Love, Beauty and the Problem of Politics
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This paper explores Plato’s *Symposium* in light of Thucydides’ *Peloponnesian War* to discover the potential impact of love on politics. I begin with a brief sketch of Thucydides’ account of the actions and speeches of Alcibiades with respect to Athens’ Sicilian expedition in book 6 of *The Peloponnesian War*. I then turn to the *Symposium*, beginning with an analysis of the speech of Diotima, in whose voice Socrates makes his speech. Love, according to Diotima, brings knowledge of death and the attempt to overcome it through begetting, understood as the good. Achieving the highest good is facilitated by the soul’s ascent up the “ladder of love,” the highest rung being the idea of the beautiful. True lovers desire to give birth to virtue in the presence of the being of beauty.

The political impact of Diotima’s understanding of love is twofold. First, the “ladder of love” replaces the gods with the idea of beauty as the object of one’s affections. This leads to the second sense in which love impacts the political, coming to light in Alcibiades’ speech in the *Symposium*. Praising Socrates as the embodiment of beauty, the object of love, Alcibiades says that Socrates made him feel ashamed of himself and his political ambitions, yet nonetheless he could not give up his pursuit of political power. The *Symposium*, therefore, in the speeches of Diotima and Alcibiades, appears to teach that the philosopher, moved by love, will transcend the city in quest for the ideas which are transpolitical. Yet, it also teaches that for politicians like Alcibiades, the idea of beauty as the object of love can disenchant political life, emptying them of their love for themselves and their city, without being able to draw them toward an alternative. Love and beauty can be dangerous to democratic politics. I will conclude, however, by arguing contrary to many scholars that the words of Diotima cannot simply be taken for Socrates’ words.

Thucydides

In book 6 of his *Peloponnesian War* Thucydides tells us that in the seventeenth year of the war the Athenians, on the pretext of coming to the aid of the Egestaeans and Leontines against the Selinuntines and the Syracusans, resolved to sail against Sicily (*PW* 358, 361-63).¹ To command this expedition they chose Alcibiades, son of Clinias, Nicias, son of Niceratus, and Lamachus, son of Xenophanes (*PW* 363). Perhaps the Athenians settled on this tripartite structure because, although acknowledging him as a talented general, the people feared Alcibiades and wished to constrain him while exacting his services. According to Thucydides, “Alarmed at the greatness both of [Alcibiades’] license in his own life and habits and of the ambition which he showed in all things soever that he undertook, the mass of people set him down as a pretender to the tyranny [...] his habits gave offence to everyone, and caused them to commit affairs to other hands, and thus before long to ruin the city” (*PW* 367).

Nicias, not desirous of the command and opposed to the expedition, cautioned against it and indirectly attacked Alcibiades on account of his lifestyle, motives and youth. In response to Nicias, most Athenians spoke in favour of the expedition. Yet, according to Thucydides, “By far the warmest advocate of the expedition was [...] Alcibiades,” seeming to appeal not to his fellow citizens but beyond death to future generations, claiming, “persons [...] that have attained to any distinction, although they may be unpopular in their lifetimes in their relations with their fellow

men and especially with their equals, leave to posterity the desire of claiming connection with them even without any ground, and are vaunted by the country to which they belonged [...] as fellow-countrymen and heroes” (PW 366). Not only does Alcibiades invoke an image of infinite expansion in time beyond death through fame, but also of infinite expansion of the Athenian empire in space. Alcibiades argues, “we cannot fix the exact point at which our empire shall stop; we have reached a position in which we must not be content with retaining but must scheme to extend it, for if we cease to rule others, we are in danger of being ruled ourselves” (PW 370). According to Thucydides, in the end, “All alike fell in love with the enterprise [...] those in the prime of life felt a longing for foreign sights and spectacles” (PW 373). Moreover, we learn that the force to set sail for Sicily was not actually the largest gathered by Athens or any other Hellenic city up to that time, but rather the most “splendid,” the captains of the crews, “spending lavishly upon figureheads and equipments, and one and all making the utmost exertions to enable their own ships to excel in beauty” (PW 377). According to Thucydides, “the expedition became not less famous for its wonderful boldness and for the splendour of its appearance, than for its overwhelming strength” (PW 377). It is as if the force is trying to embody the idea of beauty that Diotima, in the Symposium, says is grasped when one ascends to the highest rung of the “ladder of love.”

Very soon before the departure of the expeditionary force to Sicily, most of the Hermæ in Athens had their faces mutilated. The Athenian people took this matter very seriously, Thucydides tells us, believing that it portended ill for the mission and was part of a conspiracy to overthrow the democracy (PW 374). Suspected of being involved with other young men in previous mutilations and impious mocking of the mysteries in drunken frolics, Alcibiades was named by his political opponents and suspected by the people as being behind the mutilation of the Hermæ (PW 375). Offering to stand trial immediately and be executed if necessary, Alcibiades scares his opponents out of immediate action, fearing that the army gathered for the expedition would be with him and that the people would be angered if the Argives and Mantinaeans abandoned the expedition upon seeing their ally and protector prosecuted (PW 375). Alcibiades thus sets sail as one of three in command of the force. However, not letting the matter drop, after the expedition had reached Sicily, the Athenians send out the Salaminia to recall to Athens Alcibiades and other soldiers charged with sacrilege in the affair of the Hermæ and the other mysteries. In his own ship and with his fellow accused, Alcibiades sets sail with the Salaminia from Sicily as if to return to Athens to answer the charges, but disappears at Thurii, and the crew of the Salaminia return home to Athens empty-handed. Despite this, the Athenians pass a death sentence on Alcibiades and those with him in absentia (PW 390, 395).

Alcibiades, we learn, travels to Sparta in the Peloponnese, there becoming a traitor to his city. Syracusan envoys with their Corinthian allies arrive in Sparta to request that the latter prosecute the war with Athens more diligently at home and send military help to Sicily. Although the Spartans resolved to send envoys to Syracuse to prevent their surrendering to the Athenians, they did not vote to send to troops. As a result, Thucydides says, “Alcibiades now came forward and inflamed and stirred the Lacedaemonians” (PW 412). He advises the Spartans to send troops and a Spartan commander to Sicily, to carry on the war against Athens at home more openly, and most importantly he urges them to, “fortify Decalea in Attica, the blow of which the Athenians are always the most afraid and the only one that they think they have not experienced in the present war; the surest method of harming an enemy is to find out what he most fears, and to choose this means of attacking him” (PW 414). Worried about what the Spartans might think of a man who “actively join[s] [his city’s] worst enemies in attacking it,”
Alcibiades claims, “I do not consider that I am now attacking a country that is still mine; I am rather trying to recover one that is mine no longer” (PW 415). Listening to Alcibiades, the Spartans at once became more earnest in their intent to march against Athens and to fortify Decalea, as well as voting immediately to send assistance to the Syracusans as well as a Spartan commander, Gyliippus, son of Cleandridas (PW 416).

Many scholars of Thucydides such as Leo Strauss, Michael Palmer, Clifford Orwin, Steven Forde, Jack Riley and Mary Nichols, point to the universalism of Alcibiades’ political and imperial ambitions rooted in his lack of attachment to Athenian politics and resulting in the betrayal of his city (See Strauss, 1964: 228-29; Palmer, 1992: 11, 111, 113-14, 117; Orwin, 1994: 194-95, 198, 200-20, 204; Forde, 1989: 6, 7, 196-99, 208, 210; Riley, 2000: 122-23, 138-39; Nichols, 2015: 109). The debate among these scholars arises as to what Thucydides regards as the cause of the Alcibiades phenomenon, as it were, and the failure of the Sicilian expedition. Very generally, Palmer and Orwin argue that it was the abandoning in Athens and by Alcibiades of the traditional virtues of piety and patriotism represented by Sparta and practised by Nicias that was the cause of imperial overreach and then destruction, whereas Strauss and Riley suggest that it was precisely the piety of Nicias and the surge in frenzied piety among the Athenian people during the affair of the Hermae that caused the failure. According to Strauss, “Alcibiades [...] might have brought the Sicilian expedition to a happy issue. But Alcibiades’ proved or presumed impiety made it necessary for the Athenian demos to entrust the expedition to [Nicias] [...] whom they could perfectly trust because he surpassed every one of them in piety” (Strauss, 1964: 209). Nichols, on the other hand, argues that, “Nicias shares the blame, but it is not his piety that is at fault, for his ‘piety’ masks his caution. He does not manifest genuine piety, any more than the impious Alcibiades does” (Nichols, 2015: 111). Thus, for Nichols, piety is not the issue between Alcibiades and Nicias; the cause of problem, suggested by Thucydides in book 8 of his work, is the failure of Alcibiades to learn and exercise a Socratic “moderation” (Nichols, 2015: 162).

**Plato’s Symposium**

Nichols’ reference to Socratic moderation brings me to Plato’s *Symposium* and the philosophic consideration of Alcibiades’ imperial ambitions and eventual betrayal of Athens. Did Socrates “corrupt” Alcibiades or turn him away from his city and its particular political life, as Alcibiades himself, speaking near the end of the *Symposium*, seems to imply? Allan Bloom suggests that this is indeed the case, arguing, “there is an extrapolitical immoderation in Alcibiades to which Socrates probably contributed [...] The Alcibiadean vision of politics seems like a political version of Diotima’s vision of the Ideas and the beautiful” (Bloom, 1993: 155). Moreover, Bloom speculates that Socrates’ criticism of its authoritative opinions liberated Alcibiades from loyalty to Athens and made him, “capable of arguing, when he joined the Spartans against Athens, that he loved his city and therefore was a traitor to it in order to possess it” (Bloom, 1993: 166).

Nichols disagrees with Bloom, arguing that Alcibiades misunderstood Socrates’ conception of *eros* and therewith philosophy. In the *Symposium*, according to Nichols, we see Socrates characterize love and philosophy as an “in-between” state that encourages awareness of limits and thus is antithetical to imperialism (Nichols, 2007: 505). Nichols argues, “Socratic philosophizing captures [...] the imperfect human condition, needy yet resourceful. In between ignorance and wisdom, Socrates is skeptical of ‘universal’ visions, in as much as they presume a realization of wisdom” (Nichols, 2007: 504). Rather, the philosopher, in an “in-between” state recognizes that s/he needs others and hence the equality and reciprocity of the city.
I agree with Bloom that an idea of beauty such as that invoked by Diotima likely had a crucial impact on Alcibiades’ motives and actions; it disenchants political life without being able to draw Alcibiades to philosophy and hence the turn to imperial expansion and betrayal of his city. Yet, unlike Bloom and Seth Benardete, who argues, “Socrates through Diotima offers a self-portrait,” I think Diotima, although she may for the most part, does not simply and absolutely speak for Socrates (see Benardete, 1993: 193; for Diotima as a mouthpiece for Socrates see Wedgwood, 2009: 297; Pender, 1992: 73; and Warner, 1979: 334). Like Nichols, therefore, I believe that Alcibiades did not have an adequate understanding of Socratic philosophy and thus could not be moderated by it.

**Diotima**

Light can be shed on the relation between philosophy and politics by exploring the speeches of Diotima and Alcibiades following Socrates’ refutation of Agathon. The fifth speaker after Phaedrus, Pausanius, Eryximachus and Aristophanes to eulogize love as a god, Agathon praises the divine eros as beautiful and good (Sym. 195a). Socrates is supposed to speak next in praise of love as a god, but instead questions Agathon concerning the understanding of love portrayed in the latter’s eulogy. By means of his questions, Socrates establishes that love is love of something that it does not yet possess, namely the beautiful and the good things, and thus that love itself is neither beautiful nor good and as such cannot be a god (Sym. 200a-201c). Agathon concludes that he must agree with Socrates, signifying his awareness that he did not know what love was when he eulogized it; he must acknowledge his ignorance (see Ward, 2007: 168).

After refuting Agathon’s understanding of love and thus showing what it is not, Socrates proceeds to recount what a woman named Diotima taught him concerning what love actually is. Diotima, in whose voice Socrates comments on love, tells the story of the birth of love from the joining of his mother penia (poverty) and his father poros (plenty) (Sym. 203c). Due to his mother, love, “is always poor [...] always dwelling with neediness,” but due to his father, love, “plots to trap the beautiful and the good” (Sym. 203d). Diotima concludes, therefore, that “Eros is never without resources nor [is eros] wealthy” (Sym. 203e). Love is thus a feeling of need or lack, combined with the urge or desire to overcome this feeling of incompleteness. Love, as an awareness of incompleteness, opens up whoever experiences it to the external world, combined with the desire to join with what we lack and thus become complete or whole. Love opens one up to an object of desire, then draws one toward that object to make it one’s own; to make the “other” or external to us part of us. For Diotima, therefore, eros is that which loves and is not the beloved object of love (Sym. 2014c).

In response to Socrates’ question concerning love’s benefit for human beings, Diotima turns to the object of love, or that which love desires. Together, Diotima and Socrates agree that one who experiences love loves the beautiful things and desires that they be his (Sym. 204d). Diotima then asks Socrates, “what will he have who gets the beautiful things” (Sym. 204d)? Socrates, however, cannot answer. Diotima then switches to the good things asking, “What if someone changed his query and used the good instead of the beautiful? Come, Socrates, the lover of the good things loves: what does he love [...] and what will he who gets the good things have” (Sym. 204e)? Socrates can now answer, claiming, “he will be happy” (Sym. 204e). The benefit of love, therefore, if it can be fulfilled is happiness. Notice, however, that at this point in the dialogue there is a certain slipping together of the beautiful and the good (for the equation of the beautiful and the good, see for example Wedgwood, 2009: 300, 303, 317-18; and Warner,

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Although distinct the tenor of the dialogue is to proceed on the assumption that in loving both the beautiful and the good things, the lover is loving the same or at least complimentary things.

Diotima refines the object of love when she says, “This wanting and this eros, do you suppose [...] all want the good things to be theirs always” (Sym.205a)? With the use of “always,” Diotima indicates there is an element of eternity in love, and love, as love, somehow expresses our desire to transcend time and live forever, as it were. Diotima thus suggests that eros brings awareness of death or mortality which, desiring what we do not have, it then seeks to overcome. Lovers attempt to overcome this very significant imperfection and reach toward immortality through begetting. According to Diotima, for the most earnest and intense lovers of the good, those who are pregnant or, “conceive both in terms of the body and in terms of the soul,” their deed, “is bringing to birth in beauty both in terms of the body and in terms of the soul” (Sym. 206c). Love, for Diotima, is thus making or begetting “offspring,” as it were. Moreover, a pregnant human being cannot beget in the presence of ugliness but rather only in beauty (Sym. 206d-e; also, for the meaning of male “pregnancy” and “offspring” here, see Pender, 1992: 72-76). The good is the object of love, which is to give birth either physically or intellectually and thereby achieve immortality; the beautiful helps love to beget and thereby achieve its object (for the meaning of immortality through intellectual birth in this context, see White, 2004: 374-75; in contrast see Wedgwood, 2009: 312-13; and Pender, 1992: 85).

Immediately before her more famous “ladder of love,” therefore, Diotima articulates a perhaps lesser known “ladder of begetting,” as it were (for “ladder of love,” see Bloom, 1993: 55). On the bottom rung, those men “pregnant” in terms of their bodies have a bodily or sexual attraction to women and beget human children with them (Sym. 208e). The higher rungs reflect those “pregnant in terms of their soul;” those whose eros reflects a passion in the soul understood as higher than a longing of the body (Sym. 209a). According to Diotima, those pregnant in soul give birth to speeches or thought about virtue that can take three forms. First, they can be speeches about virtue, or something like philosophic conversations, with a youth beautiful in body and soul; second, they can be works of poetry such as those of Hesiod and Homer which are their “offspring,” as it were; and third, they can be the laws of cities reflecting the thoughts of their founders such Lycurgus of Sparta and Solon of Athens (Sym. 209c-e). On the highest rung, however, Diotima turns away from speeches to deeds, claiming that, “other men [...] among Greeks and among barbarians, by their showing forth of many beautiful deeds, have engendered every kind of virtue” (Sym. 209e). Glorious deeds, therefore, are virtuous and engender virtue in others.

Diotima claims that a human being pregnant in either body or soul cannot engender in the presence of ugliness but rather only the presence of beauty (Sym. 206d-e). Hence, Diotima brings forth, as it were, her “ladder of love” that paints an image of an ascending order of beauty in which the lover (in soul, not body, who is now discarded) can beget in their attempt at immortality. On the bottom rung the lover loves the beautiful body of a particular human being, causing the lover to “generate beautiful speeches” (Sym. 210b). On the second rung, the lover loves all beautiful bodies equally, or moves away from a particular human body to what is beautiful in all human bodies (Sym. 210b). On the third rung the lover loves the beautiful soul of the beloved, which is more “honourable” according to Diotima than the body, and then moves to the love all souls or what is beautiful in all souls (Sym. 210b). This love of the beauty of the soul then allows the lover to love the pursuits or products of beautiful souls, the laws of cities (political philosophy), comprising the fourth rung, and then the love of the sciences or all fields
of study (metaphysical philosophy), comprising the fifth rung (Sym. 210c-d). The sixth and highest rung, comprising the highest type of beauty which is the object of a “certain philosophical science,” is the idea or form of the beautiful itself, “pure, clean, unmixed, and not infected with human flesh, colors, or a lot of other mortal foolishness [...] the divine beautiful itself as being of a single shape” (Sym. 211a-d). In the presence of the idea of beauty itself, Diotima says that the lover will, “engender not phantom images of virtue [...] but true, because he lays hold of the true; and that once he has given birth to and cherished true virtue, it lies within him to become dear to god and [...] to become immortal as well” (Sym. 212a-b; for the idea of beauty as the female image of “pregnancy” and contribution to childbirth, see Pender, 1993: 84-86). The soul’s ascent up the ladder of love, therefore, is an ascent that begins with particularity but moves on to ever greater comprehensiveness and universality, culminating in the idea of beauty itself.

The political impact of the ladder of love is twofold. Near the beginning of her speech, Diotima says that eros connects human beings and gods, “interpreting and ferrying to gods things from human beings and to human beings things from gods” (Sym. 202e). The power of eros, therefore, is that it opens human beings up to and draws them towards the gods. Ascending up the ladder of love, however, eros is drawn not up toward the gods but to the idea of beauty. The idea of beauty, it appears, replaces the gods as the object of love (but see Howland, 2007: 185). Being tutored by Diotima perhaps one would no longer love nor believe in the gods of one’s city. Also, perhaps in this context it may be fair to ask if the “ladder of love” encourages the lover to be abusive toward particular persons; using them—the beauty of their particular body and soul—only as “steps” or instruments to gain access to ever higher and universal manifestations of beauty beyond the persons themselves (but see White, 2004: 373, 376)?

**Alcibiades**

The question of whether or not the “ladder of love” treats individuals as instruments rather than ends in themselves is brought to light in the speech of Alcibiades. Crashing the party, as it were, very drunk and with an entourage of flute girls and raucous attendants, Alcibiades’ speech is the last in the dialogue. He proceeds with a story designed to show the exceptional moderation of Socrates and thus the beauty of the latter’s soul. Alcibiades says that when young he believed Socrates, “erotically inclined to the beauties” and always around him, to be his most “deserving” of lovers (Sym. 216d, 218c). He therewith decided to gratify what he believed was Socrates’ sexual desire in exchange for, “hear[ing] everything he knew” (Sym. 217a). To facilitate such an exchange Alcibiades arranged to be alone with Socrates, often stripping along with him and wrestling naked together while alone, yet all to no avail. Alcibiades says he then invited Socrates to dinner, but that Socrates left him and went home after their first dinner meeting together. On the second dinner encounter he contrived to converse with Socrates long into the evening so that the latter would have to stay the night. Before Socrates could fall asleep, Alcibiades says he declared to him that he would gratify his sexual desire as well as make his wealth and friends available to him in return for Socrates’ help in “becom[ing] the best possible” (Sym. 218c-d). Denying that he knew how to make others better, Socrates almost chastises Alcibiades for, “intending to get the better deal” (Sym. 218e). Intimating that Alcibiades wishes to give his body in exchange for Socrates giving Alcibiades a virtuous soul, Socrates, according to Alcibiades, responds, “you are trying to acquire the truth of beautiful things in exchange for the seeming and opinion of beautiful things; and you really have in mind to exchange ‘gold for bronze’” (Sym. 218e-219a).
Alcibiades, apparently not quite fathoming the depth of Socrates’ rejection of his proposal, says he climbed into bed with Socrates and threw his arms around this “truly daemonic and amazing being” (Sym. 219c). Yet, although laying with Socrates the whole night, Alcibiades reports that nothing, “more untoward […] happened than would have been the case if I had slept with my father or elder brother” (Sym. 219d). Now clearly apprehending Socrates’ rejection of his proposal, Alcibiades interprets such rejection as having, “despised and laughed at my youthful beauty and [as having] committed an outrage against it” (Sym. 219c). Alcibiades says he was left in a quandary: “enslaved by this human being as no one has been by anyone else […] I did not know how I could be angry at him and be deprived of his association; nor did I have any resource whereby I could attract him” (Sym. 219d-e).

If Socrates thought so little of Alcibiades and his physical beauty, why did Socrates spend so much time with him such that the young Alcibiades comes to mistakenly believe that Socrates is his lover? Did Socrates, as Diotima would suggest, use the attraction of Alcibiades’ physical beauty as a stepping stone to begin his soul’s ascent up the “ladder of love,” gaining access to ever more universal manifestations of beauty while leaving the particular person of Alcibiades behind? Alcibiades suggests something like this when he concludes his speech by saying that Socrates, “committed an outrage” against him and many others, “for while deceiving them into thinking of him as their lover, [Socrates] brings it about that he is the beloved rather than the lover” (Sym. 222a).

Alcibiades’ speech also brings to light the second sense in which the “ladder of love” impacts the political. In his speech Alcibiades praises or speaks not of eros directly, but rather of Socrates, and not as an image of eros, as Diotima does, but as the beautiful itself. According to Alcibiades, “were one willing to hear Socrates’ speeches, they would at first look altogether laughable […] but if one sees them opened up […], one will find first, that they alone of speeches have sense inside; and, second, that they are the most divine and have the largest number of images of virtue in them; and that they apply […] to the whole area that is proper to examine for one who is going to be beautiful and good” (Sym. 222a). For Alcibiades, Socrates’ soul and the reasoned speeches that flow from it are the perfection beauty, and thus, as noted above, Socrates for Alcibiades is the beloved object of love (Sym. 222b). Taking together what Diotima and Alcibiades say, Socrates appears as the embodiment of both lover and beloved, of eros and the object of eros.

Alcibiades indicates the affect that Socrates’ speeches had on him when he says: “whenever any one of us hears [Socrates] or another speaking [his] speeches […] we are thunderstruck and possessed […] Whenever I listen, my heart jumps far more than the Corybants’, and tears pour out under the power of [his] speeches […] I came to the opinion that it was not worth living in the way I am […] For he compels me to agree that, though I am still in need of much myself, I neglect myself and handle instead the affairs of the Athenians […] So […] only before him do I feel shame” (Sym. 215d-216b). Alcibiades indicates that Socrates’ speeches touched powerfully the emotional part of his soul, bringing him to tears, because they made him feel that his unexamined way of life was not worth living. By showing him something higher or beyond the city, perhaps the beautiful itself that Alcibiades could not live up to, Socrates made him ashamed of himself for his political ambitions and hence desire to win the approval of the many. The suggestion appears to be that human beings whose erotic natures reach out for their highest end will transcend their city in the quest for the highest type of beauty, either in the idea as the philosopher appears to seek or in the soul of the beloved as Alcibiades appears to seek. The problem appears to be that the idea of beauty, either as transcendent or in the soul of the
beloved, separates men like Alcibiades from their city but, while disenchanting political life for them, is not strong enough to bring them over to philosophy.

**Socrates**

Is Socratic philosophy, therefore, responsible for corrupting Alcibiades? I would argue that it is not, pointing to ways in which Diotima’s understanding of the beautiful and the good may depart from Socrates’ understanding. First, considering Diotima’s understanding of the good, on her lesser known “ladder of begetting” she curiously ranks the type of philosophic conversations that Socrates engages in with his interlocutors lower than poetry and law-giving, and the highest good turns away from speech or rationality altogether toward glorious deeds (but see Wedgwood, 2009: 312-14; White, 2004: 369, 375; and Pender, 1992: 84). Moreover, the performance of these glorious deeds, according to Diotima, is motivated by the good person’s “love of honor,” and “their [deeds] setting up of immortal fame for eternity” (*Sym.* 208c). Yet, does Socrates pursue this type of immortal glory as the highest good? We should notice that Alcibiades says that when he, Alcibiades, “succumb(s) to the honor I get from the many,” he is ashamed to see Socrates and tries to avoid him because he knows he is not living up to the truth that he and Socrates have agreed upon (*Sym.* 216b–c). Another indication that Socrates does not care for fame or honour among the many is his refusal of the medal that Alcibiades wants to have him rewarded with for saving him in battle (*Sym.* 220e-221a). Perhaps acquiring fame through glorious deeds articulated by Diotima is actually a political or “Alcibiadean” image of the highest good, not a Socratic one. This points to the second way in which Diotima and Socrates appear to differ.

In her famous “ladder of love,” Diotima says the idea of beauty is the highest type of beauty toward which *eros* in the soul is drawn and ascends. Yet, if we turn to Plato’s *Republic* where Socrates speaks in his own voice rather than in another’s, Socrates says, in the context of arguing for the equality of sexes in book 5, that, “he is empty who believes anything is ridiculous other than the bad, and who tries to produce laughter looking to any sight as ridiculous other than the sight of the foolish and the bad; or again, he who looks seriously to any standard of beauty he sets up other than the good” (*Rep.* 452d–e). Socrates, therefore, seems to be arguing that the beautiful be replaced by the good. Moreover, this passage suggests, contrary to the tenor of the speeches in the *Symposium*, that one does not love the same or complimentary things when one loves either the beautiful or the good. Turning to the nature of the philosopher in the same book, Socrates, like Diotima, suggests that the philosopher has an erotic and therefore open and longing soul that draws him or her to things, such as ideas or forms, outside of themselves (*Rep.* 474c–475c). Yet, when we turn to book 6, the highest idea that the philosopher’s *eros* is drawn toward is not the idea of beauty, as Diotima would suggest, but the idea of the good (*Rep.* 508d-509a). Although it is beyond this paper to give a full explanation of Socrates’ understanding of the good in the *Republic*, I will say that it appears not to be making or begetting as suggested in the *Symposium*, but rather that which allows us to think. Perhaps if Alcibiades had grasped this good he may have acquired the Socratic moderation he lacked.

**Works Cited**


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