

## Learning through Love: A Lover's Initiation in the *Symposium*

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In the *Symposium* of Plato, Socrates reports that Diotima once described to him a process of initiation by which a lover rises from desiring one beautiful body to catching sight of what seems to be the Platonic form of beauty. Scholars have debated whether the lover is to make this ascent by a rational process or a non-rational one, or by both working either in concert or independently. This paper argues that love leads and guides a process in this initiation that necessarily involves rational activity. No teaching is necessary or appropriate, so that the process is an example of learning without being taught. The philosophical insight that results is life-changing, but it does not amount to the kind of knowledge that would fully satisfy a Socratic seeker after knowledge.

Socrates reports that Diotima has laid out for him the steps in an initiation into matters of love that leads to a life-changing vision of the beauty that “is always itself by itself with itself, one in form”.

So when someone rises from *these* [beautiful particulars and universals] through loving boys correctly (διὰ τὸ ὀρθῶς παιδεραστέιν), and begins to see *that* beauty, he has almost reached the goal, for this is what it is to go correctly, or to be led by another, at matters of love (τὰ ἐρωτικὰ): always to go upward for the sake of *that* beauty, beginning from *these* beauties, using them as steps . . . (*Symposium* 211b5-c3).<sup>1</sup>

The effect of the vision is to make the initiated lover immune to the sexual attraction of a beautiful boy, so long as he keeps his mind's eye on that vision:

Once you see *that* [beauty itself by itself], you will not judge beauty by gold or clothing or beautiful boys and youths (211d3-5).

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<sup>1</sup> Translations are my own unless otherwise indicated. “These beauties” refers to the various levels of beautiful things which participate in *that* beauty, which has the status of a Platonic Form. I will discuss the ascent from these beauties to that beauty below.

In a mystery religion, the ultimate vision or *epopteia* is supposed to change the way an initiate sees ordinary things.<sup>2</sup> Plato uses a similar model in describing the ascent from the cave through seeing things in a certain order (516ab); and the cave dwellers of the *Republic* who have clambered out and seen reality will not look at the shadows in the cave as they did before (516e8-517a4). So it is with the vision of the highest beauty in Diotima's account. To the successful initiate, boys will never look as good as they used to look. Plato soon drives the point home by having Alcibiades tell the party that Socrates had the uncanny ability to bundle up with him and give no sign of sexual desire (219ab). For Socrates, Alcibiades' beauty is merely on the level of opinion rather than truth (218e6).<sup>3</sup>

The passage raises a series of questions: What does it mean to love boys correctly? How is a lover to know how to love boys correctly? Could any lover learn what Socrates seems to know about love through the process Diotima prescribes? Can a lover gain philosophical insight through loving? Is something beyond loving required? Can love serve as the lover's guide, or does a lover need a person to guide him upward? In the *Republic*'s story of the Cave, the cave dwellers need someone to turn them around before they can make their ascent. Does the ascent through love require such a person? These boil down to my main question: Can one, through loving, and without a teacher, learn what Socrates apparently knows about love?<sup>4</sup> In other words, is Plato behind what Diotima says in 211b5-c3?

A specific case of this problem is that of Socrates. How could he have reached the level indicated by Alcibiades' account? Socrates had no Socrates to guide him, and, most likely, he had no Diotima either, as he appears to have made her up.<sup>5</sup> Socrates may believe that he has

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<sup>2</sup> The use of *epoptika* at 210a1 shows us that Diotima means us to see the parallel to mystery religion.

<sup>3</sup> Diotima's language in the ladder passage (210b5) is recalled by Alcibiades use of *καταφρονεῖ* at 216d8 for Socrates' contempt for physical beauty. This suggests that Plato means his audience to connect the passages.

<sup>4</sup> Plato here writes only of men loving boys, but gender is irrelevant to Diotima's process. Loving a person correctly turns out to entail engaging that person in a dialogue about what could be morally improving for that person, and gender is irrelevant to dialogue—although in ancient Athens women would almost never be permitted to engage with men or each other in such a way. Age, however, is relevant, as younger people typically have more time, more scope, and more motivation for self-improvement. Accordingly, in my explication (though not in my translation) I will use the more gender-neutral word “youngster” for the object of love. For clarity, however, I will continue to use male pronouns; the argument depends on the singularity of the chosen youngster, and the gender-neutral “they” would obscure that.

<sup>5</sup> Socrates' report of Diotima's teaching seems too closely tied to the context to be anything but fiction designed for the occasion. Her questioning of Socrates seems directed at Agathon, and at 205d10-e1 she refers directly to the idea behind Aristophanes' speech, which was probably original to the *Symposium*.

completed a process similar to the initiation that Diotima describes, and that this process has given him the uncanny understanding of love which he claims to have acquired from Diotima or from the god. But all of this is no use to us or to anyone – certainly not to Socrates’ audience at this symposium – unless the ascent is possible for lovers who don’t have a god or a Diotima or a Socrates to assist them. What *is* needed for the ascent?

### *The Philosophy–Eros Puzzle*

Love is a desire that humans share with wild animals – the longing to exist forever and to be immortal so far as possible – and this is possible only through some form of reproduction (207c9-d3). Such a desire cannot be rational, since it is shared with wild animals, and yet, on Diotima’s account, it can lead to the highest level that humans can reach in philosophy. How is this possible? It appears that either we must concede that one can reach the highest level of philosophy by non-rational means, or we must modify our understanding of love in such a way that love counts as rational.<sup>6</sup>

In an elegant recent paper, Nally rejects both alternatives in favor of a third: philosophical activity is ancillary to love. Love is “merely what makes lovers full of want,” and only rational, philosophical activity can satisfy that want.<sup>7</sup> Love does not do the work of philosophy; love is, instead, the workmate of philosophy (as Socrates suggests at 212b2-4). Love provides the motivation; philosophical discussion does the work.

I will show, however, that this is not the way Diotima represents the ascent. The puzzle turned on the distinction between the rationality of philosophy and the irrationality of any desire we might share with animals. What does “rational” mean in this context? It does not directly translate any of Plato’s words. A rational discussion, in a strong sense, would be one that is

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Artful rhetoric of the time commonly produced speeches as coming from figures of myth. On the question whether Diotima is fictional or historical, see for example Prior, William. “The Portrait of Socrates in Plato’s *Symposium*”. *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 31 (2006), pp. 148, ff. and Sheffield, Frisbee. *Plato’s Symposium: The Ethics of Desire*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 66, n. 33.

<sup>6</sup> The puzzle is clearly laid out with objections to both positions in Nally, E.G. “Philosophy’s Workmate: *Eros* and the *Erotica* in Plato’s *Symposium*”. *Apeiron* 55, 2022, pp. 329-57. She is right that the rationalist view leaves only volition in place of eros (p. 337), and she is also right that the non-rationalist view cannot satisfy the *logos* requirement (p. 336). But this is not decisive, as Diotima does not imply that the lover at the last stage can give a *logos* of beauty.

<sup>7</sup> Nally 2022, p. 349.

informed by the kind of definitions Socrates seeks but does not find; since he does not find them (or at least does not use them), we need a less demanding concept for the philosophical work that Socrates does in the absence of knowledge of definitions. For our purposes, and for Plato's Socrates, I shall say that a rational discussion is the sort of conversation Socrates promises to have with Alcibiades, a conversation for two aimed at the improvement of the young man (218d1-2 with 219b1). Such conversations are essential parts of the lover's ascent to the final vision. They occur at the first level of initiation ("logoi about virtue," 209b8) and they recur during the higher initiation at the first stage ("gives birth to beautiful logoi," 210a7-8) and the third ("such logoi as make young men better," 210c1-2, 210d5). They aim at finding a practical approach to virtues in which the young men can improve; they do not appear to address the topics of love or beauty and so do not directly support the lover's ascent.

In this paper I will argue in favor of the non-rational view: Love does not reason with the lover, nor does the lover reason with the youngster about love. But if lovers reflect correctly on the love that is moving them, they will find that love is drawing them toward higher and higher levels of beauty. Recognizing these levels is an advance in philosophy, although this is like having a mystical vision. We shall see that it does not entail the ability to give a *logos* of beauty that can withstand Socratic questioning.

### *What Socrates Knows about Love*

Socrates has said that he could not vote against Phaedrus' proposal that each of them speak in praise of love, since he claims to know nothing other than matters of love (*ta erotica*, 177d8), and he paraphrases this later as the claim that he is *deinos* ("terribly clever") on matters of love (198d1-2, cf. 27c3).<sup>8</sup> He represents love as a complex subject – a combination of a felt need for something the lover does not have (201b1-2) along with resources the lover may use for a purpose that becomes clear only toward the end of Diotima's speech – having a vision of beauty itself by itself (210e4 with 204c8).

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<sup>8</sup> In the *Symposium*, he reports that Diotima has taught him the subject (201d5, 207a5), and he agrees that he needs a teacher for this (207e6). He makes a similar claim in the *Lysis*, but, except that he attributes his ability to the god: "In other respects I am shallow and worthless, but this I have as a gift from the god: I am capable of recognizing a lover and one who is loved". εἰμι δ' ἐγὼ τὰ μὲν ἄλλα φαῦλος καὶ ἄχρηστος, τοῦτο δὲ μοί πως ἐκ θεοῦ δέδοται, ταχὺ οἴω τ' εἶναι γινῶναι ἐρῶντά τε καὶ ἐρώμενον (*Lysis* 204b8-c2).

On the needy side of love, we remember from the *Apology* that Socrates says he knows he does not have wisdom (20c-e). On the resourceful side, Socrates knows enough about love to deliver Diotima's questions and her speech. More impressive, Socrates knows enough of love to lie safely in the arms of a beautiful youth, presumably because his mind is fixed on a higher beauty than that of a physical body.

His knowledge appears to be limited, however. He reports that Diotima thinks he could succeed at the first level of initiation, but she does not know whether he is capable of rising through the second (209e5-210a2). Full knowledge, she holds, entails the ability to give an account (*logos*, 202a). The climax of her speech is an attractive description of a vision of the beauty that is the ultimate goal of love. Here she characterizes beauty itself by itself almost entirely in terms of what it is not (211a1-b5). This negative description must fall short of the kind of *logos* that she says one must be able to give if one has knowledge (202a5).<sup>9</sup> Her word for knowledge (*episteme*) and its cognates are absent from her account of the final stage of the ascent. Instead we have the weaker "discern" or "recognize" (*γνῶ*) at 211dc9, where Diotima says that the lover "in the end the lover has discerned what beauty itself is" and "attaining to" (*ἐφαπτομένῳ*) at 212a5: the lover has got as far as the truth. Even if he reached this highest stage in the ascent<sup>10</sup>, Socrates could claim only limited grasp of beauty. That means he could go on seeking a better understanding through philosophy, with love continuing as his motivation. This vision of beauty would not end his career as a philosopher or a lover, although it would suffice for him to say that love is the subject he knows best, and it would be enough to save him from sexual temptation. How could he have learned even this much without a teacher?

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<sup>9</sup> It lacks the substance to ground judgments as to the beauty of souls or customs or anything else that is thought to be beautiful and so cannot be the sort of *logos* Socrates demands of Euthyphro. For an argument that Plato's Socrates does not think his question to Euthyphro can be answered see Woodruff, P. "Wrong Turns in the *Euthyphro*". *Apeiron* 52.2, 2019. Pp. 117-136. As Socrates sees it, Euthyphro wrongly supposes that there is a *logos* for reverence that can guarantee that there will be nothing irreverent about the action he chooses to take. But Euthyphro's proposed action seems reverent in some respects and irreverent in others; it illustrates the point made in the *Republic* that anything reverent is also in some sense irreverent (*Republic* 5.479a).

<sup>10</sup> Where should we place Socrates in the ascent? His ability to describe the ascent, along with Alcibiades' verdict, strongly suggests that he has reached the top (so Prior 2006). For a more complex reading see Blondell 2006. I take it that to be as Socrates is with Alcibiades, he must not only have had the highest vision, but he must keep it in his mind's eye, or he may sink back to the level at which he might be enthralled by a Charmides.

### *Who Is the Guide?*

Diotima presents the ascent as an initiation, and initiation typically requires a leader to guide each candidate through various stages ending in the ultimate vision. On this model, the leader would be a former initiate who is either passing on wisdom to candidates or leading them through a series of vantage points from which they can see for themselves what they need to see in the correct order. Diotima may be referring here to mystagogues at the Eleusinian mysteries<sup>11</sup>, which Plato's symposiasts would have experienced.

Diotima mentions a guide at the start: "if the leader leads correctly, [the candidate] must love one body and there beget beautiful *logoi*" (210a6-7); the grammar of the passage suggests that the guide is operating at all stages. On the other hand, her phrasing at 211c1 suggests that a lover may make the ascent with or without a guide: "for this is what it is to go correctly, or to be led by another, at matters of love". But some guidance has seemed necessary to many scholars, because the lover must take the steps in a fixed order, must move only upward, and must not linger at any stage. Towards the end, Diotima says that the lover has been educated toward matters of love by beholding the beautiful things in order and correctly (*παιδαγωγηθῆ, θεώμενος ἐφεξῆς τε καὶ ὀρθῶς τὰ καλά*, 210e3). The roots for the Greek word "educated" include the word for leading or guiding.

Perhaps a candidate would need a personal guide to steer him away from sexual desire. Rosen makes a strong case for this:

The prospective initiate has need of a guide, since the physiological Eros inclines us to all beautiful bodies, and for sexual rather than rhetorical purposes. In addition, the neophyte requires a guide to lead him away from women and toward a beautiful boy; the guide must see to it that Eros becomes "correct pederasty" with logos as its end. That is, the guide draws the initiate away from the possibility as well as the desire to procreate via the flesh. It is then up to the novitiate to 'understand' the beauty in one body is brother to the beauty in any other; the guide cannot perform this act of apprehension for him.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> So Bury on 210a6-7, Bury, R.G. *Plato: The Symposium*. Cambridge: W. Heffer and Sons LTD 1909/1973. But scholars are not in agreement as to whether the evidence supports the presence of such mystagogues at Eleusis.

<sup>12</sup> Rosen, Stanley. *Plato's Symposium*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968, p. 265.

Most scholars have argued as Rosen does on behalf of a human leader or guide – an expert who is experienced in love.<sup>13</sup> I will argue, against Rosen and the others, that the text does not show the necessity of a personal guide, although it allows the possibility of such a guide. We shall need to look closely at the text at stage three to see how Diotima proposes that lovers will turn from the desire to have sex to the desire to beget *logoi*; there no guidance is mentioned. As for falling in love with youngsters, as opposed to women, no guidance has been necessary for Plato’s symposiasts. The culture is guide enough, hiding women away and putting boys on show in the gymnasium. In any case, if the aim of love is to give birth to beautiful *logoi*, then gender does not matter; anyone can beget good ideas on anyone. For most Athenians of the period, however, only men and boys would have been available for the begetting of *logoi*.

With or without a guide, the ascent may fail. The “if” clause (“if the leader leads correctly”) would not be necessary if it were not possible for the leader to lead incorrectly. That would seem to rule out a guide who is an expert on love. How could a Diotima, knowing what she is supposed to know, lead anyone incorrectly? Eros, on the other hand, shuttling in between the divine and the human, the wise and the ignorant (203e-204b), may well lead us astray. Most lovers, distracted by love as sexual desire, stop long before they are drawn to share philosophy with their beloveds. But an initiated mystagogue, of the sort imagined by most scholars, would not lead incorrectly.

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<sup>13</sup> Only Mitchell (1993), of the scholars I have read, takes Eros to be the leader: “For us there is no mistaking this leader. It is Eros: the shape that love comes to have within the city, finally indistinguishable from the city itself” (Mitchell, Robert Lloyd. *The Hymn to Eros: A Reading of Plato’s Symposium*. Lanham: University Press of America, 1993, p. 153). Reeve holds that there is no need for a leader, as the process does not involve teaching (Reeve, C. D. C. “Plato on Begetting in Beauty (209e5-212c3),” in Horn, Christoph. *Platon: Symposion*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2012, p. 127). But Diotima does mention a leader, and the leader in an initiation need not be a teacher, as the candidates must see for themselves. Sheffield takes the more common view: “I take it that the guide is an ideal lover, one who knows about ‘erotic matters,’ much like Diotima or (the experienced) Socrates” (Sheffield, Frisbee. *Plato’s Symposium: The Ethics of Desire*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 119 n8). Osborne, who notes the role of love as a guide elsewhere in the dialogue, writes of this passage: “the guide will not only be an expert in love, but also a philosophy teacher (Osborne, Catherine. *Eros Unveiled: Plato and the God of Love*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994, p. 93). Griffith translates ἡγούμενος as “mentor” (Griffith, Tom. *Symposium of Plato*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989, *ad loc*). Bury in his commentary (1909/73, *ad loc.*) describes the guide as “an educational ‘conductor’”. Dover, on 210c6, explains the guide as the older partner who must lead the younger (1980, p. 155). A.E. Taylor holds that the director is needed only for the first step (Taylor, A.E. *Plato: The Man and His Work*. London: Methuen. 1926, p. 229n2). Blondell 2006 argues that the guide has dropped out before the final step. R.E. Allen rightly notes that the guide is leading throughout the long sentence describing the ascent (1991, 155n245). Shelley’s 1818 translation omits the guide altogether.

Keep in mind also that only an extraordinary candidate could make the ascent. Diotima is not sure Socrates is up to the challenge, even though she thinks he meets the high standard for the preliminary initiation (“pregnant and godlike,” 209b1). No guide would be able to succeed with ordinary people. In interpreting each stage of the ascent, we must look for the ways in which a candidate or his guide could go wrong.

### *Preliminary Stage: Lower-Level Initiation*

The lower-level initiation, preceding the ascent to the highest vision of beauty, ends with a young lover giving birth to philosophical *logoi* for the youngster he loves:

Whenever someone has been pregnant with these [sc. σωφροσύνη τε καὶ δικαιοσύνη] in his soul from early youth, being godlike<sup>14</sup>, and, having arrived at the proper age, he desires to give birth and beget (τίκτειν τε καὶ γεννᾶν). Then of course he will go about seeking the beauty in which he would beget, for he will never beget in anything ugly. Since he is pregnant, then, he is much more drawn to (ἀσπάζεται) bodies that are beautiful than to those that are ugly; and if he also has the luck to find a soul that is beautiful and noble and well-formed, he is even more drawn to this combination; from contact with such a person he immediately (εὐθὺς) teems with *logoi* about virtue – what qualities a good man should have and how he should live – and he will set about educating him (209a8-c1).

At this stage, no human leader or teacher or training manual is required. Because the lover is pregnant in soul – because he is carrying latent ideas about virtue – he desires to give birth – to express those ideas – and therefore seeks out an appropriate person with whom to do so. On meeting the right youngster, he is ready to give birth to *logoi* right away, εὐθὺς. For this preliminary initiation the lover does not require anything beyond the good fortune (or divine gift) of carrying latent ideas about virtue, along with the natural tendency to be attracted toward physical and moral beauty. Diotima supposes that the young Socrates is up to this level of initiation, but she doubts that he is ready to rise to the final vision by the process she is about to describe (209e5-210a2). This preliminary initiation is similar to stage one of the ascent.

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<sup>14</sup> Here I read θεῖος with the mss. and the papyrus (unlike Nehamas and Woodruff). Dover’s argument for taking Parmentier’s emendation (ἡθεος) is not strong enough, since the mss. and papyrus text makes good sense as is. For the meaning of θεῖος in such a context, see *Republic* 331e6, where Simonides is called σοφὸς γὰρ καὶ θεῖος ἀνὴρ (“a wise and godlike man”). Simonides has been inspired to say something true, but what he says requires radical interpretation for Socrates to find the truth in it. The young lover, on this model, is inspired to deliver *logoi* that are a first step in understanding virtues; he carries these inspired *logoi* like a pregnancy until he is stimulated to deliver them by the beauty of a youngster.



### *Stage One: Loving One Body and Begetting Beautiful Logoi*

One who goes about this business correctly must begin as a young man to go for beautiful bodies, and, first, if the leader leads correctly, he must love one body and there beget beautiful *logoi* and after that . . . (καὶ πρῶτον μὲν, εἴαν ὀρθῶς ἡγῆται ὁ ἡγούμενος, ἐνὸς αὐτὸν σώματος ἑρᾶν καὶ ἐνταῦθα γεννᾶν λόγους καλοῦς, ἔπειτα δὲ . . .) (210a4-8).

The leader we are seeking to understand is mentioned explicitly in only this text, although a later passage (211c1) suggests that some kind of leading has taken place. A footnote on this passage in the Nehamas/Woodruff translation reads simply: “The leader: Love”.<sup>15</sup> But most scholars take the leader to be a human being, such as Diotima or Socrates after his initiation. Many of these scholars have argued as Rosen does that the merely psychological guidance of love cannot suffice. What sort of guidance would suffice to lead the lover “to love one body and there beget beautiful *logoi*”? That depends on what is meant by “to love one body” and on what sort of *logoi* the lover is to beget.

Love for one *body*, by contrast with love for one boy or one soul, seems to imply sexual desire, which is, after all, the common meaning of *eros*. At least the expression does not rule out sexual desire. For all we know, at Stage One the lover is drawn to the youngster by sexual desire. And, as we have seen, it is the final vision that gives the lover the power not to feel sexual desire so long as he keeps his mind’s eye on that vision. For a lover at Stage One, such immunity to sexual desire is still in the future. And from Diotima’s brief description of Stage One, we have no reason to expect the lover to have turned his back on sexual desire. Rosen, remember, proposed that “the guide draws the initiate away from the possibility as well as the desire to procreate via the flesh”. But this is not necessary at the first stage, or indeed at any stage, since the final vision will do this work in the end.

What sort of *logoi* would the lover express at this stage: philosophical or erotic or both? If the first stage were part of conventional Athenian lovemaking at the time, the *logoi* would be speeches in praise of the boy or other charming attempts at seduction. Persuasion is said to be the child of Aphrodite (Sappho, Fragment 90.1a). How could a conventional lover know enough to do

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<sup>15</sup> Nehamas, Alexander, and Woodruff, Paul. *Plato: Symposium*. Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 1989, p. 57, n. 90.

anything more philosophical than this? He is on the bottom step and has not yet taken any part of the ascent.

If, on the other hand, the first stage is already part of the unconventional approach to a beautiful youngster that Socrates would recommend, we would expect the *logoi* to include gentle arguments for education in virtue, such as we find demonstrated in the *Lysis*. The text leaves us uncertain; it might be meant to operate on both levels, philosophical and erotic, at the same time for different members of his audience.<sup>16</sup>

The preliminary initiation, however, introduced us to an inspired lover who is carrying ideas about virtue and gives them expression in the presence of the boy to whom he is drawn by love. No guide was necessary for that. And such *logoi*, probably, are what Diotima is proposing for Stage One. For the inspiration, the lover might need help from a divine being, such as Apollo or Socrates' daimonion, but this divinity cannot be the guide Diotima refers to, as that guide could go wrong. In the *Lysis* Socrates describes his ability to recognize a lover and beloved as god-given.<sup>17</sup> As often in referring to a god, he may be invoking Apollo. More likely, however, he uses this locution to claim an ability for which he has no normal human explanation.<sup>18</sup> So the guide is not a god.

The human candidates to be guides in this ascent would be people who have made the ascent themselves and so are experts on the process. Diotima is probably fictional. The other obvious human candidate is Socrates himself. Perhaps we are to infer from the passage that Socrates is prepared to guide young men correctly in matters of love through such an ascent as Diotima describes. But we find nothing in Plato's work (or Xenophon's) to support this hypothesis. Plato gives us one example of Socrates giving advice to a lover. In the *Lysis*, we see Socrates showing a young man how to address his youngster in philosophical terms. But this demonstration is anaphrodisiac – a far cry from sending a young man after beautiful bodies or bringing him together for the first stage in initiation.

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<sup>16</sup> Blundell opts for the more philosophical *logoi* of the type we see in *Lysis* (2006, 163). But double meanings are common in ancient tragic poems of the period; the *Bacchae* has many lines that an initiate will understand one way and a novice the other.

<sup>17</sup> *Lysis* 204b8-c2.

<sup>18</sup> Socrates often infers divine intervention whenever people seem to know something they have not been taught (e.g. *Ion* 542b3).

Socrates did claim to be a matchmaker, however. Since a matchmaker guides two people into their love affair, a Socratic matchmaker could be the guide for Stage One.<sup>19</sup> Such guidance is attributed to Socrates in Mary Renault's *Last of the Wine*, where he brings a young man and his boy-love together at the right time.<sup>20</sup> But here too there is no indication of an ascent. We have no explicit, literal evidence to support the hypothesis that Socrates' matchmaking was of the kind needed for the first stage of the ascent.

For Stage One, the lover needs no guide to lead him to be attracted to the youngster's beautiful body. Such an attraction is natural. And Diotima represents the delivery of *logoi* in the presence of beauty as equally natural. For the first stage, I conclude, no leader is needed aside from Eros. Sexual desire alone will bring the young lover after the beautiful bodies and lead him to settle on one of them. Then that same desire will drive him to speak *logoi* to his intended, as beautifully as he can. So, even on the more philosophical reading of *logoi* at 210a8, the lover does not need either a human or a divine guide to do what he does. This leaves open the possibility that Socrates believes the lover is led where he goes by none other than Love. Later stages are more challenging, however, and they seem to call for sophisticated leadership.

### *Stage Two: Loving All Beautiful Bodies*

What is required for the young lover to ascend to the second stage? The passage describing this ascent follows Stage One directly and is governed, as that text was, by “if the leader leads correctly” and the finite verb “must” (δεῖ):

Second, he must get in mind (κατανοῆσαι) that the beauty in any one body is brother to the beauty in any other, and that, if he must pursue beauty of appearance (τὸ ἐπ' εἶδει καλόν), he would be quite mindless not to consider the beauty in all bodies as one and the same (ἐν τε καὶ ταῦτόν ἡγεῖσθαι τὸ ἐπὶ πᾶσιν τοῖς σώμασι κάλλος). With this in mind, he must become a lover of all beautiful bodies and despise that extreme surrender to one [body] and consider it unworthy (σμικρόν). (210a8-b6)

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<sup>19</sup> Plato's Socrates presents himself as engaging in matchmaking (προμνάεσθαι), connecting those who are barren of ideas with teachers such as Prodicus (*Theaetetus* 151b2), and Xenophon's Socrates is proud of his pandering (μαστροπεία, *Symposium* 3.10), but both texts use these terms with some irony or at least as figures of speech: Socrates is not bringing people together for sex. On Socrates as matchmaker, see Gordon, Jill. *Plato's Erotic World: From Cosmic Origins to Human Death*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 137-38.

<sup>20</sup> Renault, Mary. *The Last of the Wine*. New York: Pantheon, 1956.

What sort of guidance might a lover require to make this first ascent from the single body to all bodies? It is no small ascent.<sup>21</sup> It takes our candidate from his first passion for a particular to an appreciation of a universal. This then appears to be a crucial step – from what could be merely the youthful excitement of a crush to a recognition of the superiority of the universal to the particular. Now we can see new meaning in the expression Ἔρωτα φιλόσοφον (“love as philosopher” – 204b4): In coming to appreciate the universal, the lover is taking a major step in philosophy. Like Eros, he is in between being wise and being ignorant, but he is on the upward path.

“[The lover] must get in mind”: The verb I render as “get in mind” (κατανοῆσαι) could as well be translated as “observe” or “perceive”. It would not be used of the process of arriving at a conclusion from premises. The young lover sees no significant difference between the beauty of one body and that of another, and so realizes that his pursuit of physical beauty does not stop with the beauty apparent in a single body: he is drawn to physical beauty wherever he sees it. Where Love is leading him, he sees, is not to this one body, but to beauty in appearance quite generally. The young lover realizes, by looking around him, that the desire plucking at his heartstrings is pulling him not only here, but everywhere where there is such beauty.

This is not a surprising result for the culture of love that Socrates has in mind; pederasty spreads a wide net, as Plato notes in the *Republic*.<sup>22</sup> There have been – and are – lovers of boys or young men who chase after (and may abuse) hundreds of boys. Most lovers, however, then as now, probably find sexual desire drawing them to a single person, at least one at a time. And probably the lover will want to share his beautiful *logoi* with one youngster at a time, in intimate consideration of that youngster’s good qualities and potential for moral improvement. But how can it be that a lover is drawn to a single person from the sea of beauty around him? Most of us experience love as love for an individual, and that experience bears crucially on the next stage, as we shall see.

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<sup>21</sup> I note, however, that this ascent from Stage One to Stage Two is generally ignored in the literature. Sheffield pays so little attention to it that she supposes the candidate is already committed to the idea that *to kalon* is one thing and shared by its many instances (2006, 117). If this were so, the candidate would not have paused with just one body to give *logoi* at Stage One, but started at least at Stage Two, if not higher.

<sup>22</sup> *Republic* 5.474d3-5: “All youngsters in the bloom of youth both sting and arouse a man who is fond of youngsters and given to love, and he thinks they are all worth caring for and embracing”.

Scholars, believing that love cannot lead anyone so far as Stage Two, have supposed that the ascent is at least partly *elenctic* – *i.e.*, that it is propelled by an examination of *logoi* under sharp questioning by someone with the skill in *elenchus* of a Socrates or a Diotima.<sup>23</sup> But there is no Socrates for Socrates, and probably no Diotima either, as we have seen. In any case, neither Diotima nor Socrates would lead the lover astray. But the text at Stage Two does not support the *elenchus* hypothesis. Nowhere in Diotima’s account of soul-pregnancy or ascent is there mention of what goes on in Socratic *elenchus* – that is, proposing and testing of definitions through questioning. The lover with pregnant soul in 209b1 does not test definitions with or question the beautiful person; he educates him – evidently instructing him on how he thinks a good man lives.<sup>24</sup> Besides, my interpretive hypothesis – that the leader here is Love – is more economical than the interpretation that imports *elenchus* into the ascent. My interpretation has the advantage of explaining three issues that are otherwise puzzling:

First, the Love-Leader hypothesis explains why this is an initiation into the *Love* Mysteries, and why it is Beauty that beckons the initiate onwards, rather than consistency or virtue or even wisdom. If this were an *elenctic* initiation into philosophical discourse about such virtues as justice, or if the chief attraction were wisdom, we would have no more need here than in the *Gorgias* or *Republic* to bring Love and Beauty front and center.

Second, the Love-Leader hypothesis explains how Socrates could have started on the ascent on his own, since we know of no human teacher he could have had for love, aside from the probably fictional Diotima. He did not need a human teacher. He had Love.

Third, the hypothesis explains why the leader is mentioned in a conditional clause. There would be no point in the conditional, “If the leader leads correctly,” if the leader could not go wrong. And, obviously, love can lead us wrong (to sexual abuse), or at least not far enough (ending at sex).

An additional advantage is that this interpretation connects Diotima’s speech with those that have gone before: Love’s guidance has been a theme in most of the earlier speeches: Phaedrus

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<sup>23</sup> On the hypothesis of *elenchus* in the ascent, see Sheffield (2006, 124-25 with the citations at 124n 12). Osborne proposes that the philosopher-leader for Socrates’ ascent is Diotima (194, p. 93), but Diotima is merely describing the ascent here, not leading Socrates, and she has doubts that he is up to this stage of initiation (210a2).

<sup>24</sup> The distinction between educating and *elenctic* questioning is vital for Socrates: in using *elenchus* he does not represent himself as acting the part of a pedagogue.

represented Eros as an ideal guide for one's whole life (173c5-d1), Eryximachus as our pilot (187a1), Aristophanes as our guide and commander (193b2), and Agathon as our pilot (197d8) as well as our "best and most lovely guide" (197e2). Socrates has, however, made one important change, through his characterization of love as imperfect. Of those earlier speakers who represented love as a guide, only Eryximachus allowed for love to lead us astray. Socrates' Diotima does, through the "if" clause.<sup>25</sup>

*Stage Three: Loving a Boy with a Suitable Soul, along with Stage Four: Beholding Beauty in Practices and Customs*

After this he must think that the beauty in souls is more valuable (τιμιώτερον) than the beauty in a body, so that if someone is suitable (ἐπιεικῆς ὄν) in his soul<sup>26</sup>, even if he has but little bloom in his body, [our lover] must be content to love and care [for his development<sup>27</sup>] and to give birth to *logoi* and seek for those *logoi* that will make young men better<sup>28</sup>, so that of necessity he will behold (θεάσασθαι)<sup>29</sup> the beauty in practices and customs (τὸ ἐν τοῖς ἐπιτηδεύμασι καὶ τοῖς νόμοις καλόν) and see that all this is akin to itself, with the result that he will consider the beauty of a body to be a small matter. (210b6-c6)

In this passage, Diotima presents two ascents that reach stages parallel to One and Two. In the first stage, the lover was drawn to one body and there begot beautiful *logoi*. At the end of

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<sup>25</sup> On love's guidance, see Osborne 1994, p. 92.

<sup>26</sup> "Someone is suitable (ἐπιεικῆς ὄν) in his soul" (210b8): For the meaning of ἐπιεικῆς, see the use of the cognate adverb at 201a8, for which Dover suggests the translation "reasonably".

<sup>27</sup> "Love and care [for his development]": ἐρᾶν καὶ κηδεσθαι. We should supply "for his development," because the second verb, κηδεσθαι, is one Socrates sometimes uses to mean "to take pains to help another person improve by refuting or correcting beliefs they have that are wrong" (*Gorgias* 487a6, *Republic* 344e5, cf. *Apology* 24c7). It does not mean "care for": in the sense of "cherish". At this point, it appears that Diotima might be referring to a process like the elenchus.

<sup>28</sup> "To give birth to *logoi* and seek for those *logoi* that will make young men better": τίκτειν λόγους τοιούτους καὶ ζητεῖν, οἵτινες ποιήσουσι βελτίους τοὺς νέους (210c1-c3). A plainer translation would be: "to give birth to and seek out such *logoi* as will make young men better". But this is not one operation, but two that take place sequentially. After giving birth to a litter of *logoi*, the lover and beloved will seek to find which of them will have a morally improving effect. The Greek is puzzling enough that Ast and Bury athetize καὶ ζητεῖν. Bury (*ad loc.*) admits that scholars have defended the text, but he writes "this is futile". Allen and Robin both retain it; Dover follows Ast and Bury, as does Griffith. But it is better generally to retain a difficult text, and this one fits nicely with the meaning of κηδεσθαι: the young lover should seek out which of the *logoi* are worth keeping. If this is right, then *elenchus* may be indicated at this point for testing the *logoi* against one another.

<sup>29</sup> "Behold" (θεάσασθαι): to watch actively, as an audience watches the action in theater or in a sports arena, or as philosophers may contemplate what they take to be real; the first occurrence of this verb. It could be translated as "contemplate" or "consider". It occurs also at 210e3, 211d2, 211d7, and 212a2. The cognate verb θεωρεῖν occurs once (210d4). I have translated both verbs as "behold".

the second stage, the lover was drawn to all beautiful bodies, apparently to every beautiful youngster he sees. Now at Stage Three the lover is back in discussion with an individual, this time one who has something like beauty of soul<sup>30</sup>, which the lover recognizes as superior to beauty of body. In the presence of this beauty, the lover is again giving birth, but now we are told what his offspring are: they are *logoi* about moral development. Then, by considering those *logoi*, the lover cannot help rising to Stage Four, at which he beholds and appreciates the beauty of morally improving practices and customs – plainly a universal in our sense.

The passage presents several problems: Why is the chosen youngster said to be merely *suitable*, rather than *beautiful* in soul? How does the lover see that his youngster is suitable? And why does the lover turn back to one person, tearing himself away from all those beauties of body that had excited him at Stage Two? And, most important, how does he come to see that beauty of soul is superior to beauty of body?

I will propose a set of related answers to these questions.

To be suitable is to be suitable for something; the youngster must be suitable for the role he will play in the begetting of *logoi*; he must be a proper partner in a discussion of improving practices and customs. If the youngster already had beauty of soul, he would already have virtue, and he would not be a candidate for moral improvement. But everyone at the human level is such a candidate, in Plato's view; Socrates sees himself as a candidate for improvement, because he does not have the wisdom he seeks, which is necessary for full virtue.<sup>31</sup> Henceforth the beauties that the lover beholds as he ascends from stage three will not belong to the individual, but to such universal entities as practices and customs. Those are the beauties that will help the youngster improve his imperfect soul in the direction of beauty. In choosing moral improvement as a topic for discussion, the lover is following his desire to do what is best for the youngster he loves, realizing that what is best for his loved one is improvement in the moral sphere.

To recognize a youngster's special suitability for discourse, what better way than to engage him in discussion? This the lover was probably doing already in Stage One. Lecturing at a student is no way to assess the student's capacity for anything, and Plato does not see much value in

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<sup>30</sup> Something like beauty of soul: Even if the youngster lacks physical beauty, the lover is drawn to him by something the lover finds attractive if not beautiful in the full sense: the youngster's suitability for philosophical discussion.

<sup>31</sup> See Woodruff 2022a, p. 60, ff. with p. 144. ff.

straight lecturing. What Socrates proposes to Alcibiades (apparently after his initiation) is not a lecture but a shared discussion, a taking counsel together (219a8-b2).<sup>32</sup> So the youngster must be suitable – i.e., willing and intelligent enough – for shared discussion. Since the goal of the discussion now is the youngster’s moral improvement, he must be suitable for that too. He must have the beginnings of beauty of soul – decency and moral ambition – on which he can build toward the virtue that must be his overall goal. By engaging the youngster in discussion, the lover will discover how well suited the youngster is for discussion – without needing any help from a guide.

Decency and moral ambition will be harder to discern, but for this the lover must not accept help from a teacher or guide. Socrates never takes any one’s word for qualities of soul in another. He tests Charmides by questioning him, and he does not find him beautiful inside. In the case of Theaetetus, he has reliable testimony as to his beautiful mind, but Socrates does not assent to this until the boy has shown his talent in following logical argument. His is the only soul Socrates ever pronounces beautiful, but its beauty is intellectual rather than moral.<sup>33</sup> Intellectual beauty is much easier to identify. The problem remains: how to discern even the beginnings of moral beauty.<sup>34</sup> The answer is that we see the best in those we love. More on this in answering the fourth question.

Our third question concerned the return of the lover from the universal (all beautiful bodies) to the particular – to the suitable youngster with whom he is discussing practices and customs. This is not a surprising result; all the speakers in this dialogue have addressed love in dyadic relationships; none has shown any interest in the serial predation that Stage Two suggests. Still, we need to know how this turn comes about. Is a personal guide necessary, or even possible, for this to occur? Again, one answer comes from the lover’s engaging the youngster in discussion; discussion of the kind Socrates proposes to Alcibiades is not a group affair. It requires an

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<sup>32</sup> “Now you take counsel yourself (αὐτὸς οὕτω βoθλεύου) on what you think best for you and me,” [said Alcibiades].

“But,” [Socrates] said, “on this you are speaking well. For in future we will do what seems best to the two of us as we take counsel together (βουλευόμενοι), both on this and other topics”. Note the use of the dual (219a6-b2).

<sup>33</sup> *Theaetetus* 185e, with 1568b-c.

<sup>34</sup> Moral beauty is virtue, and virtue is extremely hard to detect. Many other dialogues indicate that virtue is hard to identify. Physical beauty is manifest to see in our world—ιδεῖν λαμπρόν—whereas virtues such as justice are represented only by vague images (*Phaedrus* 250b1-6).



individual partner. No guide is required for this here, which the lover must have accepted at Stage One without a guide.

Discussion by itself, however, does not appear to be sufficient to reveal the youngster's potential for moral improvement, his basic decency and moral ambition, his near beauty of soul. Nor does it explain how the lover comes to see that even the beginnings of beauty of soul are superior to beauty of body. That was our fourth question. Again, I cannot imagine what a guide could say that would make the lover see and value this sort of beauty. A more likely story is this: All along the lover has been drawn by love to one youngster out of a throng of beauties. If the lover reflects on his experience of love, he must see that he has singled out this youngster for qualities that do not meet the eye, since many others are at least equally beautiful in body. Through engaging the youngster in discussion he is at least catching a glimpse of the qualities of his soul. Whether the youngster is superior, average, or inferior in his physical appearance, the lover prefers him to the others. But on what basis? The beauty he sees in his beloved with the eye of love must be superior in its attractive power to any beauty he could see with his physical eyes in all the others. His love for this particular youngster is clear evidence that beauties of the soul trump beauties of the body. This he could not realize if he were not in love.<sup>35</sup>

A guide could help him here by asking questions. Why does he love this person and not the others? What are his hopes for the person he loves? Why has he chosen to engage him in *logoi* on ethical subjects? If he takes these questions seriously enough, the lover will reflect on his love in a way that will bring beauty of soul into the range of his mind's eye. Of course, the lover can ask these questions of himself, with the same result. As I said at the start, a guide may be useful, but is not necessary.

In short, through being in love, and reflecting on that love, the lover is drawn to ascend to the point at which he sees beauty in the practices and customs that lead to moral improvement. That is the crucial step in the ascent to the final vision, which is now close at hand

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<sup>35</sup> Seeing moral beauty with the eye of love is the theme of Sonnet 71 by Sir Philip Sydney:

Who will in fairest book of nature know  
How virtue may best lodg'd in beauty be,  
Let him but learn of love to read in thee,  
Stella, those fair lines which true goodness show.

### *Stage Five: The Great Sea of Beauty*

After practices, [one must] lead (ἀγαγεῖν) on to branches of knowledge, with the result that he will now see the beauty of knowledge and be looking mainly not at beauty in a single example – as a servant would who favored the beauty of a little boy or a man or a single practice (being a slave, of course, he’s low and small-minded) but he is turned to the great sea of beauty<sup>36</sup>, and gazing upon this, he gives birth to many gloriously beautiful ideas and theories, in unstinting philosophy (ἐν φιλοσοφία ἀφθόνῳ), until . . . (210c6-d6).

The infinitive “to lead” (ἀγαγεῖν) indicates that this passage also is governed by the same “must” from Stage One (δεῖ, 210a4). The earlier infinitives take the lover as subject, i.e., the candidate for initiation. But then who is it who is to be led? The lover may be supposed to lead himself, or he may be supposed to lead the youngster he loves. If the leader here is the one Diotima mentioned in 210a6-7, then the sentence has made an awkward change of subject. On any interpretation the verb falls awkwardly.<sup>37</sup> But the ascent at this point is easy to understand. In seeking to identify beautiful practices, the lover must find that he is seeking to know what practices make a soul more beautiful – that he is, in fact, seeking one sort of knowledge. And he will probably also find that seeking any sort of knowledge is one of the practices that make a soul more beautiful. These results would spring naturally from his *logoi* at Stage Four. No guide is necessary. This passage does not provide evidence that a personal teacher other than the lover is at work in

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<sup>36</sup> “The great sea of beauty”: The individual youngster seems to have dropped out here as an object of love interest. But with whom else is the lover engaged in the discussion that is necessary for giving birth to ideas? Vlastos has claimed that “We are to love the persons so far, and only insofar, as they are good and beautiful” (1981, 31). This cannot be entirely right. Persons are never entirely good and beautiful, but lover and youngster must have a continuing and loving relationship in order that their discussions may continue, and that relationship depends on the lover’s recognizing the youngster’s potential for growth in virtue. This is more clear in the *Phaedrus*, where love leads the happy pair to a life and even an afterlife of shared philosophy (ὁμονοητικὸν . . . βίον, 256b1), on which see Woodruff 2022b.

<sup>37</sup> To avoid changing grammatical subject in mid-sentence, Nehamas and Woodruff translated ἀγαγεῖν as “to go”. This is not acceptable Greek, unless it is a way of saying “to lead oneself”. This latter is a likely reading, I think, although I have not found a classical parallel for it. Bury (*ad loc.*) supplies the leader from 210a6 as subject, but this upsets the flow of the long sentence and the ascent, for which the lover must be the subject. Dover (155) suggests that the subject is now the older lover, who is leading his younger beloved to the sciences. But then it would be the beloved, not the lover, who receives the ultimate vision, and that is absurd. A further alternative is Rosen’s (267): “reflection upon the customs of the city will lead the neophyte ‘to the sciences’”. That seems likely.

the ascent.<sup>38</sup> The lover simply needs to pay attention to what love is leading him to do; at this stage it is leading him to prize knowledge.

### *Stage Six: The Vision*

One who has been thus far educated in matters of love, beholding the beautiful things in order and correctly, and is now reaching the goal of matters of love, suddenly catches sight of a beauty marvelous in its nature, the very object for the sake of which he endured all earlier labors . . . (210e2-e7)

The final ascent leads to the culmination of the lover's "education in love"<sup>39</sup>, parallel to the *epopteia* or final vision to which initiates are led in a mystery religion.<sup>40</sup> For this phase of the ascent there is no process, no time for dialogue; the lover simply, suddenly catches sight of the vision that will change his way of seeing beauty in the world. As we have seen, this also changes his behavior: A successful initiate can turn away, as Socrates does, from an offer of sex with a gorgeous youngster.

Diotima leaves this last ascent somewhat mysterious, as is appropriate for a process modeled on initiation into a mystery religion. We can, however, supply an explanation: The lover has now gathered in his mind's eye many kinds of beautiful objects from young bodies to branches of knowledge. During the ascent he has found that these kinds have something in common: They are all attractive, and each one attracts him to a higher level of beauty. Recognizing the attraction at each stage is like stepping up from one level to another (211c3). Each step had led him to the next one in order.

As he reflects on that experience, he suddenly finds his mind's eye filled with the beauty that lies behind all these lesser beauties. Those lesser beauties he could describe in positive terms. But for this beauty he must use mainly negative language, as befits the culmination of initiation into a mystery.

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<sup>38</sup> Scott LaBarge (in conversation) suggested that the leader here is Parmenides, who encourages Socrates to think in terms of the forms. But Socrates had arrived at the hypothesis of forms before he met Parmenides, without having had a teacher on the subject of forms.

<sup>39</sup> ὃς γὰρ ἂν μέχρι ἐνταῦθα πρὸς τὰ ἐρωτικὰ παιδαγωγηθῆι, θεώμενος ἐφεξῆς τε καὶ ὀρθῶς τὰ καλά, πρὸς τέλος . . . (210e2-5). Plato uses forms of *paidagogein* for education (*Theatetus* 167c8, *Laws* 641b7), not merely for leading a child around. Scholars agree that this verb indicates that the lover has received an education during his ascent. But the text here does not identify a teacher.

<sup>40</sup> Diotima's use of *epoptika* at 210a1 shows us that she means us to see this parallel.

### *Objections*

On the interpretation I propose, a process of reflection on one's experience of love motivates the ascent at each of the stages I have described. But this process is nowhere explicit in the text. I answer that the text is so brief that any interpretation will suffer from this objection. My account is warranted by its explanatory power: it explains the text better than interpretations that would import personal guides or teachers. It works especially well for the later parts of the text, which attribute the lover's success to his loving correctly (211b5-6). One phrase implies that one can ascend with or without a guide (211c1). Most important, this interpretation explains how Socrates, without a Socrates to guide him, could have reached the stage at which he is able to resist Alcibiades' sexual advances.

A further objection is more serious. If love alone is sufficient to lead a lover to the ultimate vision of beauty, why has it not done so for most of us? We have all experienced love, but few if any of us have reached the stage at which a vision of the highest beauty would make us immune to sexual desire. We ordinary lovers would not be morally safe in bed with Alcibiades.

The answer, I think, is that this fact explains why the ascent is so difficult, why there is so great a risk of failure, and why few people will be good enough to make it to the top. The process Diotima describes is available only to very special people; remember, she doubts that even Socrates would be able to make the ascent (210a2). Moreover, the ascent is risky at every stage. The clause, "if the leader leads correctly," presupposes that the leader can go wrong. And *eros* often does lead us astray when it leads to merely sexual satisfaction. This risk of a detour into sex is not eliminated until the highest stage, since it is only the final vision that does that work (211d3-5). So I must be clear about my thesis: love is a guide, but a fallible guide, that may fail or may lead the best of us to lofty philosophical insights. Personal guides may also have a role in some cases but they are not required.

### *The Role of Philosophical Activity*

What now of Nally's thesis that love and philosophy have the same goal, with love providing the motivation and philosophy independently doing the heavy lifting (Nally 2022)? The

question turns on the role of philosophical activity in the ascent. “Philosophical activity” means discussion of philosophical questions, such as “What is Beauty?” and “What is Virtue?” and “What practices or customs are morally improving?” The answer I propose is that the ascent Diotima describes does not call for heavy lifting at all. Instead, it is powered by the steady pull and attractive force of Beauty itself. Beauty is manifest in many things, such as physical bodies, that can distract us from our goal, but the lover who is attentive to his experience of love will not rest at any of the lower stages, but continue to ascend. True, philosophical activity is essential to the ascent, but it is an essential part of the activity that love calls for.

We cannot easily separate philosophical activity from the experience of love. The lover engaged his youngster in philosophical activity even at the preliminary stage. And that activity is crucial to the ascent at several stages. It explains how the lover finds his youngster suitable, and how he picks the youngster out of the large field of those with beautiful bodies. Moreover, philosophical discussion of moral improvement necessitates the lover’s ascent to a vision of the beauty that customs and practices will have if they are morally improving.

These discussions are not ancillary to the activities of love; they are essential parts of the activity to which love leads the lover, as we have seen. Loving the youngster, the lover wants to do what is best for him, and that is to engage him in discussions about moral improvement. These discussions are more for the sake of the youngster than the lover. If they help the lover to a higher vision of beauty, that is incidental to these discussions, which are about the youngster’s improvement, rather than about beauty or love.

We can imagine a philosophical discussion of beauty that would be distinct from the moral discussions to which love prompts the lover. That would be a discussion of the nature of beauty through attempts at definition; it might proceed by question and answer about beauty, beginning perhaps as the *Hippias Major* begins, but reaching much further heights, leading to an argument that Beauty itself must be transcendent. Such an argument would be ancillary and truly a workmate to the ascent through love, which reached the highest vision without a dialogue on the subject of beauty. Here, however, we have only the ascent through love and not the slightest suggestion of a philosophical argument for this vision of a transcendent beauty.

We should not expect such a positive argument for transcendence in Plato’s work; the ascent in the *Republic* does not work that way. To leave the Cave the cave-dwellers need not a positive teacher but an annoying person who forces them to look away from what they like to see,

and instead to look behind them – a person they would want to kill (517a4-6). Socrates never presents himself as a teacher or a leader toward the truth; instead, he likens his work to the annoyance of a stinging gadfly. Nor does he ever identify – at least not without irony – any wise teacher who can help him or anyone else advance toward wisdom. He seeks wisdom, he says, because he knows he is not wise. Such wisdom as he has – the human wisdom of knowing he is not wise – is worth a trifle or nothing (*Apology* 23a7). And yet he has advanced, and urges others to advance, toward wisdom. Apparently, he believes that we do not need formal teaching in order to learn. The Theory of Recollection, as presented in the *Meno* and *Phaedo* and *Phaedrus*, illustrates one way that we can learn without being taught. If my argument in this paper is correct, the *Symposium* shows us another way we can learn without being taught. Love is not wise, and so cannot be a teacher. But Love can be a guide, albeit an erratic one, to advances in philosophy.

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