *erastēs* starts as a young man and it presumably takes a good many years for the “eye of the soul” to mature (cf. 219a). Cf. the many years required to attain the vision of the Good in the *Republic*.

⁸⁰ So too Scott 2000:35–36.

⁸¹ For the latter in Plato, see esp. *Alcibiades I* and II, *Protagoras* 309a–c, *Gorgias* 481d. It was also a fixture of the Socratic literature generally.

⁸² Physical beauty, though desirable, likewise comes a distant second to excellence of soul in the fledgling guardians of the *Republic* (402c–e, 535a). Cf. also Xenophon *Symposium* 8.12.

⁸³ At the dramatic date of this dialogue Alcibiades is about twenty (past the ἄνθος of adolescence). But Socrates' depreciation of his physical charms should be taken with a pinch of salt. Not only is it clear that Alcibiades remained attractive for many more years (cf. *Symposium* 213c–d, 222c–d), but Socrates takes a serious interest in him while he is still at his physical prime (*Protagoras* 309a–b, *Symposium* 217b).

⁸⁴ E.g. Bury 1932:xxxviii; Wellman 1969:150–155; Reeve 1992b:113 with Blondell 1992:126.

⁸⁵ This is Rowe's interpretation of 210b8 (1998a:ad loc.; 1998b:256).

⁸⁶ See Nails 2002:s.v.

⁸⁷ Alcibiades, Agathon, Lysis and Charmides are all marked, in various ways, as intellectually gifted as well as extraordinarily beautiful. The same applies to Euthydemus son of Diocles, as far as we know of him from outside Plato's pages (Nails 2002:s.v.). Meno, another handsome young man (Nails 2002:s.v.) with whom Socrates flirts (*Meno* 80b–c), seems less gifted, but takes a definite interest in current intellectual trends.

⁸⁸ Blondell 2002:58–62; Patterson 1991:199–202 (though he goes too far in equating grace of deportment etc. with beauty *per se*. Aside from anything else, this undermines the paradox of Socratic ugliness, on which see further Blondell 2002:70–77).

⁸⁹ Protagoras is nearly sixty at the dramatic date of his dialogue, which rules him out as a physically attractive *erōmenos*. On Theaetetus see Blondell 2002:260–261.

⁹⁰ Cf. Rosen 1987:266–267.

speaks of preferring ugly boys of good character, as Pausanias does (182d7), or of putting up with “disharmony” in body provided the soul is harmonious, as Glaucon does, with Socrates’ approval (*Republic* 402d–e), let alone of a beautiful soul making a physically ugly person beautiful, as Socrates does in *Theaetetus* (185e). There is no level at which beautiful souls, irrespective of the quality of the bodies that contain them, are the object of desire, and the reprise seems to go out of its way to avoid mentioning souls as such.

There may be various reasons for this evasiveness. Visual beauty is of great importance as the starting point for the ascent, since it is in the visual realm that beauty is most readily and commonly perceived (cf. *Phaedrus* 250b–d); clearly more beauty is always better, even if the contribution made by bodily beauty is a slight one; and the visual provides a powerful metaphor for the perception of the Form itself.⁹¹ At the same time, Plato’s conception of Socrates requires him to avoid linking beauty of soul and body unequivocally. Socrates is the iconic representative of the beautiful soul in an ugly body, the soul so beautiful that it arouses *erōs* even in the absence of the “slight” bodily beauty of Step 3. The power of this paradox is, however, parasitic on the mainstream assumption that it defies, that beauty of soul is even better when complemented by physical beauty. This assumption seems to linger not only in the ascent but in Socrates’ choice of young men to spend time with.

A further reason for placing Socrates at Step 3 is the specification that the lover, like Socrates and Diotima’s Eros, both seeks out and generates *logoi* beneficial to the young (210c1–3). There is an obvious (defensive) allusion here to the charges against Socrates, to be developed in the speech of Alcibiades with its insistence on the improving nature of Socrates’ words (222a; cf. 218d). Alcibiades’ failed seduction shows us how Socrates treats those beautiful in body and soul—the kind of improving *logoi* that they elicit from him. Though we know the content only in general terms, we do know that he persistently spends his time with them in conversation (διαλέγεσθαι 217b), and we have a pretty fair picture of what Socratic conversation with the beautiful and talented young looks like.⁹²

These educational discussions presumably embrace both “activities” and “laws” (ἐπιτηδεύματα and νόμοι),⁹³ which leads the lover to an appre-

ciation of the beauty of such things in their own right.⁹⁴ Accordingly, he is now “compelled” to “gaze upon” their beauty, and see that it is all “akin” (συγγενές), i.e. to ascend to Step 4. At this level physical beauty generally—as opposed to the obsessive love of individual bodies⁹⁵—is looked down upon as something slight (210c5). This is the point at which the lover leaves behind any merely human object of desire. He still needs other human beings as partners, or at least an audience, for his discourses. But their beauty—of body or even soul—is no longer required to inspire the lover to “give birth.” It is preferable, of course, for all of the lover’s human associates to be beautiful in soul and/or body, in so far as more beauty is always better. And a beautiful-souled partner may help one ascend the ladder more swiftly through his intellectual talents. But no such human beauty is *necessary* for the lover’s further progress. His words are now stimulated by a more “purely” beautiful inhuman beloved.⁹⁶

Do we have any reason for situating Socrates on this step? It is clear enough that he thinks of bodily beauty in general as something slight. Other things being equal he would always rather be in the presence of such beauty, but he will talk to anyone who is willing to listen to him even if they are *not* beautiful (194d)—in body or even in soul.⁹⁷ Does he also appreciate the beauty of νόμοι and ἐπιτηδεύματα as such? Between them, these words embrace laws, customs, and all kinds of human activities, behaviors, institutions and social practices.⁹⁸ Though Plato’s Socrates never declares his *erōs* for such things, he does engage with many of them. In Plato’s dialogues he grapples continually both with Athenian political culture (along with the associated νόμοι) and with an array of culturally central ἐπιτηδεύματα. An exceptional number of the latter are represented in the *Symposium* in particular, through the various participants with their different skills and ways of life, as reflected in their speeches. One of the most important of these is the theater, which informs the setting of the dialogue. Socrates shows ironic, but not necessarily insincere, appreciation of its charms, as he praises the brilliant beauty of Agathon’s

⁹⁴ Cf. the *erōs* for virtuous ἐπιτηδεύματα at *Laws* 711d. Comparable ideas are expressed at *Laws* 643e (*erōs* for being a perfect citizen) and *Letter VII* 339e (*erōs* for the best life).

⁹⁵ So Bury 1932 and Rowe 1998a:ad loc.

⁹⁶ The degree of purity depends on the extent to which a beautiful item is or is not contaminated with “mortal rubbish” (211e).

⁹⁷ Plato shows Socrates eagerly conversing with some quite untalented people, and in general, with anyone he happens to meet (*Apology* 30a).

⁹⁸ Alcibiades’ reference to Socrates’ ἐπιτηδεύματα (221c) includes by implication the whole preceding account of his extraordinary *sōphrosunē*, courage, and so forth, as well as his philosophical activities. Omission of νόμοι from the reprise suggests that ἐπιτηδεύματα can stand for both. At *Laws* 793c–d the two are equated (along with ἡθῆ) as the glue that binds the city together. For educational ἐπιτηδεύματα, cf. also *Republic* 444e, *Gorgias* 474e, *Laches* 180a.

⁹¹ Such language is also suggestive of the mysteries (O’Brien 1984:204; Nightingale 2004:83–86). On the need for bodily beauty, cf. Pender 1992:77–8.

⁹² It is illustrated in the *Symposium* by his elenchus of Agathon. *Alcibiades I* shows Socrates addressing improving *logoi* to Alcibiades himself.

⁹³ Both are included in the improving discourses of the non-philosophical soul-body lover (209b8–c1, 209d4–7).

wisdom (175e).⁹⁹ Notoriously, Plato allows him to intervene in the dramatic contest and emerge as the ultimate victor, one who, by means of his dialectical understanding, transcends the tragic-comic divide.¹⁰⁰

The theater is also strongly linked with rhetoric in this dialogue (as elsewhere), notably by means of the Gorgianic Agathon.¹⁰¹ Using language that evokes the higher levels of the ascent, Socrates praises Agathon's speech as beautiful and amazing (198b), avowing that he spoke *μεγαλοπρεπῶς* and *καλῶς* (199c7). Once again, Socrates' praise is clearly ironic, but not necessarily insincere, as far as it goes. In *Phaedrus* Socrates lets it be known that he is an *erastēs* of *logoi* (*Phaedrus* 228b–c), and in the context of the ascent there is clearly nothing wrong with beautiful *logoi* as such. They are like beautiful bodies, however, in that their beauty of form comes a distant second to the beauty of their intellectual and ethical content.¹⁰² Socrates admires Agathon's beautiful rhetoric in the same way that he admires the physical beauty of an Alcibiades—or perhaps more so, to the extent that it supplies a more promising starting point for dialectic. Even superficial physical beauty may stimulate intellectual offspring in the “correct” lover; Socrates uses Agathon's beautiful rhetoric similarly, as the starting point both for elenchus and for his own reinvention of the encomium.

The *sumposion* itself, another culturally sanctioned and informally educational social practice with clearly defined νόμοι, is a further institution that Socrates frequents,¹⁰³ critiques,¹⁰⁴ and reinvents on his own terms.¹⁰⁵ Strongly

⁹⁹ There is no reason to believe that Socrates' reaction is not based on his own experience of the performance, especially since he was present at the προαγών (194a–b). The criticisms of drama voiced by Plato's Socrates bespeak a general familiarity with the theater, and a number of anecdotes locate him there, especially in connection with *Clouds* (cf. Aelian *Varia Historia* 2.13, Plutarch *Moralia* 10c–d).

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Rowe 1998a:ad loc. On the theme of dramatic contest in the *Symposium*, see Bacon 1959; Friedländer 1969b:32; Clay 1975; Sider 1980; Patterson 1982.

¹⁰¹ Socrates calls rhetoric an ἐπιτήδευμα (albeit a despicable one) at *Gorgias* 463a. It is perhaps through such ἐπιτήδεύματα as this that we can find a place on the ladder for beautiful *logoi* as an object of desire—one of those objects that is left behind at the summit (211a7)—despite the fact that they have previously been mentioned only as the lover's progeny.

¹⁰² Cf. the equivalence of Socrates with his *logoi*—a point perceived, but not fully understood, by Alcibiades (221c–d).

¹⁰³ See Rutherford 1995:179–180.

¹⁰⁴ Tecuşan 1990.

¹⁰⁵ This is marked dramatically in the *Symposium* by his late arrival, bringing an uninvited guest, and changing the rules of discourse. In addition, Plato as author uses various strategies to appropriate the *sumposion* on his behalf. E.g. the *sumposion* included a libation to the Ἀγαθὸς Δαίμων, and Socrates is equated with the beneficent δαίμων Eros; Socrates surpasses all others in the *sumposion*'s test of character through drinking, which equates him with Dionysus, “the only one who can drink without danger” (Lissarague

marked as both autonomous and unconventional, Socrates would be the last person to attend such a gathering merely out of social pressure, and his presence at this particular party is clearly an active choice (cf. 174a). The attraction does not seem to be only the presence of Agathon or his beautiful friends, since they were also present at the victory party that he avoided (176a). Rather, he chooses to attend such events when they can be used to serve his agenda of testing and revising educational and ethical norms through dialectic (hence his preference for smaller gatherings). He is particularly inspired, it seems, by the social practices surrounding erotic desire which often informed symposiastic discourse, especially the carefully structured and rule-bound relationship between an *erastēs* and an *erōmenos*.¹⁰⁶ Plato shows him engaging with all these ἐπιτήδεύματα in his own peculiar way, evincing a critical appreciation even as he reinvents them in his own terms, and using them to generate improving discourses of his own idiosyncratic variety.

In what does their beauty consist, however? In what sense is it all “akin,” as Step 4 indicates, and is this something to which Socrates can be seen to respond? The context would suggest that the beauty of laws and activities inheres in their effectiveness at fostering virtue, which in turn depends on their availability for dialectical understanding and—crucially—on their relationship to truth. We may safely assume that Socrates agrees with Diotima that *sophia* is one of the most beautiful of all things (204b3; cf. *Protagoras* 309c–d), and hence an object of desire.¹⁰⁷ Truth is wisdom's inseparable companion, and likewise an object of philosophical *erōs* (*Republic* 485a–b, 501d, *Philebus* 58d). As Socrates puts it to Theaetetus, truth bestows beauty upon one's opinions, in contrast to the ugliness of falsehood (*Theaetetus* 194c).¹⁰⁸ As for the *Symposium* itself, the intimate relationship between truth and beauty will be made clear at the summit of the ascent (212a).¹⁰⁹ And it is truth that underpins Socrates' various cultural reinventions, distinguishing his encomium

1990:37; cf. 8–9); he is equated with a satyr, a figure emblematic of the *sumposion* (cf. Lissarague 1990:passim); his commitment to truth reflects the ideology of the *sumposion* (Rösler 1995; for the educational significance of the *sumposion*, see also Bremmer 1990).

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Pausanias' consuming interest in the proper νόμοι surrounding such relationships (182a–185c).

¹⁰⁷ *Erōs* is almost by definition a response to beauty (*Symposium* 204c, *Republic* 402d6, *Charmides* 167e; cf. also *Symposium* 196a4–b3, 197b3–5, 201a2–5, Isocrates *Helen* 55). (See further Lear's paper in this collection.)

¹⁰⁸ In the *Philebus* he declares the “truest” patch of white to be the most beautiful (53a–b). Cf. also Pausanias' remark that nothing is “beautiful” unless done “correctly” (181a). In the *Republic*, the Good is the cause of everything “correct and beautiful” (517c1).

¹⁰⁹ Cf. Stokes 1986:180.

from Agathon's (198d),¹¹⁰ his rhetoric from that of Lysias.¹¹¹ Commitment to truth is thus a unifying force in his engagement with the cultural institutions of his time. It also unifies his own behavior. He will discourse upon anything, and yet, as Alcibiades declares, what he says is always the same (221e). It is all philosophy, the single activity that trumps all others,¹¹² with which Socrates tells us elsewhere that he is in love (*Gorgias* 481d).¹¹³ This movement towards unity, a perception of what is shared by different kinds of intellectual and cultural activity and their common availability as grist to the philosophical mill, is illustrated at the end of the dialogue when Socrates argues that the expertise of the tragic and comic poet is one and the same (223d).

If the beauty of activities lies in their relationship to truth and wisdom, the lover who can see this is a short step from perceiving the beauty of understanding for its own sake. All that needs to be added is an appreciation of those branches of learning that are not directly concerned with moral and political improvement—presumably abstract studies like mathematics.¹¹⁴ This brings us to Step 5, where the lover perceives the (shared) beauty of “kinds of knowledge” (ἐπιστήμαι) collectively,¹¹⁵ in a process that will culminate in the “single ἐπιστήμη” at the summit of the ladder (210d7). That Socrates is moving along this unifying path is indicated by the wording of that final scene, when he equates two “kinds of knowledge” (ἐπίστασθαι) that were typically viewed as mutually exclusive (223d).

Step 5 precipitates the lover's perception of the “great sea of beauty” (Step 6). All the significantly beautiful items of the human world—bodies, souls, cultural practices, intellectual attainments—have now been embraced in such a way that their common beauty can be perceived and their relative beauty properly comprehended.¹¹⁶ The repudiation of an attachment to indi-

vidual items at any of the previous levels is therefore reiterated (210d1–3). The lover who gazes upon the “great sea of beauty” with the eye of the mind can perceive the true degree of beauty of everything in the human world, rather in the way that an infrared sensor allows the viewer to “see” an object's temperature. The naked eye allows us to guess which items in a landscape are warmer, but the guess can be quite wrong (e.g. we often mistakenly equate heat with light). The same is true of beauty: the naked eye needs the assistance of philosophical insight (the eye of the mind) to perceive the landscape of beauty in its true intensity. A beautiful soul shines forth through an ugly body, just as an infrared sensor may reveal the hot core of a nuclear reactor in winter. Beautiful boys and individual activities are no less beautiful at Step 6 than they were at previous levels (210d2–3),¹¹⁷ but they are merely a drop in the “great sea” as a whole, where the beauty of understanding outshines everything else as the sun outshines a fire-fly. The vision of this “sea” inspires the lover to produce explicitly philosophical *logoi*,¹¹⁸ which are abundant, beautiful and “magnificent” (210d), like the great sea itself,¹¹⁹ and filled with equally magnificent ideas.

Socrates' simultaneous ability to appreciate the beauty of bodies, souls, activities, and knowledge itself—in reverse order of importance—places him comfortably on this level. As for magnificent *logoi*, his speech in the *Symposium* itself is obviously among the most magnificent, abundant, and intellectually powerful in all of Plato's works. He is thus poised to glimpse the Form of Beauty itself, like the Step 7 lover. Step 7 differs from Step 8 only in that the lover

at the top of the ladder, which mentions material objects such as gold and clothing and also the natural world (211a5–b1, 211d3–4). Presumably such items are even less significant than human bodies because they do not house a soul. Thus Socrates is capable of enjoying a beautiful landscape, but this is far outweighed by his desire to be near beautiful bodies and their souls (*Phaedrus* 230b–d). As for works of art, his simultaneous *erōs* and disapproval are, in the case of poetry, legendary (*Republic* 607e–608a).

¹¹⁷ Even at the summit the beauties of this world remain beautiful (211b2, 211d4). This is a broadly but weakly “inclusive” reading similar to that of Vlastos 1991:40.

¹¹⁸ The mysterious phrase “in philosophy” (210d6) must refer to the lover's activity in producing these *logoi* (cf. 218a5). I am sympathetic to Pender's interpretation, whereby philosophy is the beautiful love-object (1992:81–82), and in light of the presentation of philosophy as an object of desire elsewhere in Plato it is hard not to hear such resonances. But by Pender's own criterion—the “logic” of metaphor—philosophy cannot serve here as the love-object, since it is an activity, and as such cannot simply be equated with the “great sea” of beauty that inspires the lover's discourse at Step 6 (though *qua* activity it presumably manifests a beauty that is part of the “great sea”). It is, rather, the activity that enables us to attain the ἐπιστήμη that is the object of desire.

¹¹⁹ A more beautiful love-object generates more beautiful (and “more immortal”) offspring (209c). The *logoi* generated at each level are thus more beautiful in proportion to the beauty that inspires them (Santas 1988:43). Similarly in the *Republic* the *erastai* of truth (501d) are also beggetters of truth (490a–b).

¹¹⁰ It is lack of truth that marks the deficiency of Agathon's admittedly beautiful speech (201b–c).

¹¹¹ *Phaedrus* 277a–c; cf. 272d–273a, *Apology* 17a–c, *Gorgias* 521d–522c. Socrates' overall commitment to truth is, of course, well known (cf. e.g. *Gorgias* 458a–b).

¹¹² Contrast the fragmenting view of the lover who cannot see beyond a single activity (210d2–3). Philosophy transcends this particularity because it engages with what is (or is not) valuable in all other human activities.

¹¹³ On Plato's use of erotic language for intellectual states and activities, see Halperin 1986:71–72.

¹¹⁴ From a larger Platonic perspective, however, this is not a real distinction. Cf. *Republic* 501d where the word ἐπιτηδεύματα refers to the entire course of the philosopher-rulers' education, including its highly theoretical upper levels. The ethical significance of understanding as such in the *Symposium* is evident from the fact that the wisdom achieved at the summit of the ascent yields true virtue (212a).

¹¹⁵ For the criteria that make something count as an ἐπιστήμη in Plato, see Patterson 1991:205–206.

¹¹⁶ Some kinds of beautiful thing, such as works of art and the natural world, are not explicitly considered as objects of *erōs*, but they are implied in the repudiation of particulars of all kinds

has just *glimpsed* the unitary knowledge of the Form of Beauty, and indeed the Form itself, but not yet “grasped” it, and is therefore still proceeding on his upward path (with the continued assistance of the guide, whose presence is emphasized at this level: 210e3). Socrates’ presence at this level is suggested by the fact that he claims only conviction—as opposed to knowledge—about the “mysteries” Diotima taught him (212b; cf. 198d).¹²⁰ Furthermore he describes his own wisdom as uncertain and dreamlike (175e), a familiar Platonic metaphor for belief in contrast to knowledge.¹²¹ The difference between Socrates and Diotima is also significant here. Her mysterious, superhuman authority is contrasted with Socrates’ confident but less securely grounded belief in her teachings, which he still seems to rely on as providing some kind of inspiration, if not guidance (cf. 212b). For such reasons Step 7 is favored by some interpreters.¹²² Which brings us full circle.

Nowhere Man

In the *Symposium* Plato takes advantage of the symposiastic setting, with its characteristic role-playing, self-parody, story-telling and games,¹²³ to present Socrates in many different guises—all conjured up through several layers of narration—from the Socrates of the party itself, to the Socrates of Alcibiades’ memory, to the “hypothetical Socrates” who consorts with the quasi-fictional Diotima.¹²⁴ One effect of this kaleidoscopic presentation—or so I have tried to argue—is that Socrates can be viewed more or less plausibly as occupying all of the steps on the “ladder of love.”

What are we to make of this? Perhaps we should envisage Socrates as having ascended the steps in due order, occupying each in sequence over time until he stands securely and permanently at the top, having left behind the lower steps on which we temporarily glimpse him at moments in his past.¹²⁵ But it is in practice impossible to chart his position on the ladder against time in any such fashion. Alternatively one might argue—on a strongly “inclusive” reading—that his existence at the summit is somehow expressed in behaviors that only appear to belong to the lower steps. Thus, for example, his erotic

response to beautiful young men may be viewed as compatible with, or even an expression of, his presence at the top.¹²⁶ But in my view this is inconsistent with the rhetoric of the ascent, with its belittling of the steps that are left behind and the shift of the lover’s passionate attention to a new object at each new level.¹²⁷ This shift is marked most strongly at the transition from Step 6 to Step 7. There is a categorical leap here away from the ordinary world,¹²⁸ based on the sharp disjunction between beauty as manifested in *anything* in that world and Beauty *per se*, which is explicitly detached from all such manifestations. The “great sea” of beauty consists in the sum total of these worldly manifestations of the Form, but the lover who takes the crucial next step comes to see all such objects in their true light, as “mortal rubbish” in comparison with the Form itself (211e). As beautiful as Alcibiades’ body may be, its beauty appears only in the kind of visibly beautiful surfaces—flesh and skin-color—that the successful lover now views with contempt.¹²⁹ Even his soul is a particular, and as such insignificant. The lover’s gaze in its full intensity cannot rest on human bodies, souls, activities, *and* the Form of Beauty all at once. He cannot simultaneously participate in the world of eating and drinking and gaze at a vision so beautiful that it deprives him of any desire to do so (211d–e).¹³⁰ Such Beauty will surely blind the lover completely to the beauty of this world, just as the vision of the Form of the Good blinds the philosopher who returns to the cave in the *Republic*.¹³¹ At best, Beauty’s earthly manifestations can occupy no more than the periphery of the successful lover’s vision.

¹²⁶ So e.g. Kosman 1976:65–67; Irwin 1977a:169 with 323n58. This issue is distinct from the question of whether he still *cares*—non-erotically—about other people. (The two seem to be confused by e.g. Irwin 1995:310.) Cf. Scott 2000, though I am not as sure as he is that rescuing Alcibiades is a sign of Socrates’ special affection (2000:36). He also saves the life of Laches (221b6–7), and his courage would presumably lead him to protect any fellow-soldier in need. Possibly, however, *philia* is one of the virtues that is generated in the lover at the top of the ladder.

¹²⁷ As Allen acknowledges in passing (1991:82), a strongly inclusive reading is inconsistent with the ladder metaphor itself. The same may be said for the cave image of the *Republic*, which implies that the philosopher cannot remain in the cave while contemplating the Forms.

¹²⁸ On this point I agree with Chen 1983 (though he disregards the ladder metaphor altogether). Price resists this on the circular ground that it is necessary to avoid an “acute discontinuity” (1997:50), but the discontinuity is marked by Diotima herself. The stairway to heaven is a way to bridge this gap, not to eliminate it.

¹²⁹ This does not mean that he has contempt for Alcibiades’ beauty *qua* beauty. But this kind of beauty is also, always, ugly (cf. *Republic* 479a).

¹³⁰ Diotima’s point here is that even the lover of beautiful boys would gaze upon his love-object constantly without eating or drinking, *if only that were possible*. The implication is that the lover of Forms must likewise take a break from gazing in order to turn to such mundane matters as food and drink—or else he will starve.

¹³¹ See Nightingale 2004:102–105. As has often been noted, visual language increases higher up the ladder, as if in compensation for the fact that literal (physical) vision is becoming otiose.

¹²⁰ Cf. Penwill 1978:157. I see no reason, however, to doubt Socrates’ assertion that he has been convinced by Diotima (cf. Rowe 1998b:240–241; O’Brien 1984:186–190).

¹²¹ See Gallop 1971.

¹²² E.g. Penwill 1978:159.

¹²³ For these aspects of the *sumposion*, see Lissarague 1990. Hunter 2004 is especially useful on their relevance to Plato’s dialogue.

¹²⁴ The phrase is Bury’s (1932 on 210a).

¹²⁵ This seems to be Scott’s view (2000:31–34), though he does not place Socrates at the very top.

A third possibility is that Socrates should be construed as shimmying up and down the ladder, as Steve Lowenstam has argued.¹³² I find this more plausible for a number of reasons. First, it is not possible for a human being to reside permanently at the top of the ladder. The temporarily solipsistic Socrates will soon be back in the company of his fellow mortals (cf. 175b2–3, c4–5). Even he must eat and sleep occasionally. Second, this interpretation evokes the activity of the *daimōn* Eros with whom Socrates is so strongly identified, who runs up and down between mortal and divine realms in a dynamic process of interpretation, communication, “intercourse and conversation” (ἡ ὁμιλία καὶ ἡ διάλεκτος 202e–203a). On this interpretation the ladder provides a less mythic, more systematic explanation of how mere mortals may imitate the *daimōn*, allowing for the fact that even the most philosophically exalted among us must inevitably descend from time to time. One advantage of this interpretation is that it lets us grant, for example, that Socrates has a real erotic response to Alcibiades *qua* love-object while on Step 3, while also accepting that individuals are not the objects of his *erōs* when he is at the summit. In other words, it gives us a different way of approaching the issue of “inclusiveness,” allowing Socrates to embody a variety of different kinds of love-relationships at different moments in Plato’s presentation without destroying the magnificent solitude of the philosopher in intercourse with the Form.

I believe this interpretation is in essence right. At the same time, Plato’s complex presentation of Socrates does not correspond to a “correct” and “orderly” movement up and down the ladder of the kind required by the ascent passage. We need not worry much about how the descent occurs. Doubtless it is caused by a failure to maintain one’s intellectual vision at more challenging levels. This might make one tumble all the way down to the foot of the ladder, as Socrates does momentarily when he catches a glimpse inside Charmides’ clothing. But such lapses presumably require one to start climbing the ladder again “correctly,” with each step in its proper order.¹³³ And we do not see Socrates recovering, for example, from Charmides’ physical beauty in order to address himself to beauty of body collectively before moving on to souls. Nor is there any sign that the retreat into the neighboring porch, or the Potidaea episode, comes as the climax of a series of ascending steps. Indeed,

the interlude in the doorway is preceded, as far as we can tell, by appreciation of a beautiful individual body, or soul-body complex (namely Agathon’s, 174a), not by a discussion of the one supreme kind of knowledge or contemplation of the “great sea” of beauty.

The sense that Socrates is someone who repeatedly ascends and descends, like the *daimōn* Eros, derives, rather, from Plato’s construction of an artfully impressionistic picture—or perhaps better, a cubist one, which departs from the logic of a unifying perspective to show us different aspects of its subject simultaneously from different points of view, resulting in a composite image that conveys more than verisimilitude ever could. Socrates is everywhere, and therefore nowhere. We cannot pin him down or plug him into an orderly sequence. Even when he temporarily seems to settle, it is hard to locate him securely on any one rung. If we turn our backs for a moment, what appears to be evidence for one level seems to turn into evidence for another.¹³⁴ He is *atopos*, ‘placeless’, a distinctive term used with special weight in the *Symposium*. Socrates’ *atopia*—foreshadowed, as we saw, in the prologue—is, according to Alcibiades, his very essence: the thing that makes him who he (uniquely) is (221c–d; cf. *Alcibiades* I 106a). This mysteriousness is central to Socrates’ allure as an object of desire, as Alcibiades, in his extravagant effort to solve that mystery, so clearly demonstrates.¹³⁵

Socrates’ singular (in both senses) body grounds his various identities as a receptacle of human possibilities. He is both the lens through which we perceive all the different steps of the ascent, and the paradigm by which we may judge their “correct” performance. He thus invites emulation.¹³⁶ Yet his *atopia* resists imitation.¹³⁷ The strength of the authorial invitation to place Socrates on the ladder, which I emphasized at the outset, is in itself significant here. Plato *elicits* our desire, only to frustrate it by refusing to locate Socrates securely on any one step or in an orderly sequence of steps.¹³⁸ This desire and its frustration lure us into scrutinizing Socrates’ ascent, seeking traces of his passage, while at the same time preventing us from organizing those traces into a coherent set of signposts—like Internet driving directions—that we can use to follow him in any straightforward or comfortable sense. Plato deflects

¹³⁴ The same applies to the way he shifts from leader to follower, and from subject to object of desire.

¹³⁵ On Socrates’ mysteriousness, see esp. Nehamas 1998:91–92; Blondell 2002:69.

¹³⁶ For the pervasive Greek assumption that one emulates literary characters, see Blondell 2002: 80–86.

¹³⁷ Cf. Blondell 2002:106–109.

¹³⁸ For the way Plato simultaneously elicits and thwarts the reader’s interpretive desire by raising unanswerable questions, see Halperin 1992.

¹³² Lowenstam 1985:94–98. But Lowenstam addresses only the vacillation between the mortal realm and the summit, not the sequence of lower steps as such.

¹³³ The memory of having seen the Form itself might accelerate one’s progress in repeating the ascent, for example by enabling one to recognize manifestations of the Form in bodies or souls more easily, but there is no sign that it is possible to actually skip any of the steps.

our attempts to “grasp” Socrates or his wisdom directly as Alcibiades and Agathon try to do, each in his fashion (175c–d, 219b). He prohibits us from taking him as our “leader” in the mindless manner of an Aristodemus, who is unnerved when left to forge his own path. We must start at the bottom of the ladder for ourselves (as he, putatively, once did) and respond actively to his enigmatic mode of “leadership,” emulating his independence by seeking to “grasp” not Socrates, but the truth from which he insists on distinguishing himself (209c), which may allow us ultimately to “grasp” Beauty itself (211b7, 212a4–5).

The adjective θαυμαστός, ‘amazing’, is a leitmotif in Alcibiades’ encomium of Socrates. His baffled amazement is foreshadowed in an apparently innocent usage early in the dialogue, when Aristodemus answers Agathon’s opening question, “Where is Socrates?” (174e12), with the word θαυμάζω: “I too wonder where he can be” (175a1–2). Unlike Aristodemus, we are not in a position to send a slave to find Socrates for us. Consequently we are obliged to live with our wondering. And that, of course, is the beginning of philosophy.¹³⁹

Eight Tragedy Off-Stage

Debra Nails

PLATO WEAVES STRANDS of the tragic and the comic, high seriousness and low bawdiness, into his *Symposium*; that much is uncontroversial. If someone should miss the sweep of the plot from the celebration of Agathon’s prize for tragedy to the waves of drunken revelers, the *kōmos*, there is a telling reminder at the end. With snores in the background, Socrates is passing the cup with Agathon and Aristophanes, “forcing them to agree that it belongs to the same man to know how to compose comedy and tragedy, and that the person who is an expert tragic poet is also a comic poet” (223d2–5).¹ Socrates’ parting comment has generated a variety of interpretations, most of which take Plato’s *Symposium* to be tragedy, comedy, and philosophy in one.²

The *Symposium* is obviously funny, less obviously tragic, though there are precedents for identifying both what the tragedy of the *Symposium* is, and what is tragic in the *Symposium*. I will argue that Peter H. von Blanckenhagen (1992) was right to suggest what Jonathan Lear (1998) would later argue in detail, that the *Symposium* sets up a tragedy that occurs off-stage—though I disagree with

¹ Trans. Rowe. προσαναγκάζειν τὸν Σωκράτη ὁμολογεῖν αὐτοῦς τοῦ αὐτοῦ ἀνδρὸς εἶναι κωμῳδίαν καὶ τραγῳδίαν ἐπίστασθαι ποιεῖν, καὶ τὸν τέχνη τραγωδοποιῶν ὄντα καὶ κωμωδοποιὸν εἶναι, echoed in *Laws*: “it is impossible to learn the serious without the comic, or any one of a pair of contraries without the other” (VII 816d9–e1, trans. Bury). We can see with some amusement where the elenchus would go if anyone could stay awake: since neither Agathon nor Aristophanes composed plays in the other’s genre, if either had agreed to Socrates’ principle, he would thereby have been admitting that he was not an expert poet (Rowe 1998a:214). On the bivalence principle more generally in Plato, see *Republic* I 334a1–3 where expertise in guarding is expertise in stealing (cf. *Republic* III 409d8–10), *Charmides* 166e7–8, and *Phaedo* 97d1–5.

² Clay 1975:250 called it “a new form of philosophical drama which, in the object of its imitation, comprehends and transcends both tragedy and comedy”; and Wardy 2002:58, “the literary genre which at once mixes and transcends the dramatic genres.” Nietzsche 1967:\$13 had gone so far as to offer a maxim to bind the three together: “only the intelligible is beautiful.”

¹³⁹ *Theaetetus* 155d; cf. *Symposium* 205b, 208b.

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PLATO'S *SYMPOSIUM*

ISSUES IN INTERPRETATION AND RECEPTION

Edited by

J. H. LESHER

DEBRA NAILS

and

FRISBEE C. C. SHEFFIELD

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