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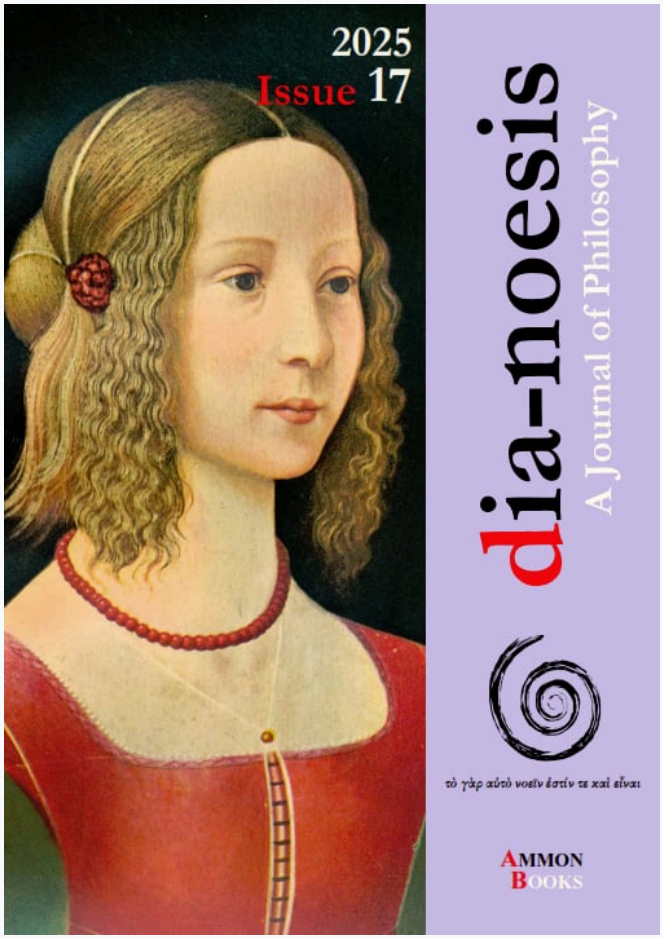
The image of woman in philosophy



Diotima: the feminine perspective in a symposium of men on the topic of love

Panagiota Vassi

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Diotima: the feminine perspective in a symposium of men on the topic of love (Plato, *Symposium*)

Panagiota Vassi,
Doctor of Philosophy,
National and Kapodistrian University of Athens
yvassi@yahoo.com

Abstract

This article focuses on the figure of Diotima in Plato's *Symposium*, examining the philosophical depth and symbolic significance of her presence within a predominantly male discourse on the nature of love. As a female figure and spiritual teacher of Socrates, Diotima offers a radically different interpretation of love—one that transcends mere physical or aesthetic desire and redefines it as a means of spiritual elevation and philosophical pursuit of the Good and the Truth. Her contribution marks a pivotal moment in the dialogue, as it shifts the emphasis from the object of desire to the very process of intellectual and spiritual self-realization. The article explores Diotima's function and rhetoric as a female presence within a philosophical context dominated by male voices, highlighting the uniqueness and enduring relevance of her role in Platonic thought on love.

Keywords: *Diotima, Socrates, Plato, Symposium, philosophy of love, the Good, truth, female voice*

1. Introduction

Plato's dialogue *Symposium* is one of the most significant works of ancient Greek philosophy, presenting a variety of perspectives and interpretations regarding the phenomenon of love. Through the voices of individuals from diverse philosophical and social backgrounds, the dialogue explores different conceptualizations of love. Within this framework, the presence of Diotima—a female figure who introduces a new dimension to the discourse on love—becomes central and multifaceted.

The present article aims to examine the portrayal of Diotima in the *Symposium* and to analyse the female perspective she offers on love within a male-dominated environment. Through her philosophical teachings, Diotima challenges traditional notions that confine love to mere aesthetic and physical desires, instead presenting it as a spiritual and philosophical pursuit of the good and truth. The primary objective of this article is to highlight the philosophical significance of Diotima's approach and her contribution to the Platonic dialogue while also investigating the importance of a female figure's presence in the male-dominated philosophical discourse of the *Symposium*. Finally, this study seeks to explore how Diotima integrates the values of philosophical thought and spiritual ascension into love, offering a more comprehensive understanding of it.

2. Love in Platonic Philosophy

One of the most beautiful texts on love—enriching not only philosophical thought but also literature—is offered by Plato in his *Symposium*, written around 384 BCE. Plato also examines love in the *Phaedrus*, composed between 386 and 367 BCE. However, his conception of love cannot be understood in isolation; rather, it must be viewed as an integral part of the Platonic system, which encompasses epistemology, ontology, ethics, and political philosophy.

Many have questioned how Platonic dialectic can be reconciled with love—how an intellectual process can coexist with emotion or even passion. If one considers that the essence of dialectic lies in questioning, and that questioning is not a static but a dynamic intellectual act, then it becomes evident that reason and love are not necessarily in opposition. The emotional perspective of things constitutes a fundamental aspect upon which human behavior, including inquiry and dialogue, is founded. In other words, for Plato, the *idea*—the true understanding of the world—becomes accessible only to those who ask questions, driven by friendship and love for the world (see K. Georgoulis, *Prolegomena*, pp. 4-7).

According to Plato, the world of Ideas is the authentic world. The world in which humans live is merely an imitation, a reflection of the true reality. In line with Platonic dualism, humans possess a dual nature: they have a perishable body (*σῆμα*) and an immortal soul. But how can a human, being material, bodily, and earthly, gain access to the world of Ideas while existing in the physical realm? The answer lies in the immortal soul, which, upon being incarnated in the body, potentially carries with it the knowledge it once acquired in the world of Ideas. However, during the process of incarnation, the soul falls into a state of forgetfulness—it forgets what it once knew. This is why education and intellectual exercise are necessary, allowing the soul to recollect what it has previously encountered in the realm of Ideas.

Thus, truth is the lifting of forgetfulness, and knowledge is a process of recollection (*anamnesis*), a dynamic act in which the soul retrieves its prior understanding. However, not all individuals reach the same level of awareness. Why is that? According to Plato's tripartite theory of the soul, the soul is divided into three parts: *epithymetikon* (the appetitive), *thymoeides* (the spirited), and *logistikon* (the rational). The highest level is the *logistikon*, corresponding to the philosophers or philosopher-kings in *The Republic*, who are the ones best suited to govern the city. However, this rational faculty is not equally developed in all individuals. It is not merely a matter of natural endowment but also of one's inclination towards inquiry and reflection.

Education, dialectic, and philosophical contemplation do not appeal to all people equally, nor are many capable of enduring the arduous journey they require. Consequently, only a few can attain the vision of the Good, and even fewer can effectively communicate it to others. Yet, as Plato powerfully conveys through the *Allegory of the Cave* in *The Republic*, it is the duty of the enlightened individual—even at the risk of their own life—to share their knowledge and not to keep it solely for themselves.

Within this framework, love (Eros) serves as the force that binds the two worlds together—the world of Ideas and the sensible world, or the realms of Being and Becoming—as well as the soul with Being itself. Love is a progression toward truth, which is why philosophy is, at its core, the philosopher's love for Ideas.

In the Phaedrus, the reader is given the opportunity to complement the understanding of love presented in the Symposium. However, in contrast to the Symposium, where the focus is on the passionate madness of the beloved (the student), the Phaedrus shifts attention to the lover (the teacher). Specifically, prompted by a rhetorical speech previously delivered by Lysias, Socrates engages in a discussion with his student, Phaedrus, on the themes of love and rhetoric, while walking along the banks of the Ilissus River.

In the section of the dialogue that concerns love, Socrates contrasts Lysias' argument, which associates love with irrational passion and extols the self-control of the non-lover. Unlike Lysias, Socrates identifies positive aspects in the so-called erotic madness. He views it as a source of inspiration, a force that elevates the lover beyond the earthly realm, leading to a form of transcendence and spiritual ascent.

Socrates distinguishes *Eros* from mere desires. Desires, he explains, are of two kinds: innate and acquired. Innate desires pertain to the pursuit of pleasures, whereas acquired desires are directed toward the pursuit of the good and therefore originate from *Logos* (Reason). At this point, Plato provides a more comprehensive view of philosophy and the

teacher-student relationship, as well as a striking allegory of the soul[1].

According to this allegory, the soul is likened to a charioteer (Reason) guiding two winged horses: one noble and beautiful (representing *Thymos*, the spirited element) and the other unruly and ugly (representing *Epithymia*, the appetitive element). The charioteer—*Logos*—must control both, keeping them in balance. This imagery aligns with Plato's tripartite theory of the soul and underscores the leading role of the rational part (*Logistikon*).

Within this framework, Socrates presents philosophy as an act of teaching, where knowledge is transmitted from the *one who knows* (the teacher) to the *one who learns* (the student). This process is characterized by direct, face-to-face communication, a dynamic exchange of ideas akin to the *sowing* and *cultivation* of thought (*Phaedrus* 276a,e). In a broader sense, this teaching process is an *erotic dialogue*—not in a physical sense, but as an intellectual engagement driven by love for wisdom. However, just as seeds require fertile soil, philosophical instruction requires a receptive and well-prepared soul. Since philosophy resides within the soul, it serves as a means of nurturing and guiding it—a true *psychagōgia* (soul-leading) (*Phaedrus* 277a).

Philosophizing, according to Plato, constitutes an *erotic* process: just as a lover relentlessly seeks to attain the object of their desire, so too does the philosopher pursue knowledge and seek out young, receptive souls to enlighten. In this way, Plato highlights the role of the teacher-lover—the philosopher—who, through dialogue with students, aspires to spiritual elevation and immortality. Thus, philosophical work is not a solitary endeavor but rather a *dialogical* and *interactive* process.

The philosopher is not detached from human affairs, nor does philosophical thought exist in a political or social vacuum. This is why philosophy requires a philosophical environment (*philosopheion*), and Plato inaugurated this tradi-

[1] «[...] *ἐοικέτω δὴ συμφύτῳ δυνάμει ὑποπτέρου ζεύγους τε καὶ ἡνιόχου. θεῶν μὲν οὖν ἵπποι τε καὶ ἡνίοχοι πάντες αὐτοί τε ἀγαθοὶ καὶ ἐξ ἀγαθῶν*, [246b] *τὸ δὲ τῶν ἄλλων μέμεικται*».

tion with his Academy—a model of philosophical initiation alongside a teacher or within a school. This tradition persisted throughout antiquity and remained influential until Christianity became the dominant religious paradigm.

Plato further elaborates on this view in his *Seventh Letter* (353 BCE), where he reinforces the argument presented in the *Phaedrus* regarding the superiority of oral discourse in the learning process. He describes philosophy as a *daily, arduous practice* aimed at guiding the soul toward enlightenment. To reach this level of understanding, the soul must break free from the rigidity of conventional thought, engage in dialectical exercise, and find its way toward the realm of Ideas (*Seventh Letter*, 341d, 344b; Vavouras, 2020).

In concluding this brief exploration of Plato's texts on *Eros*, it is important to recall that love and death constitute two fundamental aspects of life, which Plato examines extensively in his works. In particular, the *Symposium* can be seen as a counterpoint to the *Phaedo*. Whereas the *Phaedo* is concerned with death in general and the death of the teacher (Socrates) in particular, the *Symposium* centers on love in general and the love of the student for the teacher (while in the *Phaedrus*, the focus is on the teacher's love for the student).

These two aspects of life—*Eros* and *Thanatos*—form a dialectical pair, illuminating philosophy's role as a *meditation on death* (*μελέτη θανάτου*). At the same time, *Eros*, especially in its highest and most noble form, serves as a vehicle for immortality, linking the finite human experience to the eternal pursuit of truth and the divine.

3. A Symposium of Men

First of all, the work refers to a real symposium that follows the symposium culture of ancient Greece. According to this tradition, symposia served as a form of male entertainment with a specific ritual and process, in which, after dinner, wine drinking followed under specific rules, along with poetry recitations and libations in honor of the gods. In Pla-

to's *Symposium*, the occasion arises from the poet Agathon, who won at the Lenaia festival in 416 BCE. The discussion revolves around love. Each of the participants presents their own perspective on the nature of love (Cf. Vassi, 2021, p. 23).

First to speak is Phaedrus, who explores the cause and history of love while focusing on male friendship. He is followed by Pausanias (180c–185c), who examines the nature of love (Cf. Carson, 2019, p. 41). He distinguishes between *heavenly love*, which has a spiritual dimension (and is limited to male friendship and the male gender), and *common love*, which refers to physical attraction. The physician Eryximachus (185c–188e) then discusses the power of love throughout the world. After him, Aristophanes (189a–193d), Agathon (194e–197e), and finally Socrates takes the floor, with whom the discussion reaches its climax. Our reference will be limited to these three.

The comic poet Aristophanes conveys to the symposium's participants an ancient myth concerning human nature with an anthropogonic character. According to this myth, humans originally had four legs, four arms, two torsos, and two faces. There were three sexes: male, female, and androgynous, and their origins were celestial: males were born from the sun, females from the earth, and androgynous beings from the moon. With this anatomical structure, humans did not walk but moved in a circular motion, using all eight limbs, and their shape was spherical. However, they were powerful creatures and attempted to ascend to the heavens and challenge the gods.

At a council of the gods convened by Zeus, it was deemed unwise to annihilate the human race, as this would deprive the gods of the honors, temples, and offerings they received from them. Instead, they decided to weaken them. Thus, humans were split in two, and certain remnants of this misfortune were left on their bodies as a reminder, such as the navel ("a monument to their ancient suffering").

According to Aristophanes, humans seek their "other half" ("since their nature was cut in two, each long to reunite with its other half"), and Zeus repositioned their sexual organs on

their bodies to enable intercourse, reproduction, and the continuation of the human race. Likewise, in the case of male-to-male unions, physical intimacy provides satisfaction (*plēsmónē*) allowing them to continue their lives and activities. In Aristophanes' version, love is innate to humans, representing a force and tendency to restore the original unity, to heal the flawed human nature that was fragmented—to make two into one ("Thus, love is an innate force in humans, the guide back to our ancient nature, attempting to make one out of two and heal human nature").

The praise of love continues with the tragic poet Agathon taking the floor, introducing a methodological issue into the discussion, following the principles of rhetorical art. The previous speakers began by discussing the benefits of love, but Agathon reverses the order. He first considers what love *is* before addressing its advantages. Plato grounds Agathon's argumentation in sophistic reasoning, a modern way of thinking that challenges tradition. That is why Agathon, in his attempt to define love, disagrees with all previous speakers.

Love, according to Agathon, is not the oldest of the gods, as Phaedrus claimed, because the cosmos was not originally governed by Love but by Necessity. Challenging tradition, as conveyed in the poetry of Hesiod and Parmenides (noting, "if what they say is true," 195c), he argues that there would have been no mutilations and violence if Love had ruled the universe—only peace and affection. He is likely referring to the castration of Uranus by Cronus, Zeus imprisoning Cronus and the Titans, and the binding of Prometheus. These were all acts of Necessity ("Even the gods obey Necessity").

Love, Agathon asserts, has no connection to violence. Love is a young god who associates with the young. Furthermore, Love does not harmonize opposites, as Heraclitus' theory of "counter-harmony" suggests, which Eryximachus endorsed. Nor does Love possess a dual nature, as Pausanias claimed, because Love is singular, unified, and always good. Finally, contrary to Aristophanes' depiction, Love has nothing to do with ugliness—its essence is perfection and beauty.

According to Agathon, Love is the happiest of the gods, the most beautiful and the best[2]. He is youthful, delicate, slender, full of grace and charm. Love dwells in souls[3]—but not all souls. He resides only where tenderness exists, withdrawing from places marked by harshness.

Next, Agathon speaks of the virtues of Love in a very different manner than the previous speakers. Phaedrus earlier praised courage, and Eryximachus, wisdom. For the rhetoricians and sophists, virtue is divided into justice, temperance, courage, and wisdom or prudence. Agathon refers to these forms of virtue.

Initially, he connects Love with justice, because the condition of Love allows what two people agree upon, and each willingly serves Love, rather than being coerced. He then mentions prudence[4]. At this point, Agathon arbitrarily concludes that the dominion of Love over pleasures is an element of temperance. Love is also brave because, in the contest between Love and Ares (the god of war), Love wins. Finally, regarding the virtue of wisdom, Agathon praises the art of poetry and the wisdom of Love in transforming lovers into poets. Furthermore, Love's wisdom lies in creating life through love, but also in mastering all the arts. Thus, even Apollo, the god of measure, harmony, and prophetic art, must be considered a disciple of Love. Likewise, the Muses for music, Hephaestus for metallurgy, Athena for weaving, and even Zeus, who governs gods and men, are all connected to Love. In short, Agathon elevates everything to Love for the beautiful. Previously, Necessity reigned, but once Love was born, life was restructured, and the romantic inclination toward beauty became the source of all good.

The dialogues of the five participants prepare the ground for Socrates' version of Love in the text.

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[2] «*ευδαιμονέστατον είναι αυτών, κάλλιστον όντα και άριστον*» [195 b].

[3] «*εν γαρ ήθεσι και ψυχαίς θεών και ανθρώπων την οίκησιν ίδρυται*» [195e].

[4] «*προς δε τη δικαιοσύνη σωφροσύνης πλείστης μετέχει*» [196 c].

4. Diotima, the persona of Plato's Socrates

Socrates, as always, using questions, brings to the forefront and into a discussion among men the perspective of a woman, Diotima, a priestess from Mantinea, who initiated him into the concept of love[5]. Thus, Diotima and Socrates become the mediums through which Plato communicates his own version of Love—not as a fleeting act, but as a perfect idea.

According to the myth, the birth of Love coincides with the birth of Aphrodite, which is why Love is considered a follower of Aphrodite, and its nature is related to beauty. Love is the offspring of the meeting of two completely different figures: Poros (Abundance) and Penia (Poverty). Penia seeks to cover her poverty, and Poros is the one who fills the void. The meeting of these two worlds will give rise to Love. Due to his mother's poverty, Love is poor and homeless[6]. Due to his father's nature, being the son of Metis (Wisdom, abundance, intelligence), Love inherits the desire for beauty and goodness. Diotima's description of Love reminds Alcibiades of Socrates himself. In love, bold, and an eloquent speaker, Socrates is often barefoot, dressed in worn clothes, but he knows how to charm souls. Also, he claims that he knows nothing, just like the foolish ones. However, he has awareness of the ignorance of what he does not know, a trait that distinguishes him from the foolish and constitutes a form of wisdom. In Plato's philosophy, the philosopher will never attain absolute wisdom, but he can approach it, extending the boundaries of his knowledge.

Love is the desire for beauty, and therefore, it does not possess beauty, as Agathon claims. According to Diotima/Socrates, whoever does not consider that something is lacking to them, will not desire what they do not imagine is

[5] «*Ταῦτα μὲν οὖν τὰ ἐρωτικὰ ἴσως, ὦ Σώκρατες, κἂν σὺ μυηθείης*» [210a].

[6] «*ἄτε οὖν Πόρου καὶ Πενίας υἱὸς ὢν ὁ Ἔρως ἐν τοιαύτῃ τύχῃ καθέστηκεν. πρῶτον μὲν πένης ἀεί ἐστιν καὶ πολλοῦ δεῖ ἁπαλός τε καὶ καλός, οἷον οἱ πολλοὶ οἴονται, [203d] ἀλλὰ σκληρὸς καὶ αὐχμηρὸς καὶ ἀνυπόδητος καὶ ἄοικος, χαμαιπετὴς ἀεὶ ὢν καὶ ἄστρωτος, ἐπὶ θύραις καὶ ἐν ὁδοῖς ὑπαίθριος κοιμώμενος, τὴν τῆς μητρὸς φύσιν ἔχων, ἀεὶ ἐνδείᾳ ξύνοικος*».

missing. Furthermore, Love is not a god, is not beautiful, is not wise, and is not happy. But it is neither human, nor ugly, nor foolish, nor unfortunate[7]. In the dialogue between Socrates and Diotima, the nature of Love is clarified [202d-202e][8]:

Socrates:

- *So, what can Love be? – I asked. – Mortal?*
- *Ah, no, not at all.*
- *Then what is it?*
- *Just like the previous ones, – she said. – Something between the mortal and the immortal.*
- *What is it, finally, Diotima?*
- *A great demon, Socrates. And this is because the entire race of demons is between gods and mortals.*

Three elements that are initially revealed in Socrates' speech about Love are (Vassi, 2021, p. 27):

a) Relativity, meaning that there is no love without an object (he asks Agathon, "Is Love love of nothing or of something?" [200e]). Love is born in all humans, as we are all lovers of certain things. The object of love can refer to either matter and the body or to the spirit.

b) Incompleteness, the need to fill or cover a gap, and

c) The space between gods and humans, as the realm of love. Love is the mediator. It conveys to the gods the matters of humans, and to humans, the matters of the gods. Just as the philosopher, among humans, is between ignorance and wisdom. Therefore, Love is the means (medium) of commu-

[7] «*καὶ οὔτε ὡς ἀθάνατος πέφυκεν οὔτε ὡς θνητός, ἀλλὰ τότε μὲν τῆς αὐτῆς ἡμέρας θάλλει τε καὶ ζῇ, ὅταν εὐπορήσῃ, τότε δὲ ἀποθνῄσκει, πάλιν δὲ ἀναβιώσκεται διὰ τὴν τοῦ πατρὸς φύσιν· τὸ δὲ ποριζόμενον ἀεὶ ὑπεκρεῖ, ὥστε οὔτε ἀπορεῖ Ἔρως ποτὲ οὔτε πλουτεῖ. σοφίας τε αὖ καὶ ἀμαθίας ἐν μέσῳ ἐστίν*» [203 e].

[8] - *Τί οὖν ἄν, ἔφην, εἴη ὁ Ἔρως; θνητός;*

- *Ἥκιστά γε.*
- *Ἀλλὰ τί μήν;*
- *Ὥσπερ τὰ πρότερα, ἔφη, μεταξὺ θνητοῦ καὶ ἀθανάτου.*
- *Τί οὖν, ὦ Διοτίμα;*
- *Δαίμων μέγας, ὦ Σώκρατες· καὶ γὰρ πᾶν τὸ δαιμόνιον [202e]μεταξύ ἐστι θεοῦ τε καὶ θνητοῦ.*

nication between "being" and "appearing," between the sensible and the supersensible, between the mortal and the eternal. Love is the cohesive force of the universe: as it is between the two parts, it fills the gap between them in such a way that the universe connects itself with itself into a unified whole.[9]

According to Diotima, through love, a person aims for immortality. There are two ways to achieve this: one concerns physical immortality through reproduction. This is the love between man and woman, which leads to procreation and the renewal of life, as well as the individual's personality. The other way concerns "soul-based" offspring and refers to people who remain in historical memory through their virtues and deeds. Through these two ways, Plato dynamically perceives human existence. This dynamic is highlighted in Plato's epistemology by knowledge as recollection, as continuous practice and education. The renewing vitality is the only way that opens the horizon of immortality to the mortal being.

In the course of her analysis, Diotima distinguishes three successive stages in love: physical love (207b-208e), spiritual love (209a-209e), and the love of knowledge (210a-212a). Naturally, the path is from matter to spirit, from the body to intellect, just as in the gradation of the three parts of the soul: from the desirous to the spirited and from there to the rational. In the Symposium, Plato attempts to equate the beautiful with the Good. Erotic madness is initially activated by the allure of external appearance. One begins with the human body and realizes that the beauty of one body is grounded in all bodies. Along the way, the beauty of the soul is discovered. The person then perceives the beauty of souls and the beauty of customs and laws. The last category before the ideal world is the world of knowledge and the various sciences.

Diotima / Socrates concludes from the specific types of love to the contemplation of the idea of beauty, of absolute beauty. Platonic love is a force that draws the soul towards the

[9] «[...] *ώστε το παν αυτό αυτώ ξυνδεδέσθαι*» [202e].

Ideas. The person who desires this contemplation must be captivated by the Idea of the beautiful and be trained in it from their youth. Therefore, in Plato's philosophy, Love provides the soul with the drive and will necessary to achieve the truth, knowledge, and, ultimately, immortality. Here I quote verbatim the words of Socrates, in translation, with which he concludes his speech, and which constitute the supreme praise of love in this Platonic work:

"*These things, therefore, Phaedrus, and you others, Diotima said to me, and I believe them. And because I believe them, I try to persuade others that there is no better helper in humanity than Love to obtain this treasure, immortality. For this very reason, at least I say that every person must worship Love, and I myself highly esteem the erotic and devote myself to it with great dedication, encouraging others to do the same, and I praise the power and courage of Love, both now and always*."[10]

The text continues in the second part with the Bacchic entrance of Alcibiades into the symposium and the dramatic conflict of two elements on the horizon of real life: Socrates as the ascetic of love and Alcibiades as the symbol of the physical expression of love. At this point, philosophically, there is a shift from the previous speeches about love to love as a real event. Essentially, in this section, Plato provides tangible evidence and testimonies for the arguments that preceded.

5. Diotima and the Incorporation of the Feminine Element in Philosophy

In the *Symposium*, Diotima is presented as a wise woman from Mantinea, an area in Arcadia known for its connection to religious and mystical practices. Plato portrays her as a priestess and an expert in matters of love and initiation, emphasizing that she taught Socrates about the nature of love. Her status as a woman from the countryside and her connec-

[10] Plato. *Symposium*, translated by V. Dedousis, G. Kordatos, Library of Ancient Authors I, Zaharopoulos, Athens, n.d., 218 b.

tion to divination and religion give her knowledge a revelatory character.

Many scholars have debated whether Diotima was a real person or a literary invention of Plato. The lack of other references to her outside of the *Symposium* leads to the conclusion that she likely did not exist as a historical figure but instead represents an allegorical figure used to enhance the theme of the dialogue. As we know, Plato often uses fictional characters to facilitate philosophical analysis, so Diotima may be a created figure embodying the idea of feminine wisdom. In this context, Diotima's origin (Mantinea, Arcadia) and her role (priestess) are symbolically used to emphasize her connection to the divine and mystical knowledge, which are essential elements for the spiritual dimension of love.

Indeed, in the philosophical dialogue on love, Diotima plays the most decisive role, as she provides the deepest analysis of love through a progressive process of knowledge and spiritual elevation. (Cf. for example, the analysis of Annas, 1981; Mulgan, 1993; Flacelière, 1995; Kudo, 2010; Berg, 2013, Futter, 2023). Her voice gives love a dimension that transcends the level of personal attraction, highlighting its philosophical and divine nature. As we have analyzed, Diotima offers Socrates the philosophy of love as a spiritual quest that goes beyond physical desire. This love is a continuous journey toward truth and beauty, with the body functioning merely as a springboard for the transition to the intellectual and spiritual dimension of the good (*agathon*). The fact that she is a woman and not an Athenian further strengthens the idea that her wisdom comes from an external, almost supernatural, source. This offers a contrasting element in Plato's dialectic, as it presents a knowledge that does not come from the classical male philosophical tradition (Cf. Nussbaum, 2015, σ. 123).

If we consider feminist theory, as presented in the works of Simone de Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva, we will notice that the concept of feminine wisdom is often linked to the transcendence of established androcentric narratives. Diotima, as a model of the philosophy of love and spirituality, embodies this feminist element, proving that women

are not only bearers of emotions but also central figures in thought and wisdom. Contemporary feminist interpretation, again, identifies in Diotima's work a contrast with the traditional, male-centric discourse that emphasizes physical love merely as a biological need. In contrast, Diotima emphasizes the spiritual and moral dimension of love, an interpretation that incorporates the "feminist" approach to gender and love, focusing on the psychic and spiritual union rather than the physical or sexual one. According to this perspective, Diotima's feminine wisdom in the *Symposium* functions as a tool for deconstructing the limited male discourse on love, opening the way for the recognition of the multifaceted nature of human relationships and the spirit. Diotima calls for us to view love not only as an emotional or physical union but as a higher, purifying, and elevated process of spiritual connection.

For example, in the *Cambridge Companion to Plato* (see specifically Suzanne Obdrzalek, "Love and Philosophy in Plato"), we read that Diotima, as a woman, despite the social and political conditions of the time, is presented as a bearer of purifying and spiritual wisdom that leads humans toward truth and higher knowledge. Diotima, in this view, is not just a teacher of love but also a priestess, which places her in a position directly connected to religiosity and the mystical dimension of philosophy. This feminist "reading" of Diotima highlights the potential for women to hold positions of power, whether in religious or philosophical contexts, and to deeply shape the thought and understanding of human existence and the world around them. Therefore, Diotima is recognized as a figure that "resides" both in the religious and philosophical sphere, representing a *novum* for the incorporation of the feminine element into philosophical discourse.

Similarly, Heather Hardy (Hardy: 1995) argues that Diotima's figure functions subversively in relation to traditional views on love and female identity. She claims that Diotima's philosophical contribution allows Plato to explore the possibility of female participation in intellectual and philosophical activity, which was traditionally considered a male-dominated space. Plato's choice to assign a central role to a female fig-

ure, who assumes the role of teacher to men, serves as an indirect acknowledgment of the possibility of transcending gender divisions in the realm of knowledge and philosophical thought (Sherman, 1999, p. 475). In this way, Diotima can be seen as a precursor to a conception that recognizes gender equality, contributing to the foundation of a different approach to the position of women in philosophy and intellectual discourse. Given this, Diotima's presence in the *Symposium* serves a deeper role: it deconstructs the entrenched stereotypes that associate wisdom and philosophy exclusively with male thought. At the same time, it paves the way for a more inclusive and egalitarian view of the spiritual quest, free from gendered constraints.

Also interesting is the approach of Angela Hobbs (Hobbs: 2006). According to her, Plato uses female metaphors, such as pregnancy and midwifery, to describe the philosophical process and the search for knowledge. She specifically refers to Diotima, the female philosopher who appears as Socrates' teacher, and how her "voice" offers a subversive feminist perspective. Hobbs argues that Plato does not seek to appropriate or conceal the feminine element but uses both masculine and feminine imagery to show that philosophy transcends gender distinctions and frees both men and women from unnecessary physical and cultural limitations. This approach highlights the complexity of Plato's thought on gender and philosophy in general.

In contrast to this view is Marilyn Friedman's (Friedman: 1976) interpretation. Friedman analyzes the contradiction in Plato's work, where women are often presented in roles related to religious or supernatural knowledge but not with everyday philosophical or political power. Women, such as Diotima, embody the idea of "knowledge," but through religion, not through rational philosophy, which is practiced by men. Philosophy itself in Plato's works is often considered "masculine," and women who engage with it appear in acceptable, limited roles related to the divine or transcendental aspects of thought. This reinforces social stereotypes about the position of women in the ancient Greek world and the rejection of women's philosophical capability beyond these

restrictions—religious and sacred. In this context, the female "voice" remains constrained by social stereotypes.

Similarly, Fiona Leigh (Leigh: 2015) observes that, although Diotima's presence is unique and highly significant, she is integrated into a world of philosophical discussions that is predominantly male and confined to specific frameworks. Nancy Sherman also emphasizes that, while Diotima has an exceptional and multifaceted role in the *Symposium*, her philosophical contribution is embedded in a limited and socially defined context. Plato may recognize Diotima's wisdom, but he keeps her within the narrow confines associated with religiosity, mysticism, and femininity. This limits her full philosophical existence and underscores her role as a "mediator" rather than as an equal member of the philosophical community.

6. The "Diotima Problem" and Plato's Intentions

The presence of Diotima in the *Symposium* is one of the most interesting and widely discussed aspects of the dialogue, as it brings the feminine element into philosophical thought. Diotima's role is fundamental because: 1) she is the only woman who expresses philosophical views in Plato's work, even though these are conveyed through Socrates' narrative, 2) she introduces a unique perspective on love, linking it not to physical attraction, but to the pursuit of truth and the good, and 3) she represents a different type of wisdom, combining mystical and religious knowledge with pure philosophical analysis.

Plato's choice to assign this role to Diotima provides a transcendent legitimacy to his ideas, as Diotima is portrayed as a source of authentic and universal knowledge that surpasses Socrates' personal views. Thus, his ideas on love acquire greater weight and authority, as they do not appear merely as philosophical theories but as the teachings of a mystical and wise figure, which elevates love to an essential and fundamental force for spiritual progress and philosophical understanding of the world.

This raises a critical question as to whether, through Diotima, Plato reproduces, rather than challenges, the limited possibilities for women in the realm of philosophy. His decision to make Diotima a priestess may reflect the belief that philosophy—especially the philosophy of love and truth—was accessible to women only through a "divine" channel, such as religious or spiritual inspiration, and not through pure, rational thought. In this context, Diotima's wisdom may be seen as "legitimized" or accepted only because of her sacred role, which limits the philosophical recognition of women in ancient Greece (McClure, 1995, p. 110; Sacks, 2009).

However, it can also be argued that the presence of Diotima, despite her priestly identity, underscores the possibility for a woman to teach men, even in a domain as central and male-dominated as the philosophy of love. Plato may use the role of the priestess to lend greater credibility to her teachings, while simultaneously highlighting a woman's capacity to participate in intellectual dialogue, even if this participation requires a special, "divine" status. Perhaps the reference to Diotima as a priestess can be seen as a window to a more spiritual, philosophical female presence in ancient Greece, while remaining faithful to the social and religious structures of the time (Cf. Rees, 1992, p. 84).

Therefore, it is true that Diotima's status might reinforce patriarchal views on philosophy, but at the same time, her philosophical teaching transcends these boundaries and opens a path for the recognition of women as bearers of spiritual and philosophical wisdom, even within the traditional social frameworks of the era (Cf. Pomeroy, 1984, p. 112).

7. Conclusion

It is clear that the Platonic Socrates uses Diotima to impart a transcendent and almost mystical dimension to his views. Through the "mask" of Diotima: 1) the ideas about love do not appear as personal opinions of Socrates, but as wisdom that originates from a higher source, 2) her presence adds a symbolic depth: love is a force that requires wisdom,

knowledge, and inner understanding. Therefore, Diotima is not merely a teacher of love, but a guide who helps Socrates and the other participants in the *Symposium* realize that love is not just a matter of personal desire or sexual attraction, but a process of seeking the divine. Essentially, Diotima teaches that love is a ladder leading to the understanding of the good and the truth, beyond the material and the ephemeral. Thus, Diotima becomes the vehicle through which Plato presents love as a philosophical force that unites the human and the divine. Through her wisdom and authority, these ideas gain universal significance, transcending the narrow confines of social and sensual approaches.

In conclusion, Diotima represents a radical conception of the feminine element in Plato. Her role is not decorative but essential, as she, transcending the gender hierarchies of the time, reveals a deeper philosophical truth: the quest for knowledge and truth is a creative process that surpasses the biological and social categories of gender.

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