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Plato

The Symposium

Edited by

M. C. Howatson and Frisbee C. C. Sheffield

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PLATO
The Symposium

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PLATO

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The Symposium

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Introduction

Plato's writings are typically in the form of dialogues in which Socrates¹ (born 469 BC) discusses philosophical questions with other characters of his day.² Most of these are based on known historical figures, but the dialogues are not factual accounts; they are fictional, and often richly dramatic, products of Plato's philosophical imagination. The *Symposium* is a particularly dramatic work. It is set at the house of Agathon, a tragic poet celebrating his recent victory in 416 BC at one of the great dramatic festivals.³ Those present are amongst the intellectual elite of the day. They include an exponent of heroic poetry (Phaedrus), an expert in the laws of various Greek states (Pausanias), a representative of medical expertise (Eryximachus), a comic poet (Aristophanes) and a philosopher (Socrates). The guests participate in a *symposium*,⁴ a drinking party for aristocratic circles, on this occasion designed to honour Agathon's victory. Each guest delivers a speech in praise of *eros*, 'passionate love', or 'desire'.⁵ The final speech is delivered by Alcibiades, a notorious associate of Socrates, who talks openly about his love for Socrates, in particular. The conversation is disrupted by a group of drunken revellers, but Socrates continues to talk way into the night as he tries to persuade Aristophanes and Agathon that

¹ For all names, such as Socrates here, see Glossary of names.

² Plato was born sometime in the 420s.

³ Although we know Agathon did win a theatrical competition in 416 BC, and that the guests are real historical figures, there is no historical evidence for a celebration of the sort Plato describes in the *Symposium*. The work itself is believed to have been composed sometime between 385 BC and 370 BC. For discussion of the date of composition, see H. Mattingly 'The date of Plato's *Symposium*', *Phronesis* (1958) 3: 31–9 and K. Dover 'The date of Plato's *Symposium*', *Phronesis* (1965) 10: 2–20.

⁴ Symposium literally means 'drinking together'.

⁵ For all Greek terms mentioned in the Introduction, such as *eros* here, see Glossary.

the same author should be able to compose both comedy and tragedy. The events of this gathering are retold some years later by Apollodorus, another Socratic intimate, whose love for Socrates has led him to memorise the entire occasion by heart.

The dramatic aspects of this work are not limited to the lively setting and rich characterisation. During the time between Agathon's drinking party and its recollection by Apollodorus, the Athenians had lost some of the confidence shown here by Agathon and his peers. Just a year after Agathon's victory, Alcibiades had persuaded the Athenians to embark on the doomed Sicilian expedition. The Athenian defeat here marked a turning point in an already bitter struggle with Sparta (the Peloponnesian War). Two religious scandals also took their toll: the so-called profanation (i.e. parodying) of the sacred Mysteries and the mutilation of the herms.⁶ Since those involved in this desecration were from the Athenian aristocracy, it was widely held that the perpetrators were trying to undermine the democratic government. One of these events was believed to have been committed by a group of rowdy symposiasts after an event much like Agathon's symposium described here, and amongst those accused of involvement were Alcibiades and Phaedrus and very possibly Eryximachus. The inclusion of these figures at a dialogue set at a symposium, and the recollection of this occasion after these events had already occurred, invites the reader to consider these characters on the brink of their impending tragedy. The lives and loves they reveal in their speeches may well be Plato's contribution to a post-war debate about such matters.

Eros and education

The speeches about *eros* each make a very distinctive contribution to an understanding of the nature of human desire and the aim of loving relationships. Although this topic may not be prominent with many philosophers today, nor setting their work at a drinking party, these features of this lively dialogue will, in fact, take us deep into the serious business of Plato's ethics. Among members of the Athenian elite during the fifth and fourth centuries relationships between an older male lover (*erastes*) and a younger male beloved (*eromenos*) were not uncommon. Typically in such relationships an older partner sought sexual favours from a youth on the

⁶ See Glossary of names for details of these events.

verge of manhood in return for providing social, political and moral training. The feelings of desire and, at best, concern for the welfare of one's partner were employed for the socially productive end of furthering the education of the young.⁷ An important context for such relationships was the Greek symposium, such as the one that forms the setting for this dialogue. Although symposia were places to indulge in the physical pleasures of food, drink and sex, they were also a place to cultivate the pleasures of the mind. After dinner, with lover and beloved reclining on the same couch, lovers would sing drinking songs, or recite poetry or prose, to their beloveds. The content would often reflect on the practices of those gathered at the symposium, and how they should eat, drink and desire in the right way. The topic of this dialogue was, in fact, already an established theme in a context that was concerned with both arousing, and regulating, desires.⁸

The fact that erotic relationships had this educational dimension, and that the symposium was an important forum for such relationships, goes some way towards explaining why Plato wrote this dialogue. As we might expect from a philosopher whose works consistently focus on the nature of the good life and how it is achieved, Plato will have much to say here also about the sorts of values that lovers should transmit to their beloveds as they pass the wine cup. Since it is on the basis of a certain conception of a flourishing life that certain sorts of things are advocated to the young as valuable, the dialogue explores the nature of *eudaimonia*, which may be translated as happiness or flourishing. This is ultimately why a dialogue devoted to the nature of erotic relationships is at its core an ethical work, which culminates in the specification of 'the life which a human being should live' (211d). And it is this concern that relates the *Symposium* to a fundamental question that informs a variety of Platonic dialogues: how should one live (cf. *Gorgias* 500c; *Republic* 352d)?

⁷ On pederasty as an important social institution in classical Athens, see Dover (1978); Bremmer (1990).

⁸ On the educational function of the symposium, see Bremmer (1990) 135–49; Calame (1999) 93–101. See also Hunter (2004) 6, who argues that 'from an early date the literature of the symposium frequently involves a meta-discourse upon the conduct of the symposium itself; the overriding interest in their own procedures which characterises many members of modern clubs and societies found an ancient counterpart in sympotic reflections upon symposia, and Plato's *Symposium* is to be seen within an evolving fourth century tradition of prose *sympotika*, which look back to the sympotic poetry of the archaic period'.

Plato's concern with desire and its role in the good life in a number of works suggests that he believed that one's ability to act well and to lead a worthwhile and good life depends, in part, on desiring the right kinds of things and acting on that basis. What, or whom, one desires determines the choices one makes and thereby affects one's chances of leading a worthwhile and happy life. Consider, for example, the behaviour at the start of the dialogue of Apollodorus, who proudly announces that his life has been re-orientated towards the love of wisdom. Pursuing this particular goal, he believes, will lead to the kind of happiness simply unavailable to those whose lives are orientated towards the pursuit of wealth (173a). In the speeches Plato will be considering a variety of things thought to be worthy of desire and pursuit, and at the heart of the dialogue stands Socrates' argument for the centrality of philosophy to the happy human life (*philo-sophia*, means literally 'the love of wisdom'). The fact that desires are seen to play such an important role in the good life locates this text amongst many other ancient works concerned with the development of character and how that contributes to a good human life.⁹

An overview of the speeches

The *Symposium* consists mainly of a series of praise speeches (*encomia*). In some respects this is a departure from the usual form of Plato's dialogues, which are typically characterised by a question and answer format. In many of these works Socrates is pitted against some contemporary figure whose claims to wisdom he examines and refutes by a particular technique of questioning, often referred to as an *elenchus*, an examination, or refutation. In the *Symposium* we see a more constructive Socrates delivering an extended speech along with his peers.¹⁰ Since each speaker attempts to outdo his predecessor, the dialogue can still be seen as combative in nature and, with Socrates' speech occupying centre stage, the centrality of philosophy to a proper understanding of the topic is made clear. But although Socrates maintains his critical distance from his peers in this dialogue (198b–199b), the previous speeches need not be read as extraneous to the

⁹ This 'agent-centred' rather than 'act-centred' approach, as it has come to be known, has been revived in recent times as virtue ethics has become more popular. This approach emphasises the motives and character of moral agents, as opposed to duties or rules (deontology), or consequences of action (consequentialism).

¹⁰ His speech is actually a reported dialogue with a priestess called Diotima.

philosophical core of the work. They play a significant role by providing the reader with a sense of the agreements and disagreements on the subject, and by clarifying the sorts of puzzles that a clear and explanatory account – of the sort that Socrates professes to deliver (198b) – must resolve.¹¹

For example, Phaedrus (178a–180b), the first speaker, puts the issue of the role of love in moral education firmly on the agenda. He argues that a love relationship has the greatest power when it comes to acquiring excellence (*arete*) and happiness, as he conceives of such things (180b). In the presence of one's lover one is inspired to pursue honour and thereby to perform noble deeds, such as acts of heroism. Although the idea that loving relationships bring out the best in one may help to explain the positive effects of love, it is unclear why a love of honour, rather than pleasure, say, is fostered by such relationships. Do all lovers arouse this aim, or just lovers of a certain sort?

Pausanias (180c–185c) builds on Phaedrus' idea that a proper love relationship leads to the acquisition of some sort of excellence (*arete*, 185b). Since he believes that cultivating wisdom is crucial here (184d), he argues that attraction to a person's soul (*psuche*) in particular will encourage the development of that soul and its characteristic excellences. This account, at least, raises the important point that if we are to understand the sort of relationship that can contribute to the good life, then we need an account of the sort of excellence that is central to that life. If wisdom is intimately related to human excellence, as Pausanias states, then we can grasp why a beneficial relationship is focused on the development of the soul. Some kind of account remains to be given of just what sort of wisdom will lead to such benefits and why, and who might be its best exponent.

¹¹ Since Plato does not appear in *propria persona* in the work, or endorse explicitly the views of the character Socrates, one might question whether Socrates' speech does mark the philosophical core of the work, as I have suggested. Perhaps Socrates should be considered as one voice amongst many in the work, with none of the characters carrying more authorial authority than any other. If so, then perhaps each should be given equal weight in our reading. Since the dialogue begins and ends with Socratic devotees, and Socrates' speech is by far the longest and most complex, it is difficult not to read the dialogue with the Socrates character occupying centre stage. Moreover, many of his views here coincide with views argued for elsewhere in the Platonic dialogues. This suggests that, at the very least, Socrates' speech expresses some of Plato's enduring philosophical preoccupations. Whether these are considered to be Platonic doctrine expressed through a Socratic mouthpiece is a further question, however. For a general discussion of the difficulties of extracting doctrine from Plato's works, see M. Frede (1992) and for a defence of a doctrinal approach, see J. Beversluis (2006).

Eryximachus (186a–188e) addresses this issue next. He agrees with Phaedrus and Pausanias that the aim of a beneficial love relationship is the cultivation of some kind of human excellence (188d), and adds that the correct lover must have an expertise. One can see how this suggestion arises naturally from the focus on the development of the soul highlighted by Pausanias. Since Eryximachus construes good order as essential for excellence, he advocates the expertise of the doctor whose main concern, he explains, is with harmonising (i.e. ordering) the various elements of the body. Why this should be relevant to the good order of the soul is not so clear, however.

Aristophanes (189c–193d) raises a new issue. He claims that in order to appreciate why love has such a beneficial impact on human life we need an account of human nature and its needs. According to this account, human beings are needy creatures who strive towards a state of self-realisation and happiness. Love aims at the completion of self, and lovers seek someone akin to themselves who can make them complete and whole (193d). Although it seems plausible to claim that an account of the beneficial effects of love must begin from an account of human nature and its needs, Aristophanes' account of these needs, and how they can best be satisfied, also raises questions. As Socrates puts it later, we are willing to cut off our own hands and feet if they are diseased (205e), and therefore the aim of human desire cannot be limited to things that are akin to us.

According to Agathon (194e–198a), the previous speakers have failed to explain the sort of nature responsible for the benefits praised (195a). Since 'no one could teach or impart to another an art he does not know or possess himself' (196e), lovers must themselves be in every way supremely beautiful and virtuous if they are to confer such benefits on others (196b). Lovers pursue, and produce, beautiful and fine things and induce others to create such things e.g. wisdom, construed here as poetic skill (196d–e). Although it seems plausible to claim that there is something creative about desire, the puzzle that arises specifically from this account is why this is the case. If lovers are already in possession of almost all the good things one could imagine (as Agathon supposes), then why do they engage in such creative endeavour at all, or inspire anyone else to do the same?

Although the speeches stand in their own right as inventive, and often rhetorically brilliant, display pieces appropriate to Agathon's victory banquet, they also help us to realise just what is involved in providing a clear and consistent explanation of the nature of love. We might agree with the

speakers, for example, that happiness (*eudaimonia*) plays a central role in a positive account of love. We might also agree that love can contribute towards the cultivation of various sorts of excellence, and that this has something to do with pursuing beauty. But there is a vast spectrum of different ideas available about the nature of happiness, and what constitutes human excellence and, consequently, who are the best lovers. In one account bravery on the battlefield is the privileged value and this is somehow related to a love of honour (Phaedrus). In another, wisdom is central to excellence (Pausanias). Eryximachus prizes the virtue of the doctor, or seer, who can promote a harmonious order (188d). Aristophanes highlights the virtues of the politician (192a), and Agathon gives priority to poetic skill (196d). If we are to understand why *eros* is a fitting subject for praise at all, then what stands in need of explanation is some account of which of these pursuits (if any) are central to *eros* and why, and what relationship holds between their pursuit and happiness.

Socrates' speech¹²

Since Socrates claims to provide an account that privileges the truth over rhetorical effect (198b), we expect an attempt to resolve such puzzles. His speech is, at least, systematic. First, he provides an account of the nature of desire (203b), he then proceeds to its aims (204d), and finally he outlines its characteristic activity (206b), the most central of which, he argues, is philosophy (210–212).¹³ Socrates argues that the highest form of *eros* is contemplation of the Beautiful itself, an abstract and perfect idea of beauty. Happiness resides in intellectual union with this idea. This is a claim that has led to accusations of 'cold-hearted egoism' from critics who suppose that Plato fails here to appreciate something distinctively human about love.¹⁴ To allow for better scrutiny of what is arguably the central idea of the work let us first give it some context by piecing together the various strands of Socrates' speech.

¹² The bulk of the speech is ostensibly by the priestess Diotima. See Glossary, and Sheffield (2006), chapter 2.

¹³ His procedure suggests that he believes that it is only when one has correctly identified the nature of one's subject matter that one can go on to make inferences about its effects. This procedure can be compared to those dialogues in which Socrates prioritises answers to his 'What is X?' question. This is often referred to as 'the priority of definition'. See, for example, *Meno* 71b3–4.

¹⁴ This charge was initially brought by Gregory Vlastos (1981). See further below.

The nature of desire (199d–204c)

Socrates argues that Agathon was mistaken to suppose that lovers are beautiful and fulfilled creatures. If they were in such a state then there would be no reason for them to desire such things as beauty. Nor are they in a state of complete deficiency, however. If they were completely deficient creatures then they would not even be aware of their need of such things, nor strive to remedy a lack they fail to perceive. Consider the case of ignorance. Those who are completely stupid are not even aware that they lack wisdom, and so do not search for it, whilst those in possession of knowledge do not search for what they already possess. Lovers of wisdom are those who are in between a state of lack and possession (204b). In more general terms, lovers are those who are aware of a lack of the beautiful and good things they desire (whatever these may be), and who strive towards the possession of those things. In response to obvious counter-examples, such as cases where one appears to desire something one already possesses (e.g. health), Socrates argues that in such cases what one, in fact, desires is the possession of these things in the future. Since this future state of affairs is not something one currently possesses, such cases can also be considered to be examples of desiring something for which there is a perceived lack.¹⁵

The aim of desire (204d–206b)

Why desiring agents typically strive for something good and beautiful that they lack is addressed next. Desire, Socrates argues, occurs for the sake of something (204d). When we desire something we are aiming at the attainment of some goal. Although it seems axiomatic amongst all the speakers that beauty is the object of desire, Socrates is initially unclear as to what goal a desiring agent aims for in that pursuit. When he considers the good as an object, though, he is able to see more clearly the goal for the sake of which the agent acts: happiness. Happiness, he argues, is the end of human desire (its *telos*); for unlike other desirable ends, no one would ask why one wants to achieve *that* (205a1–3). In this rather laboured portion of the account Socrates is making a substantive point. It is that when we consider what it is that we desire (e.g. sex, or money, or wisdom), we can

¹⁵ It was Aristophanes who highlighted first the centrality of lack in our experience of desire.

think about how our desires relate to further ends (e.g. the pursuit of pleasure or knowledge), and discover what is of most importance to us (e.g. happiness). There is, Socrates supposes, an end, or a greatest good, towards which our desires and actions ultimately aim.¹⁶ What we really want as desiring agents is the possession of the sort of good that will satisfy our desire for happiness. This reflection suggests to Socrates that people are mistaken to suppose that *eros* refers to sexual desire exclusively; in fact, it is happiness quite generally that is desired and sexual desire is just one way (a pretty poor way, he will argue) in which this broader aim is manifested (205a).

This claim is often seen as part of a larger Platonic thesis referred to as *psychological eudaimonism*, which occurs in other Platonic dialogues. This thesis claims that we desire something if and only if we believe that it will contribute to our overall happiness (whether or not we are mistaken). When we go astray, this is not because there is something wrong with our desires (for our own good and happiness), but because of some cognitive deficiency on our part (failure to identify correctly the nature of this good). This thesis has been criticised for what is often termed its intellectualism, according to which people act in what they perceive to be their best interests. This seems to ignore the fact that people often pursue things that are bad for them. Reflecting on how to interpret Socrates' position most charitably might begin by probing the nature of such apparently bad desires. An often cited example is smoking. If a cigarette (a bad thing) is desired, but the description under which it is desired is as a good thing (e.g. as a pleasure inducer rather than as a cancer inducer), is this a counter-example to *psychological eudaimonism*?¹⁷ When we desire such apparently bad things are we, in fact, pursuing them as such? Do we ignore (deliberately or otherwise) the aspects of the desired thing that will cause us harm? If so, are such cases genuine counter-examples to Socrates' claim? Reflection often shows that it is difficult to find cases where one desires something bad that is known to cause overall harm and misery, and that the thing in question is still desired as such.

Even if one concedes this, however, one might agree that there are *some* desires that are sensitive to considerations of this kind but object that there are others that are entirely independent of such thoughts. In other

¹⁶ Cf. *Symposium* 204e–205a with *Euthydemus* 278e–282a and *Philebus* 20b–23a, 60a–61a.

¹⁷ Arguments at *Meno* 77a–78a are particularly helpful in this context.

works (e.g. the *Republic*) Plato explored aspects of human motivation that operate independently of any consideration about the value of its desired ends. In the *Symposium*, consideration is limited to desires for our own good and happiness. This has led some scholars to suppose that the *Symposium* operates with a rather simplistic, intellectualist, psychology that fails to account for the complexity of human motivation (e.g. non-rational desires). But caution is required when interpreting Socrates' claims in the *Symposium*. Socrates does not, in fact, claim that all *desire* (*epithumia*) is directed towards the acquisition of good things and happiness, but that all *eros* is so directed (205d). He is only committed to the claim that *eros* is that area of desire concerned with the acquisition of good things and happiness. It may well be the case that there are other desires (more basic appetitive ones, that might better be called drives, e.g. hunger), that are not instances of *eros*, nor thereby of a broad desire for good things and happiness.¹⁸ If so, then we are not entitled to draw general inferences about Socrates' views on the nature of desire as such in the *Symposium*. This is a dialogue about the human aspiration towards happiness, and how that desire is best satisfied. Whether such desires are the only ones Plato entertained at this point in his career is a further issue, not easily settled on the basis of the evidence of the *Symposium*.

One thing that is clear is why Socrates' account will move from an analysis of the nature of such desire to an account of knowledge and its acquisition; for if we all have a desire for our own good and happiness, the issue becomes how to identify correctly the nature of this good. Talk of correctly identifying a good we consider to be central to our happiness might sound rather odd to a modern reader, though. Happiness is quite often conceived as a subjective state to be determined from the inside, so to speak. If happiness is the sort of thing that individuals decide upon for themselves on the basis of how they feel at any given moment, for example, then how can philosophical analysis determine whether or not we are happy? This highlights the difficulties in translating *eudaimonia* as 'happiness'. *Eudaimonia* was considered not just to be a subjective feeling of pleasure, or contentment, or the mere satisfaction of an individual's desires (whatever these may be). What is under consideration here is whatever it is that makes a life worthwhile, that is, the success, or flourishing, of a human being who can be considered to be living well.

¹⁸ There is a range of different desire terms employed in this text (*eros*, *epithumia* and *boulesis*).

Whether or not an individual is flourishing is more plausibly something about which one can be wrong, and which can be subjected to philosophical scrutiny. What counts as a flourishing human life, and on what basis one decides that issue, are further, difficult, questions. Socrates' argument for the superiority of the philosophical life will stand, or fall, by the plausibility of his criteria for deciding the issue (for which see below).

Socrates' assumption that there is some one good we seek as central to the happy life also deserves some reflection. He instances moneymaking, athletics and philosophy (205d).¹⁹ It is not clear why one would pursue a single good of this kind rather than choose a rich variety of different goods in one's life. Nor is it clear how, if at all, this good might function with other valuable things in a flourishing life. The behaviour of Apollodorus at the start of the dialogue provides one model for thinking about such things. Before reciting his recollection of Agathon's banquet he explains that he used to run around all over the place before he discovered the pleasures of philosophy (173a). The implication is that his newfound valuation of wisdom has given his life an organised and focused structure. If the good functions in some way like this, that need not mean that one pursues one thing to the exclusion of all others. It might mean only that this good is the value one chooses to maximise and which one uses to adjudicate competing claims on one's time and attention. It is a real question how Socrates will end up conceiving of the good, and whether he advocates what is often referred to as an inclusive conception of the good which involves valuing other good things, or an exclusive conception which forsakes other goods in favour of one value.

The claim that happiness (however conceived) is the real end of desire has consequences for the rest of the account. For the good that will satisfy that desire will be a good of a certain sort. It will be the sort of thing that is desired for its own sake, for example; for we never want happiness for the sake of any further end. Socrates also suggests that it will be an enduring good: he says that we want immortality with the good (207a). These can be taken to be the criteria for judging competing conceptions of happiness.

¹⁹ Socrates considers the desires for honour (208c) and wisdom (211c) in what he calls the Lower and Higher Mysteries of love. It is an interesting question why Socrates calls the final section of his account 'the Higher Mysteries' (and so, by implication, the previous section 'the Lower Mysteries'), after the religious Mysteries presumably (for which see Glossary of names under 'Mysteries'). This is perhaps partly explained by the fact that the real end of love is (a) something divine, and (b) a mystery to most lovers who fail to achieve this end.

Now, whilst we might concede that rational agents desire their own happiness, and even that there is a single, dominant, good that is central to that happiness, many readers will be stumped as to why we are also thought to desire immortality with this good. Again, reflection on the kind of good in question may be helpful here. If we keep in mind that *eudaimonia* is not conceived as a state of felicity, or a transitory feeling of pleasure or contentment, but as whatever it is that makes one's life a worthwhile and flourishing one, then perhaps it is the case that whatever good we take to be central to our happiness must be the kind of good that is possessed in a lasting way if it is to be the right kind of good at all. What constitutes *eudaimonia* is not to be had in a moment in time. Even if we concede this, though, we are still left with little explanation for why this desire is thought by Socrates to extend beyond a lifespan. Is this just wanton hyperbole? There are different ways to interpret this claim. There might be some goods with which one identifies to such an extent that their survival entails one's own, even though one's body has ceased to live. Consider the flourishing of one's children, for example, or the realisation of treasured projects one knows will unfold only after one's death. It seems that people engage quite often in valuable pursuits they know will come to fruition only after their death, hoping perhaps that something good with which they identify will endure beyond their lifespan. Or perhaps the desire for immortality with the good is a desire for a certain quality of existence which typically (for a Greek) characterised the divine. It may well be the case that different desiring agents have different notions of how to achieve their share of the divine. The plausibility of this idea will depend upon the sort of good Socrates advocates as central to the happy life.

The characteristic activity of desire (206b–208b)

According to Socrates this pursuit of good things and happiness manifests itself in a very particular way because of certain aspects of our mortal nature. As Aristophanes had already intimated, human beings are needy creatures whose happiness is not a given state of the soul. In other words, we are not (like gods) just born happy, but we need to *create* a good life for ourselves. This dynamic tendency is built into the very fabric of our survival. Consider the variety of dynamic activities involved in maintaining a mortal life and preserving it from change and loss, for example: we

need nutritional replenishment to maintain our hair and skin, and mental practices of various kinds to retain knowledge (207d–208b). The desire for good things and happiness typically manifests itself in some form of activity because mortal beings need to create a certain sort of good life for themselves. This explains why Agathon was right to think that desire is typically productive in a broad sense.

Through a strange set of images, Socrates describes the endeavours through which we try to achieve good things and happiness by claiming that we are all pregnant in body and soul, and that we desire to express that pregnancy in an encounter with beauty (206b).²⁰ Some people are drawn towards physical beauty and produce children (an expression of a physical pregnancy) in the hope that these will secure them a memory and happiness (208e), whilst others are drawn towards cities and souls in which they can be productive of ‘manifold virtue’ (expressions of a psychic pregnancy) including acts of heroism (208d), lawmaking (209d), poetic displays (209a), political leadership (209a) and educational conversations (209b). Such virtuous productivity is designed to secure something good – honour in this case – for their producers, in the form of cults or shrines set up as memorials (208c, 209e). This is why, Socrates explains, desire is not of the beautiful, as he puts it (206e), but of production in a beautiful environment; it is the good things that result from an encounter with beauty that promise happiness. Since productive activity in a beautiful environment is the only way in which mortal beings can achieve a share of happiness (208b), this explains why creative activity of various kinds is the characteristic way in which human desire manifests itself.²¹

²⁰ The claim that all human beings are pregnant in body and soul may simply be a way of indicating that human beings have certain natural abilities, or potentialities: for children in the physical case and for wisdom and other excellences in the case of the soul (209a3).

²¹ The fact that it is beauty that presides over our attempts to secure good things and happiness shows that it is closely related to the good, though the precise nature of this relationship is controversial. Beauty appears to be pursued in each case because it is a visible manifestation of something good and, as lovers of the good, beauty thereby prompts us to secure some good for ourselves. Consider the case of Socrates and his devotees, for example. Socrates’ beauty resides in his ability to show them the wisdom they lack, and perceive to be of value (175d, 219d, 222a). In so doing, his beauty prompts them towards a good they desire, and it provides an appropriate environment for them to procure that value for themselves; for intellectual intercourse with Socrates is conducive to the attainment of wisdom. In this way our response to beauty is indicative of what we value and, as such, it can draw us into the good life. This was a theme Plato was to explore in the *Republic*.

The best expression of desire (210a–212b)

Socrates moves on to describe a very particular pursuit of beauty in what is arguably the most famous section of the work: the ‘ascent of desire’, so-called because it describes a series of attractions to a hierarchy of beautiful objects. It is here that he claims that the best expression of desire is contemplation of an abstract and perfect Idea of Beauty. Socrates describes an encounter with a variety of different beautiful objects that culminates in the acquisition of wisdom about the real nature of beauty itself. The manner of this desiring agent’s response to beauty suggests that there is a very particular kind of desire at work here – philosophical desire. For this pursuit of beauty is characterised by *thinking* about what is similar about a variety of different beautiful objects and focusing on that common quality (210b).²² First one reflects upon the beauty of bodies, then the beauty of souls, and laws, practices and various branches of knowledge, until finally, if successful, one can apprehend what beauty is, in its essential nature. The object of this apprehension is a purely intelligible object, grasped, if at all, by the intellect: the Idea, or Form, of Beauty. This beautiful object has a stable nature, it is immune from change of any kind, and it admits of no imperfections. In this it differs from the perceptible beautiful things we experience, which are subject to change over time, appear beautiful to one person and not to another, and whose natures are beautiful in one respect but not in another. Although defective in this way, these beautiful things share in the nature of this Form and, to the extent that they do so, reflection on the common feature of these beautiful things can lead to the apprehension of this Form. If one pursues beauty in this reflective way, according to Socrates, then one is able to contemplate the Beautiful itself, and to produce a genuine good: knowledge about beauty (211d) and true virtue (212a). As one needs physical union to produce physical offspring in physical beauty, so one needs intellectual engagement of this kind to encounter an intelligible beauty and produce an intellectual offspring of this sort.

There are some substantial ideas behind this dense passage and not all of them are argued for in the *Symposium* itself. What exactly is the relationship between the knowledge acquired here and the virtue and happiness which, Socrates argued earlier, are the true goals of *eros*? Why

²² Such progress shares features in common with Socrates’ search for the *eidōs* – the essential feature of a thing – that is common to many other dialogues.

should knowledge concern an abstract object of this kind? Why suppose that there are such things as Forms, or that beauty is homogeneous across a range of cases, in such a way that reflection upon beautiful bodies and souls, for example, can lead to a unified understanding of this Form? What reasons do we have for accepting this, or for thinking that there is anything over and above the perceptible examples of this property? Arguments for some of these claims are lacking in the *Symposium*.

Before tackling the vexed question of the relationship between knowledge and virtue and happiness, let us start with the nature of the knowledge acquired here. In other dialogues Plato expresses doubts about the ability of the perceptible world to deliver knowledge. Some philosophers before him (e.g. Heraclitus) held that the perceptible world was in a state of constant flux and change. If knowledge is the sort of thing that is stable and unerring, then it cannot be of perceptible, changeable things. Either there is no such knowledge, or it is to be had elsewhere. Plato was no sceptic. Since he believed in the possibility of stable knowledge, he supposed that the objects of such knowledge were changeless and perfect intelligible objects – the Forms. Such ideas are implicit in the *Symposium*. The distinctive characteristics of the Form of Beauty are conveyed by means of a derogatory contrast with perceptible beautiful things. Whereas the form is stable, immune from change and uniform, the things that share in the nature of this form are unstable and changeable, and exhibit opposite characteristics in the manner discussed above (211a–b). As such, we suppose, they will yield only a confused and changeable grasp of the nature of beauty. If knowledge is the sort of thing that is unerring, true at all times, and to all (capable) perceivers, then such a thing cannot be grounded in a grasp of the sensible things experienced in the world. It must be had, if at all, by grasping the relevant Form.²³

If Socrates holds such abstract metaphysical views about the nature of knowledge, then we can appreciate why an account of the acquisition of knowledge leads to the grasp of a Form. What may not be so clear is why the account leads to the acquisition of such knowledge in the first place, and what relationship holds between the acquisition of this knowledge and virtue, or the human good. If the aim of *eros* is the possession of the sort of good that will satisfy a desire for happiness, then what is it about

²³ The presence of Forms suggests that the *Symposium* is a middle-period work, perhaps close in date to the *Republic*, where this theory finds fuller expression. For the role of this theory in Plato's account of knowledge, see G. Fine (2003).

this kind of knowledge that will deliver that? Now, one might suppose that the pursuit of happiness is inextricably linked to an understanding of what is good for us; for without such knowledge we will be unable to make the sort of choices that will benefit us. One might also think that reflection on what makes bodies and souls into *beautiful* bodies and souls (in the manner of the desiring agent in the ascent) contributes to an understanding of what makes a fine and beautiful (in the moral sense) human being. But Socrates' account suggests rather more than the notion that such knowledge contributes to virtue. His claim is not that virtue requires knowing about what makes beautiful bodies and souls into instances of their kind, so that one could go out into the world and exercise that knowledge in some virtuous activity of one sort or another. Rather, his claim appears to be that the activity of contemplating the Form of Beauty is itself a virtuous activity. 'There is the life', we are told, 'which a human being should live, in the contemplation of Beauty itself' (211d). Since nothing further is required to produce true virtue, it is strongly suggested that to contemplate the Idea of Beauty just is to cultivate a certain kind of – intellectual – virtue.²⁴ And if this is 'the life which a human being should live', it is also suggested that this particular virtue is sufficient for happiness.²⁵

So Socrates' account of our desire for the good concludes by discussing the nature of knowledge and its acquisition for the following reason. Virtue is assumed here, as it was in the previous speeches, to be good for its possessor (virtue is not conceived to be something separate from the flourishing of the human being), and this good resides in a certain kind of intellectual activity – the contemplation of the Form of Beauty. If so, why is this intellectual activity considered to be the best good, and more central to human happiness than any of the other excellences mentioned? It is questionable whether Socrates has established sufficiently robust criteria against which one can assess the supposed superiority of contemplation. The earlier remarks about the nature of happiness as the proper end of human desire were very suggestive, however (205aff.). We learnt there

²⁴ I am here taking it that the activity of contemplating and that of producing true virtue are one and the same activity. For further arguments for this claim see Sheffield (2006) 134.

²⁵ This need not be taken to imply that philosophical desire shows no concern for other persons. At 202e Socrates explains that Eros personified – and so, by implication, human desire – moves from the human to the divine *and* from the divine to the human realm. This may be taken to suggest that it is part of the proper functioning of desiring agents that they go back from contemplation of the divine Form (211e) to the world of human concerns. See page xvii and below xxv with footnote 31.

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