

Agalmata, Deontology, and the Erotics of Emptiness in the *Symposium*

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Abstract: An integrated interpretation of (1) the Alcibiades episode in Plato's *Symposium* that bases its skepticism about his reliability as a narrator on the evidence provided by the text itself, especially its use of the terms *agalmata*, *exaiphnês*, and *epi dexia*; (2) Socrates' claim that he an expert on *ta erôtika*; and (3) Diotima's account of the *ergon* of love as *tokos en kalô[i]*, that uncovers some concealed deontological elements in Platonic ethics.

Keywords: Alcibiades, Socrates, eros, *agalmata*, elenchus, deontology.

Agathon's drinking-party has reached its philosophical apogee in Diotima's vivid description of the ultimate object of all love, the Platonic form of beauty – the beautiful itself. All of a sudden, there's a commotion. Loud knocking. A man, «very drunk and shouting loudly, asking Where is Agathon? And saying, Take me to Agathon» (*Symposium*, 212d5)¹. Alcibiades, the best-looking man in Athens, has arrived, «crowned with a bushy wreath of ivy and violets and a multitude of fillets on his head» (212e1-2), – looking pretty much, we might imagine, as he does in Pietro Testa, *The Drunken Alcibiades Interrupting the Symposium*. And what happens? The beautiful itself gets eclipsed by the beautiful body; the philosophical apogee overshadowed by the theatrical one.

The description that Alcibiades soon gives of Socrates is as riveting as his dramatic entrance. It casts the other speeches into the shade. It is so vivid, so entertaining, so alive, in fact, that we almost forget that it had any predecessors. Yet it is a deeply problematic description – as, indeed, are its effects on us. Three key passages in it are linked by their mention of ἀγάλματα (*agalmata*) – «statues», «images», «effigies», and «figures» are standard translations. In the first passage, the *agalmata* are inside the statues of Silenus to which Socrates is compared: «I say that Socrates is exactly like those silenes sitting in the statuary shops, the kind the craftsmen

¹ Translations of the *Symposium*, sometimes silently modified in minor ways, are from Allen, R.E. (1991).

manufacture holding flutes or pipes, but when opened in the middle, they prove to hold within them *agalmata* of the gods» (215a7-b3).

It is this that makes the standard translations seem correct. In the second passage, however, the *agalmata* that are actually inside Socrates are characterized in a way that makes them seem incorrect:

As to his appearance – isn't it Silenus-like. Of course it is. His outside covering is like a carved-statue of Silenus, but when he is opened, gentlemen and drinking companions, can you guess how he teems with temperance (γέμει [...] σωφροσύνης) within? [...] But he is sly and dishonest and spends his whole life playing with people. Yet, I don't know whether anyone else has seen the *agalmata* within when he is in earnest (σπουδάσαντος) and opened up (ἀνοιχθέντος), but I saw them once, and I thought that they were so divine and golden (χρυσῶ), so marvelously beautiful (πάγκαλα καὶ θαυμαστά), that whatever Socrates might bid must, in short, be done. (216e4-217a2)

Literal statues of gods are inside the silenes that the craftsmen manufacture, but what is inside Socrates aren't literal statues. What we expect are analogues of the statues, so to speak, but what we get – incongruously – are the statues themselves again.

Confirming the suspicion aroused by the phrase «teems with temperance», Alcibiades tells us in the third passage that the *agalmata* in question are *agalmata* of virtue, and that they are located not just inside Socrates but inside his arguments too:

But the sort of man this is and his strangeness, both himself and his arguments, one couldn't come close to finding if one looked, neither among people present nor past, except perhaps if one were to compare him to those I mention – not any man, but silenes and satyrs, him and his arguments. Actually, I left this out at first, that even his arguments are like silenes that have been opened. For if one is willing to listen to Socrates' arguments, they'd appear quite ridiculous at first; they're wrapped around on the outside with words and phrases like the hide of an outrageous satyr. He talks about pack asses and smiths and cobblers and tanners [...] but if the arguments are opened and one sees them from the inside, he will find first that they are the only arguments with any sense in them, and next that they're the most god-like and contain the most *agalmata* of virtue, and that they are relevant to most or rather to all things worth considering for one who intends to be noble and good. (221e1–222a6)

Now the standard translations seem even more mistaken, since we have no idea at all of how an argument could contain statues or the rest – though a case could, I suppose, be made for the ever-ambiguous «image».

I am not claiming, obviously, that ἀγάλματα doesn't mean «statues», «images», «effigies», or «figures», that the translators have got it wrong. They haven't – ἀγάλματα does mean all these things. It is Alcibiades' use of the term that is causing the problems – problems that cannot be resolved simply by finding a better translation.

In the seduction scene, *agalmata* are again present, this time concealed in the response Socrates makes to Alcibiades' sexual overtures:

My dear Alcibiades, you are really not to be taken lightly, if indeed (εἴπερ) what you say about me happens to be true, and there is in me (ἐν ἐμοί) some power through which you might become better; you would then see inconceivable beauty (ἀμήχανόν [...] κάλλος) in me (ἐν ἐμοί) even surpassing your own immense comeliness of form. But if, seeing it, you are trying to strike a bargain with me to exchange beauty for beauty, then you intend to take no slight advantage of me: on the contrary, you are trying to get possession of what is truly beautiful instead of what merely seems so, and really, you intend to trade bronze for gold (χρύσεια). (218d7-219a1)

The repeated ἐν ἐμοί, the equivalence of ἀμήχανόν κάλλος and πάγκαλα καὶ θαυμαστά, the repetition of χρύσειος, all serve to make plain that what Alcibiades thinks he will receive in return for his brazen body are precisely the golden *agalmata*. Socrates shows no inclination, however, to endorse the claim that these exist: a cautious «if indeed what you say about me happens to be true» is as far as he will go.

Had Alcibiades been successful in seducing Socrates, let us ask, how would the *agalmata* have become his? How would the trade have been effected? In the seduction scene, he seems to be imagining that in giving himself sexually to Socrates he will thereby receive them in exchange. In other words, the statues are apparently being treated as analogues of the embryo-like spermatozoa Diotima countenances when she speaks of the lover as pregnant and seeking a beautiful boy in which to beget an offspring (209a5-c2). Alcibiades' use of the verb γέμειν – which is a synonym of κύειν («being pregnant») – fits nicely with this picture. It also explains why he thinks of the *agalmata* as located inside Socrates.

When Socrates finally arrives at the party, after his sojourn in a neighboring porch, Agathon greets him by saying: «Come here, Socrates, and lie down beside me (παρ' ἐμὲ κατάκεισο), so that by touching you (ἀπτόμενός σου) I'll get the benefit of the wisdom that came to you on the porch» (175c7-d1). The simile with which Socrates responds amplifies the sexual connotations of κατακεῖσθαι and ἄπτειν²:

2 See Plato (*Laws*, 840a4) and Aristotle (*Politics*, 1335b40).

It would indeed be well, Agathon, if wisdom were the sort of thing that might flow from the fuller of us into the emptier if only we touch (ἀπώμεθα) each other, as water flows (ρέον) through a woolen thread from a fuller into an emptier cup. If wisdom is that way too, I value the place beside you very much indeed; for I think I will be filled (πληρωθήσεσθαι) from you with wisdom of great beauty. (175d4-e2)

It isn't difficult to imagine Alcibiades thinking in a similar fashion that the *agalmata* need only enter him in order – by developing into their mature forms – to make him «as good as possible» (218d2). What actually happens is the reverse of what he projects. Socrates responds to his fancy speech about love by submitting him to an elenchus, with the result that the latter's aporia (ἀπορία) blocks the flow of his own apparent wisdom – wisdom to which a crowd of thirty thousand Athenians had awarded first prize the day before (175e4-7)³. In the *Cratylus*, ἀπορία is what impedes flowing and moving (*Cratylus*, 415c5-e1).

Alcibiades also seems to conceive the exchange with Socrates in a different way: he will give his body to Socrates now and will later acquire virtue through philosophical discussion. Here he is imagining the *agalmata* as primarily located inside Socrates' arguments. And that would explain, although in a different way from before, why he thinks they are inside Socrates⁴. What generally happens to those who see him in action, Socrates tells us, is that they «think that I'm wise about the subjects on which I examine others» (*Apology*, 23a3-5). Alcibiades is no different. Socrates is «sly and dishonest (εἰρωνευόμενος)», he says, and «spends his whole life playing with people» (*Symposium*, 216e4-5). But these descriptions would only be true if *agalmata* of virtue really were hidden within him. Put the other way around: Alcibiades believes that Socrates is an ἐρῶν – a dishonest ironist – because, like everyone else, he imagines the *agalmata* must exist in him to account for his competence in elenctic argument: «by gratifying Socrates», he says, «I could learn everything he knew» (217a4-5). Again, however, Socrates demurs:

In fact, gentlemen, it's pretty certainly the god who is really wise, and by his oracle he meant that human wisdom is worth little or nothing. And it seems that when he refers to the Socrates here before you, and uses my name, he makes me an example, as if he were to say: "That one among you is wisest, mortals, who, like Socrates, has recognized that he's truly worthless where wisdom's concerned". (*Apology*, 23a5-b4)

3 «The traditional number of male citizens of Athens even in the early fourth century» (Dover 1980). The theater of Dionysus accommodated no more than seventeen thousand.

4 Compare Plato (*Crito*, 46b4-6): «I'm not the sort of person who's just now for the first time persuaded by nothing within me except the argument that on rational reflection seems best to me; I've *always* been like that».

Alcibiades' sense that he has seen into Socrates' arguments, and so into Socrates himself, is as much a fantasy, therefore, as his idea of becoming virtuous through sexual intercourse. His sense of privilege – «I don't know whether anyone else has seen the statues within when he is in earnest and opened up, but I saw them once» – is no more than a common failing: «if anyone says that he learned something from me, or heard something in private that all the others didn't also hear, you may be sure that he isn't telling the truth» (33b6-8).

I said that Socrates would be a dissembler if he had *agalmata* of virtue within. This is so because Alcibiades thinks of these as providing knowledge. In Plato's view, however, only contact with forms can do that. And *agalmata* are not forms, but puppet-like entities that cast «the shadows of justice», and the like, onto the walls of the cave (*Republic*, 517d8-9). Nonetheless, the language Plato uses seems intended to make clear that *agalmata* are the closest things Alcibiades can countenance to the τι θαυμαστόν τὴν φύσιν καλόν («something marvelous, beautiful in nature») (*Symposium*, 210e4-5) that is αὐτὸ τὸ θεῖον καλὸν [...] μονοειδὲς («the divine beauty itself, one in form») (211e3-4). Like the «lovers of listening and seeing» in the *Republic*, Alcibiades is «passionately devoted to beautiful sounds, colors, shapes, and everything fashioned out of such things», but «his thought is unable to see the nature of the beautiful itself or be passionately devoted to it» (*Republic*, 476b4-8).

The same sort of indecisiveness about *agalmata* (or their equivalents) is present in Diotima's account of love as τόκος ἐν καλῷ – «begetting in beauty» (*Symposium*, 206b78):

Some men are pregnant in respect to their bodies, and turn more to women and are lovers in that way [...] Others are pregnant in respect to their soul – for there are those, she said, who are still more fertile in their souls than in their bodies with what it pertains to soul to conceive and bear. What then so pertains? Wisdom and the rest of virtue – of which, indeed, all the poets are procreators, and as many craftsmen as are said to be inventors. But the greatest and most beautiful kind of wisdom by far is that concerned with the correct ordering of cities and households, for which the name is temperance and justice. (208e1-209a8)

Here the *agalmata* seem to be embryo-like entities that must be present in any *erastês* (older lover) able to «practice boy-love correctly (τὸ ὀρθῶς παιδεραστεῖν)» (211b5-6). In the remainder of the account, however, their nature apparently changes:

Whenever, then, one of them is pregnant of soul from youth, being divine (ἐκ νέου), and reaches the age when he then desires to bear and procreate, he too, then, I think, goes about seeking the beauty in which he might beget; for he will never beget

in the ugly. Now, because he is fertile, he welcomes beautiful rather than ugly bodies, and should he meet with a beautiful and naturally gifted soul, he welcomes the conjunction of the two even more, and to this person he is straightway resourceful in making arguments about virtue (εὐπορεῖ λόγων περὶ ἀρετῆς) and trying to educate him. (209a8-c1)

Now what the *erastês* is pregnant with, and so gives birth to, are not virtues themselves, but arguments about them. Since they are «the sorts of arguments (λόγους) that will make young men better (οἵτινες ποιήσουσι βελτίους τοὺς νέους)» (210c1-3), however, it seems that they too must contain the *agalmata*, whose supposed presence in Socrates ensures that, as he says, «there is in me some power through which you [Alcibiades] might become better (τις ἔστ' ἐν ἐμοὶ δύναμις δι' ἧς ἂν σὺ γένοιο ἀμείνων)» (218e1-2).

I have been doing piecemeal, obviously, rubbing together some texts in hopes of making a genie appear. In the critique of writing that ends the *Phaedrus*, Socrates conjures her up explicitly. A written argument, he says, like the «offspring of painting», stands there «as if alive (ὡς ζῶντα)», yet it cannot answer questions or attune itself to the needs of different audiences, and «when it is ill-treated and unjustly abused, it always needs its father to help it; for it is incapable of defending or helping itself» (*Phaedrus*, 275d4-e5). Its «legitimate brother», however, which is «the living and animate argument (λόγον [...] ζῶντα καὶ ἔμψυχον) of the man who knows, of which a written argument would rightly be called a kind of phantom (εἶδωλον)», is «much better and more capable» in all these departments (*Phaedrus*, 276a1-9). Hence, just as «a sensible farmer who had some seeds (σπερμάτων) he cared about and wanted to bear fruit would show them in earnest (σπουδῆ) during the summer in some garden of Adonis, and delight in watching it become beautiful within eight days», so too «the man who has [seeds] of knowledge (ἐπιστήμας) about what is just, and what is beautiful, and what is good» has no less sensible an attitude «toward his seeds (σπέρματα)» (*Phaedrus*, 276b1-c5). When others «resort to other sorts of amusements, watering themselves with symposia», he will amuse himself by writing «stories about justice and the other virtues», so as to «lay up a store of reminders both for himself, when “he reaches a forgetful old age”, and for anyone who is following the same track, and he will be pleased as he watches their tender growth» (*Phaedrus*, 276d1-e3). But when «he is in earnest (σπουδῆ) about them», he instead,

Makes use of the craft of dialectic, and taking a fitting soul plants and sows in it arguments accompanied by knowledge, which are able to help themselves and

the man who planted them, and are not without fruit but contain a seed (σπέρμα), from which others grow in other soils, capable of rendering it forever immortal, and making the one who has it as happy as it is possible for a man to be. (*Phaedrus*, 276e5-277a4)

Living arguments (*logoi*) are now explicitly likened to seeds (*spermata*) – something on which the Stoics, with their *spermatikoi logoi* (seminal principles) will capitalize⁵.

Though Alcibiades is not mentioned by name in this bit of the *Phaedrus*, he is, I think, lurking in the shadows of Adonis' garden. For as part of the *Adônia* (the feast celebrating the love-affair of Aphrodite and Adonis, and mourning the early death of the latter), women in fifth-century Athens, «sowed seed at midsummer in broken pots and placed these on the rooftops, so that germination was rapidly followed by withering»⁶. These were the gardens in question. Two things connect them to Alcibiades – omitting the fact that he was something of an Adonis himself. The first is the verb σπουδάζειν, which is used to describe Socrates' demeanor toward Alcibiades, the demeanor with which the sensible farmer sows the garden of Adonis, and the one with which the philosopher who possesses seeds of virtue seeks out a suitable soul in which to implant them. The second is the odd choice of the garden of Adonis as a suitable place for sowing virtuous seeds, since seeds rapidly wither there; the odd choice of midsummer as a time to sow seeds of any sort; and the odd choice of the word *agalmata* to describe what Alcibiades thinks he sees in Socrates. These choices become readily intelligible, however, once Alcibiades enters the picture. For the seeds Socrates sowed in him didn't fare very well: «as soon as I leave [Socrates]», Alcibiades confesses, «I cave in to the honors of the crowd. So I desert him and flee» (*Symposium*, 216b4-6). Moreover, Alcibiades was accused of involvement in the mutilation of the Herms – statues of the god Hermes – and in the profanation of the Eleusinian Mysteries, both of which occurred in midsummer, right around the *Adônia*⁷. The use of the technical term βέβηλος («uninitiated») at *Symposium* (218b6), strongly suggests that Plato had these scandals in mind. (Though it is no part of my

5 See *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta* (Harmin 1964, 1. 497, 2.780, 1027, 1074, 3.141).

6 *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (3rd rev. ed., 12).

7 See Thucydides (VI.27). Nussbaum, M. (1986, 188) writes: «A man who will deface holy statues compares the soul of Socrates to a set of god-statues and speaks of the injustice of rubbing out, or defacing, Socratic virtues (*Symposium* 213E, 215B, 216D, 217E, 222A)». I see the statues referred to in some of these texts but not, as I hoped, the rubbing out or defacing of them.

argument, I cannot resist noticing the reference to symposia as amusements that Plato – who else? – would rather write books than attend!)

If, as we should, we seek the origins of *logoi* as *spermata* and *agalmata*, the obvious place to look is the complex ideology of Athenian *paiderastia*, which Diotima explicitly adapts to her philosophical purposes. It is an ideology that seeks to negotiate between ideals of masculinity and the somewhat conflicting reality of male desire. The salient issue is: what is it to be a man? Not, as Michel Foucault thought, in the sense of who is playing the active phallic role, but of who has manly control of his appetites and desires and who, like a woman or a slave, does not (Davidson 1998, 139-182 and 250-277). What an *erômenos* («beloved boy») who desired to be sexually penetrated by his *erastês* was in danger of being thought was not a passive penetrated one, but a *katapugôn*, a *kinaidos*, a «slut» or «sex addict» – someone too enslaved to his appetites, too much of an un-fillable or insatiably leaky vessel, to be trusted with citizenly power⁸. Hence his desire had to be refigured as something more appropriate, namely, a desire to be a slave to his *erastês* for the sake not of sexual pleasure, but of virtue (*Symposium*, 184c2-7). At the same time, the sexual desire of the *erastês* had itself to be refigured as educative rather than merely sexual in intent. Boy-love became implicitly divided, as a result, into what Pausanias calls (good) Uranian love, whose object is the soul and whose aim is to instill virtue in the *erômenos*, and (bad) Pandemotic love, whose object is the body and whose aim is sexual pleasure for the *erastês* (180c1-d7). Sexual intercourse and the inculcation of virtue thus become so metonymically related, their conceptual fields so fused, that *spermatikoi logoi* began to seem like a natural kind.

When we open up Alcibiades' portrait of Socrates, I have been arguing, we find not golden *agalmata* of virtue, but something more like fantasies – personal, no doubt, but primarily socio-ideological. When we open up Socrates' own self-portrait, we find something equally interesting, something we might with justification call the negative of Alcibiades' portrait. «I [...] claim to know (ἐπίστασθαι) nothing», Socrates insouciantly says about himself, «except τὰ ἐρωτικά» (177d8-9). Literally speaking, τὰ ἐρωτικά are «the things of love». But like other similar neuter plurals, they are also τὴν ἐρωτικὴν [...] τέχνην – «the craft of love» – that the god *Erôs* gives to

8 *Problemata* IV.23, attributed to Aristotle, but probably dating from the third century BC, is revelatory in this regard. In men who have «a superfluity of semen», and so overindulge in sexual intercourse, or whose sperm ducts are blocked, semen collects in the rectum, instead of being discharged in the natural way. Unable to find release in normal sexual intercourse, they desire «friction in the place where the semen collects». But since this doesn't result in seminal discharge «they are insatiable or unfillable just like women».

Socrates in the *Phaedrus* (257a3-9). And that raises a problem; in fact, two problems. The first is to explain how it can be true, as Socrates puts it, that «I myself honor and surpassingly devote myself to the craft of love and exhort (παρακελεύομαι) others to do the same» (*Symposium*, 212b5-7). I mean, where do we see Socrates doing that? The other is to reconcile his knowing that craft with his general epistemic modesty, with his characterization of himself as wise «in neither a great nor a small way» (*Apology*, 21b4-5): how can the man who knows only lots of insignificant things possibly know something as apparently important and difficult as the art or craft of love?

To these questions the *Lysis* offers appealing clues. Hippothales, like a true Socratic, loves beautiful boys and philosophical arguments (*Lysis*, 203b6-204a3). But what he does to win Lysis' love is sing eulogies to him. And that, Socrates argues, no master of the craft of love would ever do:

If you make a conquest of a boy like this, then everything you've said and sung turns out to eulogize yourself as victor in having won such a boyfriend. But if he gets away, then the greater your praise of his beauty and goodness, the more you will seem to have lost and the more you will be ridiculed. That is why someone who is wise in the craft of love doesn't praise his beloved until he has him: he fears how the future may turn out. And besides, these beautiful boys get swelled heads if anyone praises them and start to think they're really somebody. (*Lysis*, 205e2-206a4)

Convinced, Hippothales turns to Socrates for advice: «What different advice can you give me about what someone should say or do to get his prospective boyfriend to love him»? (*Lysis*, 206c1-3). Unlike in the *Symposium*, where he is laconic, Socrates goes into detail: «if you're willing to have him talk with me, I might be able to give you a demonstration of how to carry on a discussion with him» (*Lysis*, 206c4-6). What follows is an elenctic examination of Lysis.

«This is how you should talk to your boyfriends, Hippothales», Socrates says when the examination is finished, «making them humble (ταπεινοῦτα) and drawing in their sails (συστέλλοντα), instead of swelling them up and spoiling them, as you do» (*Lysis*, 210e2-5). What he goes on to say about philosophy, however, shows elenctic discussion to be much more than merely chastening:

Those who are already wise no longer love wisdom (φιλοσοφεῖν), whether they are gods or men. Neither do those who are so ignorant (ἄγνοια) that they are bad, for no bad and stupid person loves wisdom. There remains only those who have this bad thing, ignorance, but have not yet been made ignorant and stupid by it. They are conscious of not knowing what they don't know (μη εἰδέναι ἃ μὴ ἴσασιν). (*Lysis*, 218a2-b1)⁹

9 Compare *Symposium* (204a1-b5).

By showing Lysis that he isn't already wise, therefore, by getting him to recognize that he doesn't know, Socrates is setting him on the right road to love – the one that leads to the love of wisdom, and so to the beautiful itself¹⁰. Just how that solves Hippothales' problem of getting Lysis to love him is another matter – one to which we'll return.

As a philosopher himself, Socrates does not know the answers to his own questions about virtue. Unlike those he questions, however, he knows that he doesn't know, that he lacks wisdom. And what gives him that knowledge is the one craft he does possess – the craft of asking questions. It is what makes him a lover of wisdom, therefore, and so is itself the craft of (producing) love. And questioning, of course, is what we do see Socrates devote himself to and exhort others to practice (*Apology*, 29d2–30a2, 38a1–6). Socrates' claim to know the craft of love reveals a deep truth about him, therefore – so deep, in fact, that it appears to have been encoded in language itself by the possibly divine νομοθέτης («rule-setter») who made it: «The name 'hero' (ἦρωζ) is only a slightly altered form of the word 'love' (ἔρωτος) – the very thing from which the heroes sprang. And either this is the reason they were called 'heroes' or else because they were sophists, clever speech-makers and dialecticians, skilled at questioning (ἔρωτᾶν)» (*Cratylus*, 398c5–e5). Add ἐρῶν to the etymological mix, and you have Socrates – questioner, lover, philosopher hero, ironist – as truly a gift of the gods!

«A thing that desires, desires what it lacks», the *Lysis* (221d7–e2) tells us. The *Symposium* delivers the same message yet more stridently: «what is not at hand, what is not present, what one does not have, what one is not oneself, and what one lacks – desire and Love are of such things as these» (*Symposium*, 200e2–5). In the *Republic*, this picture of desire gets, so to say, metaphysicalized. Hunger, thirst, and the like, are «some sorts of emptiness (κενώσεις τινές) related to the state of the body», while «foolishness and lack of knowledge» are «some sorts of emptiness related to the state of the soul». Nourishment fills the former; «true belief, knowledge, understanding, and, in sum, all of virtue», the latter. But these fillings are not on a par: nourishment fills temporarily – it is soon digested or excreted; virtue fills permanently, because, as something that always is what it is, it partakes more of «pure being» than nourishment, and so «is more (μᾶλλον ὄντος)» than it (*Republic*, 585a8–b8).

The importance of this difference emerges once pleasure is identified with being filled: «if being filled with what is appropriate to our nature is

10 Compare Plato (*Sophist*, 231b3–8): «the refutation of the empty belief in one's own wisdom is nothing other than our noble sophistry».

pleasant, what is more filled with things that are more is more really and truly caused to enjoy a more true pleasure, whereas what partakes of things that are less is less truly and surely filled and partakes of a less trustworthy and less true pleasure» (*Republic*, 585d11-e4). Since only philosophers use «things that are to fill the part of themselves that is a thing that is, and a leak-proof vessel (στέγον)» (*Republic*, 586b3-4)¹¹, only they enjoy the real and true pleasures characteristic of true happiness. Hence they live 729 times more pleasantly than the tyrant, and some other number of times more pleasantly than every other type of person, and are the happiest people on earth (*Republic*, 587d12-e4, 580a9-c5).

The things that fully are (what they are) are the Platonic forms (*Republic*, 475c6-480a13). And it is only when the true lover of boys reaches them – or, more particularly, the beautiful itself – that his education in the craft of love reaches its proper goal, enabling him to give birth at last in true beauty:

He who has been educated in the craft of love up to this point, beholding beautiful things in the correct order and way, will then suddenly, in an instant, proceeding at that point to the goal of the craft of love, see something marvelous, beautiful in nature: it is that, Socrates, for the sake of which in fact all his previous labors existed [...]. Do you think it a worthless life [...] for a man to look there and contemplate that with that by which one must contemplate it, and have intercourse with it? Or are you not convinced [...] that there alone it will befall him, in seeing the beautiful with that by which it is visible, to beget not phantoms (εἶδωλα) of virtue, since he does not touch (ἐφαπτομένω) a phantom, but true virtue, because he touches what is true (τοῦ ἀληθοῦς ἐφαπτομένω)¹². But in begetting true virtue and nurturing it, it is given to him to become dear to the god, and if any among men is immortal, he is too. (*Symposium*, 210e2-212a7)

For each one of these forms, the theory of desire postulates an emptiness in the soul which can be completely filled only with it. The elenchus is important to love because it reveals the presence of these emptinesses – emptinesses which, because they were concealed or occluded by the false conceit of knowledge, were erotically inert. In the way that Johannes Climacus describes in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, the revelation of a hunger thereby becomes a sort of feeding:

11 At Plato (*Gorgias*, 493c2a), στέγον is contrasted with «the leaking jar» in which the bodily appetites reside.

12 To be understood as, «what is truly what it is», in the way that the form of F alone is truly F. Compare *Republic* (585c7-12): «And does the being of what is always the same partake any more of being than of knowledge? – Not at all. – What about of truth? – Not of it either. – And if less of truth, less of being, too? – Necessarily».

This seems very strange and ironical, and yet I believe that I have succeeded in expressing precisely what I mean. When a man has his mouth so full of food that he is prevented from eating, and is likely to starve in consequence, does giving him food consist in stuffing still more of it in his mouth or does it consist in taking some of it away, so that he can begin to eat? (Kierkegaard 1941, 245, n.)

It is a sort of feeding, however, that creates a living hunger for a food that it cannot itself supply. Thus, even though Lysis is already something of a philosopher when he meets Socrates and receives a rare accolade from him – «I was pleased with his love of wisdom (φιλοσοφία)» (*Lysis*, 213d6) – he is left in aporia. Later, in keeping with the logic of this erotics of emptiness, Alcibiades will speak of Socrates' refusal to have sex with him as με ὕβρισεν – his «sexual outrage of me» (*Symposium*, 222a8).

If refusal of sex is a kind of sex, a kind of penetrative filling, *agalmata* – by the same inverted logic – are less like statues (fillings) and more like what Proust calls «an inverted image or projection, a negative» of desire (Proust 2003, 472). Alcibiades is made hungry for virtue, mistakes what causes his hunger for what would assuage it, and thus projects what are actually emptinesses in Socrates back into him as fillings – knowledge. This explains why Alcibiades' seeing the «marvelously beautiful» *agalmata* in Socrates leads him to conclude that «whatever Socrates might bid must, in short, be done» (*Symposium*, 217a1-2). The impulse to obedience is caused by his own elentially-aroused desire.

The phrase εὐπορεῖ λόγων περὶ ἀρετῆς («resourceful in making arguments about virtue»), applied by Diotima to the pregnant and properly philosophical *erastês* (*Symposium*, 209b8), finds a parallel in Alcibiades' last words about Socrates, which are also, in fact, his very last words: «It's the same old story [...]. When Socrates is around, it's impossible for anyone else to get a share of the beauties. Now, too, see how resourcefully he's found a convincing argument (καὶ νῦν ὡς εὐπόρως καὶ πιθανὸν λόγον ἤρπεν) to make this fellow [Agathon] lie down beside him» (223a6–9).

They are words long prepared for in the *Symposium*. «Was I not prophetic», Socrates says when it is his turn to make a speech in praise of love, «when I said just now that Agathon would speak wonderfully and I would be at a loss (ἀπορήσοιμι)». «As to you being at a loss (ἀπορήσειν)», Eryximachus replies, «I doubt it». «And how am I not to be at a loss (ἀπορεῖν)», Socrates responds, using the verb for the third time, «after so beautiful and so varied (παντοδαπὸν) a speech» (198a5-b3)¹³. It is in Diotima's story of Poros and Penia, however, that we find what belies them:

13 Παντοδαπὸν is seldom a term of praise in Plato.

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Because Eros is the son of Poros and Penia, this is his fortune: first, he is ever poor, and far from being delicate and beautiful, as most people suppose, he on the contrary is rough and hard and unshod, ever lying on the ground without bedding, sleeping in doorsteps and beside roads under the open sky. Because he has his mother's nature he dwells ever with lack. But on the other hand, by favor of his father, he ever plots for good and beautiful things, because he is courageous, eager and intense, and a clever hunter ever weaving some new device, desiring wisdom and capable of it, a philosopher through the whole of life, clever at enchantment, a sorcerer, and a sophist. And he is by nature neither mortal nor immortal, but sometimes on the same day he lives and flourishes, whenever he is resourceful (εὐπορήσῃ), but then he dies and comes back to life again by reason of the nature of his father, though what is provided ever flows away (ποριζόμενον), so that Eros is never rich nor at a loss (ἀπορεῖ) and is, on the contrary, in between wisdom and ignorance. For things stand thus: no god loves wisdom or desires to become wise – for he is so; nor, if anyone else is wise, does he love wisdom. On the other hand, neither do the ignorant love wisdom nor desire to become wise; for ignorance is difficult just in this, that though not beautiful and good, nor wise, it yet seems to itself to be sufficient. He who does not think himself in need does not desire what he does not think he lacks. (203c5-204a7)

Just as Socrates turns Athenian *paiderastia* upside down by playing the part of the pursued *erômenos* rather than that of the pursuing *erastês* (222b3-4), he turns *aporia* into *euporia*, emptiness into something more like a resource. What as a philosopher he desires, however, isn't to lie down with Agathon («Mr. Goodman»), as Alcibiades claims, but to have intercourse with the form that shares his – much punned upon in the *Symposium* – name. Alcibiades' suggestion otherwise is a genuine profanation of mysteries – not the Eleusinian this time, but the philosophical ones Diotima has modeled on them.

An important passage in the *Republic* shows this way of interpreting Alcibiades to be Plato's own. In it, Socrates is explaining why philosophers have an undeservedly bad reputation, and what is the real effect on their souls of contemplating forms:

The harshness of the masses towards philosophy is caused by those outsiders who do not belong and who have burst in like a band of revelers (τοὺς ἔξωθεν οὐ προσῆκον ἐπεισκεκωμακότας), abusing one another (λοιδορουμένους), indulging their love of quarreling, and always arguing about human beings – something that is least appropriate in philosophy [...]. For surely, someone whose mind is truly directed towards the things that are has not the leisure to look down at human affairs, and be filled with malice and hatred as a result of entering into their disputes. Instead, as he looks at and contemplates things that are orderly and always the same, that neither do injustice to one another nor suffer it, being all in a rational order (τεταγμένα), he imitates them and tries to become as like them as he can. Or do you think there is any way to prevent someone from associating with something he admires without

imitating it? [...] Then the philosopher, by associating with what is orderly (κόσμιός) and divine becomes as divine and orderly as a human being can. Though, mind you, there is always plenty of slander (διαβολή) around. (*Republic*, 500b1-d2)

Alcibiades, we notice, accuses Socrates of «abusing (λοιδορεῖται)» him (*Symposium*, 213d3), and then proceeds to give a speech that, because it is entirely about human beings, is as anti-philosophical – as anti-the-philosopher-Socrates – as possible. It isn't the continuation of the symposium, therefore, but, as in Testa's inspired title, an «interrupting». No wonder, then, that it is represented by Socrates as slanderous in intent: «as though you hadn't said it all to sow slander (διαβάλλειν)¹⁴ between me and Agathon» (222c7-d1). Finally, there is the «crowd of revelers (κωμαστὰς [...] παμ-πόλλους)», that shows up at the end of the *Symposium* (223b1–2), and finding Agathon's doors as «open (ἀνεωγμέναις)» (223b3) as Alcibiades found Socrates, bursts in and puts an end to all «order (κόσμος)» (223b4-5).

The order the revelers destroy is that established by Eryximachus in his role as συμποσίαρχος or master of ceremonies – «I think each of us should make as beautiful a speech as he can in praise of love, from left to right (ἐπὶ δεξιᾷ)» (177d1–2). When Alcibiades arrives late at the party, Eryximachus imposes it on him too:

Before you came, it seemed best that each of us, from left to right (ἐπὶ δεξιᾷ) should give the most beautiful speech about Eros he could and offer an encomium. The rest of us have all spoken; but since you haven't and you've finished your drink, you ought to speak too. Once you've done so, you can prescribe for Socrates as you wish, and he for the man on his right (ἐπὶ δεξιᾷ), and so on for the rest. (214b9-c5)

But, as we have seen, Alcibiades does not really follow the rule, since he speaks about Socrates – a human being – not about love (214d2-10). Later, however, when Aristodemus wakes up, he finds order restored: «only Agathon and Aristophanes and Socrates were still awake, drinking from a large bowl, and passing it from left to right (ἐπὶ δεξιᾷ)» (223c4-5). I take this to imply that Alcibiades and the crowd of revelers have gone – but perhaps, like some others, they have simply gone to sleep.

This order, this movement of love (or of the speeches or *logoi* about it) around Agathon's table, is symposiastic, but it is also allegorical. It is related, first and most obviously, to the order discerned in love by dialectic in the *Phaedrus*, where the «parts of madness on the right-hand side (δεξιᾷ)»

14 The verb is repeated at *Symposium* (222d6 [Allen 1991]): «My dear Agathon, [...] don't let anyone sow slanders (διαβαλεῖ) between you and me».

of the definitional division are identified with «divine», philosophical love that is «the cause of our greatest goods», which is contrasted with the bad, sexual love, identified with the bad madness on the left (*Symposium*, 266a2-b1). It is also related to «the movement of the Same», which the Demiurge in the *Timaeus* «made revolve toward the right (ἐπὶ δεξιῶν) by way of the side» (*Timaeus*, 36c5-6). For like dialectic, and the divisions and collections of which Socrates proclaims himself an *erastês* (*Phaedrus*, 266b3-4), this movement, too, is associated with philosophy: «whenever an argument concerns an object of reason, and the circle of the Same runs well (εὐτροχος) and reveals it, the necessary result is understanding and knowledge» (*Timaeus*, 37c1-3).

What these allegorical aspects of ἐπὶ δεξιῶν mean within the *Symposium* emerges when we turn to Diotima's philosophical demythologizing of the story of Poros and Penia. If those already filled with wisdom, and so touching all the forms, neither love nor desire anything, what happens to the philosopher who reaches the goal of education in the craft of love? Is his love wrecked by its very success? In her view, the answer is no. The philosopher's desire, like that of all lovers, isn't to possess the beautiful or the good for a moment, but to have it be his «forever» (*Symposium*, 206a3-13). Concealed in every desire or love, therefore, is «the love of immortality» (207a3-4). But the closest a mortal creature can come to gratifying that love is a far cry from the permanent satisfaction achieved by the gods:

Mortal nature seeks so far as it can to exist forever and be immortal. It can do so only in this way, by giving birth, ever leaving behind a different new thing in place of the old, since even in the time in which each single living creature is said to live and be the same – for example, as a man is said to live and be the same from youth to old age – though he never has the same things in himself, he nevertheless is called the same, but he is ever becoming new while otherwise perishing, in respect to hair and flesh and bone and blood and the entire body. And not only in respect to the body but also in respect to the soul, its character and habits, opinions, desires, pleasures, pains, fears are each never present in each man as the same, but some are coming to be, others perishing. Much more extraordinary still, not only are some items of knowledge coming to be and others perishing in us, and we are never the same even in respect to items of knowledge, but also each single one among the items of knowledge is affected in the same way. For what is called practicing exists because knowledge leaves us; forgetting is departure of knowledge, but practice, by introducing a new memory in place of what departs, preserves the knowledge so that it seems to be the same. For it is in this way that all that is mortal is preserved: not by being ever completely the same, like the divine, but by leaving behind, as it departs and becomes older, a different new thing of the same sort that it was. By this device [...] what is mortal has a share of immortality both body and everything else; but what is immortal by another device. (207d1-208b4)

Thus, when the philosopher reaches the beautiful itself, his task, just because he is mortal, is by no means complete. To stay in touch with the beautiful, each item of knowledge that is his knowing or contemplation of it must give birth to another like it – just as, if he himself is to stay alive, each of his person-stages or time-slices (as philosophers call them these days) must give birth to another.

One effect of this way of thinking, as Derek Parfit has famously argued in our own time, is to blur or soften – perhaps even elide – the distinction between self and others, and with it the distinction between self-interest and altruism (Parfit 1984, 199-347). There is little doubt, I think, that Plato is aware of this effect and seeks to exploit it. What a philosopher begets in the true beauty of the beautiful itself, is the good thing that is his own «true virtue». And it is with the nurturing of it that he is first concerned. Since he is a changing metabolizing creature, however, what he has to do to remain virtuous – to keep that good thing – is to give birth to a later stage of himself that is also virtuous. This later self, as a case of himself possessing good things, is also something he loves – for the very same reason that he loves his present self as such a case. «Do not be surprised», Diotima cautions, «if everything by nature values its own offshoot; it is for the sake of immortality that this earnestness (σπουδῆ) and love attend upon all» (*Symposium* 208b4-6). Pregnant with virtue, then, and ever ready to give birth to it in true beauty, the philosopher meets a boy that he, using the beautiful itself as his standard of beauty (211d3-5), finds beautiful, and «seeks to educate». That is, he seeks to make him, too, a virtuous lover of wisdom – something «of the same sort» as himself. If he succeeds, the boy will be his «offshoot», and will be loved as his own future selves are loved, and for exactly the same reason – the boy stands to him (to his present self) precisely as they do. Egoism has melted into altruism; self-interest into something more impersonal. If we look at this from the point of view of the boy, we can see why Socrates' elenctic demonstrations do show Hermogenes how to get Lysis to love him. An elenchus of another is always at the same time, Socrates claims, a self-examination (*Apology*, 38a4-5; *Charmides*, 166c7-d2 and *Gorgias*, 506a3-5). Thus if Hermogenes, like Lysis, is a nascent philosopher, their elenctic conversations will make each the other's second self, every bit as much beloved as the first.

«I think», says Diotima, «that ἀπτόμενος γὰρ [...] τοῦ καλοῦ καὶ ὁμιλῶν αὐτῷ («in touching *to kalon* and holding familiar intercourse it») he bears and begets what he has long since been pregnant with» (*Symposium*, 209c2-4). Is it the boy or the beautiful she's talking about? A happy ambiguity (τοῦ καλοῦ and αὐτῷ could be either masculine or neuter) al-

lows her to superimpose one on another, as it were, what I have presented as two separate events, namely, the philosopher's giving birth in the true beauty of the beautiful itself to *what we would all intuitively consider to be his own later self*, and his giving birth in a beautiful boy to *what Diotima's own theory of the self invites us to see as such*.

Diotima's picture of desire and of philosophical love, in particular, has proved seminal for subsequent thought. But it is one of its less obvious descendants that reveals what was already subtly concealed within it. In his strange and not always fathomable book, *The Sex Appeal of the Inorganic*, Mario Perniola writes:

What is striking about Kant's morality is the impersonal, neutral, categorical character of the moral imperative, and the absolute lack of respect for pleasure and pain, desire and fear, and the most complete indifference to success or accidents. This mode of being does not belong to man as animal or man as God, but to man as thing in itself, who, however, has a motive: he is moved by an autonomous feeling completely independent of the subjective affections and which, in fact, is essentially opposed to self-love and presumption. What does the thing in itself feel? Respect [Achtung], the only rational sentiment which is at the same time submission to an order and emancipation from desire. It implies humiliation of the subject and elevation of the will that feels it. (Perniola 2004, 38)

Many elements in this insightful characterization could apply to Plato: "humiliation of the subject", for example, might be related to the effect of the elenchus; "elevation of the will", to the emerging rule in the soul of its rational element; "impersonality", to the rational element itself as analogue of Kantian will. But it is the idea of "submission to an order and emancipation from desire" that I find most revelatory.

Perhaps more noticeable in the *Symposium* than the fourfold repetition of ἐπὶ δεξιῶν is the fourfold repetition of ἐξαίφνης («all of a sudden»): all of a sudden, the true lover catches sight of the beautiful itself (*Symposium* 210e4-5); all of a sudden, Alcibiades arrives at Agathon's house (212c6); all of a sudden, Socrates turns up in Alcibiades' life (213c1); all of a sudden, the crowd of revelers burst in (223b2-6). What suddenly turns up in each case is a candidate object of love: the beautiful itself for the philosopher's love; Alcibiades for Socrates'; Socrates for Alcibiades'. And the crowd of revelers – the κωμαστὰς [...] παμπόλλους? They are the object that successfully competes with Socrates for Alcibiades' love, since it is to «the honors of the crowd (τῶν πολλῶν)» that Alcibiades caves in when not by Socrates' side (216b4-6).

For what suddenly turns up – what lands the *coup de foudre* – to be truly beautiful, however, to be what is really loved, it has to come at the right place in an order that is, first and foremost, an education-induced order in the lover's own soul. This is something on which Diotima is insistent:

It is necessary for him who proceeds correctly (ὀρθῶς) in this matter to begin while still young by going to beautiful bodies; and first, if his guide guides correctly (ὀρθῶς) [...] He who has been educated in the craft of love up to this point, beholding beautiful things in the correct order and way (φεξῆς τε καὶ ὀρθῶς), will then all of a sudden, in an instant, proceeding at that point to the goal of the craft of love, see something marvelous, beautiful in nature. (210a4-e5)

But the importance of proper order doesn't end there. To stay in touch with the beautiful itself, the psychological order thus acquired must be sustained. Like Socrates' own fabled orderliness it must be of a sort that neither wine, nor sexual desire, nor extremes of hot or cold, nor lack of sleep, nor normal human weakness can disrupt. Expressed figuratively as a movement, it must be that of the circle of the Same.

With one clear exception, Eryximachus' left-to-right order is followed until all those initially present have spoken (214c2). The clear exception is Aristophanes¹⁵. He should have spoken after Pausanias, but he got the hiccups, and so yielded his turn to Eryximachus, who praises orderly, harmonious, pious, temperate love, while condemning «the Pandemotic Eros of the many-tuned Muse Polyhymnia». Comedy, which Aristophanes represents, is thus presented as a backward turn, a step in as anti-philosophical a direction as the «satyr play – or rather Silenus play» of Alcibiades (222d3-4). As in real life, so in the *Symposium*, Aristophanes is no friend of Socrates. The proper order, I conjecture, is: myth (Phaedrus); myth corrected (Pausanias), as it is corrected in *Euthyphro* and *Republic* II and III; craft (Eryximachus); tragedy (Agathon), which imitates the products of craft (*Republic*, 598d7-599e4); Socratic elenctic philosophy, which corrects tragedy; Platonic philosophy (Diotima), which is «the truest tragedy» (*Laws*, 817b1-5). But nothing depends on my being right about that. What is alone relevant is that the one effective hiccup-remedy Eryximachus prescribes seems at odds, as Aristophanes is quick to point out, with what he has said about love: «Yes, the hiccups did indeed stop, though not before I applied the sneeze, so I wonder if the more orderly element of the body

15 The unclear one is Aristodemus, the narrator, who, because he is lying next to Eryximachus (175a3-5), should presumably have spoken after him had Aristophanes not take his turn.

(τὸ κόσμιον τοῦ σώματος) doesn't desire the sorts of noises and tickles a sneeze is» (*Symposium*, 189a2-6).

The mark of Pandemotic, or left-handed, love, is that it does not conceive the sneeze simply as a cure for already disorderly hiccups, but as love's proper goal: orgasm in the beautiful is precisely what it desires. The movement corresponding to its satisfaction is not a circle, therefore, but *epor*: excitation, which «involves the induction of sexual tension or arousal through psychological or physical stimulation»; plateau, which «represents a heightened level of sexual tension»; orgasm proper, «where the sexual tension is relieved in explosive waves of intense pleasure»; and resolution, «where the vasocongestion that occurred in the excitement and plateau phases subsides», and there is a return to the pre-excitement state (Lloyd 2005, 23-24). If we take this sort of love as our model of erotic desire, therefore, right-handed, philosophical love will not look like desire at all. The same is true, if we take ordinary appetites, filled up and then emptied, as our model.

Plato's idea that there are desires that can be permanently filled, is just that: an idea, a philosophical invention. It is not something of which we have or – embodied and on earth – *could* have an experience of. (Unless, the infant's experience of its mother is an exception.) In fact, we don't even have experience of a desire that, like left-handed love, has an *epor* structure of satisfaction, but where, by dint of proper training or education, we can stay at the *o* stage indefinitely. The idea, canonically enshrined in Diotima's *scala amoris*, of getting to the epiphanic top and staying there is a fantasy. (The satisfactions of even Tantric sex are fleeting).

Kant was well aware that «love as an inclination» – as a feeling or desire – «cannot be commanded». To make sense of the Christian commandments to love God and our neighbor, to make sense of promising to love at the altar, therefore, he introduced a new sort of love that isn't a desire: «Beneficence from duty – even though no inclination impels us to it, and, indeed, natural and unconquerable aversion opposes it – is practical and not pathological love, which lies in the will and not in the propensity of feeling, in principles of action and not in melting sympathy; and it alone can be commanded» (Kant 1996, 55).

Practical love, I suggest, is what right-handed love is in embryo. What disguises that fact is our – and Plato's – failure to see that right-handed love is so unlike an ordinary desire as to be «at the same time submission to an order and emancipation from desire». What looks like eudaimonism

(or happiness-focused ethics) in Plato, therefore, is really much closer to deontology¹⁶.

I said at the beginning that Alcibiades' portrait of Socrates is the theatrical apogee of the *Symposium*. (I suppose second place goes to Aristophanes' speech.) That we find it so is a measure of how interesting we find Socrates – indeed, «human affairs». It is an interest that aligns us with the anonymous friends of Apollodorus whose desire to hear about what happened at Agathon's house results, as we are invited to suppose, in our interest being gloriously satisfied. At the same time, though, the *Symposium* diagnoses that very interest as un-philosophical, as an interest in the wrong things. We will not find the forms in Socrates, only the emptinesses, the *agalmatata*, that are the desires for them. Yet it is these, paradoxically, and not the forms themselves, that are, to use Giovanni Verga's description of his ideal novel, «throbbing with life» (Verga 2003, 82).

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16 My *Plato's Metaphysics of Morals* (2003, 39-58), takes a different route to a similar conclusion.

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