

Pierre Destrée and Zina Giannopoulou, Eds.
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The most relevant trait of this collection of essays on Plato's *Symposium* is that it is itself a symposium. Namely, a symposium on the *Symposium*. The choral effect and the generative strength of the platonic dialogue are preserved and reiterated through the analyses of different sections of the dialogue. Besides this fascinating trait, the principal merit of the collection is that none of the multiple aspects of the *Symposium* are omitted or overlooked, not even meta-literary expedients like the narrative frames built around the dialogue at its beginning.

The work is composed of 13 Chapters and a detailed Introduction.

The Introduction is designed by the two editors Pierre Destrée and Zina Giannopoulou who demonstrate that the *Symposium* is at the core of Plato's work because of the abundance of determinant themes involved in it and because of the multifaceted sides from which eros is considered. In regards to the collection, they point to the originality of the essays and they briefly discuss what this originality consists of for each essay.

Chapter 1, "Narrative Temporalities and Models of Desire", is by Zina Giannopoulou herself. Starting with a reflection on the narrative frames, she elaborates on an interpretation of the use of time in the dialogue. Giannopoulou notices a structural analogy between the use of time in the narrative frames and prologue, and between the intrinsic time that characterises eros. The analogy is based on the assumption, that there are two types of erotic desire, which is declared throughout the entire dialogue -particularly in Diotima's discourse. One is physical, materialistic and possessive, while the other one is generative and progressive. This distinction corresponds to the two ways of using time for narrating: the use of time for the narrative frames at

the beginning of *Symposium* is regressive and resembles the possessive erotic desire; while the narration in the prologue uses time in a progressive way and resembles the generative erotic desire. Out of this comparison, it seems that Diotima's account of eros, figuratively symbolised by the ladder of love, is the most balanced in terms of temporality as it is rooted in the past, is progressive in its evolution and mostly, is open to the future.

In Chapter 2, "Unfamiliar Voices: Harmonizing the non-Socratic Speeches and Plato's Psychology", Jeremy Reid carries out a parallelism between the first four speeches by the participants of the symposium and between the stages of the education of the Guardians in the *Republic*. The four speeches represent four goals of education which are propaedeutic to philosophy, according to Reid's interpretation. Specifically, the first discourse by Phaedrus, and Phaedrus' character itself, represent the spirited part soul which, in the *Republic*, is said to be essential for the Guardians in order to be courageous and to have a reliable sense of shame and honour. The discourse by Pausania shows love as lawful as it strives to ultimately reach virtue. This matches with one of the goals of education in the *Republic*, namely, lawfulness. The discourse by Eryximachus points to a form of moderation which is balanced between opposites and could be named temperance (*sophrosyne*). The same kind of harmony between opposite elements is the key for the Guardians' health in the *Republic*. Aristophanes' discourse recalls some elements of the appetitive part of the soul as described in the *Republic IV*; what his discourse claims indirectly, and in accordance with the previous speeches, is that appetites need to be minimised and managed. This progression toward the moral education, in the *Symposium* as well as in the *Republic*, is

indispensable for intellectual ascent and for climbing the ladder of love. It can be said that the educational training sketched in the *Republic*, finds a mirroring and a further development in the *Symposium*.

Chapter 3 is the first of a sequence of chapters (from 3 to 6) focusing singularly on one of the speeches of the characters in the *Symposium*. This sequence follows a narrative order starting with Eryximachus in Chapter 3, "A Doctor's Folly: Diagnosing the Speech of Eryximachus", by Franco Trivigno, and finishing with Chapter 6 on Agathon's speech. There are at least two elements of Trivigno's interpretation that are worth noting for their originality in contextualisation. First of all, Trivigno proposes to consider seriously a reading of the speech as a parody. In fact, the character of the Doctor was often represented as an impostor in Greek Comedy and Eryximachus presents all the traits of this characterisation. Secondly, the discourse by Eryximachus anticipates some of Diotima's claims and it is superior in comparison with the previous two discourses. Nevertheless, notes Trivigno, Plato rejects most of the contents as Eryximachus cannot evolve further from the physical level of love.

Suzanne Obdrzalek, in Chapter 4, "Aristophanic Tragedy", offers a reading of Aristophanes' speech. The main element that she addresses is the tragic and pessimistic vein that characterises the discourse of the comedy-writer. The tragedy comes mainly from the thwarted nature into which human beings have been forced after being hubristic with the Gods; but also, the depiction of the Gods is negative as they seem to be dependent on human acknowledgment. Being thwarted, humans are incomplete and strive for completion, hence, eros is a desire for something that the lover lacks as it stands at the core

of Diotima's speech. For these reasons, Obrzalek believes that Aristophanes' speech is fundamentally tragic. However, she underlines that if eros can make us whole again, then it would turn out to be optimistic. The author detects two reasons for Plato to diverge from Aristophanes' account of eros. First, Aristophanes depicts human nature and eros as irrational. In fact, humans -as represented by Aristophanes- pursue their completion, but they are not able to articulate what this wholeness would consist of. Out of this, eros appears only as a blind urge, like a form of madness. Second, Aristophanes assigns the wrong object to eros. The object of love that Aristophanes proposes is wrong because it is directed toward mere humans, hence it does not allow transcending toward Forms. To support this second point, Obrzalek recalls some attitudes by Socrates in the dialogue which make him the personification of the right way of directing love. Socrates seems not to be dependent or incomplete in regards to any possible desire or need, but at the same time he remains erotic as a lover of the Forms. If this argument by Obrzalek is valid, then it should follow that Dover and Nussbaum -both arguing that Aristophanes' account of eros gives relevance to the individual- misunderstood the sense of the speech. Indeed, the beloved in Aristophanes' myth seems to be chosen only in virtue of his ability to return to wholeness and not for her/his individuality and uniqueness.

Chapter 5, "Divinization", is by David Sedley who investigates the aetiology of the myth narrated by Aristophanes. He presents strong evidence that the myth has been invented by Plato. This evidence mainly derives from a comparison with the story of human origins in the *Timaeus*. This comparison does not imply a revision of the dating of Plato's dialogues.

Indeed, Sedley, is looking for theoretical continuity between the two myths, without questioning the chronological order of the dialogues, as this, in fact, does not affect his argument. Sedley's main claim is that both the *Symposium* and the *Timaeus* offer an intellectualist account of human essence.

Francisco Gonzales is the author of Chapter 6, "Why Agathon's Beauty Matters", a chapter completely dedicated to Agathon's speech. With nine claims and an attentive reading, Gonzales tries to rehabilitate the value of Agathon's speech, often considered as philosophically irrelevant, but rhetorically valid. As a matter of fact, Gonzales points out that Agathon is the only person with whom Socrates engages in philosophical conversation in the dialogue; also, there are many similarities between Agathon's speech and Socrates' speech, most of all the close relation that both of them establish between Beauty and Good.

In Chapter 7, "Eros and the Pursuit of Form", Frisbee Sheffield argues in favour of an original position according to which eros was not a theme of enduring significance for Plato. She aims to give an account of the significance of eros for Plato and hence to explain the limited interest that Aristotle showed towards platonic eros. The first feature of eros that can be detected in Plato's dialogue is its relationship to beauty (*kalon*). The *kalon* is how the goodness of something appears to us. Hence, beauty has an axiomatic role in Plato's dialogues as it contributes to the attainment of virtue and happiness. The ultimate end of eros is the Form of Beauty and the Form of Good, but we lean toward these Forms with the goal of changing ourselves and not for the sake of the Forms themselves. In fact, notes Sheffield, it may not be accidental that eros emerges strongly in those dialogues that deal mainly with the theory of the Forms. In

continuity with Lear, Sheffield argues that there is a connection between the role and functionality that Plato attributes to eros and the way Aristotle uses the word *eromenon* to indicate how the heavenly bodies are related to the unmoved mover.

Chapter 8, “The Mortal Soul and Immortal Happiness”, by Andrea Nightingale, focuses on the mortality of the soul versus the immortal happiness. The author starts from the assumption that in the *Symposium* the soul is not immortal, but longs to possess happiness forever. One can partake in immortality through descendants or else through giving birth to *logoi* and virtue. Nightingale puts aside the physical pregnancy and examines two models of spiritual pregnancy. The first is the one of great poets and lawgivers who gain immortality thanks to their posthumous fame. The second, is when a philosophical lover gives birth to ideas and discourses on virtue in presence of his beloved. To give birth to true Virtue is a distinguished trait of philosophers, while non-philosophers who do not contemplate the idea of Beauty, can give birth only to images (*eidola*) of virtue. Nightingale concludes his analysis claiming that unfinished dialogues are more immortal than any other human creation as there is not a determined offspring. It is the dialectical, philosophical dialogue itself that guarantees immortal happiness.

Chapter 9, “A Fetish for Fixity?” is written by Christopher Shields. This Chapter has the shape of questioning, asking why the contemplation of ideals and forms appears so determinant in Plato’s account of beauty and love. Shields bases his evaluations on the process of abstraction carried out by Diotima and compares it with the importance Plato gives to Forms. Beyond Diotima’s movement of abstraction from a beautiful boy to the Beauty

itself, there is an epistemic value and a rational eudaimonism. This has a precise hierarchy where the most elevated object (the Form of Beauty) establishes the higher epistemic relation. Nevertheless, criticises Shields, this way of loving is very ambitious for human beings living for a limited period of time, in a world that is constantly changing. For this reason, it can be argued that the real value of the ascent is the process of becoming *homoiosis theoi* which means godlike, eternal. Shields believes that Plato has a fetish for fixity which, in the context of the *Symposium*, identifies with the infinite contemplation of Beauty.

In Chapter 10, “Generating Beauty for the Sake of Immortality: Personal Love and the Goals of the Lover”, Anthony Price reflects on the sense of possessing good things expressed by Diotima. In trying to answer this question, Price analyses pederasty on socio-anthropological terms. Pederasty in Greek tradition had a pedagogic aim, an older man loving a younger one is not only transmitting emotional value, but also a set of social rules and behaviours that eventually would turn the young boy into a man. Hence, if on one side heterosexual love contributes to eternity through physical procreation; on the other side, pederastic, homosexual love, has its continuity and participation to eternity through communication. A difficulty in this parallelism arises when it comes to the theme of procreation, as the young boy assumes the role both of a mother welcoming future children (*logoi*) and as a midwife that relieves the older man from his spiritual pregnancy. The relevance that is given to this kind of non-reproductive love (not generating human beings) hides a strong ambition behind itself, which is to follow the ascent to produce instead True Virtue. Moreover, producing True Virtue, is a promise of immortality much more

appealing than the participation to eternity through procreation.

Following the development of the dialogue's weave, Chapter 11, "Alcibiades the Profane: Images of the Mysteries", focuses on the moment of Alcibiades' arrival at the symposium. Radcliffe Edmonds specifically addresses the relevance of the mysteries in his analysis. It could be said that Alcibiades desecrated the mysteries twice. First, when he parodied the Eleusinian Mysteries which represented the sacral identity of Athens; second, when he devalued and misunderstood the beauty and the eros he found in Socrates. Alcibiades tried, unsuccessfully, to make a possession of the Mysteries as well as of Socrates' Beauty. Even though very talented and well-disposed to philosophy, Alcibiades failed philosophically, as he was not able to abstract the concrete Beauty personified by Socrates, in the same way as he was not able to respect the sacredness of the Mysteries.

In Chapter 12 Pierre Destrée, one of the two editors of the book, offers a reading of Diotima's discourse in the retrospective light of Alcibiades' discourse. The chapter, entitled "How does Contemplation Make you Happy? An Ethical Reading of Diotima's Speech", starts by considering the importance that Diotima's speech gives to contemplation. Destrée points specifically to the contemplation of Beauty as a source of true Virtue which, once applied to practical life, leads to happiness (*eudaimonia*). Undoubtedly, this is argued in Diotima's speech, but it is also argued in Alcibiades' speech -claims Destrée. In fact, the model of moral education that Socrates offers and Alcibiades describes aims to that partaking in immortal happiness that only contemplation can assure.

The last chapter, "Eudaimonism and Platonic eros" discusses some of the aspects dealt

with in the previous chapter. Richard Kraut holds that eudaimonism is not a key theme in Plato's dialogues, hence, it does not play a relevant role in the *Symposium* either. Kraut analyses different dialogues and he concludes that the main reason for sustaining his own position is due to the fact that *eudaimonia* is individually related, while the main themes in Plato's works transcend the individual and his particular status. In fact, themes such as polis, universe, gods and the Forms have much more importance in Plato's arguments and philosophical constructions. Above all, Kraut believes that individual happiness in the *Symposium* is not even the ultimate goal of a virtuous life; instead, the ultimate goal of virtue and contemplation of beauty is the interaction with other people, in its highest expressions (such as laws and politics).

