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Alternative Perspectives on Plato

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in Collaboration with

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## Contents

Preface	i
MIKA KAJAVA, PAULIINA REMES and EERO SALMENKIVI	
Introduction	iii
HAROLD TARRANT and DEBRA NAILS	
Paradigmatic Method and Platonic Epistemology	1
DIMITRI EL MURR	
Pseudo-Archytas' Protreptics? <i>On Wisdom</i> in its Contexts	21
PHILLIP SIDNEY HORKY	
Plato and the Variety of Literary Production	41
MAURO TULLI	
The Meaning of "Ἀπολλων ... δαιμονίας ὑπερβολῆς" in Plato's <i>Republic</i> 6,509b6–c4: A New Hypothesis	53
A. GABRIÈLE WERSINGER-TAYLOR	
Dangerous Sailing: [Plato] <i>Second Alcibiades</i> 147a1–4	59
HAROLD TARRANT	
Bad Luck to Take a Woman Aboard	73
DEBRA NAILS	
Argument and Context: Adaption and Recasting of Positions in Plato's Dialogues	91
MICHAEL ERLER	
Listening to Socrates in the <i>Theaetetus</i> : Recovering a Lost Narrator	107
ANNE-MARIE SCHULTZ	
The Mask of Dialogue: On the Unity of Socrates' Characterization in Plato's Dialogues	125
MARIO REGALI	
Plato, Socrates, and the <i>genei gennaia sophisticē</i> of <i>Sophist</i> 231b	149
CHRISTOPHER ROWE	
<i>Erōs</i> and Dialectic in Plato's <i>Phaedrus</i> :	169
Questioning the Value of Chronology	
FRANCISCO J. GONZALEZ	

Changing Course in Plato Studies GERALD A. PRESS	187
Is the Idea of the Good Beyond Being? Plato's <i>epekeina tēs ousias</i> Revisited ( <i>Republic</i> 6,509b8–10) RAFAEL FERBER and GREGOR DAMSCHEN	197
Like Being Nothing: Death and Anaesthesia in Plato <i>Apology</i> 40c RICK BENITEZ	205
Ideas of Good? LLOYD P. GERSON	225
Are There Deliberately Left Gaps in Plato's Dialogues? THOMAS ALEXANDER SZLEZÁK	243
Plato's Putative Mouthpiece and Ancient Authorial Practice: The Case of Homer J. J. MULHERN	257
Translating Plato JAN STOLPE	279
'Making New Gods'? A Reflection on the Gift of the <i>Symposium</i> MITCHELL MILLER	285
A Horse is a Horse, of Course, of Course, but What about Horseness? NECİP FIKRİ ALİCAN	307
Works Cited	325
Index Locorum	347
General Index	359

# Bad Luck to Take a Woman Aboard\*

DEBRA NAILS

Despite Diotima's irresistible virtues and attractiveness across the millennia, she spells trouble for philosophy. It is not her fault that she has been misunderstood, nor is it Plato's. Rather, I suspect, each era has made of Diotima what it desired her to be. Her malleability is related to the assumption that Plato invented her, that she is a mere literary fiction, licensing the imagination to do what it will. In the first part of my paper, I argue against three contemporary 'majority views' about Diotima that I regard as false. The first is that we can be certain she is fictional;<sup>1</sup> a second is that Diotima is our best evidence for Plato's feminism; the third, that she is Plato's mouthpiece for the higher mysteries in the *Symposium*. After I have set aside what I regard as false, I proceed in the second half of my paper to develop Diotima's positive contribution to philosophical psychology, her naturalistic account of the psyche<sup>2</sup> as mortal, unified, and developmental. Whether the view Plato assigns to her is one that he held I do not pretend to know; but it is a powerful, defensible, and coherent view that inspired positive aspects of Freudian psychology in the twentieth century. Freud's insight, in fact, makes clear how *erōs* can be developed in relation to the bad as well as the good.

## 1. Diotima of Mantinea: Three Assumptions to Discard

1.1 That Plato created Diotima *ex nihilo* is widely assumed and deeply puzzling. I hold, on the contrary, that the reasons to regard a Mantinean priestess known to Socrates as having actually existed outweigh those for treating her as Plato's invention. Her fictionality is typically stated without reasons or, when reasons are offered, provided in glancing strokes.<sup>3</sup> They are not particularly good reasons in any case. I have encountered three.

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<sup>1</sup> For the case that Diotima was assumed to have been an actual person *until* the modern period, see Ausland 2000, 185–86 with abundant references.

<sup>2</sup> The least laden term I can identify for ψυχή is the ordinary English 'psyche', in use since 1590.

<sup>3</sup> For example, Thesleff (1967, 135 and 1982, 135)—usually careful about such matters—says, 'Diotima is very probably a transformation of the Aspasia of Socratic legends who had taught Socrates "erotics"', citing Dittmar (1912, 40–41), who emphasizes that the title 'Aspasia' is attributed to works by other Socratics as well.

The first is that Plato could never have met this foreign woman, otherwise absent from the historical record, who is purported to have known Socrates before Plato was born. That he could not have met her is an especially weak defense of fictionality, and not only because it is a fallacious argument from silence, especially so when applied to a non-Athenian female. Plato writes vivid accounts of others he could only have known by reputation: e.g., Parmenides, Zeno, his great-grandfather Critias. The preponderance of the evidence is that the characters in Plato's dialogues were flesh-and-blood human beings, people who show up in histories and commentaries, the epigraphical record, court speeches, and plays. Unlike the woman Socrates sees in a dream (*Crito* 44a10–b3) or the Eleatic visitor, Plato gives Diotima a geographical location, Mantinea, in the Arcadian interior of the Peloponnesus. She has the vocation of mystagogue, priestess of the Eleusinian Mysteries, and is credited with service to Athens. These details matter in the context of Plato's own method of composition: he mentions about six hundred people in his dialogues and letters,<sup>4</sup> of whom 124 are present in dialogues, and 84 speak in direct or indirect discourse. Of those who speak, only two are otherwise unknown: Diotima and Philebus.<sup>5</sup>

Whereas there are no hints about who Philebus was (the name itself is not attested in Greece in ancient times), we are more fortunate in the case of Mantinean priestesses, albeit without names for more than a handful of individuals. If Plato fabricated Diotima—she who postponed the Athenian plague for ten years—he did so with abundant resources at his disposal. The unique and highly feminized religious customs of Mantinea were legendary. According to Herodotus (2.171), Egyptian rites were taught by the daughters of Danaus to women of the Peloponnesians; later, Dorians drove all but the Mantineans from Arcadia, so the rites survived only there.<sup>6</sup> Further, there is a tradition of Athenians seeking help from diviners when anticipating pestilence. In pseudo-Aristotle's *Constitution of Athens* 1, Epimenides of Crete purifies Athens on the condition that Alcmaeonids be banished forever, following a guilty verdict against them for sacrilege. The three-sentence account is embroidered in a number of later sources. Yet when Epimenides is mentioned in the *Laws* (1,642d3–e4), he is moved forward by a

<sup>4</sup> *Dubia* and *spuria* make exact calculations otiose.

<sup>5</sup> Protarchus, son of Callias, yields a handful of possible matches to known Athenians with the name; and transcription errors have complicated the identification Calicles of Acharnae with two contemporaries.

<sup>6</sup> Inscriptions and later textual sources are collected in Fougères (1898, 325–26).

hundred years to postpone the Persian invasion by ten years.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, a marble votive statue of a priestess standing beside a palm and holding a divining liver was excavated in 1887 in Mantinea, dated 425–400. Slightly smaller than life-sized, it is now displayed in the National Museum of Athens and labeled ‘Stele of Diotima’ though the statue’s identification as Diotima is entirely speculative (Möbius 1934).

A second reason proffered for Diotima’s fictionality is that Plato, probably writing after 385,<sup>8</sup> sets Diotima in about 440, alluding to the speech Aristophanes made in 416, the dramatic date of the *Symposium*—decades after she alludes to it. There is no such anachronism. As Kenneth Dover argues (1966, 45), neither the playwright nor the philosopher should be credited with originality: ‘Plato means us to regard the theme and the framework of Aristophanes’ story as characteristic not of comedy but of unsophisticated, subliterate folklore.’<sup>9</sup>

Reason number three is literary: that is, Plato—by creating Diotima—is paying homage to awesome Parmenides:<sup>10</sup> Diotima plays the guiding role to Socrates that the goddess played in Parmenides’ poem. Further, Plato embeds her so deeply—stories within stories—to signal the fact that she is removed from reality. But Socrates is not the only person in the dialogue to report a flashback, and few want to claim that Alcibiades’ recollections never took place, so I discount the third reason.

While I do not conclude that Diotima existed, I think the jury should still be out and, on balance, I think Plato developed the character from something Socrates reported.

<sup>7</sup> Levin (1975, 235–37) adduces the ten-year postponement and other evidence to undermine the view that Diotima was fictitious. I thank Tony Preus for pointing me to Levin.

<sup>8</sup> Although Dover (1966, 45) takes Aristophanes’ remark about the Spartan dissolution of Mantinea (193a2–3) in 385 (Xen. *Hell.* 5.2.1–7) as establishing the likely date of composition of the *Smp.*, Mattingly (1958) revived and augmented Wilamowitz’s (1897, 102 n. 1) view that Plato’s Aristophanes referred to a Spartan action in Mantinea in 418 instead.

<sup>9</sup> *Pace* Thesleff’s (1978, 140) characteristically bold examination of Plato’s and Xenophon’s compositions of symposia pieces, Plato does not treat Aristophanes with respect in the *Smp.* The revival of *Nub.* in about 418 would have been recent to the dramatic date. Besides, Aristophanes’ criticism of Socrates continued in 414 and 405. Other reasons to think Plato belittles Aristophanes are the playwright’s behaviour during Eryximachus’ speech, and the pairings of the males at Agathon’s victory party, which leaves Aristophanes to be coupled with his fellow demesman, the runt Aristodemus of Cydathenaeum.

<sup>10</sup> Mitchell Miller has compared the end of Diotima’s speech to Parm., fragment B8.

1.2 Diotima is our best evidence for Plato's feminism—so the second falsehood goes. Diotima has been on the feminist pedestal for a while. In the 1994 *Feminist Interpretations of Plato*, for example, Diotima has twenty-six entries in the index, some of several pages, while the uncontested living woman who speaks in Plato's dialogues, Xanthippe, has none; and the other woman Socrates claimed as a teacher, Aspasia of Miletus, has a modest three. I take this as an example of a phenomenon I mentioned above: each era makes of Diotima what it wishes her to be.

I don't disagree that Diotima says admirable things, and that admirable things spoken by a woman, especially one identified as a teacher of Socrates, are evidence that Plato's regard for women's intellects was more reasonable than that of most Greek males; and it is further noteworthy that her estimable remarks are estimable independently of her relationship to Socrates. However, stronger evidence for Plato's feminism, if the term is not anachronistic, emerges from the consistency of his theorized discussion, his arguments in the dialogues, and what we know of his life. Undeniably, he sometimes uses the dismissive language of fifth-century Athenians about 'womanish' behaviour—but such nods to realism are offset by Socrates' acknowledging men and women, priests and priestesses, instead of limiting his circle to Athenians and other males.<sup>11</sup> Much of the gender bias attributed to Plato should rather be laid at the door of translators who make no distinction between *ἄνθρωπος* and *ἄνῆρ*. But all such incidental remarks are overwhelmed in Plato by his set of arguments in *Republic* 5 that men and women should be trained and educated together (451e4–5) because the intellects of women, their psyches, are not different in nature from those of men (454e1–4); and the *polis* deserves the best guardians (456e4–5) not just the best male guardians.

*Republic* 5 has sometimes been taken as comedy; and it has also been said that Plato allows women guardians only because the best men cannot be reproduced without them. I note, however, that Plato's Socrates could easily have stipulated that the generally weaker bodies of women (455e1) should relegate them to some subset of guardians' duties. It was not lack of imagination on Plato's part, but lack of a principled reason, that prevented it. The *Republic* is not our only source; at *Laws* 7,804d6–805b2 women and men must have the same training and education (with none of the banter of *Republic* 5). By that late date, there were two women in Plato's Academy, albeit foreign women.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Some have taken Socrates' reference to priestesses at *Men.* 81a10 as an allusion to Diotima.

<sup>12</sup> Lasthenia of Mantinea, and Axiothea of Phlius (D. L. 3.46 and 4.2).



1.3 The third falsehood is that Diotima speaks for Plato, that her advice that Socrates attempt to climb the ladder of love and enter into a life of contemplating the beautiful and the good is philosophical advice. It is not philosophical advice, and Diotima does not speak for Plato. Although she focuses narrowly on the proper ascent that goes along with *paidēra*, inspiring us with the goal of the permanent possession of the good, we would do well to recall that that mature ideal is anything but permanent. By the time we reach the ladder of love, she has already established that, with age, we lose bits of knowledge we once possessed (207e5–208a4).

As the *Phaedrus* is to rhetoric, and the *Theaetetus* is to mathematics, so the *Symposium* is to mystery religion. For all Diotima's wisdom, so admirable in the eyes of the young Socrates, what she outlines is 'a radical new vision of piety—one that utterly trumps all prior accounts', as Mark McPherran (2006, 91) put it: piety. Perhaps it was a similar inference that led David Sedley (1999, 310) to mark the *Symposium* as 'Plato's probable debut' on the topic of becoming like god, insofar as a human being can. For centuries after Plato's death, Platonists of antiquity almost universally considered *becoming like god* to be the end toward which all the striving of a philosopher properly aimed.<sup>13</sup> Although the issue usually emerges from the *Theaetetus*, where the philosopher of the digression actually uses the expression (ὁμοίωσις θεῶν, 176b1), Diotima's religious ascent has evident similarities: she describes the pinnacle as divine (τὸ θεῖον καλὸν, *Symposium* 211e3) and the climber, 'when he has given birth to and nurtured true virtue', as 'loved by the gods' and as having such *erōs* as a human being can have (212a5–7).<sup>14</sup> Both the philosopher of the digression and Diotima's climber represent idealizations—neither Socrates, nor Plato, nor any embodied philosopher. The climber eschews what is human, 'seeing beauty itself, pure, clean, un-mixed, and not contaminated with things like flesh, and colour, and much other mortal nonsense' (*Symposium* 211d8–e4, φλυαρία at e3), and the philosopher of the digression eschews what humans value—gossip, political power, wealth, and breeding (*Theaetetus* 174d3–175b4). This raises the question whether any flesh-and-blood philosopher—Socrates, or Plato, or any one of us—experiences erotic longing for *permanent* intellectual intercourse with the forms, something that sounds more like a mystical experience or religious rapture than anything

<sup>13</sup> See Sedley (1999) and Annas (1999, ch. 3) for ancient attributions of the view to Plato; and Gerson (2005, ch. 8) who shows why Neoplatonists (so-called) attributed the view to both Plato and Aristotle.

<sup>14</sup> I use the Burnet text, and Rowe's 1998 translation.

related to philosophy. Diotima gives us what we expect from an expert in mystery religion: the good as piety, the good life as the ascetic life, communion, contemplating rather than doing, words not deeds.<sup>15</sup>

One might argue, however, that Diotima specifies a productive outcome beyond the vision itself and, in one sense, she does: ‘he will succeed in bringing to birth, not phantoms (εἰδωλα) of virtue ... but true virtue, because he is grasping the truth’ (*Symposium* 212a4–5).<sup>16</sup> There is a literature urging that we take virtue to be knowledge, which seems particularly appropriate when, as in this case, one is grasping truth. Perhaps the ultimate vision of beauty enables the initiate to infer the implications of the form, much as having an unhypothetical first principle would be useful in revisiting what one previously grasped only hypothetically. As I argue below, there is better reason to suppose that, as Diotima suspected (209e5–210a2), Socrates did not follow her to be initiated into the higher mysteries, into her version of the permanent possession of the beautiful and the good. He was a philosopher—not a mystic, a magician, a prophet, or a priest—who examined his life by reasoning about it. Diotima’s domain, ‘sacrifices, rites, spells, and the whole realm of the seer and of magic’ (202e7–203a1), is not the domain of philosophy. As the philosopher of the digression is not Socrates, the Socrates of the *Symposium* is everywhere and nowhere on Diotima’s ladder of love—as Ruby Blondell has argued in telling detail.<sup>17</sup>

Both Socrates and Plato chose to conduct their lives as engaged philosophers, guiding actual human beings where they had the opportunity to do so, and creating further opportunities when they could. Socrates and Plato chose to live examined lives.

How should a human being live? Socrates says ‘the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being’ (*Apology* 38a6: ὁ δὲ ἀνεξέταστος βίος οὐ βιωτὸς ἀνθρώπῳ), but Diotima says, ‘life is worth living for a human being, in contemplation of beauty itself’ (*Symposium* 211d1–3: τοῦ βίου ... βιωτὸν ἀνθρώπῳ, θεωμένῳ αὐτὸ καλόν).<sup>18</sup> These are not obviously compatible because no one’s examined *life*, no matter how beautiful and good, *is* the contemplated

<sup>15</sup> Within the nine character types ranging from philosopher to tyrant, the expert in mystery religion is fifth, after the physician, at *Phdr.* 248d3–4 (cf. *R.* 9,587d3–e4).

<sup>16</sup> I thank Henry Dyson for this argument and for sending me back to Patterson 1993.

<sup>17</sup> For the digression in *Tht.*, see Blondell 2002, 251–313, especially 289–300; and her 2006 for the *Smp.*

<sup>18</sup> Alcibiades echoes the remark at 215e7–216a2, saying of his experiences with Socrates, ‘I was frequently reduced to thinking that it wasn’t worth my living, in the condition I’m in’.

eternal form of beauty. But perhaps I am being over-literal. Perhaps the suggestion is that one should contemplate those things that are beautiful and good in one's life because they are expressions of beauty and the good. After all, Socrates doesn't say, Tell me, Laches, what is cowardice? Perhaps. On the other hand, what is examined in the dialogues is all manner of good *and bad* instances as the characters make their way toward deeper understanding of some particular virtue. To contemplate only the good apparently inhibits the dialectical process. Besides, contemplating beautiful and good things is not the same as contemplating the forms. Perhaps 'beauty' is metaphorical for a perfect mathematical proportion, implying that an examined life, well lived, resembles that ratio. Whatever the appropriate explanation for the two approaches to living, identity is not available.

The evidence of how Socrates lived his own life supports the notion of an examined life: openly and constantly questioning others—even the poor, women, and old men (215d3–6)—and encouraging them to care for their psyches, while denying that he himself was wise. One might object, recalling his periods of oblivion, his *daimonion*, and Alcibiades' description of Socrates—imperviousness to winter cold, to alcohol, to fear, and to the wiles of the young Alcibiades. Perhaps Socrates was unworldly wise, a sage—contemplating the forms in his trances (175b1–3, 220c3–d5). That view plays havoc with the corpus: we would need to imagine a Socrates seeking permanent possession of something (the beautiful and the good) he already possessed intermittently after his initiation, despite his protests that he didn't have the knowledge he helped others to acquire. It is difficult to imagine what would motivate the maintenance of such a deception for Plato's Socrates. The conceit of the dialogue is that, as a young man, Socrates was persuaded by Diotima's words (212b1–4); perhaps the goal, however impossible, served its purpose so well that he later sought to motivate others with it, and Plato later did likewise. An advantage of taking the text in this straightforward way is that it implies neither failure nor pretense to lead an examined life.

Diotima tells Socrates, 'I don't know whether you would be capable of initiation into *them*', the final revelations (209e5–210a2). Commenting on that passage, Cornford (1949, 125) remarks, 'I incline to agree with those scholars who have seen in this sentence Plato's intention to mark the limit reached by the philosophy of his master'. In other words, from that point, Diotima, not Socrates, is Plato's mouthpiece. Vlastos followed suit (1991, 73–74) when he identified Diotima's words as those of Socrates. The implication is that Plato saw himself as the contemplator of beauty and the other forms, saw himself as imitating the divine.

If that were so, why then would Plato establish the Academy? Why attempt to reform the tyranny in Sicily despite the hardships it caused him? It is not as

if there are city-founders in Athens, forcing Plato back down into the cave. One answer that comports with the texts is that Plato was motivated by knowledge and the same desire to lead an examined life that motivated Socrates.<sup>19</sup> Plato, like Socrates, was determined to turn psyches toward the good, and no initiation into higher mysteries was required to generate that commitment.

An argument against my view that Socrates does not follow Diotima to pure contemplation of the beautiful and the good (is not initiated into the higher mysteries), is that Diotima—mystic, priestess, prophetess, and mystagogue—instructs young Socrates after her initiation into the higher mysteries, implying that Socrates could go on ‘giving birth to the sorts of words ... that will make young men into better men’ (210c1–3).<sup>20</sup> Diotima blocks that move almost immediately, explaining that making young men better is a preliminary stage, after which there is the initiate’s sudden (ἐξαίφνης, 210e4) vision of beauty itself, when the life worth living for a human being (211d1–3), contemplating beauty uncontaminated by the human distractions of previous stages, is reached.

There is another reason to doubt that we should view Diotima’s exhibition as an expression of the kind of engaged philosophical commitment that Socrates and Plato showed throughout their lives: she plays the role of sage and instructor, not that of elenctic guide. I concede that Socrates prepares us for his parallel to Diotima, soothing the confused Agathon: ‘I myself was saying to her other things of pretty much the very sort that Agathon was saying to me just now, that Love was a great god, and was of beautiful things; and she then set about examining me by means of the very arguments I was using with Agathon’ (201e3–5).<sup>21</sup> The content of the two conversations overlaps, but their form does not.<sup>22</sup> Whereas Agathon asks not a single question of Socrates, Socrates turns Diotima’s statements and questions into questions of his own fifteen times. Often, she simply

<sup>19</sup> In *Ep.* 7,328c, explaining why he returned to Sicily a second time, despite the disastrous end to his first visit, he says he would be ashamed if he proved to be a man of words who cowered at deeds.

<sup>20</sup> Rowe’s commentary on 210a6–7 takes Socrates’ initiation to be a philosophical one. On the other hand, he points to the conditional at 211e1, ‘if someone succeeded’, as evidence against simply assuming that anyone succeeds. *Phd.* 69c–d on philosopher mystics may perhaps be taken as a defense of the notion that Diotima was a philosopher; I pursue this issue from the question of where the tragedy of the *Smp.* lies in Nails 2006, 187–200.

<sup>21</sup> Rowe translates ‘examining’ for ἀνακρίνουσα, which also has the sense of ‘interrogating’; the adjective translated ‘unexamined’ from Socrates’ famous assertion at *Ap.* 38a5–6 is ἀνεξέταστος—but I would nevertheless credit Diotima with encouraging Socrates to examine his own life.

<sup>22</sup> For a very different account of the conversation from the one I present, see Wersinger 2012.

gives him the answers he seeks; to some questions, however, she replies with long didactic speeches (203b1–204a7; 207c8–208b6; 208c1–212a7); sometimes she pummels Socrates with questions without waiting for any answer (four in a row at 207a5–c1, three in a row at the end, 211d8–212a7); and sometimes she answers her own rhetorical questions without a pause (208d2–e1). Diotima needs little encouragement to dissert: Socrates says, ‘If I could [answer you], Diotima ... I wouldn’t be admiring you for your wisdom, and visiting *you* to learn just these very things’, so she just obliges him (206b7–8). When Socrates cannot answer why unreasoning animals are strongly affected by love (207c2), she chides him, but when he protests that he has come to her because he needs teachers, she immediately sets off on twenty-nine more lines—‘like an accomplished sophist’, says Socrates (208c1).

What I have just described is not like Socrates’ conversation with Agathon, and not like Socrates’ usual conversations with respondents. In fact, from Diotima’s behaviour at argument, one might be reminded that Agathon wanted Socrates to recline beside him, prompting Socrates to say, ‘It would be a good thing, Agathon, if wisdom were the kind of thing that flowed from what is fuller into what is emptier’ (175d4–6). Unlike Plato’s Socrates, Diotima has a kind of wisdom, and employs a didactic method, making it difficult to see her as illustrating someone’s living in contemplation of beauty while also leading the examined life of the philosopher.

Nevertheless, a younger Socrates might have been dazzled and motivated by her, by the prospect of such a permanent state of the psyche. If one suspends disbelief momentarily, and imagines a young man’s desire to be initiated into the higher mysteries, it would be difficult to avoid asking just how essential it is to proceed exactly ‘in order and in the correct way’ stipulated by Diotima (210e3; cf. 211b6). After all, she herself could not have been initiated by the procedure she recommends because *paidēraistia* was an Athenian institution for socializing males; and Diotima was not Athenian—or male. On the other hand, one cannot *be* a mystagogue without having been initiated. Perhaps, again, I am being too literal. The prospect of pure communion with forms might seem possible from a great distance, the distance of youth perhaps; but Socrates may have found later that the more one pursues such a goal, the more it recedes, and the more one recognizes one’s own inescapable humanity and specificity. One’s knowledge is shed like one’s hair and skin, though that is no reason not to use the beautiful and the good to attract others into aspiring to improve their psyches.

Thus far, I have been swimming against the current of contemporary views of Diotima, arguing that we have been too quick to claim that she is fictional,

that Plato has better feminist credentials than Diotima's mere presence gives him, and that Diotima is no philosopher though she may point toward philosophy. Socrates and Plato were philosophers, not priests. I now turn to Diotima's positive contribution to philosophy.

## 2. A Naturalistic Account of the Psyche

As the psyche matures in differentiation and complexity, its psychic energy, *erōs*, seeks greater varieties of happiness: so Plato and Freud.<sup>23</sup> The developmental theory of the psyche—as articulated in Plato's *Symposium*, and explicitly appropriated by Freud—moves from the primitive erotic state of pure appetitive desire to a complex intellectual culmination. Plato's *Symposium* is explicitly about *erōs*, and most of the literature devoted to the dialogue concerns what we now label 'erotic' or sexual desire. I make a case for the role of Diotima's more generic sense of *erōs*,<sup>24</sup> a sense that fits the unified and developmental nature of the psyche that tends to be overshadowed by the popular tripartite version from the *Republic*. Our easy contemporary separation of cognitive from conative desires—intellectual curiosity from lust, for example—is not so easy to discern or maintain in dialogues where the psyche is a cohesive whole. While the theory of human motivation in the *Symposium* may be rudimentary by the contemporary standards of cognitive science, it has greater explanatory power than, say, tripartition, for such situations as are encountered in the dialogues, and it has the added advantage of leaving Socratic intellectualism intact.<sup>25</sup> I say 'advantage' not only because I consider it true that human beings seek the good, but because Plato (or the Platonists of the Academy who were working on the law code while he was spending much of his time in Sicily<sup>26</sup>) was still defending Socratic intellectualism, no one does wrong voluntarily, in the *Laws* (9,860d1).

The psychic-pregnancy account of epistemology in Plato's *Symposium* (206c1–212a7) is decidedly naturalistic, comporting with other positions Diotima articulates that are equally naturalistic: (i) there is no personal immortality (206e7–8, 207d1–2), thus no appeal to *anamnēsis* conceived as the recall of prena-

<sup>23</sup> More specifically, so Freud before the Great War and flu epidemic, so Plato of the *Smp*.

<sup>24</sup> For the controversy over when exactly Diotima discusses generic and when specific *erōs*, see Sheffield 2006 and Rowe 1999.

<sup>25</sup> See Christopher Rowe's contribution to this volume.

<sup>26</sup> Nails and Thesleff 2003.

tal knowledge of Platonic forms;<sup>27</sup> (ii) human ‘pieces of knowledge’ (ἐπιστήμαι, 207e5) are forgotten and have to be studied anew (μελετᾶν, 208a4) in the course of a lifetime; and (iii) human beings occupy the continuum with other animals, passing from childhood to old age, constantly replacing their ‘hair, or flesh, or bones, or blood’ (207d4–e1) and, indeed, (iv) on the continuum with the single related whole of nature (210c4–5). Diotima’s general description of the psyche is developmental in that an individual’s psyche increases in complexity in a context of general change. Consistently, however, to be alive, to have a psyche, is to have *erōs*, to desire; the psyche’s function is *erōs*.

Plato’s most deliberate, sustained, and independent account of desire is the *developmental* theory of the psyche found in the *Symposium*: from brute instinct to the cosmic level, and from the primitive erotic state of pure appetitive desire to its complex intellectual culmination at the end of Diotima of Mantinea’s instruction.<sup>28</sup> The distinctions we now make or observe, and often invoke, between conative and cognitive desires can obscure their origin in the same one reservoir of psychic energy, *erōs*, so it behooves us to take seriously the challenge that the developmental model of the *Symposium* poses for the tripartite model.<sup>29</sup>

After setting out the account of human psychological motivation proposed in the *Symposium* and clarifying Freud’s explicit use of it, I argue that mystery religion cannot be more than a hydraulic lift toward philosophical satisfaction: like rhetoric and mathematics, it may be useful as a stepping stone, but the philosopher’s examined life is distinct from Diotima’s in two essential ways: in its attention to embodied particulars, and in its ultimate object of erotic desire, the good.

The most general account of *erōs* in the *Symposium* is that of the physician, Eryximachus, according to whom everything is moved, energized, by *erōs*; the planets owe their motion, and the seasons their changes, to *erōs*; plant and animal

<sup>27</sup> *Anamnēsis* conceived as learning by inference, as Leibniz describes in his *Discourse on Metaphysics* 26 is still in play, however: valid inference about the world is possible because the forms are present in us. Leibniz dispenses with the ‘error of preexistence’, as he calls it, arguing that the human intellect ‘already thinks confusedly about everything it will ever think about distinctly’ because each intellect expresses all forms from all time—invoking Socrates’ statement that ‘the whole of nature is akin’ (tr. Garber and Ariew).

<sup>28</sup> Cf. *Phd.* 66e2–3 where, as Dodds (1959, 261) puts it, ‘wisdom as an object of passion’ (καί φαμεν ἐρασταὶ εἶναι, φρονήσεως) appears.

<sup>29</sup> Tripartition is described and supported in *R.* 2–5 and 8–9, and the ‘continuation’ of *R.* in *Ti.*; it is strongly suggested by the charioteer myth of *Phdr.* as well. Nevertheless, the psyche-as-stream analogy in the *R.* (6,485d6–8) shows at the very least that there is no fundamental incompatibility between the tripartite and developmental models of the psyche.

growth, disease, and even meteorological events such as hail are all ‘erotic things’ (188a1–b6). Picking up on Pausanias’ theme that *erōs* is two—one heavenly and one vulgar—Eryximachus’ account of ‘double Love’ (διπλοῦν Ἔρωτα, 186b4) belies the notion of separation into two discrete drives. Instead, the physician emphasizes continua (hot-cold, wet-dry, the musical scale) with each extreme seeking the other to effect what medical expertise assists in producing: balance and harmony, achieved through ‘knowledge of the erotic affairs of the body in relation to filling up and emptying’ (186c5–7). Eryximachus, at his most grand, says *erōs* ‘as a whole has all power’ and that, when it is developed in relation to what is good, it results in ‘all happiness’ (188d4–e2).<sup>30</sup> This cosmic psychology, beginning with unconscious processes,<sup>31</sup> provides a basis for, and complements, what will be Diotima’s more focused account. She considers the motivation of animals including humans briefly (206a5–208b6) then limits her discussion to specifically human motivation, not mentioning cosmic *erōs* or even the *erōs* of nonliving things explicitly, but leaving wider possibilities open: ‘all of this is mutually related’ (210c4–5).<sup>32</sup> Only Eryximachus’ view that *erōs* can be developed in relation to what is bad and, indeed, that disease and unhappiness occur under just that circumstance, may appear incompatible with Diotima’s view. It is not.

Diotima agrees that all desires whatever are erotic: and it is only *we* who ‘separate off one kind of love and apply to it the name which belongs to the whole’ (205b4–6). That is, we human beings fix on sexual passion, to which we apply the term ‘erotic’ exclusively, although *erōs* actually includes *all* wanting, loving, longing, wishing, or craving, whether irrational or rational, unconscious or conscious. In a similar move, Freud invokes ‘the divine Plato’<sup>33</sup> against critics who claim that psychoanalysis is obsessed with sex: ‘What psycho-analysis called sexuality was by no means identical with the impulsion towards a union of the two

<sup>30</sup> This description of the physician’s skill is similar to that of the midwife who knows how to bring on labor pains or diminish them, how to birth and how to abort, and which matches will produce the best offspring (*Ibt.* 148e–151d). In other respects, as has often been noted, the physical theory of Empedocles is invoked.

<sup>31</sup> See Rowe 1998, 147.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. *Men.* 81c10–d1, ‘The whole of nature is akin’. Harold Tarrant objects that the *Smp.* text at 210c4–5 is more naturally understood as referring to the beauty in laws and customs. Kamtekar (2008) argues that the account of the powers of the psyche in the *Phdr.*, mentioning Anaxagoras at 270a4, takes the whole cosmos into account (not just the whole psyche, and not just the psyche plus its environment, as the previous literature argues); she suggests that *Cra.* 400a–b may provide another parallel.

<sup>33</sup> 1920: SE 7, 134.



sexes or towards producing a pleasurable sensation in the genitals; it had far more resemblance to the all-inclusive and all-preserving Eros of Plato's *Symposium*.<sup>34</sup>

Desire is *initially* unconscious, non-rational, and appetitive, which is only to say that desire at its most primitive is a brute fact of being alive and as true for a single-celled organism as for baby Einstein. Initially, all desire is for the avoidance of pain and the increase of pleasure. A human newborn, feeling the pain of deprivation—hunger or cold, say—desires first of all the absence of pain. Later, specific desires can be differentiated, desires *for* things such as food, warmth, and human contact, each of which delivers a distinct corresponding pleasure. There are unconscious desires as well. So long as there is air to breathe, an infant feels no pain of asphyxia, but it will be a long time before the recognition of oxygen as a distinct object of desire kicks in. So far, for the human infant, as for most living things permanently, the crude approximation of pleasure-good and pain-bad delivers its evolutionary advantages. The priestess leaves no doubt that, for animals including humans, *erōs* is the mover, the motivator, between subject and object;<sup>35</sup> *everyone* is in love (205a9), and 'there is nothing else that people are in love with except the good' (205e7–206a1).<sup>36</sup> When a pine sapling turns toward the sun, it loves the good. When an amoeba extends its pseudopod in search of the nutrition that will benefit it, it loves the good. When a toddler reaches for a bright, pretty object, she too loves the good. None can be said to have a concept of the good, so the love of the good is a love of its *expression* in light, air, food, warmth and so on.

Eryximachus' view, that *erōs* can be developed in relation to what is bad, needs to be understood against Diotima's view that we love only the good. When the amoeba's pseudopod finds food, but the food is subtly toxic, the doctor's description is that the amoeba's *erōs*, seeking something good, nutrition, encountered something bad, toxins. If the toxins cannot be detected, then the amoeba keeps eating, developing its *erōs* in relation to the bad. If the bright, pretty object grasped by the good-loving toddler is an open flame, the explanation is similar: she reached for something good (bright and pretty) and encountered something bad, pain. She does not yet have the concepts of light-implicating-heat or potential-pain, but those concepts will be acquired through just such experiences as this one. What were undetectable 'toxins' before the experience can afterwards be

<sup>34</sup> 1925a: SE 14, 218. In my interpretation of Freud's remark I differ from Santas 1988, 154.

<sup>35</sup> In her mythic introduction, Diotima makes *erōs* an intermediary spirit between gods and human beings (202e3–203a8), wisdom and ignorance (203e5), but she then attributes *erōs* to animals as well (206c6–8, 207a6–208b6).

<sup>36</sup> ὡς οὐδέν γε ἄλλο ἐστὶν οὐ ἐρωσὶν ἄνθρωποι ἢ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ; cf. *R.* 6,505d5–9.

avoided. If the toddler—let's call her Philia—has caregivers who know good from bad nutrition, then they offer her yummy rice, spinach, beets, and other healthy foods, smiling and praising her every bite. Philia's *erōs* develops in relation to what is good and she sets out on the path to happiness. Philia's cousin Sophia's development proceeds by the same principle. If her caregivers are ignorant, they feed her fast foods and sugary puddings for which she quickly develops a taste, which pleases them all mightily. The doctor says Sophia's teeth are decaying and she's overweight; as her *erōs* develops in relation to what is bad, she's on the path to misery.

There's the rub. Do we really want to say that, despite appearances, Sophia loves the good? Yes, insofar as Sophia seeks happiness (*Symposium* 204e6–205a3, 205d1–3). Her wanting to be happy and wanting the good are a far cry from her having them. Crucially, one must learn that there is no necessary correlation between pleasure and good, or pain and bad. If Sophia someday learns about good nutrition, then she will struggle against the tastes she has long since cultivated in relation to what is bad.<sup>37</sup> This is at the very root of the view that no one does wrong voluntarily.<sup>38</sup> It is why Diotima points out that, for love of the good, people willingly amputate diseased limbs (205e3–5). For Plato and Freud, the education of erotic desire begins very early indeed. What delights one in infancy and early childhood, even before one is old enough to know the reason (*Republic* 3,402a1–4), affects one's later physical and psychological health.<sup>39</sup> If little Bartholomew *feels* pleasure when pleasing his adored older brother and sensing his approval, then Bartholomew will enjoy and desire to repeat activities that his brother has set for him—music and books, games, puzzles, wooden blocks—all contributing in their different ways to the psyche's 'growth' in conative and cognitive features. This interaction—our being influenced and changed by contact with those we love—is something Diotima picks out as important (209c2–3). The beloved or the beautiful *causes* in us an increase in desire.

The human psyche of the *Symposium* develops under the influence of need and desire, adding more complicated and convoluted expressions of its single

<sup>37</sup> We might recall the story from Phaedo's *Zopyrus* that Socrates defeated his natural tendency to stupidity and lust through his efforts at reason.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. *Sph.* 228c7–8, with its explicit connection to knowledge.

<sup>39</sup> I do not mean to overestimate the malleability of infants and small children—I mean rather to keep my discussion short. One's physiological inheritance is more than just a limiting factor, and not easily controlled. Moreover, children do not automatically like the activities that give their parents pleasure. In both those senses, I am aware of my oversimplification of the interaction that results in the development of tastes.

primitive *erōs*. That is what it is to mature psychologically, emotionally and intellectually, and this specialization of psychic labor occurs naturally; it would fail to occur if the right stimuli were not present.<sup>40</sup> Cognitive desires likewise have a trajectory of development.<sup>41</sup> Just as a body needs nourishment and exercise for healthy growth and strong limbs, the embryonic capacity to learn and to reason requires stimulation through the senses and practice to grow into a healthy, mature intellect. All humans, females and males alike, are pregnant with capacities, innate ideas, that are nourished and grow under certain conditions—by Diotima's lights, in the presence of the beautiful. The psychic-pregnancy account of the *Symposium* (206c1–212a7) is not unique to the dialogue,<sup>42</sup> but it is richly detailed, and it does the work managed elsewhere by *anamnēsis*. It explains why we learn under questioning, i.e., upon the stimulation of capacities formerly dormant; the value of figuring things out, which is rather like exercising the body; and how our holding false beliefs prevents our seeking true ones. Agathon, under the influence of Socrates' questioning, for example, is purged of his false beliefs and *becomes* eager to learn, much as Meno's attendant needed first to recognize that he didn't know what he thought he knew. Sometimes, as in the case of philosophical learning, the midwifery of a dialectician is needed as well.

For both Diotima and Freud, the psyche responds to its environment by developing increasingly complex, finer varieties of *erōs*: mature intellectual curiosity manifested as scientific research into the recoil of atomic nuclei, for example, or a connoisseur's appreciation of a 1989 Amarone. *Erōs* is the source, the reservoir, from which all the streams of psychic energy emanate toward their many objects of desire and into which they recede. Freud's economic model of the psyche recalls Plato's metaphor of psyche-as-stream.<sup>43</sup> Freud too emphasizes *development*,

<sup>40</sup> By featuring Plato's view of the early training of the desires, Brown 2004 uncovers the deep and far-reaching similarity between Plato's *R.* and *Lg.*, something even more important than explaining why there is no gap in the *R.* between psychological and practical justice.

<sup>41</sup> Reason (deliberative desire), for example, is explicitly identified as a type of desire at *R.* 9,580d6–7, its object proving most true and permanent, and thus providing the greatest possibility for happiness. As Eryximachus promotes his expertise at filling and emptying, the argument at 9,585a–586e promotes filling the psyche with truth: a greater fulfillment (happiness) than such food and drink as fill the body.

<sup>42</sup> The accounts in the *Tht.* (148d4–151d3) and the *R.* (6,490a8–b7) are broadly similar. While everyone can learn (*R.* 7,518c4–6), not everyone can learn philosophy; Socrates suggests other teachers to some would-be pupils (Damon and Prodicus in *La.*, Prodicus in *Tht.* and *Ap.*).

<sup>43</sup> 'When the desires set strongly in one direction, we know they flow more weakly by the same amount in others, like a stream diverted into another bed', *R.* 6,485d6–8. See Freud's metapsycho-

a topographic overlay from primitive, undifferentiated instinctual desire (psyche as id, ruled by the pleasure principle), to the environment's impinging on one's ability to achieve pleasure directly (the reality principle confining the pleasure principle as ego emerges); finally, as one starts to internalize the cruel and often impossible demands of others, the superego restricts satisfaction further. We might pause to note that the tripartition of *Republic* is like one frame of psychic structure in the developmental movie.

In her account of the higher mysteries, after she has expressed her uncertainty about whether Socrates will be able to make the climb, Diotima focuses in tightly on one segment of a lifetime, the psyche's development from adolescence (*véov*, 210a5) to maturity, putting aside childhood and the aging process she countenanced earlier. The desire for happiness *is* the desire for permanent possession of the good, most likely to be achieved in the presence of beauty. Beauty attracts, moves, changes us.<sup>44</sup> For the few who come under the appropriate kinds of intellectual influence, who obtain the proper nourishment during their intellectual pregnancies, and the services of a good dialectical midwife when ready to give birth, contemplation of forms yields knowledge that does not supplant their earlier experiences and learning—not if those experiences were developed in relation to the good. Rather, the increasingly competent and skilled psyche becomes more adept at achieving goals that are more likely to bring happiness in more ways.

A human being—nurtured and loved in infancy and childhood by caregivers with the inclinations and information required to rear a child in good health and happiness—is a human being with fellow-feeling, empathy, and concern for the *lives* of others, especially others in the local environment. Training and education in rhetoric, mathematics, mystery religion, and philosophy do not remove these profound effects of early childhood on the psyche.<sup>45</sup> One can describe a *god* so ethereally—or the philosopher of the digression, or Diotima's initiate into the higher mysteries—but if a psyche has developed in relation to the good, then Diotima's metaphor of the amputation of diseased limbs betrays an inadequacy in her account of the psyche: it is the *wrong* metaphor for abandoning the *healthy* objects of one's desires (*logoi*, youths, et al.). Yes, the economic model of the

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logical works, e.g., 1911, SE 12, 222; 1915, SE 14, 180–182; the reservoir metaphor has been the subject of some controversy.

<sup>44</sup> Gabriel Richardson Lear (2006, 107) expresses the process more clearly and in greater detail.

<sup>45</sup> Brown 2004, 286 develops this point in relation to the higher education of the guardians in *R.* 7, an overlay, but not a replacement of, what they learned in the description of *R.* 2–3.

psyche implies that the exertion of the intellect toward one objective results in diminished exertion toward other objectives, but the most productive exertion of the intellect, dialectic, requires a great variety of *other* objects of desire, beginning with air and gravity, and including other human beings, along with thinking. Life itself is impossible on intellect alone. In the *Symposium*, where personal immortality is denied (206e7–8, 207d1–2), the philosopher's death is the personal *end of the story*, so the question becomes, How should a human being *live*?

The second sense in which I see the mystagogue's description of the psyche to be inadequate is in her neglect of what is unique to philosophy. Although it is unusual now to write of philosophers as if they differ in any way from other human beings, Plato regularly distinguished philosophers from others, most especially in his passages of ascent.<sup>46</sup>

What characterizes the reflecting subject as a philosopher is the insatiable desire for truths lying beyond the subject's grasp, hence *love* of wisdom; in Plato's dialogues, philosophers are not sages (*Symposium* 203e4–204b5).<sup>47</sup> Certainties or facts, once attained, are quickly assigned to some other discipline (physics, psychology, theory of *x*); they cease to motivate, and lose their attractiveness, compared to what is still out of reach; at best, facts are rungs to what remains attractive. The reflecting subject's desire is so unique to the philosophical endeavor that Alcibiades calls it madness (218b3–4),<sup>48</sup> and it has been called worse. If the developmental model of the psyche is correct, then philosophical practice increases philosophical success which, in turn, has the double effect of draining energy from the pursuit of other goals while honing the intellect of the reflecting subject, making it gradually more suitable for its pursuit of its object (at least until one reaches the age when the slipping away of 'pieces of knowledge' begins to require returning to one's earlier studies). The philosopher's interest in proximate objects—whether physical, mathematical, human, fictional, or other—is in their actual, not their merely apparent, natures, i.e., in their structure, their formal principles;<sup>49</sup> the philosopher has no interest in making predictions à la cave dwellers. This is no less true of the contemporary philosopher of *x* (e.g., art, medicine, mathematics, physics) than of the metaphysician; each seeks

<sup>46</sup> *Smp.* 204b4–5, *R.* 5–7, and *Phdr.* 248d2–4, 248e5–249d3.

<sup>47</sup> *R.* 6,485a10–b3, 494a3, 496a11–497b7, et al.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. *Phdr.* 249d4–250b2.

<sup>49</sup> See *Smp.* 205e3 where *x* must be good (ἀγαθὸν ὄν), and more explicitly at *R.* 6,505d5–506a2.

as universal and fundamental an understanding of its object as possible, not just what is *good* about the object.<sup>50</sup>

To explain human motivation satisfactorily for the entire lifetime of a human being, from infancy to old age, Plato's developmental account of the psyche, or something very like it, is required. The unified psyche of the *Symposium* desires happiness and pursues a wide variety of proximate objects of desire; that no one does wrong voluntarily remains intact. Psychic conflict develops as soon as Sophia, say, wants both to binge on pudding and to refrain for her better health. According to the developmental model, all desires originate from exactly the same reservoir of psychic energy,<sup>51</sup> and they naturally adapt to a vast array of available objects. However, because adult human beings can accurately describe the psyche's appetite and its rationality without overlap, that is, because they can *distinguish* the psyche's solving (as in solving for  $x$  in an equation) from its striving (as in striving to win a race), they then make the mistake of inferring that these are in fact separate and independent psychic functions. As the physician Eryximachus gave support to Diotima's psychology, Freud supports the Platonic psychology of the *Symposium* by isolating its essential features and imbedding them in a therapeutic program requiring analysis of the psyche—knowing oneself.

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\* It was Holger Thesleff who dragged me into awareness of the material conditions of ancient academic labour. Because he sails by the stars, our many and profound disagreements have been as delightful as our collaborations, so it is a joy to honor him with this chapter. Parts of this paper were sharpened by the comments of audiences at meetings of the Ancient Philosophy Society in 2009, the International Plato Society in 2013, and the Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy in 2014.

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<sup>50</sup> More accurately, the philosopher's interest in any object is in its instantiation or expression of forms.

<sup>51</sup> As late as 1938, Freud wrote of 'the great reservoir, from which libidinal cathexes are sent out to objects and into which they are also once more withdrawn' (1940: SE 23, 150); echoing, 'All through the subject's life the ego remains the great reservoir of the libido, from which object-cathexes are sent out and into which the libido can stream back again from the objects' (1925b: SE 20, 56).

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