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From the Ladder to Drunkenness: The Dialectical Tension between Theoretical Ascent and Embodied Eros in Plato's *Symposium*

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Da Escada à Embriaguez: a Tensão Dialética entre Ascensão Teórica e Eros Corporificado no *Banquete* de Platão

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To my teachers, past and present.

Aos meus professores, do passado e do presente.

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RESUMO[1]

Esta tese sustenta que o *Banquete* não deve ser lido meramente como a exposição de uma teoria sistemática de eros, isto é, como um tratado ordenado e progressivo sobre o amor que culminaria na contemplação do belo em si, mas como uma encenação filosófica do próprio desejo. O diálogo não formula uma doutrina fechada, mas dramatiza o movimento de eros por meio de camadas narrativas, deslocamentos temporais, alternância de oradores e espaços, e um constante entrelaçamento entre corpo e palavra.

A interpretação central propõe que o *Banquete* constitui um exercício filosófico moldado pela própria estrutura do desejo – relacional, dinâmico e instável. O diálogo codifica em sua forma uma instabilidade fundamental, dramatizando a tensão entre o desejo humano e a impossibilidade de possuir definitivamente o objeto amado.

A tese propõe, nesse contexto, uma leitura da relação entre Sócrates, Diotima e Alcibíades – tanto em seus discursos quanto em sua configuração dramática – a partir de chaves interpretativas extraídas do prólogo. É nele que se estabelecem as coordenadas que orientam a leitura proposta nos demais capítulos.

Para revelar essa estrutura, a tese distingue entre movimentos teóricos – o desenvolvimento conceitual e argumentativo – e movimentos dramáticos – as dimensões espaciais, corporais e performativas do texto, como a movimentação das personagens, a embriaguez e os gestos. A coesão do *Banquete* emerge do atrito dialético entre essas duas dimensões, cuja tensão constitui a própria forma do pensamento platônico.

Do ponto de vista metodológico, a pesquisa inspira-se na chamada "Terceira Via" nos Estudos Platônicos, que busca integrar argumentos contrastantes e ressaltar a unidade entre forma e conteúdo nos diálogos de Platão. Essa abordagem entende a dialética platônica como prática reflexiva e não apenas teórica: o conhecimento é inseparável do método e se manifesta também em formas não proposicionais de saber.

A tese argumenta que o *Banquete* é um convite à prática filosófica fundada na repetição, na memória e no deslocamento narrativo. A primeira frase, em que o narrador se declara "não

[1] Resolução CEPE 80/2021, Art. 37. As Dissertações de Mestrado e as Teses de Doutorado poderão ser redigidas e defendidas em língua portuguesa ou em outras línguas, de acordo com a natureza das demandas da área de conhecimento, a serem especificadas no Regulamento do PPG.
Parágrafo único. Quando produzida em outra língua, a Tese ou a Dissertação deverá apresentar título e resumo expandido em português.

despreparado" (*ouk ameletetos*) (172a), introduz o conceito de *melete* (prática ou exercício). Este conceito, no contexto do discurso de Diotima, é caracterizado como a exposição repetida a um conhecimento que inevitavelmente nos escapa (208a).

O 'Capítulo 1' analisa o prólogo (172a-178a) e o apresenta como o eixo de enquadramento da investigação. Argumenta que a abertura do diálogo estabelece, de modo performativo, o vocabulário e a estrutura da *melete*: o exercício filosófico como repetição, rememoração e reinterpretação. O capítulo mostra como interrupções, mediações e deslocamentos, sejam narrativos, temporais ou corporais, constituem o próprio espaço da filosofia. A disposição dos corpos, as pausas do relato, a passagem de uma voz a outra e a alternância entre sobriedade e embriaguez instauram o ritmo dialético do *Banquete*, antecipando a fricção entre ordem e disrupção que estrutura o todo.

O 'Capítulo 2' centra-se no discurso de Sócrates e Diotima, tradicionalmente tomado como o núcleo teórico do diálogo. A tese propõe, contudo, que essa seção expressa também tensão entre teoria e drama, na qual a busca pela verdade filosófica é inseparável da forma de sua encenação. O capítulo explora como o relato de Sócrates sobre sua iniciação nos assuntos do amor desestabiliza a ideia de um percurso ascendente linear: a *scala amoris* é lida como um itinerário iniciático e existencial, no qual cada etapa exige exposição e perda. Diotima, como sacerdotisa, introduz ressonâncias religiosas e performativas – evocando a lógica da iniciação e da *epopteia* – e redefine eros como *metaxy*, força intermediária e sempre em movimento. A experiência da visão súbita (*exhaiphnes*) do belo não é transcendência pura, mas momento de revelação da condição humana, em que o saber se mostra profundamente frágil e parcial.

O 'Capítulo 3' examina a entrada de Alcibíades e a reviravolta dramática que ela produz. Sua irrupção embriagada desloca o foco do diálogo para a dimensão prática e turbulenta do desejo, retomando a experiência erótica no campo das relações humanas e políticas. Alcibíades não devolve o eros à humanidade – pois ele nunca a abandonara –, mas o reinscreve no contexto concreto da *polis,* onde o desejo se confunde com ambição, rivalidade e exposição pública. Sua *philotimia* leva à *hybris*, e sua tentativa de posse de Sócrates revela a corrupção do desejo quando submetido às lógicas de prestígio e poder. O capítulo mostra como essa inversão trágica evidencia a fragilidade da *melete* diante das forças e contingências da vida prática e como a justaposição entre Sócrates e Alcibíades funciona como apologia de Sócrates, mas também da filosofia enquanto prática precária e relacional.

A tese conclui que o *Banquete* encena a própria estrutura do desejo e que a filosofia nele representada é uma prática contínua, marcada pela instabilidade e pela limitação humana. Ao escolher a forma dramática, Platão transforma o diálogo em exercício: filosofar é sustentar o movimento, aceitar a fragilidade e buscar a virtude na tensão entre o desejo ilimitado e a limitação humana. O amor à sabedoria surge, assim, não como um estado de posse, mas como um ensaio incessante de exposição, repetição e renovação. Nessa perspectiva, o *Banquete* articula também uma dimensão ética e política da filosofia: a de uma prática que se realiza no espaço compartilhado da cidade e que enfrenta, sem ilusões de pureza, as contradições da vida comum.

ABSTRACT

This thesis argues that the *Symposium* should not be read merely as the exposition of a systematic theory of eros – that is, as an ordered and progressive treatise on love culminating in the contemplation of beauty itself – but rather as a philosophical enactment of desire itself. The dialogue does not formulate a closed doctrine; instead, it dramatises the movement of eros through narrative layers, temporal displacements, shifts of speakers and settings, and a constant interweaving of body and word.

The central interpretation proposes that the *Symposium* constitutes a philosophical exercise shaped by the very structure of desire – relational, dynamic, and unstable. The dialogue encodes within its form a fundamental instability, dramatising the tension between human desire and the impossibility of definitively possessing the beloved object.

In this context, the thesis offers a reading of the relation between Socrates, Diotima, and Alcibiades, both in their speeches and in their dramatic configuration, through interpretative keys extracted from the prologue. It is there that the coordinates guiding the analysis of the subsequent chapters are established.

To uncover this structure, the thesis distinguishes between theoretical movements – the conceptual and argumentative development – and dramatic movements – the spatial, bodily, and performative dimensions of the text, such as the characters' movements, intoxication, and gestures. The *Symposium*'s cohesion emerges from the dialectical friction between these two dimensions, whose tension constitutes the very form of Platonic thought.

Methodologically, the research draws on the so-called "Third Way" in Platonic Studies, which seeks to integrate contrasting arguments and emphasise the unity of form and content in Plato's dialogues. This approach understands Platonic dialectic as a reflective rather than merely theoretical practice: knowledge is inseparable from method and also manifests itself in non-propositional forms of understanding.

The thesis argues that the *Symposium* is an invitation to a philosophical practice grounded in repetition, memory, and narrative displacement. The opening line, in which the narrator declares himself "not unprepared" (*ouk ameletetos*, 172a), introduces the concept of *melete* (practice or exercise). In the context of Diotima's speech, this concept is characterised as repeated exposure to a form of knowledge that inevitably eludes us (208a).

'Chapter 1' analyses the prologue (172a-178a) and presents it as the structural axis of the investigation. It argues that the dialogue's opening performatively establishes the vocabulary and framework of *melete*: philosophical exercise as repetition, recollection, and reinterpretation. The chapter shows how interruptions, mediations, and displacements – narrative, temporal, and bodily – constitute philosophy's own dramatic space. The arrangement of bodies, the pauses in narration, the transition of voices, and the alternation between sobriety and intoxication set the *Symposium*'s dialectical rhythm, anticipating the friction between order and disruption that structures the whole.

'Chapter 2' focuses on the speech of Socrates and Diotima, traditionally regarded as the theoretical core of the dialogue. The thesis contends, however, that this section also embodies the tension between theory and drama, where the search for philosophical truth is inseparable from its mode of enactment. The chapter explores how Socrates' account of his initiation into the mysteries of love destabilises the idea of a linear and ascendant progression: the *scala amoris* is read as an initiatory and existential itinerary in which each stage entails exposure and loss. Diotima, as priestess, introduces religious and performative resonances – evoking the logic of initiation and *epopteia* – and redefines eros as *metaxy*, an intermediate and ever-moving force. The experience of the sudden vision (*exaiphnes*) of beauty is not pure transcendence, but a moment of revelation of the human condition, in which knowledge appears profoundly fragile and partial.

'Chapter 3' examines the entrance of Alcibiades and the dramatic reversal it produces. His drunken outburst shifts the focus of the dialogue to the practical and turbulent dimension of desire, bringing the erotic experience back into the realm of human and political relations.

Alcibiades does not restore eros to humanity – for it never left it – but reinscribes it within the concrete context of the polis, where desire becomes entangled with ambition, rivalry, and public exposure. His *philotimia* degenerates into *hybris*, and his attempt to possess Socrates reveals the corruption of desire when subjected to the logics of prestige and power. The chapter shows how this tragic inversion exposes the fragility of *melete* in the face of the contingencies of practical life and how the juxtaposition between Socrates and Alcibiades functions both as an apology for Socrates and as a defence of philosophy as a precarious and relational practice.

The thesis concludes that the *Symposium* stages the very structure of desire and that the philosophy it embodies is a continuous practice marked by instability and human limitation. By choosing the dramatic form, Plato transforms the dialogue into an exercise: to philosophise is to sustain movement, to accept fragility, and to seek virtue within the tension between unlimited desire and finite capacity. Love of wisdom thus appears not as a state of possession, but as an unending rehearsal of exposure, repetition, and renewal. From this perspective, the *Symposium* also articulates the ethical and political dimension of philosophy: a practice that unfolds within the shared space of the city and faces, without illusions of purity, the contradictions of common life.

SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION – Framing the Enquiry

Plato's *Symposium* has captivated readers for centuries not only because of its philosophical treatment of love, beauty, knowledge, and mortality, but also for the singular way in which it stages these themes. Instead of offering a systematic theory of *eros*, the dialogue enacts it – through narrative layering, temporal displacement, shifts in speaker and setting, and a persistent entanglement between body and speech. From the very first sentence, "I believe (*doko moi*) I am not unprepared (*ouk ameletetos*) to relate the events you are asking me about" (172a)[2], the dialogue guides the reader through the narrator's lens toward the Greek notion of *melete*, which translates as "practice" or "exercise". This concept, in light of Diotima's speech, is characterised as the repeated exposure to a knowledge that inevitably leaves us (208a). Thus, the *Symposium* is not simply a philosophical dialogue about desire. It is a philosophical exercise shaped by desire's own structure – relational, dynamic, unstable and ever-changing. It is not a work to be read once and mastered, but one that must be returned to repeatedly.

Many readings of the *Symposium* treat it as a structured ascent culminating in Diotima's account of the beautiful. In this tradition, the so-called "ladder of love" offers a progressive model for philosophical development, moving from embodied attraction to intellectual contemplation. The present thesis takes a different path. I do not interpret the dialogue as a gradual unfolding of a doctrine. By focusing on the dramatic tensions that unsettle that very trajectory, I argue that the *Symposium* encodes, within its own structure, a fundamental instability. It does not simply theoretically discuss desire – it dramatises its nature and the fragility of any philosophical form that seeks to constrain it. Thus, my interpretation aims to acknowledge and integrate this dramatisation.

To uncover this structure, I employ an interpretive lens that distinguishes between theoretical and dramatic movements in the dialogue.[3] Theoretical movement refers to the development of philosophical concepts, arguments, and methodological procedures. Dramatic movement, by contrast, encompasses the spatial, bodily, and performative dimensions of the text: the comings and goings of characters, the physical ambience of a symposium, the gestures

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[2] All quotations from the *Symposium*, unless otherwise stated, are taken from Sheffield and Howatson's (2008) translation, with minor modifications. In this first sentence, I have altered the translation which originally reads: "I believe I am quite well prepared to relate the events you are asking me about.".

[3] I am following Bacon (1959) in naming these categories.

and silences, the drunkenness and delay. Together, these movements shape the philosophical discourse and constitute the architecture of the *Symposium*. The interplay between these dimensions anchors the dialogue's cohesion not in a linear progression, but in a dialectical construction marked by friction. Each new development unsettles the previous ones, prompting reflection and reinterpretation. It is this tension between the theoretical and the dramatic that sustains the dialogue's rhythm and prepares the ground for its culminating scenes.

This tension does not unfold evenly. It intensifies during the interaction between Socrates and Alcibiades, when the dialogue's theoretical and dramatic movements collide. Socrates' theoretical ascent – delivered through the borrowed voice of Diotima – meets its counterpoint in Alcibiades' confession: embodied, fragmented and unresolved. Their juxtaposition reveals not only a contrast of characters but also the central philosophical gesture of the dialogue: *eros* cannot be contained within a single register. It must be enacted across thresholds – between the rational and the affective, the structured and the spontaneous, the remembered and the immediate.

'Chapter 1' begins its analysis with the dialogue's prologue. This is not incidental material. On the contrary, I argue that the *Symposium*'s opening frames are an invitation to a philosophical practice grounded in repetition, memory, and narrative displacement. By 'narrative displacement' I mean the shifts that interrupt and redirect the course of narration – whether through changes of voice, insertions of second-hand accounts, or temporal digressions – which suspend the illusion of transparent narrative and expose the precariousness of memory and narration. The very first line – "I believe I am not unprepared to relate the events you are asking me about" (172a) – already unsettles the narrator's authority and places the dialogue within the temporal frame of recollection[4]. Who remembers? Who narrates? What is worth remembering? In tracing these uncertainties, I examine how the first scene introduces the vocabulary and structure of *melete* that underpins the dialogue's entire composition. The chapter explores how the opening configuration of voices, spaces, and gestures serves as the

[4] Plato's theory of recollection, or *anamnesis*, is a foundational theory of learning and enquiry. It asserts that the human soul is immortal and existed before its embodiment, having acquired knowledge of the forms. Learning in an embodied life is the recovering of this forgotten knowledge, typically triggered by the perception of sensible particulars. This doctrine function as both ontological and epistemological thesis. The scholarly traditional interpretation holds that *anamnesis* explains general conceptual thought necessary for all humans (see Ackrill 1973). Conversely, the revisionist interpretation restricts true recollection to the philosophical reflection required to attain philosophical knowledge of the forms (see Scott 1995). Other readings adopt a hybrid view distinguishing between pervasive recognition of particulars and the conscious seizing of the forms achieved through disciplined reflection (see Willians 2002). For further studies see: Franklin (2005) and Allen (1959).

entryway into Plato's exploration of how philosophy unfolds in time, through bodies, and amid interruptions – interruptions that are at once narrative (shifts of voice, digressions, Alcibiades' sudden entrance), temporal (the displacements between past and present, memory and retelling), and bodily or performative (hiccups, pauses, changing of seats, drunkenness, silences). Far from being incidental, these interruptions shape the very structure of the dialogue's philosophical practice. This chapter aims to identify in the prologue the cues that guide the interpretation of the dialogue.

'Chapter 2' focuses on Socrates' account of Diotima's teaching. Commonly read as the theoretical core of the *Symposium*, it is better understood as a moment in which theory, at its peak, is both articulated and unsettled by the dialogue's own dynamics. To be sure, Diotima's speech at its closing moments reveals a structured ascent – from bodies to souls, laws, branches of knowledge, and, finally, the beautiful itself – and is therefore prone to doctrinal interpretation. Yet, this apparent coherence is internally shaped by the very displacements that shape the dialogue. The speech is staged through a layered temporality, with an older Socrates recounting a learning experience from his youth; its authority is mediated by the voice of a foreign priestess, whose religious register extends the reach of philosophical discourse; and its climactic *exaiphnes* interrupts the staged ascent with an event that resists assimilation to its sequence. Diotima's speech cannot be reduced to a closed doctrinal system but unfolds within a scene where theoretical and dramatic movements continue to converge, demonstrating that philosophy in the *Symposium* is practised as a way of life, exercised in relation to oneself, others, and the world.

The sudden *exaiphnes* vision of the beautiful has often been taken as a mystical or initiatory culmination – an interpretation that reinforces, rather than contradicts, the idea that it belongs to a different order of experience. The language of initiation supports the view that the final vision of the beautiful does not simply conclude the ascent but instead dislocates it, exposing the limits of the method it both crowns and exceeds. Its force is not exceptional but continuous, aligned with the structural displacements that pervade the entire dialogue. Thus, the lover does not abandon the ladder, for it remains operative in the very act of being recalled, taught and transmitted in Socrates' account of Diotima's speech. At its summit, the method reaches a threshold: indispensable for approaching the vision of the beautiful, but insufficient to account for the nature of what appears there.

The relevance of the vision of the beautiful itself does not, however, mean that the previous objects of desire are abandoned. Two layers should be distinguished. At the methodological level, Diotima insists on a correct way of proceeding. The lover must ascend, step by step, until reaching the beautiful itself (210a-211b). On the existential level, however, the objects encountered along the way are not simply left behind but are reinterpreted from a transformed perspective. As Diotima explains, after giving birth in the beauty of one body, the lover comes to see this beauty as akin to the beauty present in others (210a-b). Each step involves not nullification but reorientation, as earlier attachments are revisited in the light of a broader horizon. This double register echoes the broader division and entanglement between theoretical and dramatic movements: the methodological dimension aligns with the theoretical – ordered and sequential – whereas the existential resonates with the dramatic – embodied and relational.

Furthermore, in Socrates and Diotima's speech, we learn that not only is the goal to behold the beautiful but also to give birth, *tiktein*, in it (206b-209c), generating works of virtue, knowledge, and even laws and institutions. This activity, namely, giving birth, is reconfigured after the sudden *exaiphnes* vision of the beautiful. Once the lover experiences the vision of the beautiful – if indeed such a vision is possible for a human being (212a-b) – all previous products are recognised as mere images of virtue rather than virtue itself. Only then does the possibility of generating true virtue come into view. The vision of the beautiful reframes everything before it, showing that each step is bound to the next and, at the same time, retroactively altered by what follows. For a human being – whose body and soul are marked by instability – there is no bypassing of this fragile progression, no leap directly into the vision of the beautiful. The dialogue stages philosophy as an exposure to this condition: a practice of advancing and returning, remembering and 're-seeing,' always at risk of interruption yet guided towards a horizon of beauty.

'Chapter 3' turns to Alcibiades. His speech reintroduces the dramatic aspect in full force: noise, shame, longing, and laughter. His encounter with Socrates is analysed as a point of theoretical and dramatic collision. In contrast to Diotima, who offers a model of eros that transcends the particular, Alcibiades insists on its return to the singular, to the unresolved, to the body. His fragmented recollections – at once tender and chaotic – reveal a different kind of truth, one shaped not by ascent toward the limits of humanity but by proximity to the city and to failure. In his account, the philosopher is the bearer of superhuman characteristics and

wisdom, and the object of obsessive attachment. Socrates becomes, for Alcibiades, both a figure of desire and a reminder that desire cannot fulfil itself. Alcibiades' charges of *hybris* against Socrates bounce back upon him.

Taken together, these readings form a single gesture. The *Symposium* is not a treatise to be schematised; it is a composition to be practised. Its philosophical import lies not in the possession of a teaching but in the cultivation of responsiveness – through speech and gesture, through structure and rupture. Therefore, this thesis argues that the dialogue's commitment is not to the restraint of *eros* within a theory but to an ongoing confrontation with its nature.

The *Symposium*, then, does not merely define *eros* but also invites us to see how desire actually works. It shows us that *eros* is not something we can – at least not easily – fully grasp, control, or complete. The dialogue's form reflects this: it is marked by subtle shifts in direction, interruptions in narrative flow, and dissonances between speech and action. We learn about *eros* not just by reading the arguments but by being drawn into the instability that the dialogue's structure and dramatic composition together enact. The dialogue places us inside the paradox of striving for something that we can never fully hold – a kind of learning that happens not by means of conclusions, but by recognising oneself within the tension between unlimited desire and limited capacities.

The Proposal

As academics dealing with ancient texts, we, in many ways, become mediators akin to Eros, the mediator presented by Socrates in the *Symposium*. Engaging with one another's texts and ideas, we participate in an infinite and enriching process of interpretation, analysis and begetting of texts that inevitably bears traces of our individualities. With this work, I aim to contribute to this process.

My methodological approach in this thesis is inspired by what is known as the 'Third Way' in Platonic Studies – a perspective introduced in the seminal work *The Third Way: New Directions in Platonic Studies,* edited by Gonzalez (1995). Rather than choosing between dogmatic or sceptical interpretations, the third-way approach seeks to recognise and reconcile seemingly contrasting arguments, even if it is just by underscoring their interconnectedness. In this thesis, it remains always in the background – or, better said, forms the foundation – what Gonzalez, in his introduction, considers an absolute: "(…) the unity of form and content in Plato's dialogues." (1995,19).

The ‘third way’ approaches Plato’s philosophy as dialectic, underscoring three key characteristics. First, it is *reflexive,* meaning that its content is inseparable from its method, suggesting that “(…) philosophical knowledge is not some purely external, impersonal object and therefore is not “objective” in the way the sciences are, but is instead inseparable from self-knowledge.” (Gonzalez 1995, 19). Because of this reflexivity, the dialogue form is essential not only for capturing the philosopher’s process of inquiry, by which formal arguments presented in a treatise were reached, but also constitutes a necessary part of the message conveyed.

Secondly, dialectics for Plato serves as a form of *practical* knowledge, a ‘knowledge of how’, implying that his philosophy reveals itself through practice as portrayed in the dialogues. Lastly, the insights provided by the dialectic are *non-propositional*; thus, they cannot be communicated through a treatise but may instead be sparked by suggestive ‘hints’ and ‘silences’ scattered throughout the dialogues. According to Gonzalez, these three mutually dependent characteristics “(…) map out a new direction in which Platonic scholarship can head in the attempt to understand both Plato’s conception of philosophy and the dialogue form that this conception demands” (Gonzalez 1995, 30).

In view of the previous observations, this thesis seeks to explore the interplay between the dramatic and theoretical movements of the *Symposium,* aiming to contribute to the debate on the significance of the dramatic form in Plato’s philosophy, while uncovering new dimensions of interpretation and shedding light on the intricate relationship between philosophy and physicality. This endeavour is grounded in the ongoing scholarly discussion about the form of Plato’s writing and the necessity of considering its literary aspects to comprehend his philosophy. Many of these studies extend from or are influenced by the ‘third way’.

A Division of the *Symposium*

In the composition of the *Symposium*, Plato articulates multiple timelines, blending fictional and real events, resulting in the production of a multi-layered dialogue. In this thesis, I propose a specific division of the dialogue to facilitate references to the text while remaining attentive to its multiple layers. Within the division, I will highlight a non-exhaustive number of different layers of the narrative.

Traditionally, the *Symposium* is divided into three main sections for didactic purposes: (1) a monologic section (178a-199b) comprising five speeches, often referred to as the ‘non-philosophical’, followed by (2) a dialogic section (199b-212c), featuring Socrates’ speech,

typically seen as the philosophical core of the dialogue, (3) and a final section beginning with Alcibiades' late arrival at Agathon's symposium, including his speech (212c-223a). Additionally, there are introductory scenes (172a-174a), a prologue (174a-178a), and occasional 'comic intervals' (185c-e; 193d-194e).

I will refer to the sections between 172a, the beginning of the *Symposium,* and 178a, just before Phaedrus's speech, as 'the prologue', dividing it into two subsections according to the narrator. Within the prologue, the narrator, Apollodorus, oscillates between narrative layers. First, Apollodorus is in the present moment at 172a, the first narrative layer. Then, he descends one level, recalling events that occurred two days prior, during a conversation with Glaucon, the second layer. For a moment, from 173c to 174a, Apollodorus returns to the present moment, engaging in a brief dialogue with his unnamed interlocutors. At the end of this exchange, before the introduction of Aristodemus' voice, I draw a line marking the end of the subsection that began at 172a and designate it 'Apollodorus' prologue'.[5]

Beginning at 174a, Apollodorus recalls what he heard from Aristodemus. The date of this conversation is unknown, though it clearly occurred before the one described between Apollodorus and Glaucon. It constitutes the third layer of the narrative. In this layer, Aristodemus recollects events that took place roughly seventeen years before the dialogue's dramatic date, which include the famous dinner at Agathon's house, forming the fourth layer. This sub-section of the prologue, in which Aristodemus' voice is heard before the speeches begin, will be referred to as 'Aristodemus' prologue'.

The third section, which I refer to as the 'main section', encompasses everything between 178a and 223b, including all the speeches. This section also contains another temporal layer of the dialogue, the fifth one, in which Socrates recalls a dialogue from his youth, a conversation he had with Diotima.

From 223b to 223d, the section is named 'Aristodemus' epilogue'. The decision to identify an epilogue arises from the recognition that, at 223b, there is no further concern for the dynamic of the gathering that so strongly defines the main section. However, it is essential to note that this epilogue is not the *Symposium*'s epilogue but rather Aristodemus'. This distinction is crucial, since, as readers, we do not return to the present moment where the dialogue begins

[5] By referring to a specific section of the *Symposium* as a 'prologue', in this thesis my focus is primarily didactic rather than an attempt to stablish or corroborate a formal definition of a Platonic prologue across the dialogues.

with Apollodorus; instead, it concludes while we are still immersed in Aristodemus' story, deep within the fourth layer.

A) To facilitate the comprehension of the sections, I represent them as follows:

I. Prologue: 172a – 178a.

a) Apollodorus' prologue: 172a – 174a.

b) Aristodemus' prologue: 174a – 178a.

II. Main section: 178a – 223b.

III. Aristodemus' epilogue: 223b – 223d.

B) On some temporal layers of the dialogue:

First Layer: Present moment – Apollodorus speaks with unnamed interlocutors (399 BCE).

Second Layer: Apollodorus' recalling of the conversation with Glaucon (two days before the present moment).

Third Layer: Dialogue between Apollodorus and Aristodemus (prior to the conversation with Glaucon).

Fourth Layer: Aristodemus' recollection of events that occurred seventeen years before the present moment (416 BCE).

Fifth Layer: Socrates' recollection of the encounter with the priestess Diotima.

1. FINDING DIRECTION IN THE PROLOGUE

> *I shall begin at the beginning and try to tell you the whole story*. (Pl. *Smp.* 174a)
>
> *Socrates: But surely you will admit at least this much: Every speech must be put together like a living creature, with a body of its own; it must be neither without head nor without legs; and it must have a middle and extremities that are fitting both to one another and to the whole work.* (Pl. *Phdr.* 264c)[6]

In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates presents the principle of the 'logographic necessity', which underscores the importance of approaching a literary composition as if it were a living creature. According to this principle, comprehending a dialogue requires comprehending its parts in relation to the overall unity. If we were to envision the *Symposium* as a creature, I would argue that the prologue figures as its head, and, taking the image further and thinking about a moving creature, the head usually shows the way for the rest of the body. Gonzalez (2003, 44) provides another insightful metaphor, describing the prologue as our entrance to the fictional world created by the author. According to him, immersing oneself in this world is necessary to truly grasp the dialogue's intended message.

As I shall demonstrate, the prologue is a section of the dialogue rich in dramatic elements. These elements characterise Plato's work but are not always regarded as relevant to its philosophical interpretation.[7] Before turning to the prologue, I would like to clarify what I mean by 'dramatic elements' and state my position on their philosophical relevance. By referring to dramatic elements, my point is not to draw a sharp distinction between the dramatic and the philosophical, but to identify specific features on which I will focus in this chapter. For these purposes, Kellerman's definition of dramatic elements is of particular significance:

> Dramatic elements include not only the *description of the setting of the dialogue* but also the *light-hearted banter or pleasantries* that may precede the more "serious" philosophical conversation, as well as any *interruptions of the debate* by seemingly extraneous circumstances. Also included as a

[6] All the quotations from the *Phaedrus*, are taken from Nehamas and Woodruff's (1995) translation.

[7] At the beginning of the 19th century, Schleiermacher argued for the need to harmonise content and form to interpret Plato's dialogues, stating that these two dimensions equally hold philosophical weight. He became an exponent by defying the dogmatic interpretation heavily focused on content. According to Gonzalez (1995a, 5), this is probably Schleiermacher's most significant contribution to modern Platonic studies.

> dramatic element is any characterization *of the interlocutors* in the dialogue because a philosophical argument may be determined as much by the psychology of the participants as by strict logic of desire for truth. In short, the dramatic elements are those details that may not be logically necessary for the argument of the dialogue, but may speak to the less rational, more emotional side of the reader – a part of human nature that needs as much convincing as the more logical aspect of humanity and, as the *Symposium* argues, is a proper subject of philosophy. (Kellerman 1996, 34-35) (emphasis added)

According to Kellerman, dramatic elements are those that may seem logically unnecessary to the argument of the dialogue – such as description of the setting, jokes, and other subtle interactions between characters, as well as interruptions of the debate and characterisation of the interlocutors.[8] Although the mere fact that Plato chose to write dialogues rather than treatises provides sufficient reason to examine these elements carefully, I would like to explain how they have been addressed over time, especially in discussions of the *Symposium*'s prologue.

The value of the author's opening words in a literary text is widely recognised in the study of ancient works. Clay (1992, 112) points out that, for the ancients, the first words of a poem were enough to identify it.[9] This observation also applies to the philosophical texts: the philosophical relevance of their prologues, such as the opening words of Plato's dialogues, has been debated since antiquity. Tarrant (2000, 39) notes that Proclus offers the clearest overview of the debates about Plato's prologues, dividing opinions into three categories:

> (1) That they are irrelevant to the interpreter's task, (2) that they are concerned with dutiful behaviour and perhaps loosely related to what follows, and (3) that they are an integral part of the dialogue and contribute towards its principal aim. (Tarrant, 2000, 39)

Although the most prevalent opinion was that prologues lacked philosophical relevance, Tarrant observed that ancient scholars were nonetheless concerned with justifying their positions – largely because of a collective effort to consider every part and aspect of the text in interpretation (2000, 39-41).

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[8] On interruptions, Halliwell (2021,15) argues that Plato, in the *Symposium*, orients his narrative by "cutting across the boundaries of the event," breaking expectations – for example, through the late arrival of Socrates. Similarly, Gonzalez (2013, 492) interprets Alcibiades' entrance as a "*bruyante et chaotique*" irruption that interrupts Socrates' attempt to establish consensus around Diotima's speech, thereby unsettling any definitive philosophical closure.

[9] For a broad perspective on this topic, see Dunn and Cole (1992).

From a more contemporary perspective, the approach to the relationship between philosophical and dramatic content in the literary writing of the Platonic dialogues, as Kellerman (1996) points out, can be divided into two main categories. The first, adopted by more analytical philosophers, is guided by the intention of moulding Plato's work according to modern standards of philosophical writing. That is to say that it tends to regard any textual element that is not reducible to logical propositions – such as prologues – as unimportant for understanding Plato's philosophy (1996, 5-7)[10]. This approach offers an efficient way of reducing the amount of material one must deal with and reflect upon during the philosophical analysis of a Platonic dialogue. That is so because Plato's dialogues are rich in dramatic elements, in the sense that they occupy significant sections of the text, and – as noted earlier, following Kellerman's definition – they may appear not to be logically necessary to the argument of the dialogue.[11]

Another possibility is to take a dramatic approach to the dialogue:

> Although scholars who take this approach do not agree on how to interpret the dialogues, they at least agree that the dramatic elements are worthy of consideration in deducing the philosophy of Plato as the 'more philosophical' elements are. (Kellerman, 1996,15).

This perspective emphasises the importance of understanding both the medium through which Plato conveys his philosophy – the dialogue form – and his intentions behind choosing this format. From this perspective, there is an awareness that philosophical statements, within the theoretical dimension, are embedded in a broader context and therefore cannot be studied in the abstract, as modern logical positivists might prefer. Kellerman (1996, 17-19) observes that the dramatic context provided by Plato in his dialogues reveals the author's recognition that the ambiguous character of language, such as form and content, cannot be separated.

In these lines, Rowett (2018) affirms the relevance of the dramatic elements in Plato's dialogues, arguing that they can, at times, be the key to the interpretation. She illustrates this through her reading of the *Theaetetus,* in which the dialogue's emphasis on Theaetetus' youth

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[10] Scholars under this designation, according to Kellerman (1996), include Grube (1980 [1935]), Popper (1966), Shorey (1903), Taylor (1960) and Conford (1957). Kellerman justifies the inclusion of Conford in this list because despite, in theory, acknowledging the importance of dramatic elements, the author, in practice, ignores them (1996, 6).

[11] Kellerman (1996, 13) also mentions the Esotericists, another school that, according to him, similarly dismisses the dramatic features of Plato's dialogues. The Analytics and the Esotericists share, in his view, the same error: "the anachronistic view that philosophy must be a completely systematic presentation of the philosopher's beliefs".

becomes a crucial interpretative feature. Ebrey (2023), in his recent book on the *Phaedo,* provides another example of an approach that takes the dramatic elements seriously. He argues that the interactions between characters play an integral role in the development of the dialogue and that the literary structure contributes significantly to its dramatic force and philosophical meaning, thereby complementing Socrates' views (2023, 1).

Kellerman (1996, 35) notes that even among the scholars who recognise the relevance of the dramatic elements, Plato's prologues often fail to receive adequate attention. According to him, it is necessary to identify the connections between the prologue and the philosophy of the dialogue.[12] Part of my interest in the prologue arises from an appreciation of the literary aspects of the text, but, more importantly, from an intuition that the prologue maintains a philosophical relationship with the subsequent sections of the dialogue.[13] Thus, this thesis aligns with a dramatic approach to the text, and it is my intention to demonstrate the connections between the prologue and the philosophy of the *Symposium.*

Clay (1992), in *Plato's First Words,* working with the *Republic* and *Phaedo,* provides an example of how to approach Platonic prologues by demonstrating their connections with the dialogue as a whole, extending even to the epilogue.[14] He argues that there is a deeper reason behind Plato's careful crafting of his dialogue's beginnings as part of an organically unified work – as suggested by the opening quotation of this chapter – namely, that the prologue serves to establish a critical link between Plato's contemporary audience and the time of Socrates (1992, 12). Clay thus treats context as a central element, which is equally relevant to the *Symposium*. As I shall demonstrate, when considering the temporal layers of the dialogue, context proves to be a crucial aspect of its prologue.

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[12] This is precisely the aim of Kellerman's thesis (1996).

[13] Ebrey (2023) develops his reading of the *Phaedo* through the identification of an unfolding movement of themes – mostly introduced at the beginning of the dialogue – such as storytelling and the opposites. This unfolding establishes significant threads that run throughout the dialogue. More broadly, I consider his reading an exception to Kellerman's assertion. However, it is worth noting that Ebrey does not regard the *Phaedo* as having a prologue: "There is no prologue in the dramatic sense since the dialogue opens with the chorus. However, the dialogue's opening serves the typical function of a prologue since it sets the scene and establishes the background necessary to understand the events before the proper action begins." (2023, 46). His remarks on the dramatic sense relate to his interpretation of the *Phaedo* as an alternative to tragedy – a realisation of the project outlined in the *Republic* II-III. Ebrey also follows Aristotle's *Poetics* (1452b.18) definition of the prologue which identifies it as an integral part of the tragedy preceding the entrance of the chorus; thus, from this perspective, if one identifies Phaedo and Echecrates as the chorus, their conversations cannot be formally considered the prologue.

[14] Clay's work is recognised by Kellerman (1996) as an exception to the rule of insufficient treatment of the prologue.

According to Clay (1992, 115), understanding a Platonic dialogue requires a commitment to its complexity. Recalling Gonzalez's (2003) image, if we overlook the prologue – the entrance to this carefully constructed world – we risk experiencing the dialogue from a decontextualised, impoverished perspective. That said, embarking on this thesis nevertheless requires me to confront a problem already pointed out by Kellerman: there is no consensus among scholars adopting the dramatic approach regarding which parts of the dialogue are dramatically significant, or on the method to determine their relevance (1996, 20).

Even if we agree on the relevance of reading the dialogue as a unity and accept its philosophical relevance, a fundamental question remains: what is its significance? In alignment with Kellerman (1996, 20), I do not believe that Plato necessarily constructed his dialogues with the intention of always to assigning the same significance to specific dramatic elements, even when they recur, especially given the multitude of variables involved.

A clear example of that is Plato's use of female characters. Asserting a specific or consistent significance for this dramatic element across Plato's corpus proves difficult because of the many factors that must be taken into account both within and beyond each dialogue. To elaborate, some variables that compound the complexity of analysing women in Plato's dialogues include textual aspects, such as the dramatic context, including setting and characters, the topic under discussion, the interlocutor's aims and the rhetorical strategies employed; as well as historical factors, including the political, cultural, and legal circumstances surrounding women in ancient Greece, and the heterogeneity of the group referred to as 'women'.[15]

For this reason, my proposal here is not to establish an overarching hermeneutic framework capable of interpreting dramatic elements across multiple dialogues. Instead, it centres on the hypothesis that, within the specific dramatic context of the *Symposium*, the prologue functions as a guiding compass for reading and interpreting the dialogue as a whole. It operates like a map, meticulously aligning the landscape, roads, and boundaries that lead us through the essential landmarks and pathways of the *Symposium*'s terrain. Recalling Socrates' image in the *Phaedrus* (264c), it serves as the head of the creature, guiding the whole body in a particular direction.

Cornelli (2013, 144) underscores the profound connection between the prologue of the *Symposium* and the remainder of the dialogue, emphasising its role in providing essential clues

[15] For detailed analyses of specific female figures see: Guimarães; Pio and Cornelli (2025) on Xanthippe in the *Phaedo*, and Pio (2020) on Alcestis in Phaedrus' speech in the *Symposium*.

that contribute to the dialogue's overall meaning. In sum, I firmly believe that, to grasp what the dialogue seeks to convey, we must immerse ourselves in the fictional world created by Plato. I approach the prologue as a gateway to this world. By following the indication of its relevant themes, I develop my interpretation to gain a fuller understanding of the dialogue as a living creature – an organic whole whose every part, from prologue to epilogue, participates in the overall movement.

Characters' Perspectives

Two voices narrate the prologue of the *Symposium*: Apollodorus and Aristodemus, who are responsible for recounting what took place at the famous symposium held at Agathon's house. The first voice is that of Apollodorus, asserting his competence in giving the account: "I believe I am quite well prepared to relate the events you are asking me about (…)" (172a).[16]

The use of characters is a distinctive element of Plato's works. In the *Symposium,* the dialogue is mediated through acts of memory and narration that are themselves reflective and self-aware. The text repeatedly recalls the narrators' presence, interests, and the constrains of their recollection – as though Plato were sketching their psychological contours. Since the entire narrative unfolds through these characters' perspectives, it becomes crucial to examine this dramatic dimension, specifically the construction of the narrators, in order to achieve a fuller understanding of the dialogue.[17]

Blondell (2002) analyses this element, arguing that the use of 'characterisation' in the dialogues establishes a link between philosophical content and literary form, serving as a "site of an intrinsic and indissoluble connection" (2002,1), between the "philosophical" and the "literary", which are interdependent in Plato's writings.[18]

> Since dialogue form entails the representation of persons, a concern with human character and its portrayal is literally essential to reading Plato's works in a way that takes their form into account. At the same time a concern with

[16] The correspondent Greek text is: δοκῶ μοι περὶ ὧν πυνθάνεσθε οὐκ ἀμελέτητος εἶναι. The construction contains a double negative, comprising "not" and alpha privative: Apollodorus says that he is not (οὐκ) not prepared (ἀμελέτητος), therefore he is prepared.

[17] Kellerman (1996, 34) identifies the characterisation of interlocutors as a dramatic element and regards their psychological profiles as a relevant variable to consider when pursuing a philosophical argument.

[18] For works discussing the form of Plato's writings, see: Schleiermacher (2008 [1836]); Strauss (1946); Goldschmidt (1963); Arieti (1991) (1995); Halperin (1992); Press (1995); Gonzales (1995); Blondell (2002); Kahn (2004); Corrigan and Glazov-Corrigan (2004); Nails (2013); MacCready-Flora (2018).

> human character, its formation and representation, pervades the dialogues on the discursive level. Form and content are further reciprocally related by means of Plato's preoccupation with the effects of literary characterization on the moral character of the audience. His own manipulation of his dramatic characters thus intersects in a unique way with issues of moral philosophy, literary form, cultural tradition, and philosophical and pedagogical method. (Blondell 2002, 2).

The drama, including the presence of distinct dramatic personae such as Apollodorus and Aristodemus, obliges the reader to conceive philosophy as inextricably grounded in human specificity and locates the practice of philosophy within a concrete human, temporal and cultural context. It moves beyond merely articulating a philosophical thesis to demanding engagement with the unique human contexts in which those ideas are explored. (Blondell 2002, 2;48).

Blondell's interpretation provides a valuable framework for approaching the *Symposium*. If, as she argues, Plato's literary characterisation operates as a site where form and philosophy intersect, then Apollodorus and Aristodemus must be read not merely as narrative instruments but as integral to the philosophical articulation of the dialogue. Their voices mediate the interplay between recollection and narration, between presence and absence, and thus embody the dynamic of *melete* – the practice of revisiting and rehearsing knowledge – that structures the dialogue as a whole. The psychological depth with which they are drawn, together with the layered narrative form through which they speak, transforms them into philosophical figures in their own right: dramatised examples of how philosophy, for Plato, takes place through human experience, memory and speech.

Furthermore, the dialogue structure imposes critical limitations on how the text can be interpreted. Its structure dictates the complete self-effacement of the authorial voice: Plato never speaks directly, and consequently, the views expressed by any given character cannot be attributed to him unambiguously. This deliberate avoidance of an authoritative pedagogical stance prevents Plato from being accused of dogmatism, making his choice of dialogue form axiomatic for modern interpretation (Blondell 2002, 39). This formal constrain thus strongly justifies the decision to examine the construction and intentions of the narrators, since their perspectives necessarily filter and shape the philosophical content presented to the reader.

Apollodorus and Aristodemus' prologues exhibit distinct emphases. Apollodorus' prologue introduces the dramatic setting, reflects upon the textual structure and literary features, and begins to establish a portrait of the narrators and characters. Aristodemus' prologue, by

contrast, leads us into different territory, one closely related to the dynamics and conventions of the gathering in Agathon's house. This narrator provides context for his presence at the symposium, conveys key information about the characters, offers a picture of the physical environment, and establishes the initial themes of discussion that culminate in the subsequent speeches on love.

In the closing lines of Aristodemus' prologue, it is worth noting that neither Apollodorus nor Aristodemus is concerned with transmitting all the speeches – not even the chosen ones – in their entirety (178a). How this fact is interpreted can significantly affect the reading of the *Symposium*. Two extreme and opposite interpretations would likely lead us into a dead end and are therefore unhelpful for the purposes of this study: disregarding the dialogue's finer details or obsessing over every single word. Instead, I propose an intermediate approach that aligns with the *Symposium*'s opening line, where Apollodorus states his readiness to report the event.

My approach involves examining that declared readiness by tracing how the narrators perceive the relevance of certain topics and their preferred ways to convey a good report. Apollodorus and Aristodemus each emphasise particular aspects in their narratives; these selective emphases reflect their perceptions of what is significant within the remembered event. I hold that engaging with this issue – namely, the narrator's perception of what holds value in the act of narration – is an essential step towards immersing oneself in the fictional world of the dialogue and offers valuable insights into the *Symposium* as a whole.

The enquiry begins with the opening line of the *Symposium,* particularly with Apollodorus' confidence in recounting the story. Through an examination of the prologue, I aim to explore how the narrators' choices contribute to the construction of the dialogue's fictional world, while also embracing the individualistic tone that characterises the text. This analysis, I suggest, can illuminate a broader interpretative question that extends beyond the *Symposium* to other Platonic dialogues: how might one approach a text in which every detail is potentially significant?[19]

In the following sections of this chapter, I undertake a detailed examination of the prologue, aiming to unravel the architectural design of the *Symposium*'s fictional world. In

[19] Corrigan and Glazov-Corrigan (2004) use the prologue as a basis to decide on what is reasonable to suppose about the *Symposium*. Although I share their interpretative intent, my analysis differs, as it addresses different topics and angles of enquiry. Their study focuses primarily on the *Symposium* as a companion piece to the *Republic* in relation to Socrates' views on art. Despite the many similarities between our projects, the recognition of the dramatic dimension of the narrative certainly stands as a point of connection.

doing so, I seek the guidance necessary to navigate the intricate layers carefully crafted by Plato in composing the *Symposium* – layers that invite a mode of reading akin to *melete*: a sustained exercise in recollection and attentive practice through which philosophy reveals itself in time, through speech, and within the living texture of the dialogue.

1.1 Apollodorus' Voice

At the time of the *Symposium*'s narration, Apollodorus has been following Socrates for three years (172c), devoted to "know everything he says and does" (173a). The narrator speaks with passion about how his proximity to the philosopher and his dedication to philosophy have transformed his life for the better (173a), leading him to think differently about other people's lives, interests and achievements (173c-d).[20] In the *Phaedo* (59a-b), Apollodorus is mentioned among those who visited Socrates before the philosopher's death and presented as a highly emotive character, frequently weeping (59a; 177d).[21]

Nails depicts Apollodorus as someone who was "successful early in life but abandoned business to follow Socrates" (2002, 39). She notes, however, that he probably did not embrace Socratic poverty since he was among those who offered to pay Socrates' fine in the *Phaedo*.

Apollodorus' voice in the prologue of the *Symposium*, as I shall demonstrate, offers important clues for understanding the dialogue as a whole. The opening line, in which Apollodorus declares his readiness to recount the story, functions as a pivotal cue for identifying key themes within the prologue. In this section, I undertake a detailed analysis of Apollodorus's prologue, examining its implications for unravelling the *Symposium*'s interpretative nuances. Before proceeding to the analysis, I provide an overview of Apollodorus' prologue (172a-174a). This overview establishes a clear understanding of the text's development and principal themes, which I then approach non-linearly, through thematic categorisation.

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[20] Kellerman (1996, 74-75) interprets this as an encouragement to the readers and interlocutors to pay attention to the narrative. By introducing interlocutors such as Glaucon and Apollodorus's friends, Plato conveys the somewhat popular nature of philosophy, which "shows that one need not be a full-time philosopher to derive benefit from the dialogue."

[21] In Xenophon's *Apology* (X. *Ap.* 28), Apollodorus appears among those present during Socrates' final moments and is described as an ardent disciple.

Overview of Apollodorus' Prologue

From the outset, in the prologue of the *Symposium,* the reader is placed in the midst of a conversation between the narrator and unnamed interlocutors. In the opening line, Apollodorus' voice emerges, confidently stating: "I believe I am quite well prepared to relate the events you are asking me about." (172a). This declaration most likely responds to a preceding question, setting the readers as observers within the unfolding exchange.

Apollodorus explains that he is well prepared to recount the events because of a recent discussion on the same topic with his acquaintance Glaucon (172a-c). The narrative unfolds as Apollodorus describes his journey "going up" (*anion*) into the city (Athens) from his home in Phalerum (172a), when Glaucon calls out to him to ask about Agathon's symposium. Glaucon wishes to hear what Agathon, Socrates, Alcibiades, and the others said in their speeches about love (172a-172b). His curiosity, according to Apollodorus, was sparked by another man who had received second-hand information from Phoenix but lacked a coherent account. Mistakenly believing that Apollodorus had been present, Glaucon sought him out for clarification.

Apollodorus clarifies that Glaucon's informant must have been mistaken and explains that the party had not taken place recently enough for him to have attended. He remarks that Agathon had been away from Athens for an extended period and that it has been less than three years since he began following Socrates and getting to know what he does or says (172c -173a). He emphasises that the gathering occurred when both he and Glaucon were still boys, "in the year when Agathon won the prize with his first tragedy" (173a).

Glaucon then asks Apollodorus whether he heard about the symposium from Socrates, given that he was not present at the event. Apollodorus replies that he did not and explains that he heard the story from the same source as Phoenix: Aristodemus, a devoted admirer, *erastes*[22], of Socrates, who had attended the party. Apollodorus adds that he later supplemented his account by questioning Socrates directly on specific details (173b). Glaucon's eagerness to hear

[22] In the *Symposium*, the term *erastes* is used to denote lovers in a broader sense, encompassing both sexual and non-sexual relationships. It also has a more specific meaning, referring to the older male in a pederastic relationship, while the younger partner is commonly referred to as *eromenos*. There is general scholarly consensus that pederasty in Classical Athens functioned not merely as an erotic practice but as a social institution (see: Dover (1980); Cohen (1987); Davidson (2001); Cantarella and Lear (2008). The theme of pederasty pervades the *Symposium* and vividly illustrates the connection between sexual love, education and knowledge. Calame (1999, 80) analyses pederasty in Greek simposia as a rite of passage for the boy into adulthood, emphasising the "institutionalized function of Eros". An illuminating example of the use of the term *erastes* throughout the dialogue appears in Phaedrus's speech, Cornelli and I examine this topic in a recent article: Pio and Cornelli (2023), where we argue that conceptions surroundings this practice can shape the interpretation of the *Symposium*.

the story is evident; he insists, "(…) do tell me. The city road is in any case convenient for conversation between fellow-travellers." (173b).

Apollodorus speaks with the unnamed interlocutors about how the conversation with Glaucon has left him well prepared to recount the story of Agathon's symposium. He expresses his interest in philosophical subjects and labels his listeners as "rich money-makers" who rarely engage in the kind of topics he finds enjoyable (173c). Apollodorus claims to possess a kind of special insight into his friend's misfortune while simultaneously acknowledging the possibility that he himself might be in the same position (173d).

One interlocutor, referred to as "friend", remarks that Apollodorus disparages everyone except Socrates, implying that they are all of an equal level, and lower, standing compared to him. Apollodorus rejects this suggestion, responding: "(…) if I think as I do about myself and all of you, I am completely mad!" (173d). The "friend" does not continue the discussion but instead presses him to tell the story of the speeches: "Please do what we asked you and tell us what they said in their speeches." (173e).

Apollodorus begins to recall the speeches but immediately interrupts himself, choosing instead to start from the beginning. He sets out to recount the entire narrative as Aristodemus had originally related it to him (174a).

Apollodorus' interruption and decision to "start from the beginning" (174a) introduce the first instance of narrative displacement in the *Symposium.* His abrupt shift in focus – from his own recollection to Aristodemus' account – creates a layered narrative structure in which the story is told through successive mediations. Each voice in this chain of transmission adds a new temporal and interpretative distance from the original event, turning the act of narration itself into a subject of reflection. This displacement unsettles the notion of a stable perspective, as the dialogue becomes less a record of what happened and more an exploration of how philosophical experience is remembered, reinterpreted, and retold. Through this device, Plato transforms the narrative framework of the *Symposium* into a commentary on the fragility and reconstruction of memory.

1.1.2 Time's Labyrinth and the Truth's Game

In this section, I examine Apollodorus' treatment of several key aspects. I begin by considering the opening sentence and the conversional context into which the reader is introduced – a practised, ongoing dialogue. I then analyse the construction of the chronological layers through which the narrator recounts the story. In the following part, I address the question

of the function of these layers, asking whether they form a deliberate narrative game devised by Plato. Finally, I reflect on the distinct narrative modes highlighted by the narrator in the closing passages of Apollodorus' prologue.

The Practised, Ongoing Dialogue

The first sentence of the *Symposium* presents Apollodorus confidently affirming "I believe" or "it seems to me" (*doko moi*) that he is quite prepared – or 'not unprepared' (*ouk ameletetos*), as mentioned before – to relate the events about which he is being questioned: "I believe I am quite well prepared to relate the events you are asking me about" (172a).

This opening scene immediately immerses the reader in an ongoing conversation between Apollodorus and his unidentified interlocutors, prompting questions about its context. It invites reflection on who Apollodorus is addressing, on the nature of their inquiries, and on what it means for him to be "prepared".[23]

The construction used to express his "not unpreparedness" centre on the term *melete*, which may be translated as "care" or "practice". The same expression reappears at 173c: "So it happened that as we [Apollodorus and Glaucon] went on our way we talked about the speeches, with the result that, as I said at the beginning, I am quite well prepared (*ouk ameletetos*)". In this passage, Apollodorus restates his opening words, linking his present confidence to the fact that he recounted the same story to Glaucon two days earlier.

As the dialogue unfolds, the situation becomes increasingly complex. Curiosity intensifies as it becomes evident that Apollodorus could not be present at the event that he is about to recount. The episode in question occurred almost two decades earlier, when the narrator was still a boy (173a). These facts naturally raise doubts about the credibility of Apollodorus' confident claim in the opening sentence of the *Symposium*. How can he express such assurance in narrating events he did not personally witness? Understanding the grounds for this confidence, I argue, provides the first clue for unravelling the prologue and gathering strategic information for reading the dialogue.

At this stage, it is clear that Apollodorus' confidence is linked to the fact that he has practised recounting the event. Yet, might there be more to consider regarding the use of the

[23] The interlocutors remain unnamed throughout the whole dialogue; Apollodorus, in 173c, calls them "rich money-makers" (χρηματιστικῶν).

term *melete*? Could it suggest something beyond mere repetition? Significantly, the third occurrence of *melete* in the dialogue appears in Diotima's speech: "Consider what we call revising or practising (*melete*). We do this because knowledge leaves us." (208a) – precisely in the context of the exploration of human nature and its relation to knowledge.

Might the prologue, then, prefigure a focal theme that will be developed throughout the dialogue? This question will be examined further in the analysis of Socrates-Diotima exchange, where I explore the broader philosophical resonance of *melete*. For the moment, however, the focus remains on the prologue and on understanding Apollodorus' declaration of preparedness.

Chronological Layers and Ambience

The opening scene of the *Symposium* unfolds in the present moment, yet Apollodorus swiftly moves into the second layer.[24] He recounts a conversation that took place two days earlier between him and his acquaintance Glaucon – an episode that, as mentioned previously, helps to explain his sense of preparedness to discuss Agathon's symposium. On that occasion, Glaucon questioned Apollodorus about the same subject (172a-c), so the narrator needs only to revisit that prior exchange. This marks the beginning of the dialogue's temporal layering, one of its most distinctive structural features.

The date corresponding to the present moment – or the dramatic time – is difficult to establish. It must precede Socrates's death, as he is not referred to as passed, and it must occur late enough for Apollodorus to have reached maturity and become his follower. According to Nails, the scene may be set in the spring of 399 BCE, "between the preliminary hearing Socrates attended after the *Euthyphro* but before his trial" (Nails 2006, 205).

Apollodorus recounts a specific conversation that he once had with Glaucon, narrating it to his interlocutors and carefully describing even the moment of their encounter (172a-172b). His initial concern is to clarify a chronological confusion that has arisen because Glaucon's original source failed to provide a coherent account of the event. This imprecision led Glaucon to believe, mistakenly, that the gathering had taken place more recently than it actually had, prompting him to ask whether Apollodorus had attended: "Were you at the party yourself or not?" (172b). Apollodorus, however, had not been present at the event.

[24] In the introduction section, under the section titled "division of the *Symposium*", I provide a schematic representation of these layers with an explanation of the numerical division to which I refer. In the present section, the focus shifts from description to interpretation, examining the implications of this narrative construction.

This situation must have been disappointing for Glaucon, who had expected to hear the story from an eyewitness. Instead, he discovers that Apollodorus was absent from the event and that it had taken place considerably further in the past than he had anticipated. Although the text does not indicate whether the chronology posed a problem to the interlocutors in the first layer, it is clearly an element that the narrator considered important to clarify, both in his conversation with Glaucon and in the retelling of it.

This passage establishes a temporal reference point and provides contextual grounding for the events under discussion. Apollodorus explains that the party did not occurred recently enough for him to have attended, situating the gathering in a period when both he and Glaucon were still boys, "in the year when Agathon won the prize with his first tragedy" (173a).[25] The historical record confirms that Agathon's first victory in a dramatic contest took place in 416 BCE; thus, the gathering recounted in the *Symposium* must correspond to that date.

The competition won by Agathon took place at the Lenaia, an annual Athenian festival, and unfortunately, the content of the award-winning tragedy remains unknown. The Lenaia was one of the Dionysian festivals amongst the so-called "Lesser Festivals" – the Rural Dionysia, the Lenaia, and the Antheresteria. The festivals anticipated the Great Dionysia, also known as City Dionysiaca, and had a more domestic character, whereas the Great Dionysia attracted visitors from beyond Attica. The Dionysian celebrations extended throughout the winter months and into the early spring, and by the end of the classical period, each of them included dramatic competitions.

The Lenaia was held during Gamelion, the seventh month of the Attic calendar, corresponding roughly to mid-January through mid-February in the Gregorian calendar. Both comedies and tragedies were performed at this festival: in 405 BCE, for instance, Aristophanes won the comic competition with his celebrated *Frogs.*[26] In the *Frogs*, Dionysus serves as the judge in a contest between Euripides and Aeschylus. Similarly, in the *Symposium*, 175e, Agathon declares that the god will act as judge in their forthcoming competition of speeches.[27]

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[25] Plato, born in 428 BCE, was likewise a boy at that time.

[26] For further context on festivals in the Classical Period in Athens, see Pickard-Cambridge (1968), Csapo and Slater (2001), and Castiajo (2012).

[27] Aristophanes – who also appears as one of Agathon's guests in the *Symposium* – depicts Dionysus as the main character in his comedy *Frogs*, attempting to bring Euripides back from the dead to restore the former glory of tragic drama. Dionysus seeks advice from Heracles, his half-brother, on how to reach Hades. Herackes' suggestions include suicide, which the god dismisses, so Dionysus and his slave Xanthias instead travel there by ferry. As they cross the river Acheron, Dionysus hears the croaking of frogs, hence the play's title. In Hades,

By situating Agathon's symposium in 416 BCE, Apollodorus resolves the chronological uncertainty and provides his interlocutors with historical grounding, thereby distinguishing himself from Glaucon's initial, imprecise informant. Although Glaucon's expectations may have been disappointed, he now realises that his earlier assumptions were based on unreliable information and begins to gain a clearer understanding of the matter.

The next point of significance concerns the source of the information. Glaucon speculates that it might have come from Socrates himself (173b). At this juncture, Apollodorus fully reveals the narrative chain. He denies Glaucon's conjecture and clarifies that he heard the story from the same source as Phoenix– the very person consulted by Glaucon's informant. His source was Aristodemus, a devoted admirer (*erastes*) of Socrates, who had been at the party.[28] Apollodorus adds that he later verified certain details by questioning Socrates directly (173b). As the dialogue proceeds, Apollodorus' exchange with Aristodemus will form the third layer of narration, while Aristodemus' account will reconstruct the main event at Agathon's house within the fourth layer.

Following the initial disappointment, Glaucon's hope of obtaining reliable information about the famous gathering at Agathon's house is likely rekindled. Apollodorus' persistent effort to substantiate his claim of being prepared to recount the *Symposium* now appears to bear fruit. At this stage, his interlocutors – both in the first and second layers – recognise not only the date of the events but also Apollodorus' connection to two of the symposiasts (Aristodemus and Socrates) and the complex trajectory of the narrative up to this point. This deliberate dramatic progression seems carefully constructed to draw both readers and listeners of the *Symposium* into its vivid fictional world, while simultaneously anchoring it in historical reality, almost as if it were a kind of historical novel.[29]

The meaning of Apollodorus' preparedness thus acquires greater depth, encompassing both the accurate temporal framework and the intricate path through which the narrative is transmitted. Moreover, Apollodorus' verification of certain details with Socrates is presented as part of his method of reconstructing the account. The result of these multiple mediations is a

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Euripides and Aeschylus argue over which of them is the greater tragedian. Aeschylus ultimately wind the contest and is chosen by Dionysus to return to life (Ar. *Ran*. 1467-1481).

[28] Aristodemus is described as Socrates' lover (*erastes*). This does not necessarily imply a sexual relationship but certainly indicates their close bond.

[29] Gold (1980) examines the challenges and advantages of applying modern literary categories to the *Symposium,* focusing particularly on its classification as a "novel" in Bakhtinian terms.

multilayered narrative structure whose very complexity introduces a subtle instability into the act of recollection itself.

This instability – produced by the successive mediations through which the account is transmitted – reveals one of the *Symposium*'s most distinctive compositional features: its use of narrative displacement as a philosophical device. The layering of voices – Aristodemus' recollection of the speeches, filtered through Apollodorus and relayed again to new interlocutors – creates a distance between the reader and the original event that both frustrates and refines the pursuit of truth. In this configuration, recollection (*anamnesis*) is no longer a straightforward recovery of lost knowledge, but a process continually refracted through memory, language, and desire. Each retelling reconstructs and simultaneously transforms what it seeks to preserve, suggesting that philosophical understanding, like *eros* itself, is dynamic, mediated, and incomplete.

In this sense, Plato situates knowledge not within the certainty of direct testimony but within the fragile space of mediated remembrance. The *Symposium* invites its audience to navigate this labyrinth of speech and memory, where truth is not given but must be practised – rehearsed, questioned, and reimagined through dialogue itself.

Is Plato Playing Games?

The layers, mediations, and dramatic construction of the *Symposium* are integral to the manner in which Plato chose to convey his philosophy. Examining their significance is therefore essential to the philosophical interpretation of the dialogue. Halperin characterises the *Symposium*'s structure as a dialogue composed of a sequence of inset narratives, "(…) each of them containing another dialogue and each of them taking the reader further away in time from the dramatic date of the conversation between Apollodorus and his acquaintances" (1992, 97). He identifies this layered structure as one that permeates the entire dialogue, with Diotima's narrative being the deepest layer, in my division, the fifth.

A notable feature of the *Symposium* is the absence of back-and-forth conversation, questions, or critical commentary concerning the recalled events. Throughout the narration, neither Apollodorus towards Aristodemus nor the interlocutors towards Apollodorus offer

interjections, inquiries, or conclusions.[30] The final lines of the *Symposium* still belong to Aristodemus' account. Within the dramatic frame, the narrative never returns to the present moment: the reader is left with the final quote informing that, by the morning, after leaving Agathon's house, Socrates went about his day as usual (223d). No commentary, reflection or evaluative response follows the story's end.

The interpretative consequences of this narrative construction warrant close attention. Several issues raised by scholars merit consideration in developing this reading. These temporal distances, produced through the dialogue's layered structure, lend the text a particular density and create the reflective space necessary for Plato's critical engagement with the events situated within these different timelines.

As a work intended to be read or heard[31], the *Symposium* was composed after pivotal events in Athenian history, most notably the death of Socrates – an event that must have profoundly affected Plato and his contemporaries. This historical reality would undoubtedly have been present in the minds of the dialogue's earliest audience. Plato's use of multiple timelines both reveals and conceals his intentions as an author and historical witness. By intertwining fact and fiction, he situates the *Symposium* within a historical framework that anchors interpretation while simultaneously destabilising certainty. The ethical and political resonances of the dialogue are therefore unmistakable and have been widely examined. Its broader historical and political dimensions will be addressed in greater depth in the final chapter.

Another interpretation of the *Symposium*'s layered structure is that it may represent a deliberate strategy to make the audience less concerned with the factual accuracy of the story – a manoeuvre designed either to divert attention from minor details or to prompt readers to question the very notion of the truth within it. This is the view advanced by Dover (1980, 90), who contends that the text's vagueness functions as a reminder that the exact remembrance can never be guaranteed. Cornelli (2013) offers a similar reading, maintaining that such imprecision is something that can hardly be overcome. He argues that the 'fact-checking' with Socrates does not necessarily dispel the doubts provoked by the dialogue's narrative construction:

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[30] An exception occurs at 222c, where Apollodorus recalls Aristodemus' remarks concerning the reaction to Alcibiades' speech: "When Alcibiades finished speaking there was laughter at his frankness, because he seemed to be still in love with Socrates." (222c).

[31] For the discussion regarding whether Plato's dialogues were intended to be read or orally delivered see Waugh (1995).

> The inaccuracy of his narration of the facts, therefore, becomes almost unbeatable: the informant of both the one who wants to know - the acquaintance, who will later reveal himself to be Glaucon, probably one of Plato's elder brothers - and of Apollodorus (that is, Aristodemus), is virtually the same. The intense sequence of information seems intended to provoke in the "reader" a sensation of labyrinthine confusion. So, how can one ultimately trust the narrative? Apollodorus, in truth, claims to have "verified" the story with Socrates, who would have confirmed (*homologein*) its truthfulness. However, at this point, doubt naturally arises as to whether this confirmation makes any difference. (Cornelli 2013, 143).[32]

Both Cornelli and Dover thus highlight what appears to be a concern with the degree of precision attainable in any account of Agathon's symposium. This is a compelling observation, especially given the multiple mediations inherent in oral transmission and the temporal distance between the dramatic date and the narrated event. As will be shown, this inaccuracy is further underscored by the way both Apollodorus and Aristodemus introduce their respective recollections immediately before recounting them.

The theme of fact-checking information with Socrates, mentioned by Apollodorus, also appears in the prologue of the *Theaetetus*. This emphasis on Socrates' memory as a narrative resource seems to be a shared characteristic between Apollodorus and Euclides, the narrators of the *Symposium* and the *Theaetetus,* respectively. Such alignment suggests that Socrates' memory functions as a valuable instrument of conversation. Yet there is, perhaps paradoxically, another dimension to this device: the sketchiness of the narrative – what Cornelli and Carvalho (2011) describe as the "juego retórico de la verdad", the "rhetorical game of truth".

This rhetorical game of truth unfolds through multiple mediations in both the *Symposium* and *Theaetetus*. In the latter, as Cornelli and Carvalho (2011, 117) argue, the paradox lies in the fact that the most faithful representation of truth arises through invention, through fiction. Euclides, the narrator, decides that the most effective way to reproduce Socrates's report is to eliminate the phrases "he said" and "he replied," thereby recreating the

[32] The original text, in Portuguese: A imprecisão de sua narração dos fatos, portanto, torna-se quase que invencível: a fonte de quem quer saber – o conhecido, que depois se revelará ser Gláucon, provavelmente um dos irmãos maiores do próprio Platão – e aquela de Apolodoro (isto é, Aristodemo), é virtualmente a mesma. A intensa sequência de informações parece intencionada a provocar no "leitor" uma sensação de confusão labiríntica. Portanto, como confiar em última análise na narrativa? Apolodoro, em verdade, afirma ter "verificado" a história com Sócrates, que haveria confirmado (*homologéin*) a veracidade dela. Porém, a essa altura, surge naturalmente a dúvida sobre se essa homologação faz mesmo alguma diferença (Cornelli 2013, 143).

dialogue as though Socrates were speaking directly, not narrating. In the *Symposium*, however, the game operates through a different strategy.

The *Symposium* is primarily a work of narration, and throughout the text, Plato continually leaves traces that emphasise its mediated character. As Halperin stresses, "he emphasises the reported character of the account – by sprinkling throughout Apollodorus' narrative such phrases as "he said that he said," (*ephe phanai* or simply *phanai*)" (1992, 98). Unlike in the *Theaetetus*, the *Symposium* repeatedly reminds us of both the path of the transmission and the narrator's visible presence. The cloudiness of truth resides in the fact that, despite these carefully constructed and explicitly signalled layers, together with the frequent reminders of intermediaries, the narrative itself discloses that an exact recollection of the event is absent – an aspect that highlights Plato's role as the ultimate mediator and the true voice behind the dialogue.

A crucial passage that underscores this point occurs at 178a, immediately before the recollection of the speeches begins. Apollodorus re-emerges into the first layer from beneath Aristodemus' voice to remark that, in the end, he will recount only what seemed particularly noteworthy to him:

> Now, Aristodemus did not entirely remember all that each speaker said, nor do I remember everything that Aristodemus told me, but I will tell you what seemed to me particularly worth recording from the most memorable speeches. (Pl. *Smp.* 178a)

Thus, even though the narrative path and the presence of mediators are constantly emphasised, the *Symposium* does not ultimately present itself as an exact rendition of the events or the dialogues between intermediaries. Rather, it crystallises as an expression of the narrator's interpretation and perspective on these occurrences and exchanges, signalled from the outset by the dialogue's opening words: *doko moi*. By 'perspective', I refer to the narrators' discernment of what is most captivating, relevant, and effective in communicating their account. This point reinforces the importance of this chapter's proposal to approach the dialogue through its dramatic context, guided by the narrators' distinctive perspectives.

Given that Plato is the author of this dialogue – one in which the recollection of Agathon's symposium, though rooted in a real-world event, is not meant to be read as a precise historical record – the game-like dimension of the work becomes still more apparent. Within this intricate interweaving of fact and invention, the *Symposium* takes shape as an act of creative

fabrication, a deliberate work of philosophical fiction (Cornelli and Carvalho 2011, 117). In this light, the emphasis on fact-checking with Socrates assumes a subtle irony regarding the very possibility of historical accuracy. This perspective suggests that the dialogue constructs a multi-layered narrative whose vivid dramatic texture continuously blurs the boundaries between theatrical storytelling, philosophical argumentation, and historical reference – inviting readers and listeners to engage with this fictional world through many layers of interpretation and reflection.

The nuanced and individualised nature of the narration is first and most clearly observed in Apollodorus' prologue, where it is partially shaped and intensified by the layered structure of the narrative. This distinctive quality is subsequently developed and sustained throughout the dialogue by the continual emphasis on the perspectives of both narrators and characters. Such a deliberate construction reinforces Plato's intention to create a sophisticated narrative and dramatic framework that not only engages with but also vividly embodies the intricate complexities inherent in the multiple themes explored in the *Symposium.*

Different Types of Narrative

The narrator's remarks regarding different types or modalities of narrative embedded within his account constitute another clue provided by Apollodorus' prologue – one that reverberates throughout the dialogue. By foregrounding these reflections among the narrator's concerns, Plato further accentuates the literary dimension of the *Symposium.* Returning to the previous question – is Plato playing games? – the earlier discussion examined some interpretative implications of the alternating form of discourse, a technique frequently employed in the dialogue. It is, however, worth noting that the issue of the narrative types is addressed explicitly in another dialogue, where various evaluations of narrative modalities are presented. Should these evaluations inform the reading of the *Symposium*? And if so, in what way? The first classification of forms of narrative discourse (*diegesis)* appears in Book III of the *Republic* (Finkelberg 2019, 1). It emerges in the context of evaluating both content and style of literature suitable for the ideal city (*kallipolis)*. Socrates and Adeimantus first consider what constitutes acceptable content and then turn to the question of style, both of which are treated as equally significant. They distinguish three types of narrative discourse: simple discourse (*haple diegesis)*, imitation or mimetic discourse (*he dia mimeseos*), and mixed discourse (*di' anphoteron*), the latter combining the first two.

> [Socrates] Well, we must see that you do. Maybe this will help you to grasp it better: isn't everything said by the poets and storytellers a narration of past, present, or future events? [Adeimantus] Of course. [Socrates] And don't they proceed by narration alone, narration through imitation, or both? [Adeimantus] Of course. (Pl. *R.* 382 c-d)[33]

The simple narration or simple discourse (*haple diegesis*) occurs when the poet does not disguise themselves within the narration but speaks in their own person, describing what the characters say without pretending to be the character. This mode is "(…) best exemplified by first-person choral poetry" (Finkelberg 2019, 1). Here, the poet-narrator stands outside the story; as Collobert notes, objectivity emerges from this very distance: "the demand for objectivity requires that the narrator be effaced." (2013, 3).

Imitation (*mimesis*), by contrast, involves the poet impersonating the characters through direct speech and is "best exemplified by dramatic poetry" (Finkelberg 2019, 1). In the *Republic, mimesis* is treated under two distinct characterisations. In Book III, it refers to a mode of impersonation or embodiment, where the poet becomes a character in the story (393c); in Book X, it encompasses a broader sense of reproduction, imitation, and simulation. As Collobert observes, "This mode corresponds to the dramatic mode in which the account is no longer a reported conversation (plain *diegesis*), but a telling in direct speech." (2013, 3).

The third category is the mixed style, which combines *mimesis* with the poet's voice. It involves an alternation between narration and enacted representation, as well as between direct and indirect speech. This typology of modes primarily concerns the degree of the narrator's presence; as Collobert (2013, 2) notes, it should therefore be understood in terms of narration.

Socrates, in the *Republic* (393a-394b), illustrates his point by rephrasing a passage of the *Iliad* (1.15ff), originally conveyed in a mixed style, so that it conforms to a simple narration. In this example, Homer begins in simple narration, speaking in his own voice, before shifting to imitation by adopting the voice of Chryses. The transposition describes the event abolishing the use of the character's direct quoting, simple discourse, or pure narration, is thus, "a narration in which the action is described but not acted out" (Collobert 2013, 2).

Plato's dialogues are often classified into three groups according to their mode of representation. The narrated dialogues are presented in the first-person narrative form, such as

[33] All the quotations from the *Republic*, are taken from Reeve's translation (2005).

the *Lysis and Charmides*; the dramatic dialogues unfold through direct exchanges of speech and constitute the majority of the corpus. The mixed dialogues, which alternate between direct and reported speech, are typically delivered in first person by a character – frequently Socrates – without an explicit introduction, as if addressed directly to the reader or to a silent interlocutor:

> That character usually turns out to be Socrates himself, as in the case of the *Charmides* (which begins, "We got back on the previous evening from Potidaea…"), the *Lysis* ("I was making my way from the Academy straight to the Lyceum…") and most notoriously, the *Republic* ("I went down yesterday to the Peiraeus with Glaucon…"). (Halperin 1992, 95)

Within this modality of representation, the narrator recalls events and incorporates imitation through description of dialogues, assuming both their own voice and those of their interlocutors. Other mixed-style dialogues, however, exhibit different constructions – most notably the *Symposium*. Apollodorus begins in what Halperin (1992,97) terms as a 'true dialogue' form, engaging with unnamed interlocutors, before shifting to his recollection of conversations with Glaucon and, ultimately, with Aristodemus.

The section in which Apollodorus recounts Aristodemus's story marks a structural shift from dialogue to report. This distinction is underscored by Apollodorus' own language:

> Moreover, the opening of the *Symposium* emphasizes, by means of the very language Apollodorus uses in speaking to his friends, that what is about to follow will be a report, a narrative (*diegesis)*, not a dialogue of the sort that is currently taking place between Apollodorus and the assembled company. Glaucon tells Apollodorus in the latter's recounting of their conversation that someone who had heard the story of Agathon's party from Phoenix *narrated* it to him in turn, Apollodorus remarks that Glaucon's *narrator* had evidently not *narrated* the story clearly, who *narrated* the story to you? Glaucon inquires, Socrates' account agrees with what Aristodemus *narrated,* Apollodorus assures us, well, Apollodorus tells his unnamed interlocutors, I'll try to *narrate* it to you from the beginning as he *narrated* it to me (172b3-174). (Halperin 1992, 98)

Recalling the speeches involves Apollodorus using direct speech, as though imitating exactly what he heard. The same occurs in Aristodemus' narrative, where he employs direct speech to reproduce the symposiast's eulogies. Consequently, when Apollodorus recalls Aristodemus' imitation, the result is an imitation of an imitation (Corrigan and Glazov-Corrigan 2004, 11). Yet, certain passages within Aristodemus' account are not imitations from his

perspective as narrator – such as his recollection of the encounter with Socrates, which pertains to his own experience – revealing an alternation between modes.

From this standpoint, the mixed style is strikingly evident and extends far beyond the prologue, permeating the entire dialogue. For instance, this alternation of modes is apparent in the exchange between Agathon and Socrates and, later, when Socrates becomes the narrator of his conversation with Diotima. Beneath the 'true dialogue' of Apollodorus and his interlocutors – nested in the first layer – lie additional dialogues, each opening yet another level of narration with embedded accounts within accounts.

The development of this discussion on narrative modes in the *Republic* leads the characters to evaluate the modes differently.[34] Scholars often consider these evaluations within the broader framework of Plato's philosophy, which has produced varying interpretations of his use of mimesis across the dialogues – and the *Symposium* is no exception.

The overall conclusion is that, in the *Republic*, simple narration is regarded as superior to imitation (*mimesis*), to the point that imitation is ultimately banished from the ideal city.[35] When this evaluation is brought to the *Symposium,* a difficulty arises: as mentioned earlier, the narrative of Agathon's gathering is itself preserved through imitation and would, by the standards of the *Republic,* have been excluded from the *kallipolis*. Does this imply that its content is not to be taken seriously?

According to Corrigan and Glazov-Corrigan (2004), this tension, introduced in the prologue is designed to prompt readers to question whether anything in the *Symposium* can escape the criticisms levelled in the *Republic:* "In other words, can the dialectical questioning, introduced by Socrates and nestled within the mimetic narrative, transform altogether the mimetic level of presentation?" (Corrigan and Glazov-Corrigan 2004, 28). The authors argue that the mimetic narrative associated with Apollodorus and Aristodemus stands in opposition to an 'outrageous' or hubristic dimension inherent in Socrates' character throughout Plato's dialogues.

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[34] The confrontation between these different types of narrative also appears in the *Theaetetus.*

[35] In a detailed analysis of the Republic, Collobert (2013) subdivides the mimetic mode into six, resulting in: the plain diegetic mode, wholly imitative mode, mixed mode, diegetic-mimetic mode, mimetic-diegetic mode, and a further mode produced by the combination of these two composites. The analysis leads to the conclusion that the banishment applies to the wholly mimetic and only one of the subcategories of the mixed mode – the mimetic-diegetic. "The poet who imitates the *lexis* of the good (the diegetic-mimetic mode, as we have shown) will be allowed to stay (398b2)." (2013, 6).

In this context, it is intriguing to imagine the *Symposium* with Socrates as its principal narrator – or at least to consider how the dialogue might unfold if Aristodemus were more interested in questioning the philosopher's views than in merely verifying the details of his account. In that case, the lost content of the final conversation between Socrates, Agathon, and Aristophanes might well be known. Yet this hypothetical version would not necessarily bring the narrative closer to "reality" since a version told by Socrates could differ radically; he might have hubristically played with the speeches, just as he playfully distorts the proverb when persuading Aristodemus to attend Agathon's party uninvited:

> 'Well, come with me then' said Socrates, 'and we will spoil the old saying by altering the words. We will make it say that "to good men's feasts good men go unbidden". After all, Homer himself comes close not merely to spoiling it but to treat it with contempt. He represents Agamemnon as an exceptionally valiant warrior and Menelaus as "a fainted hearted spearman", and when Agamemnon after sacrificing is giving a banquet he has Menelaus coming to the feast unbidden, and so the worse man going to the feast of a better'. (Pl. *Smp.* 174b)

This manipulation of narrative and quotation exemplifies the "outrageous" or hubristic narrative, pointed out by Corrigan and Glazov-Corrigan (2004). According to these authors, although the mimetic narrative is deemed inferior in the *Republic,* within the *Symposium* it acquires a certain virtue – namely, its capacity to preserve the precarious memory of the event.

> No story, then, and least of all the *Symposium*, can be contained merely on the mimetic level (whose shortcomings are made equally clear in the *Symposium* and the *Republic,* but whose virtues are implicitly demonstrated in Apollodorus' care for every detail) since other voices, thoughts, and ideas caught in the narrative as if by reflection will continue to possess their own life, a life collected but not directed or challenged within the narrative of faithful disciples. (Corrigan and Glazov-Corrigan 2004, 19).

The complexity surrounding the narrative structure of the *Symposium* presents an apparent paradox regarding Plato's vision of the ideal city. If one were to apply rigorously the principles articulated in the *Republic*, many of Plato's own dialogues – including the *Symposium* – would be deemed unsuitable due to their mixed narrative styles and uses of *mimesis*. This tension becomes particularly apparent in the representation of Socrates. At the outset, he appears hubristic, playing with proverbs and subverting conventional wisdom, while later he adopts the mimetic mode to recount Diotima's teachings.

Yet this apparent inconsistency invites reconsideration. The direct correlation often drawn between the classification of narrative categories in Book III of the *Republic* and the modes of representation of Plato's dialogues may, as Finkelberg (2019, 2) observes, be misleading. It must be remembered that Plato never speaks in his own voice within the dialogues. Thus, treating the Republic's typology of narrative as directly applicable to the dialogues risks conflating Plato's reflections on the poet's visibility or concealment within the text with the question of how his characters speak. Collobert (2013, 9) points out that a first-person account lacking an explicit addressee produces "the illusion of an identification between the writer and the narrator" – an illusion that has sometimes led readers to regard Socrates as Plato's spokesman (2013, 28).

In this light, the interpretation that Plato distinguishes between author and narrator requires caution. Since Plato never appears as a narrator in his dialogues, a more precise classification – following Socrates's account of narration in the *Republic* – would be that narrated and mixed dialogues belong to the category of mimetic narratives, which includes the *Republic* itself.

> Plato's position is that of a reputable imitator who in his discourse impersonates another good man, Socrates, and who ought not "be ashamed of this sort of mimesis." Accordingly, the *Republic* can only be approached as "diegesis through mimesis." The same obviously applies to the other narrated dialogues and to the narrated parts of the mixed dialogues. Still, the classification of narrative genres set out in *Republic* 3 does not sufficiently clarify what precisely Plato had in mind when identifying dramatic genres as narratives. Even more pertinently, it does not clarify how this identification is supposed to work when applied to Plato's own dramatic dialogues. (Finkelberg 2019, 4-5)

But what about the dramatic dialogue? These works not explicitly present a narrator. A passage in the *Theaetetus* offers some clarity. As mentioned earlier, Euclides in the *Theaetetus* omits the markers of indirect speech (143b), just as Socrates does in his exercise with the *Iliad* passage in the Book III of the *Republic*. In both cases, reported speech is rendered as direct speech. According to Finkelberg (2019, 8), this technique suggests that the narrator is explicit in narrated dialogues and implicit in dramatic ones.

Focusing on these different forms of narration in the *Symposium* illuminates the dialogue's architecture and encourages reflection on the narrators' – and ultimately Plato's – deliberate choices in constructing it. The *Symposium*, like other dialogues, quietly subverts the

prescriptive rules concerning *mimesis* set out in the *Republic*, compelling a reconsideration of whether these rules should be treated as universally binding principles of Platonic philosophy. As Collobert (2013, 6, n19) reminds us, "Plato is not a poet in the ideal city, so he speaks to souls that have already been shaped (…)", different audiences, therefore, require different rules.

1.2 Aristodemus' Voice

Despite the apparent exclusive interest of Apollodorus' interlocutors in the symposiasts' speeches, his recounting of Aristodemus' story begins with the latter's encounter with Socrates and unfolds through a sequence of events that precede the speeches themselves. To approach this section – Aristodemus' prologue – and to analyse its central themes, a concise overview is first required, following the same method adopted in the discussion of Apollodorus' prologue.[36]

Overview of Aristodemus' Prologue

Aristodemus' prologue opens with his encounter with Socrates, who appears "fresh from the baths and wearing his sandals, two rare events for him" (174a). Aristodemus inquires where the philosopher is going, and Socrates replies that he is on his way to dine at Agathon's house. Having adorned himself, Socrates remarks that he wishes to be a beautiful guest for a beautiful host (174b). The philosopher asks if Aristodemus wants to join him despite the lack of an invitation. Aristodemus accepts, and Socrates proceeds to misquote a proverb – deliberately distorting it and saying that it was first spoiled by Homer: "'to *good* men's feasts good men go unbidden.'" (174b). In response, Aristodemus modestly says that he is closer to Homer's version, an inferior man going to the feast of a wise one (174c).[37]

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[36] It is intriguing that, although Aristodemus is the 'real' source of information, his speech is not included in the 'recalling of the speeches' segment. The reason for this omission is uncertain. Perhaps Aristodemus, out of modesty, chose not to include his own contribution when remembering the event; or perhaps Apollodorus, as narrator, did not consider it memorable. Could something else have happened? According to Xenophon, Aristodemus was an Atheist (X. *Mem.* 1.4.2,11), which could have led him to decline to praise the god (Kellerman 1996, 67). Corrigan and Glazov-Corrigan (2004) point out that Aristodemus's silence regarding the absence of a speech contrasts with his crucial role alongside Apollodorus as a story keeper. They explore this issue, especially in their fourth chapter, by reflecting on the role of the narrator's individualities and creativity in the drawing of the narrative's direction. Nails (2002, 52) characterizes Aristodemus as a low birth and small stature man, and states that their relationship with Socrates would be an example of the philosopher's efforts to improve ordinary people.

[37] Corrigan and Glazov-Corrigan (2004, 14) argues that Aristodemus' response gently thematizes his intellectual and social dependence of Socrates. They also point out that the reference to the inferior and superior man anticipates the discussions on expected roles in a pederastic relationship.

Aristodemus expresses concern about arriving uninvited and advises Socrates to think of an excuse: “because I shall not admit I came uninvited – I shall say I was invited by you”. (174c). Socrates replies that they can decide on a story on their way to Agathon’s. As they walk, Socrates becomes lost in thought and lags behind. Aristodemus waits for him, but Socrates instructs him to proceed ahead. Upon arriving at Agathon’s house, Aristodemus finds the door open and, standing there in a somewhat ridiculous situation (174e), hesitates until a servant guides him inside.

Agathon welcomes him, saying that he meant to invite him but could not find him the previous day. Almost immediately, Agathon asks about Socrates: “But how is it you have not brought Socrates to join us?” (174e). Aristodemus explains their plan to arrive together. Agathon tells Aristodemus to sit beside Eryximachus. A servant appears and says that Socrates is just standing in a neighbourhood doorway, that he has been called in but refuses to come. Agathon wants Socrates to come inside and insists that the servant should keep trying to convince him, but Aristodemus advises that he should not be disturbed but left alone, explaining that this is one of Socrates’ habits, and that he will eventually come in (175b). Agathon concedes and orders the servants to begin serving the feast.

When the symposiasts were halfway through dinner, Socrates arrived. Agathon, reclining alone on the bottom couch, invited Socrates to sit beside him “(…) so that I may enjoy the benefit of being in contact with that piece of wisdom which came into your mind in that doorway. Obviously, you are now in possession of the answer you were looking for, otherwise, you would not have stopped looking” (175d). Socrates replied that it would be wonderful if wisdom could indeed flow between them through mere contact. The philosopher exults Agathon’s’ beautiful wisdom, downplaying his own: “My own wisdom is certainly of an inferior sort, and like a dream, of doubtful reality, whereas yours is already brilliant and full of promise.” (175e). Socrates also mentions Agathon’s victory in the dramatic festival as a sign of Agathon’s wisdom. Agathon calls Socrates sarcastic (*hubristes*) (175d) and says that soon they will display their wisdom in the speech contest and be judged by Dionysus, but that for now, Socrates should focus on his dinner.

After the meal, libations, and customary rituals, the guests began to discuss the rules for the remainder of the gathering, starting with how much they ought to drink. Pausanias suggests moderation, considering that they were still weary from yesterday’s celebrations (176b), and Aristophanes agrees. Eryximachus then invites other opinions, directing his question to

Agathon. When the company concurred that moderation would be best, Eryximachus expanded upon the point, arguing – on medical grounds – that drunkenness is harmful and should therefore be avoided (176d).

Phaedrus joins the conversation, endorsing Eryximachus' advice and suggesting that they should drink in moderation for a more enjoyable meeting. Eryximachus proposes that the girl who plays the *aulos* should exit the room: "(…) let us tell her to go away and play to herself or, if she likes, to the women in their rooms, while for this evening we entertain each other with talk." (176e). He further suggests that the topic of discussion should be love, though attributing the idea to Phaedrus, who, he observes, is always complaining about the lack of encomiums to the god Eros. "My proposal is that each of us should make a speech in praise of Love, the finest he can manage, going from left to right, and, since Phaedrus is occupying the first place on the left and is also the originator of the subject, he should begin." (177d).

Socrates endorsed the plan, remarking that love is the only subject which he can claim to know about (177d), "and the same is true I rather think of Agathon and Pausanias, and certainly true of Aristophanes, whose whole time is taken up with Dionysus and Aphrodite. In fact, is true of everyone I see here." (177e). He noted, however, that the seating arrangement is not fair to the ones that will be speaking last; he is the last one in the order but adds that "if those before us don't disappoint, and speak well, we shan't complain." (177e). The symposiasts agree. Apollodorus, recounting the story, acknowledges that Aristodemus did not remember all that each speaker said, nor did he, but that he will tell "what seemed to me particularly worth recording from the most memorable speeches" (178a).

1.2.1 What Constitutes a Good Report?

The core elements of Aristodemus's prologue establish thematic threads that resonate throughout the *Symposium.* These elements are closely tied to the narrator's choices regarding what is important to include in the narrative and what is memorable. The most evident indication of this is that Aristodemus' account does not open with the speeches themselves but with his encounter with Socrates, who appears "fresh from the baths and wearing his sandals, two rare events for him" (174a). The scene draws immediate attention to Socrates' physical appearance – his unusual cleanliness and the rare detail of wearing sandals – thereby foregrounding the philosopher's body as the first feature of his characterisation in the prologue.

This segment reminds me of how Apollodorus previously portrayed Aristodemus: this close follower, Socrates's lover, who even mirrors the philosopher's habits, such as walking barefoot (173b). Yet, unlike Apollodorus, Aristodemus is not present in any other Platonic dialogue.

Aristodemus' encounter with Socrates initiated a chain of events that ultimately led to his presence at Agathon's symposium. The passage that follows the description of their encounter, in which Socrates alters a proverb (174b-174c), has already been discussed in the previous section. Once Aristodemus consents to accompany Socrates, the prologue proceeds to depict four key events: Socrates' still behaviour; the interactions that demonstrate affinity and proximity between Aristodemus and Socrates; descriptions of seating arrangements; and finally, the establishment of rules governing the gathering.[38] These narrative moments foreshadow major themes that will reverberate throughout the *Symposium*: the construction of Socrates' character, the relationships and interactions between the symposiasts, the intertwinement of education and desire, and the tension between philosophical practice and strangeness.

These themes will be examined in two parts. The first section will analyse how Aristodemus' closeness to Socrates is presented alongside the philosopher's odd behaviour, while the second will turn to the details of the seating arrangements and the formulation of the symposium's rules. Notably, these elements contribute to the construction of the dialogue and were, at the dramatic level, considered pertinent to be included in the report by the narrators and, of course, considered relevant by Plato himself as the author.[39]

1.2.1.1 Socrates' Oddity and Proximity to Aristodemus

The establishment of Aristodemus' close relationship with Socrates begins to take shape in preceding passages that were explored in Apollodorus' prologue. In Aristodemus' prologue, his decision to begin relating his story from his meeting with Socrates – and the encounter

[38] Kellerman (1996, 85, n.1) refers to this section of Aristodemus's prologue, as Aristodemus' description of the setting of the symposium, indicating his view that this constitutes the central aspect of the passage. I suggest, however that this is one of several key themes developed here.

[39] The significance of these themes within the dialogue becomes apparent when contrasted with their treatment of less emphasised moments – such as the brief account of the first half of the dinner, summarised as "After this, they started dinner, Aristodemus said, but still Socrates did not come. Agathon kept trying to have him summoned, but Aristodemus would not allow it." (175c).

which led to the invitation to Agathon's party – reinforces their proximity while simultaneously contributing to the construction of Socrates' character, another relevant theme introduced by the prologue.

The story opens with a striking image of the philosopher's physical appearance:

> Apollodorus: Well then, those speeches went something like this – no, I shall begin at the beginning and try to tell you the whole story as Aristodemus told me. Aristodemus said that he and Socrates chanced to meet when the latter was fresh from the baths and wearing his sandals, two rare events for him (…). (Pl. *Smp.* 174a).

Socrates is depicted as "fresh from the baths and wearing his sandals", details highlighted precisely because of their rarity. Nussbaum (1986, 184) observes that this passage underscores Socrates' habitual distance from social norms and should be read as more than an intriguing piece of biography, but as an intentional drawing of a character that represents the weirdness that comes along in the path of excellence.[40]

The development of the conversation between Aristodemus and Socrates confirms Nussbaum's suggestion, since it doesn't simply revolve around Socrates' hygiene or footwear choices but turns towards the topic of beauty, an important theme developed in the dialogue. This becomes evident in Socrates' explanation of his unusual appearance: "So that is why I have beautified myself like this, a beautiful guest for a beautiful host" (174a-b). In this passage, in contrast with his usual manners, Socrates seems to be intentionally trying to meet certain social standards.

The characterisation of Socrates is an outstanding element in the *Symposium*.[41] Kellerman (1996, 50), following the view that, to some degree, all of Plato's dialogues are encomia to Socrates, observes that by introducing two narrators within the layered structure of the dialogue, Plato adds "two more characters to the chorus praising Socrates". Yet, as is already

[40] Kellerman (1996, 65-66) points out that this section differentiates Socrates from Aristodemus; the philosopher displays the ability to accommodate society, while Aristodemus does not. The dramatic context, however, informs us that Aristodemus was caught by surprise with the invitation to Agathon's party, so it seems unfair to negatively evaluate this character based on this passage; perhaps he would have taken more care of his appearance if he had the time.

[41] Alcibiades' speech is perhaps the most detailed contribution to Socrates' characterisation in the dialogue, encompassing both moral and physical descriptions. As Alcibiades chooses to praise the philosopher rather than Eros, his speech directly confronts the apparently definitive conclusions in Socrates' own account. I return to this topic in the final chapter.

perceptible by the first description of the philosopher, Socrates' characterisation is not entirely positive.

The boldest characteristic of the philosopher, as presented by Aristodemus, arises from a description of an incident in which Socrates exhibits a motionless behaviour, occurring between the moment of their decision to go together to Agathon's house and their actual arrival. This event not only adds to the array of characteristics attributed to the philosopher throughout the dialogue but is developed in such a manner that deepens the portrayal of Socrates' closeness to Aristodemus and introduces an important, arguably the main, topic of dialogue – the transmission of knowledge.

Socrates' behaviour is described in Aristodemus' prologue as follows: Apollodorus recalls Aristodemus' narrative saying that as they were walking together, Socrates fell behind: "(…) as Socrates proceeded along the road, he became absorbed in his own thoughts and started to fall behind; when Aristodemus waited, Socrates told him to go on ahead." (174d – 174e).[42]

Aristodemus recounts Socrates' behaviour of standing still on his way to Agathon's house, describing how it led him to the uncomfortable situation of arriving at the dinner party without the very person who had invited him in the first place. Blondell (2006, 148), in agreement with Nusbaum (1986), notes that Aristodemus' discomfort and embarrassment are related to the transgression of the social conventions of exclusivity and decorum that governed symposium events.[43]

In other words, Socrates is not merely absent; he disrupts the social script of the evening, both by arriving late – halfway through dinner (175d) – and by provoking Aristodemus' uninvited presence. Something appears to matter more to Socrates than the initial intention of adhering to the social conventions of the gathering.

The embarrassed Aristodemus explains what has happened: Socrates fell behind, absorbed in thought, and instructed him to go ahead rather than wait. Agathon reacts naturally to the situation; he seems eager to put Aristodemus at ease by assuring him that he had intended to invite him from the outset:

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[42] This passage illustrates well the discussion outlined in the previous sections: Plato draws the reader's attention to the existence of narrative layers. Although Aristodemus is the narrator of the scene, the use of indirect speech highlights the reported nature of the account.

[43] Blondell (2006, 148-149) further refers to Socrates' behaviours of skipping the party from the previous day and inviting someone else for Agathon's dinner as a sign of his independence from social convention, a stance that he simultaneously attempts to extend to Aristodemus.

> As soon as Agathon saw him he called out, 'Aristodemus, how lucky! You are just in time for dinner. If you have come for some other purpose, do postpone it. I was looking for you yesterday to invite you, but I could not find you. But how is it you have not brought Socrates to join us?' (174e)

This page reveals not only Agathon's skill as a host but also reinforces the close association between Socrates and Aristodemus. Agathon clearly expected to see them together. Such proximity between these characters also is not something completely unexpected to the readers, since earlier, at 173b, Apollodorus describes Aristodemus as "someone called Aristodemus of Cydathenaeum, a small man, who never wore any shoes. He had been at the party; I think there was no more devoted admirer (*erastes*) of Socrates at that time." (173b).

The disclosure of the intimacy shared with Socrates is significant for both Aristodemus and Apollodorus, as explored in the discussion of Apollodorus' prologue. There, it was shown how this personal dimension intertwines with the types of narrative and contributes to the immersive experience of the dialogue's constructed world. In Aristodemus's prologue, however, the proximity to Socrates appears more personal than in Apollodorus' account, a point made evident by Aristodemus's familiarity with Socrates's odd behaviour. This display of their proximity develops throughout the prologue.

According to Aristodemus's account, Agathon sends a servant to look for Socrates. When the servant returns, further details emerge concerning the philosopher's peculiar behaviour, revealing both Aristodemus' and Agathon's impressions of it. For Aristodemus, such behaviour is "one of his habits", for Agathon, it is "odd":

> 'Socrates is here but has withdrawn into your neighbour's doorway and is just standing there, and though I have been calling him he will not come inside'. 'How odd'(*atopos*), said Agathon. 'Call him again and keep on calling him'. 'No', said Aristodemus, 'let him alone. This is one of his habits. Sometimes he turns aside and stands still wherever he happens to be. He will come in very soon. I think. Don't disturb him, leave him alone'. 'Well, if you think so then that is what we had better do', replied Agathon. (175a-b)

Aristodemus demonstrates his familiarity with Socrates's eccentric ways and shows that he knows how to handle such situations. Agathon, who finds the episode odd, publicly confirms Aristodemus' familiarity with Socrates' oddity by following his advice. The word translated as "odd" is *atopos*, meaning 'out of place' or 'strange'. Blondell (2006 n.9) connects the spatial sense of *atopos* with Socrates' signature state of mental *aporia*, arguing that, in this passage, Plato associates Socrates' behaviour with intellectual wandering. Blondell suggests that Plato

links Socrates' physical immobility to intellectual exploration, thus uniting the dialogue's theoretical and dramatic dimensions.

Aristodemus appears to offer a more straightforward interpretation of the incident, remarking only that it is one of Socrates' habits. It remains unclear whether he holds any deeper view of the matter beyond recognising that it occurs and that Socrates will eventually emerge from this state.

As the narrator predicts, Socrates finally arrives, making his entrance halfway through dinner (175c). Agathon's greeting underscores his awareness of a connection between Socrates' thoughts and his physical behaviour "Obviously, you are now in possession of the answer you were looking for, otherwise, you would not have stopped looking" (175d).

This scene occurs immediately after Agathon invites Socrates to sit beside him so that the host might share in the wisdom acquired through the philosopher's strange episode. This invitation prompts Socrates' assertion that wisdom cannot simply be transferred through physical contact (175d-e), a main theme in the theoretical dimension.

In Diotima's speech, the word *atopos* reappears in a crucial passage linked to the earlier discussion of *melete*. While talking of the perpetual renewal of body and soul – "always being renewed" (207d) – Diotima observes:

> Stranger (*atopoteron*) still is the situation with the various branches of our knowledge (*epistemai*). Not only do they too come and go, so that we do not remain the same in the case of them either, but it is also true of each single thing we know. Consider what we call revising or practising (*melete*). We do this because knowledge leaves us. (Pl. *Smp.* 207e-208a)

This passage indicates a connection between Socrates' oddity and the notion of *melete* as developed in Diotima's speech – topics that will be examined in detail in 'Chapter 2'.

In conclusion, the juxtaposition of Socrates' odd (*atopos*) behaviour, his contemplative detachment, while Aristodemus proceeds towards Agathon's house, and the manner in which the other characters – Agathon included – perceive this episode not only enriches their characterisation but also underscores their close relationship. It simultaneously introduces two further central themes of the dialogue: Socrates' characterisation, his relationships and the discussion of the transmission of knowledge.

From these scenes emerges an indication of the interrelation between practice, strangeness and knowledge – a triad that will recur in Diotima's speech. Agathon's immediate

recognition of the bond between Socrates and Aristodemus, together with his readiness to follow Aristodemus' advice on how to respond to Socrates' oddity, further consolidates the portrayal of their intimacy. This theme of Socrates' character construction – including his relationships – first highlighted in the prologue, continues to resonate throughout the dialogue, playing a crucial role in the unfolding of its events and the weaving together of its theoretical and dramatic dimensions.

1.2.1.2 Seating Arrangements and Rules for the Gathering

Aristodemus' prologue includes key descriptions of the symposiasts' seating arrangements, and of rules governing their gathering. In this section, the discussion extends beyond the prologue, examining these two cues to establish a clearer image of the dialogue's dramatic and theoretical movements. The aim is to reveal how they point to an interplay between order and disruption – an interplay that is crucial for interpreting the speeches of Socrates and Alcibiades.

Plato devotes considerable effort to creating the scene: describing the characters' movements and interactions, indicating their positions in the room, and outlining the evolving structure of the gathering. These positions, movements, and interactions are interwoven with the rules of the symposium – sometimes supporting them, at other times disrupting them.

It is essential to remember that Plato's *Symposium* presents a fictional event. Part of the construction of this fiction involves the careful depiction of the setting – the physical space. Faced with the abundance of detail regarding the participants' seating or reclining positions readers are naturally prompted to visualise this arrangement. At least, I was. This section aims to contribute to that visualisation while considering how the spatial and behavioural dynamics underpin the dialogue's philosophical texture.

Although the *Symposium* may initially appear familiar to modern readers – particularly given its treatment of love and the apparent absence of highly abstract argumentation – this familiarity is deceptive. In truth, the dialogue stands at a considerable distance from us, historically, culturally and chronologically. Approaching it with an excessive sense of familiarity can therefore be problematic, especially within an academic framework.

Seemingly simple tasks, such as visualising the space – a necessary step for those who wish to engage with the dialogue's dramatic elements – can prove complex for contemporary readers precisely because of this temporal and cultural gap. Imagining Agathon's dining room,

for instance, is far less straightforward to us than picturing a modern classroom or a football stadium.

In this regard, Blanckenhagen's observation is particularly pertinent: "Every attempt at interpretation must proceed from an account of setting and persons as precise and complete as possible." (Blanckenhagen 1992, 52). He argues that this attention to details is of utmost importance while interpreting the *Symposium*, since the proportion of the text devoted to establishing the dramatic date and setting – both in length and precision – reflects the degree of their interpretative importance (1992,53).

The Physical Space

As presented in the first chapter, the dramatic date, within the dialogue's intricate chronological layers, and the setting, which includes the seating arrangements and the rules of the gathering, are among the elements that the narrators deemed significant in their recollection of events. Exploring these aspects allows for a closer alignment with their perspectives, drawing the reader deeper into the dramatic construction and, arguably, into Plato's own intentions in his character design. Yet once again, considerable gaps separate us from the ancient Greeks.

Fortunately, when addressing the specific challenge of envisioning the physical layout of the room, some degree of approximation is possible through the combined use of archaeological evidence and historical accounts. My approach begins with an investigation into the kinds of spaces in which such gatherings were typically held during the period described in Plato's *Symposium*, with the aim of outlining a basic blueprint of the room. The purpose is to imagine, with a measure of historical and cultural accuracy, how the physical space and seating arrangements might have appeared during Agathon's banquet.

Although we know from the dialogue that the gathering takes place in Agathon's house (174a), it is important to note that symposia could also occur in public venues. The fact that both public and private settings shared many homologous characteristics offers valuable insight into the general nature of these events and the cultural codes that governed them.

To begin with, the dimensions of the room. Symposia such as the one described in the *Symposium* would have taken place in relatively small rooms. Blanckenhagen (1992, 57), drawing on archaeological evidence, suggests that such spaces typically measured around 5 x 5 metres or, at most 6.7 x 6.7 meters. If these gatherings happened to be in the context of a larger event, there would be multiple rooms instead of a single large one.

Lissarrague (1990, 20) provides an architectural example from the sanctuary of Artemis at Brauron (see Image 1): "…nine rooms of equal size open onto a long portico, and each has room for eleven couches[44]". Lissarrague takes this layout as a model for reflecting on what the room in Plato's *Symposium* might have looked like. This space represented in the architectural blueprint, often has its graphic equivalent on Attic vases that depict a symposium. (Lissarrague 1990, 21).

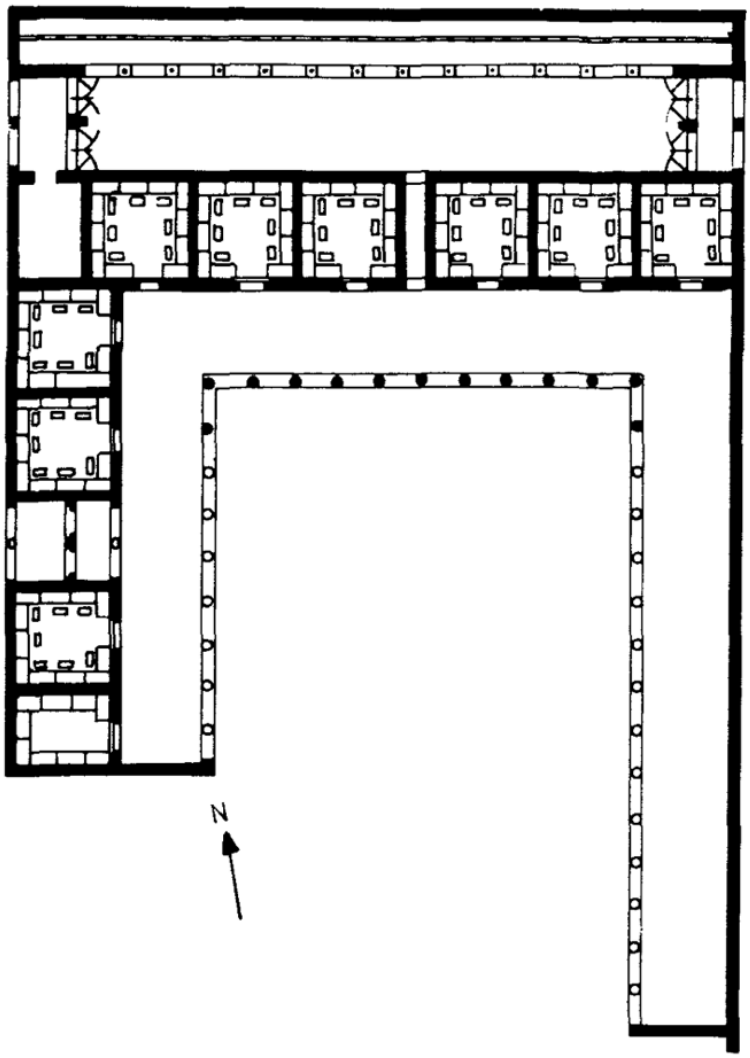


Image 1. Architectural blueprint of the dining chambers at the Sanctuary of Artemis at Brauron.(Lissarre 1990,20)

[44] See the plans reproduced in C.Boerker, *Fetsbankett und griechische Architektur* (Constance, 1983), for Brauron, his fig.19, according to the reconstruction of C.Bouras, *He anastylosis tes stas tes Brauronos* (1967), 2I, fig.5. There is an excellent discussion in P.Schimitt-Pantel, "Le Cadre des banquets,"in *La Cité au banquet* (diss. Lyon, 1987), 393-437.

To remain plausible, the room described in the *Symposium* must have been large enough to accommodate all the individuals mentioned in the text. Those explicitly named are Phaedrus, Pausanias, Aristodemus, Eryximachus, Aristophanes, Socrates, Agathon, and Alcibiades. Additionally, we are informed that there were "some others" present from the beginning of the gathering (180c), although Aristodemus could not recall their speeches. Later, near the end of the dialogue, new guests arrive and recline on the couches (223b).

Beyond the reclining participants, the scene also includes servants and a flute girl, who, after being dismissed (176e), later returns among the newcomers, accompanying Alcibiades (212e). Based on these details, the room would need to comfortably accommodate at least fifteen people: the eight named participants, at least two unnamed guests near Phaedrus, the flute girl; two newcomers (likely more), and at least two servants.

The event, taking place in Agathon's house (174a) – a private place – suggests a setting suited to an affluent Athenian host. Blanckenhagen (1992, 54), notes that, as a 'well-to-do gentleman', Agathon's home would almost certainly have contained a designated dining room. Sider (2022), in his attempt to reconstruct the physical layout of this space, proposes that it was shaped like a typical *andron* (see image 2), where "the door opens up between at least one couch on each side" (Sider 2022,74). This configuration aligns closely with the dining chambers of the sanctuary of Artemis at Brauron (image 1) previously discussed, both in the architectural form and in the arrangement of entrances.

> One can find rooms where the entrance abuts one wall or the other, but this seems like an awkward arrangement for whoever reclines on the first couch along this wall. Let us then imagine that the dining room in the lower right of this house is like Agathon's in having its door open between at least one couch on each side. (Sider 2022, 74)

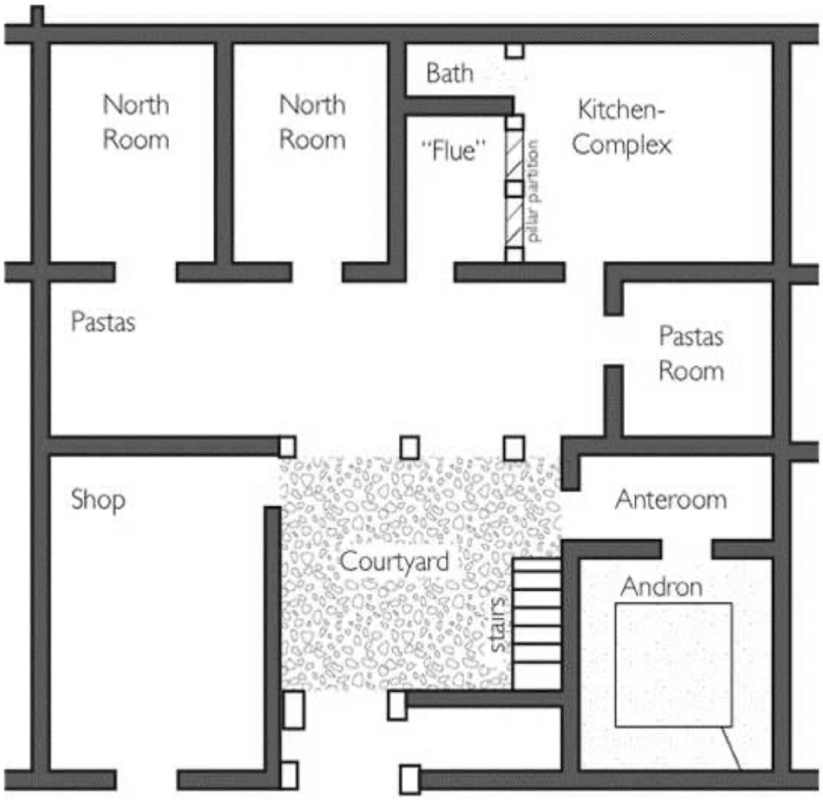


Image 2. House in Olynthus, ca. 350 BCE. Dining room (ἀνδρᾶν) at lower right. N. Cahill, Household and City Organization at Olynthus (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001). See also John E. Jones, "Town & Country houses of Attica in classical times," in F. Muss et al. (eds), Thorikos and the Laurion in Archaic and Classical Times (Ghent: Belgian Archaeological Mission, 1975) 63–144. (Sider 2022,74).

Blanckenhagen (1992) and Sider (2022) share the same view regarding the position of the doorway. According to Blanckenhagen, although both private and public dining rooms exhibit some variation in shape, one type appears to have been standard: a rectangular or square room with an off-centred doorway and an odd number of couches – frequently seven:

> It is the plan in which the couches are placed on a slightly raised platform lining all four walls of a rectangular room. On one wall the space for one couch is left free for the door. It follows that the doorway is off-center and the number of couches is an odd one. An off number of couches also prevails in the literary sources. Private dining rooms of this type have been identified in Athens and elsewhere. The largest Athenian example, from the end of the fourth century, is an oblong and could take nine couches. Smaller rooms for seven couches are more frequent both in Athens and other places. (Blanckenhagen 1992,55)

At this point, a certain consensus emerges regarding the architectural features of the space: a square or rectangular room, always with an odd number of couches and an off-centred doorway. Continuing the investigation, Blanckenhagen, drawing on representations of reclining feasters on Attic red-figured vases, observes that single and double occupancy were the most common arrangements:

> The couches were placed in a row of two to three alongside each wall; single occupancy is more frequent than double; three to a couch is highly exceptional. In a double occupancy it is rare that both are bearded, mature men. In the very rare instances of three males on one couch, they are youths, not mature men. Double occupancy consists, as a rule, of combination of bearded man and either a youth or a woman. This means of course that such a banquet is an erotic one: the two are lovers. This type seems almost as frequent as single occupancy. One may therefore conclude that, where possible, one man to a couch is the prevailing custom unless feasting and drinking are combined with lovemaking. (Blanckenhagen 1992, 55)

According to Blanckenhagen, then, single occupancy was the norm, while double reclining – often between an older man and a younger companion – signified erotic or pedagogical context. In the *Symposium*, however, this convention is disrupted. Eryximachus and Aristodemus share a couch, Socrates reclines beside Agathon, and Alcibiades later joins them, resulting in the rare case of three adult men sharing the same couch.

Blanckenhagen (1992), using as a size reference an edifice excavated in Eretria that could be a public or private one, suggests a room with something close to 5 x 5 metres – thus squared instead of rectangular – and containing seven couches.[45] The referred edifice contained two dining rooms, one bigger than the other; he believes that Agathon's apace would likely resemble the smaller one, which also featured an off-centred entrance:

> May have been a private residence, as the excavators suggest, or a public one. Its date, affirmed by a find of Panathenaic amphorae, is the first half of the fourth century, Plato's time, earlier than Athenian examples. It contains two dining rooms, one very large, said to be suitable for eleven couches, a square, of 6.7 m. x 6.7 m. The other, with a small anteroom beautifully decorated with mosaics, is much smaller, about 5m x 5m. This is the size for seven couches. The entrance to the smaller room is off-center. (Blankenhagen 1992, 57)

[45] Blanckenhagen's (1992) suggestion of a with 5 x 5 metre room with seven couches appears suitable for accommodating around fifteen participants, considering that with double occupancy fourteen would be reclining.

Sider (2022, 74) also depicts the doorway as off-centred, as shown in Image 2, noting that any alternative placement would create “an awkward arrangement for whoever reclines on the first couch along this wall.” Blanckenhagen (1992) and Sider (2022) agree on several points, including the square layout of the room and the odd number of couches, yet differ regarding the total number. Blanckenhagen, proposes seven couches (1992, 57), while Sider suggests nine (2022, 75).

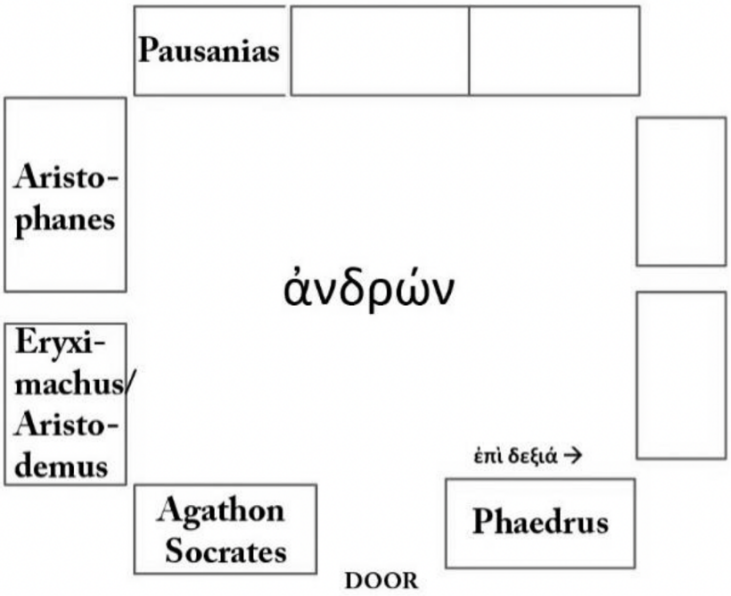
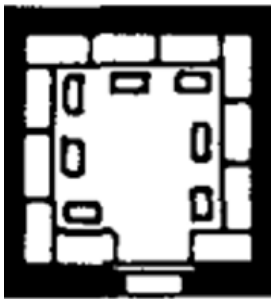


Image 3. One possible reconstruction of the room, as an ἐννεάκλινος. There is room for four more diners at (sic) one person per *kline* (couch). (Sider 2022, 75)

Sider’s reconstruction of the *Symposium’s* room leaves some open space in the corner between two couches. When comparing his illustration with a cropped section of image 1 – showing an individual dining chamber from the Sanctuary of Artemis at Brauron – one might be tempted to identify only seven couches instead of eleven, assuming that such spaces existed between them. However, the smaller rectangles in image 1 actually represent small tables, while the larger ones denote couches. This interpretation indicates that there was virtually no space left between couches, not even in the room’s corners.



A cropped section of image 1

Finally, considering, the approximated number of guests, the likelihood that Agathon's dining room was a private and relatively small space, and the consistent rule in both textual and archaeological evidence regarding the use of an odd number of couches, my suggestion for visualization of Agathon's dining room is, following Blanckenhagen, a 5 x 5 metres room furnished with seven couches.

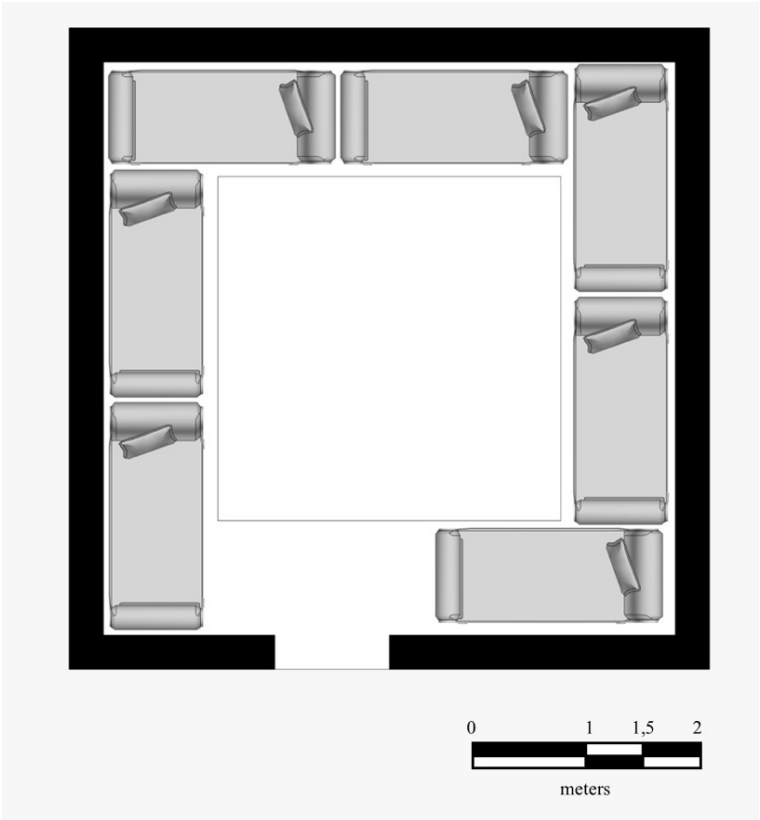


Image 4. Possible reconstruction of the *Symposium*'s room.[46]

[46] I am grateful to the architect Adriano Carvalho for his generous contribution in producing the drawings used in images 4 and 5.

With an approximate idea of the physical aspects of the room (see image 4 for illustration), the next step is to map the movements of the participants in order to establish their probable positions during Agathon's gathering and to consider possible implications arising from these observations.

Bodies Moving Under Rules

With a basic blueprint of the room established, the next task is to trace the movements described in the dialogue. The following analysis highlights and comments on passages concerning the participants' seating positions, while also noting the rules that govern the gathering.

The first passage that deals with seating positions is the one that describes Agathon, the host, welcoming Aristodemus upon his arrival: "'Go and look for Socrates and bring him in' said Agathon to a servant. 'Now, Aristodemus, do take place beside Eryximachus'". (175a).[47] This passage provides the initial indication that the main source, Aristodemus, is seated next to Eryximachus. At this stage, it remains uncertain whether Aristodemus is positioned to Eryximachus' right or left.

To standardise the textual tracking of positions, I will represent them as follows: Aristodemus; **Eryximachus**; Aristodemus. Boldface text denotes confirmed positions, while non-boldface entries indicate provisional or uncertain placements. Consequently, non-bold names may appear more than once when positional ambiguity persists. Once all relevant passages are analysed, these findings will be transferred to a visual representation of the room.

Because Aristodemus serves as the primary source of the information narrated by Apollodorus, and since his account of the event begins only upon his arrival at Agathon's house, there is naturally no prior information regarding the initial arrangement of the symposiasts. Aristodemus's position beside Eryximachus is, therefore, the first spatial cue explicitly defined by the host himself.

The next passage deals with Socrates' arrival:

> After delaying for a little while in that habitual way of his, Socrates eventually arrived, but by then they were about halfway through dinner. Agathon, who

[47] For comprehensive studies about symposium rooms, see Lissarrague (1990) and Blanckenhagen (1992).

> happened to be alone on the bottom couch, called out, 'Socrates, come over here beside me so that I may enjoy the benefit of being in contact with that piece of wisdom which came into your mind in that doorway. (Pl. *Smp*. 175d-c)

Plato next clarifies Agathon's and Socrates' positions, noting that Agathon reclined alone on the lowest couch. Although the exact side on which Socrates sits is not specified, it is clear that he occupies the place beside the host. Earlier, Agathon had interpreted Socrates' stillness in the neighbouring doorway as a sign of intellectual revelation – something he hopes might be shared through proximity. Socrates, however, dismisses this possibility: "It would be a happy state of affairs, Agathon, if wisdom were something that could flow between us through mere contact (…)" (175d).

This passage anticipates a core theme in the dialogue: the question of education and the transmission of knowledge. This discussion goes through the speeches, culminating in a type of prescription or methodology to ascend in the knowledge of beauty in Diotima's and Socrates' speech, something discussed in the next chapter. At this stage, what is most relevant to highlight is that the connection between Agathon's and Socrates' positioning in the room, conjoined with the strange behaviour previously portrayed by the philosopher, leads to the introduction of the topic of knowledge, which proves decisive on both the theoretical and dramatic levels of the dialogue.

Continuing in Aristodemus' account, regarding seating positions and rules for the gathering, after the symposiasts have eaten, poured libations, and completed the customary rituals, attention turns to determining the evening's rules. The first issue concerns drinking. Pausanias raises the question of moderation, observing that many of them, himself included, are still recovering from the previous night's excess. Aristophanes, joining in, admits that he too has drunk too much (176a–b).

Eryximachus, after consulting Agathon about how he felt following the previous night's excesses[48], assumes a central position in the dialogue's unfolding. Drawing on his medical expertise, he comments on the nature of drunkenness and argues that excessive drinking should be avoided, especially when recovering from a hangover (176d).

When discussing endurance against excessive drinking, Eryximachus appears to distinguish between two groups. He seems to refer to Pausanias, Agathon, and Aristophanes as

[48] Agathon also remarks that he cannot drink to excess (176b).

the stronger drinkers when he says: "It would be a stroke of luck for us, I think, continued Eryximachus, that is, for Aristodemus, Phaedrus, and me, and for our other friends here, if you, the most stalwart drinkers, have now given up" (76c). By contrast, he implicitly classifies himself, Aristodemus, Phaedrus, and perhaps the others as the weaker ones in this respect.

Socrates is explicitly excluded from the weaker group; in fact, he appears to be the strongest among them: "I am not counting Socrates; he is unaffected either way, so he will not mind whichever we do." (176c). This passage adds another distinctive trait to Socrates' portrayal. Not being affected by any amount of alcohol is surely an unusual characteristic – his endurance differs from the mere strength attributed to Pausanias, Agathon, and Aristophanes[49].

Eryximachus, revered by the others, assumes, for the most part, the position of being responsible for the establishment of the gathering's rules once the group agrees to drink in moderation (176e). This is underscored in the following passage, which links dramatic elements with the specific rules and expected outcomes for the event. Here, Eryximachus proposes that the girl who plays the *aulos* should be dismissed:

> I have another suggestion to make about the girl who plays the *aulos* who has just come in: let us tell her to go away and play to herself or if she likes, to the women in their rooms, while for this evening we entertain each other with talk. (Pl. *Smp.* 176e).

This passage establishes one of the key rules for the gathering: that the evening should centre on conversation. The removal of the girl, who would otherwise provide musical entertainment, creates a deliberate separation between the dialogue's theoretical and dramatic dimensions.[50] Eventually, the girl comes back to the gathering space; her presence and absence establish a framing for a segment of the text. Her absence marks the transition into a more reflective and discursive phase, while her latter reappearance – physically supporting Alcibiades' entrance (212e) – signals a return to physicality and movement. The echoes of this element introduced in the prologue continue to occur as, in his speech, Alcibiades calls Socrates and aulos-player (215c).[51]

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[49] Alcibiades, in 220a, depicts Socrates, in the context of their joint service in Potidaea, as someone who preferred not to drink but, when compelled, would beat everyone else on it, and surprisingly, no one would have ever seen the philosopher drunk.

[50] For an analysis of the female imagery in this passage, see: Brazil (2021).

[51] In *Republic* (399d-e), both flute players and flute makers are to be excluded from the ideal city.

At 177a, Eryximachus introduces the theme for the speeches – Eros – pointing out that it is, in fact, Phaedrus' idea, since he is always complaining about the lack of attention given to the god by the poets despite his great antiquity and importance (177b). The choice of conversation topic emerges as a key dramatic element in this section of the prologue.[52]

The following passage continues to intertwine the two elements – seating positions and the rules for the gathering. Eryximachus declares:

> I propose that each of us should make a speech in praise of Love, the finest he can manage, going from left to right, and, since Phaedrus is occupying the first place on the left and is also the originator of the subject, he should begin." (Pl. *Smp*. 177d).

From this statement, it becomes clear that Phaedrus occupies the first position on the left and that the sequence of speeches follows that direction. This can be textually represented as: **Phaedrus**; Aristodemus; **Eryximachus**; Aristodemus; Socrates; **Agathon**; Socrates.

The next passage follows Phaedrus' speech:

> This was, roughly speaking, the speech Phaedrus made, according to Aristodemus, and after him there were some other speeches which Aristodemus did not altogether remember. Passing over these he related next the speech of Pausanias. (Pl. *Smp*. 180c)

This indicates that additional, unnamed participants were present – an observation already considered in the reconstruction of the room. Updating the textual representation of the symposiasts' positions: **Phaedrus**; **others**; **Pausanias**; Aristodemus; **Eryximachus**; Aristodemus; Socrates; **Agathon**; Socrates.

The next relevant passage, following Pausanias' speech, provides further clues about Aristodemus' probable position:

> Aristodemus said that it was Aristophanes' turn to speak, but either through over-eating or for some other reason he had an attack of hiccups and could not do so. The doctor Eryximachus was reclining on the next couch, so Aristophanes turned to him. 'You are just the person, Eryximachus, either to put a stop to my hiccups or to speak instead of me until I stop myself'. (Pl. *Smp.* 185c-e)

[52] The claim that Eros has not received encomiums is widely questioned. See: Rowe (1998, 135).

At this point appears one of the most recognisable dramatic elements of Plato's *Symposium*: Aristophanes' hiccupping episode. This moment disrupts the original plan established by Eryximachus concerning the sequence of the speeches "My proposal is that each of us should make a speech in praise of Love, the finest he can manage, going from left to right" (177d). According to Foley (2010, 59), this disruption brings awareness to the very importance of the order of the speeches – something that could not have been as effectively emphasised had they been disposed in the intended order from the beginning. In this sense, the interruption operates dramatically as a means of reinforcing the dialogue's theoretical architecture.

From another perspective, the hiccupping episode's relevance can also be perceived as underscoring the disruptive, and in this case, uncontrollable, power of physicality over norms and rational expectations. McPherran interprets it as a moment when the "power of the human physical constitution" asserts itself over "the power of custom and reason – of *nomos* and *logos*", signalling the necessity of an account of Eros grounded precisely in that tension (2006, 74). Thus, the episode illustrates how Plato invites readers to consider both the ordered structure of the speeches and the unpredictability inherent to human embodiment.

The passage further offers an indirect clue regarding Aristodemus's position and, consequently, his silence during the speech sequence. Aristophanes turns to Eryximachus for help with his hiccup and asks him to speak in his stead, implying spatial proximity between the two. If Eryximachus occupied the couch immediately beside Aristophanes, and Aristodemus shared a couch with Eryximachus, Aristodemus would then be positioned between Eryximachus and Agathon. However, this configuration is not explicitly stated in the text, leaving some ambiguity that warrants further consideration.

From a dramatic perspective, if Aristodemus were seated next to Pausanias, one might expect at least a brief indication of his speech or an explanation for its omission. O'Mahoney (2011) addresses precisely this issue, suggesting that it is more plausible to place Aristodemus between Eryximachus and Aristophanes: "Aristophanes' request for help is directed to Eryximachus because the latter is a physician (clearly, as the account reminds us just at this point that he is an *iatros*), not because he happens to be the closest speaker." (O'Mahoney 2011, 148)

This argument is compelling. Aristophanes' appeal to Eryximachus seems motivated more by the latter's professional identity than by physical proximity. When combined with the lack of explicit textual information regarding Aristodemus's exact position in the room, this

reading offers a plausible explanation for both the absence of Aristodemus's speech and the lack of comment on its omission.

The dramatic circumstances may thus be imagined as follows: Aristophanes, interrupted by his hiccup, turns to Eryximachus for assistance, and amid the ensuing exchange and negotiation over the order of speeches, Aristodemus's potential contribution fades from attention. Evidence supporting this hypothesis emerges later in the dialogue, particularly at 193d, where the following scene unfolds:

> 'This is my speech about Love, Eryximachus', Aristophanes concluded, 'and very different from yours. As I asked you, please do not treat it as funny, but let us listen to what all the remaining speakers have to say, or rather, the other two: only Agathon and Socrates are left'. (Pl. *Smp*. 193d)[53]

If Aristodemus were positioned between Agathon and Eryximachus, it would be unlikely for Aristophanes to state that only Agathon and Socrates remained to speak. A more plausible image is that Aristophanes, while looking toward Eryximachus, focused on his right side – following the established order from left to right – thereby overlooking Aristodemus seated to Eryximachus' left.

This configuration supports the hypothesis that the hiccupping episode operates as a dramatic mechanism to justify Aristodemus' silence within the round of speeches. Given Socrates' prominence in Plato's *Symposium* and the emphasised intimacy between him and Aristodemus, it is striking that the latter – described as Socrates' "most devoted admirer" (173b) – remains voiceless in a dialogue devoted to love.[54] His absence becomes more than an omission; it forms part of the dialogue's texture, reflecting the interplay between participation, mediation, and erasure.

Of course, Aristodemus may simply have chosen not to include his own speech, as he omitted others. Yet, the fact that Aristophanes does not acknowledge him among those remaining to speak (193d) lends the silence an additional layer of meaning. Eryximachus, the self-appointed regulator of the symposium, becomes so absorbed in his exchange with Aristophanes that he neglects the very structure he established – the rule that each participant should contribute a speech in honour of Eros.

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[53] Aristophanes' speech has the body as a central aspect when dealing with what would be our primitive nature as the spheric beings that were physically divided and as a result we would spend our lives looking for the other half.
[54] In 173b the word translated for admirer is *erastes* and it could also be translated as lover.

The resulting "forgetting" of Aristodemus functions both dramatically and philosophically. It invites reflection on whose voices are preserved or lost in the act of narration, and how even within a carefully ordered dialogue, moments of disorder and omission and revel Plato's subtle negotiation between order, desire, and human nature.

After Aristophanes, the sequence proceeds with the speeches of Agathon and Socrates. At 212c, the narrative reaches a moment of closure: "With these words, Socrates concluded his speech. Aristodemus said that everyone was praising it, and Aristophanes was trying to say something about the reference Socrates had made to his speech" (212c). At this point, after Socrates' speech, it seems the ascent has reached its summit. No speech could surpass Socrates' account of love. It is precisely at this apparent conclusion that a loud banging at the door announces the arrival of Alcibiades. In an instant, the atmosphere shifts from contemplative to chaotic, as the symposiasts agreed to admit the unexpected guest.

> When suddenly there was a loud banging on the outside door. It sounded like a party of revellers, and they could hear a girl playing the *aulos*. 'Go and see who it is', said Agathon to the servants, 'and if it is one of my friends, ask him in, but if not say that the drinking is over and we are calling a halt'. (Pl. *Smp*. 212c-212d)

In this passage, Agathon displays his guidelines to decide who is going to be in the space of the symposium, in his house, and those guidelines are related to friendship, to a certain preexisting affection between him and the person arriving.

> So Alcibiades was ushered in, supported by some of his attendants and the girl who played the *aulos*. He stood by the door, crowned with a bushy garland of ivy and violets and with an abundance of ribbons tied round his head. (Pl. *Smp.* 212d-e)

Alcibiades, a colourful and bold character, interestingly, is brought back by a character that we encounter at the beginning of the *Symposium*, a character that didn't have space within the rules established by Eryximachus, the girl who played the *aulos*. Alcibiades greetings are the following:

> Good evening, gentlemen', he said. 'Will you welcome as a fellow drinker a man already very drunk, or must I merely crown Agathon, which is what I came for, and then go away again? [..] Will you laugh at me because I am drunk? You may laugh, but all the same I know my proclamation is true. But

> tell me straight away: do you agree to my terms? May I come in or not? Will you drink with me or not? (Pl. *Smp.* 212e-213a**)**

Alcibiades' words confirm what his staggering entrance had already announced: his presence embodies excess, spontaneity, and transgression. He meets Agathon's criterion for entry – friendship – while simultaneously subverting every rule previously established by Eryximachus. His self-proclamation as "already very drunk" transforms intoxication into a mode of truth-telling, blurring the line between play and revelation. Naturally, the guests welcome him in.

The next passage, 213a-b, elucidates Socrates' and Alcibiades' positions:

> So in he came, escorted by his companions. Because he was simultaneously untying the ribbons in order to crown Agathon with them and had them in front of his eyes, he did not notice Socrates, who, catching sight of him, had moved over. Alcibiades sat down beside Agathon, between him and Socrates, and as he did so he embraced Agathon and crowned him. (Pl. *Smp.* 213a-b)

This passage completes the spatial arrangement of the gathering. Alcibiades, seated between Agathon and Socrates, becomes the literal and symbolic point of contact between beauty and wisdom. The positions are now defined as: **Phaedrus**; **others**, **Pausanias**; **Aristophanes**; **Aristodemus**; **Eryximachus**; **Agathon**; **Alcibiades**; **Socrates** (see image 5).

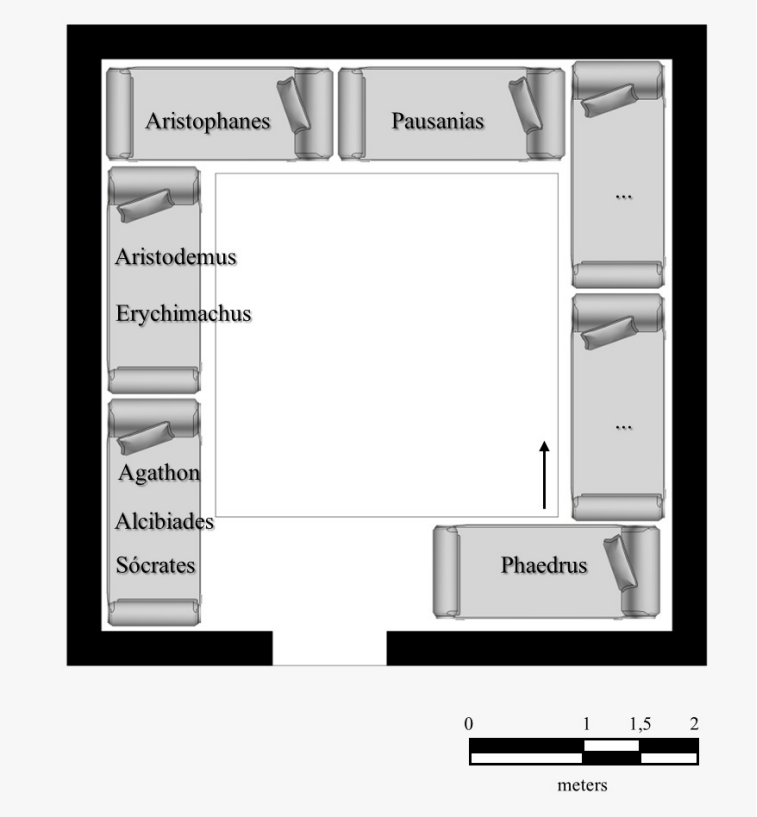

Image 5. Symposiasts' positions within a suggestion of reconstruction of the *Symposium's* room.

The text first highlights Alcibiades' unawareness of Socrates' presence, describing the moment of recognition with the word *exaiphnes* – "suddenly" (213c) – the same term used earlier for the banging at the door announcing Alcibiades' arrival (212c) and, later, for the sudden vision of beauty itself in Diotima's speech (210e). This recurring word marks decisive moments of interruption and revelation, moments in which perception shifts abruptly. These parallel uses of *exaiphnes* will be explored in the subsequent chapters.

At 214 d-c Alcibiades asks Eryximachus for directions and is invited to also make a fine speech in praise of *Eros.* After his speech, he is to issue instruction to the next in sequence – to Socrates, reclining to his right, and so on. This marks the moment when the first round of speeches ends, and a new proposal begins. Alcibiades does not proceed with a speech on *Eros* but offers a speech on Socrates, arguing that Socrates is jealous to the point that he shouldn't praise anyone, god or human, in his presence. At this moment, a new dynamic starts, with Eryximachus' approval.

Socrates and Agathon intentionally seek to disrupt this newly established order by changing places:

> My dear Agathon, you must not let him get away with it. Take care no one drives us apart'. 'I believe you are right, Socrates', replied Agathon. 'I cite as evidence the fact that he took his place on the couch between the two of us in order to keep us separate. He won't gain anything by it; I shall come and take the place next to you'. 'Please do', said Socrates. 'Take this place here on my right.' 'Zeus!' exclaimed Alcibiades. 'What I have to put up with from the man! He thinks he has to get the better of me every single time. My amazing friend, at the very least let Agathon have the middle place, between us'. 'Impossible!' declared Socrates. 'You made a eulogy of me, and I in my turn have to praise the man on my right. So if Agathon is between us, won't he be praising me again, rather than being praised by me? Be a nice, dear friend, and don't grudge my praising the young man. I have a strong desire to deliver a eulogy of him'. (Pl. *Smp.* 222d-223a)

Socrates' request is accepted by Agathon, who replies: "Brilliant!' Exclaimed Agathon. 'Alcibiades, I cannot possibly stay here, I absolutely must change places and be praised by Socrates'" (223a).

If the change had taken place, the new seating order would have been: Phaedrus; others, Pausanias; Eryximachus; Aristodemus; Aristophanes; Alcibiades; Socrates; Agathon. In this hypothesis, Socrates remains beside Alcibiades and prepares to praise "the wisest and most handsome man", as Alcibiades had called Agathon. It seems that Socrates' intention is to provoke Alcibiades' jealousy or, perhaps, to divert his attention away from Agathon.[55] However, just before Agathon could move, suddenly (*exaiphnes*) some others entered the room and took places, resulting in a situation where there was no longer any order.

> Agathon was getting up to put himself on the right of Socrates when suddenly a crowd of revellers, having found the street door open because a guest was just leaving, made their way straight into the dining room and began to take up places. There was a general commotion, and a great deal of wine was forced on everyone and there was no longer any order. (Pl. *Smp.* 223b)

[55] Blanckenhagen (1992, 62) considers that this episode a form of mockery directed at Agathon for his "silly pretense of desirable youthfulness", the author argues, considering Aristophanes' caricature of Agathon in *Thesmophoriazusae,* where he is represented as an 'effeminate' character, that Agathon must have been somewhat relatable with the caricature and it is being mocked for not being young enough to be desired, falling into an inadequate role. "Agathon pretends to be the *eromenos* of the *erastes* Socrates – *this* is what this arrangement really means and why it is important to visualize the setting." (Blanckenhagen 1992, 61).

This is the final passage concerning the seating positions and the rules for the gathering – the one that describes the sudden disruption of any established order with the arrival of uninvited guests. In this section, the analysis has explored the physical space, seating arrangements, and the rules governing the gathering as themes introduced in the prologue that serve as cues for the dialogue's overall interpretation. By following the dramatic construction of the *Symposium*, I have outlined the likely layout of the room, identified the rules set for the evening, and highlighted moments of disruption to this prearranged order, such as Aristophanes' hiccups and the sudden arrivals of Alcibiades and other revellers. The dynamic interplay between order and interruption, therefore, emerges as a significant structural and thematic feature of the dialogue.

1.2.1.3 Why Remembering Everything Is not so Important

By the end of the prologue (178a), just before the recalling of the speeches begins, Apollodorus informs his interlocutors that Aristodemus did not quite remember everything: "Now, Aristodemus did not entirely remember all that each speaker said, nor do I remember everything that Aristodemus told me, but I will tell you what seemed to me particularly worth recording from the most memorable speeches" (178a).

What, at 174a, appeared as a concern with the completeness of the story – when Apollodorus declares his intention to start from the same point that Aristodemus, following with such detailed information – seems at odds with this latter statement in 178a. The claim that he is not necessarily concerned with conveying the exact content of even the most memorable speeches, but rather what he himself considers worth recording, introduces a sense of inconsistency.

This passage raises questions about Apollodorus' motivations and decision-making process: he appears simultaneously concerned with completeness and specific information, yet willing to omit others. Careful attention to detail, especially in the speeches, does not seem to be his main priority. Wouldn't the speeches be the most important part of the narrative? Apollodorus' interlocutors would likely think so, given their insistence on hearing them in particular.

Despite the possible impression of inconsistency, raised both for the reader and Apollodorus' interlocutors, the narrative, within its dramatic context, appears sufficiently complete. No one questions why Apollodorus begins his account before the speeches or why

he chooses to include or omit certain ones. His audience seems satisfied with the way the report unfolds. The personal nature of the account – its reliance on the narrator's memory, selectivity, and sense of what was memorable – is not presented as a flaw but rather as an accepted feature of the storytelling. Within this dramatic frame, such subjectivity poses no problem for Apollodorus or his interlocutors; guided by the same cues, it need not be one for the reader either.

1.2.2 Final Remarks

This chapter examined the significance of the prologue of the *Symposium* to identify key themes that guide the interpretation developed throughout the thesis. The prologue operates as a gateway, providing essential cues for navigating the intricate and vast terrain of the dialogue. Understanding the narrators' perspectives and their decisions regarding both the content and form when delivering the story of Agathon's symposium proves crucial for grasping the depth of Plato's narrative construction.

Several dramatic elements emerged as central during the analysis. The first was the dramatic element of the characters' perspectives, introduced in the first sentence of the dialogue, which invites attention to the narrator's voice and to the notion of *melete* (practice). Apollodorus' prologue also revealed the structural complexity of the narrative – its layered temporality and multiple mediations – and raised the question of different narrative types, particularly through his description of Aristodemus' account as a report. Aristodemus' prologue, in turn, introduced themes such as the characterisation of Socrates and his relationships with other characters, as well as the problem of knowledge transmission. Furthermore, the detailed descriptions of seating arrangements and the establishment of rules for the gathering drew attention to the interplay between order and disruption, a dynamic that underlies the dialogue's dramatic rhythm.

The next chapter turns to the speeches of Socrates and Diotima's speech. Although this speech may carry a stronger theoretical weight, the interpretation will address the relevance of its dramatic dimension in revealing the philosophical structure of the *Symposium*.

2. SUDDENLY, THE BEAUTIFUL: DIOTIMA, SOCRATES AND THE TENSION OF DESIRE

Socrates in the *Symposium* introduces Diotima's teaching, especially the 'Higher Mysteries', as the theoretical climax and apparent doctrinal core of the *Symposium*. Yet the surrounding narrative frame unsettles this expectation by introducing striking dramatic elements: an older Socrates recounts a formative experience from his youth; his authority is mediated through the voice of a foreign priestess; and the ascent toward the beautiful culminates not in a closure but in a sudden (*exaiphnes*) vision. As shown in the previous chapter, the dialogue resists linear argumentation to the extent that philosophy takes shape precisely through interruptions, narrative displacements, and embodied gestures. Socrates' speech follows the same pattern.

The surrounding context of this moment in the *Symposium* is crucial for approaching Diotima's teaching. Her account cannot be reduced to an ordered ascent culminating in the vision of the beautiful because this apparent coherence is not self-sufficient. In continuity with the interpretative approach developed in the first chapter, attention must be given to how deeply this speech is embedded in the preceding dramatic exchanges – specifically, the preliminary dialogues between Socrates, Eryximachus and Phaedrus (198a-199c), and subsequently between Socrates and Agathon (199c-202d). Within these exchanges, the rules governing speech are renegotiated, and shame – the very affect that Phaedrus had celebrated as the force compelling lovers to virtue takes up Socrates to redirect the encomiastic frame toward philosophical enquiry. These preliminary scenes constitute the narrative ground from which Diotima's voice arises. What appears as a method is never autonomous; what seems theoretical is from the outset entwined with the dramatic movement of the dialogue.

This chapter proceeds in three steps. It begins with the preliminary dialogues, tracing how the *Symposium* is reorganised through rules, shame, and shifts of genre. It then turns to the multiple voices through which Socrates' speech is staged, focusing on the interplay between his changing of persona and the mediated authority of Diotima. Finally, it examines Diotima's preparatory teaching and the ascent itself, emphasising how its apparent order and method remain open to interruption – how the act of giving birth reconfigures desire, and how the climactic vision retroactively reframes all that preceded it in the eyes of the lover. The purpose is to show that Diotima's account is not the presentation of a closed doctrine but a scene in

which theoretical and dramatic movements converge, staging philosophy as *melete*: a lived practice sustained in exposure, in the tension of desire.

2.1 Preliminary Dialogues

The previous chapter showed that Apollodorus does not restrict himself to recounting the speeches, though these seem to be the main interest of his interlocutors. Instead, he chooses to recall the story from the beginning, as Aristodemus told him (173e-174a). The narrative thus opens with Aristodemus' chance encounter with Socrates, who persuades him to accompany him to Agathon's banquet despite not having been invited (173e-174a). That opening already indicated how events outside the speeches – such as the arrival at the party, the seating arrangements, and the rules for the gathering – constitute an essential part of the dialogue's dramatic fabric. These elements function as interpretative cues, suggesting that the philosophical content of the *Symposium* is never detached from its narrative form.

A similar dynamic reappears before Socrates' own speech. Once again, what precedes it is not a neutral background but a sequence of exchanges that establish the dramatic conditions under which the speech will be articulated. Socrates' intervention makes this especially clear: after Agathon's speech, Socrates declares that he cannot compete in eloquence and must have misunderstood the task. Rather than adding further embellishments to Eros, he proposes to speak the truth and to say whatever comes to mind (199a-b). What initially appears as a confession of inadequacy is, in fact, a critique of what has have been practised before. By rejecting the competitive frame of encomiastic display, Socrates reorganises the symposium's conventions, redirecting them toward dialectical exchange. Irony here becomes the vehicle for shifting the terms of speech, exposing the instability of the rules that were supposed to govern the gathering.[56]

The preliminaries thus perform a function analogous to the prologue: what might at first seem incidental context proves integral to the dialogue's philosophical architecture. They act as a frame within the frame, preparing the ground for Socrates' speech and demonstrating that

[56] Vlastos (1991,31) defines Socratic irony as "complex irony", meaning that what is said both is and is not what is meant: the surface content is meant to be true in one sense and false in other. For Socrates' claim of ignorance, see *Apology* 22e-23b. On irony as a pedagogical device, see Burge (1969). For a critical view of the interpretative problem of identifying Socratic irony, see Vegetti (2010).

philosophy in the *Symposium* arises not in isolation from its setting but through its dramatic conditions. Rivalry embodied in Agathon's celebrated eloquence, irony in Socrates' challenge to the encomiastic frame, and the interplay of admiration and shame circulating among the participants all reveal that affect and performance are inseparable from enquiry. In this light, Socrates' intervention should not be read as a rupture but as the deliberate culmination of a carefully staged dramatic design.

2.1.2 Socrates, Eryximachus and Phaedrus (198a-199c)

After Agathon's speech, which was met with a burst of applause from the guests (198a), a brief yet significant interaction unfolds between Socrates, Eryximachus and Phaedrus. Socrates turns to Eryximachus, the very figure who had earlier established the rules for the gathering. In doing so, he draws attention to a particular rule that, in his view, has been neglected: the obligation to speak the truth. "'For in my naivety,'" Socrates remarks, "'I thought I had only to speak the truth about the subject of eulogy'" (198d). This statement not only underscores the theme of truth but also signals a rhetorical and philosophical shift that will determine the course of what follows.

This interaction is particularly striking, as Socrates' remark about speaking truthfully serves as a foundation for a broader critique. Before delving into this critique, however, Socrates offers his thoughts on Agathon's speech. He begins by praising Agathon, saying: "Was I not a true prophet when I said just how that Agathon was going to deliver a brilliant speech and that I should be left with nothing to say?" (198a). Eryximachus partially agrees, recognising the value of Agathon's speech but doubting that Socrates was left in *aporia* (198a), as he claimed to be.

Socrates continues praising Agathon's speech, mentioning that it reminded him of Gorgias, playing with the proximity between the words Gorgias and Gorgon to say:

> The speech reminded me of Gorgias, so much so that I had the Gorgon experience in Homer: I was afraid Agathon would conclude his speech by challenging mine with the eloquence of Gorgias, that brilliant orator, and like the Gorgon – would turn me into stone, unable to utter a word. (Pl. *Smp.* 198b-c)

This passage further underscores both Socrates' evaluation of Agathon's speech and reinforces his previous claim of being in *aporia*. The reference to Gorgias is clearly directed to

Agathon's style. Brisson (2006, 245) describes the speech as "empty but magnificently constructed, manifests the influence of the school of Gorgias"; according to him, Socrates' comment on the Gorgon is sarcastic and refers to the particularly numerous rhetorical turns of phrase in Agathon's conclusion. Similarly, Foley (2010, 66) characterises Agathon's speech as 'flowery', suggesting that it highlights the issue of normativity, while expressing concern with the proper practice for speech-making. Socrates, by contrast, inherits this methodological preoccupation but offers "a radically different account of what it means to speak correctly" (Foley, 2010, 67). Shindler (2020, 29) further argues that Agathon's speech, although the most philosophical in form among the preceding ones, is – precisely because of this preoccupation with form – the most devoid of philosophical interest.

But Socrates' critique of Agathon's speech goes beyond mere irony. By highlighting the absence of a commitment to truth, Socrates exposes the hollowness underlying Agathon's eloquence and rhetorical skill. This critique prepares the ground for Socrates to challenge, even if ironically, the very rules of the gathering.

Regarding his claims of being in *aporia*, the philosopher finds a way out by returning to the theme of the rules. These rules are reintroduced by Socrates to set the stage for his speech. The passage gains clarity when considered in a fuller context. Addressing Eryximachus, Socrates explains:

> It was then I realised what a fool I have been in agreeing with you to take my turn and deliver a eulogy of Love, and in saying I was an expert on the subject of love, despite, as it turned out, knowing nothing about how to compose a eulogy of anything. For in my naivety I thought I had only to speak the truth about the subject of the eulogy. This should be the foundation, I thought (…) (Pl. *Smp.* 198c-d)

Socrates claims that he misunderstood the first established rules, believing that one of the rules was to speak only the truth. He had accepted terms of which he was unaware: "it was in ignorance that I agreed to make my turn to eulogise. 'My tongue it was that swore; my mind is not under oath.'" (199a). This is clearly a critique of Agathon's speech, as previously discussed, but it also extends to all the preceding ones. Above all, it assesses the underlying dynamics among the participants – the ethics of speech. This marks a decisive turning point: Socrates transforms a seemingly ironic admission of error into a means of challenging not only the speeches delivered so far but also the implicit rules and interpersonal conventions that had

placed him in an apparent *aporia*. By exposing these unspoken constraints, he redefines the ethical and dialogical ground on which philosophical speech can unfold.

This deviation marks a declared disruption in the evening's dynamic – a deliberate shift that affirms and anticipates a contrasting way of proceeding: in a practical sense by redefining how a eulogy should be delivered, but also, as later developments will show, in an ethical sense. Socrates refuses to conform to the ongoing pattern and, addressing Phaedrus directly, proposes something different, something in 'his fashion':

> I don't intend to eulogize in that way (for I could not do it), but if you like, I am prepared, to tell the truth about Love in my own fashion, though not in competition with your speeches; I do not want to be a laughing-stock. Phaedrus, you might find out whether there is any call for a speech that entails listening to the truth about Love, spoken in whatever words and phrases happened to come into my head at the time. (Pl. *Smp.* 199a-b).

At this point, Socrates further reveals the personal dimension of his words, a feature closely aligned with the theme of individual perspective previously noted in the prologue. Like the other speakers, he offers a personal account of Eros: "in my own fashion (…) in whatever words and phrases happened to come into my head at the time" (199a-b). Yet, unlike the others, the philosopher distinguishes his standpoint by evoking truth as its guiding principle. What is often regarded as the dialogue's theoretical apex thus emerges as a moment where philosophical enquiry, personal experience, and the dramatic present intertwine – a convergence that the unfolding of the text will continue to emphasise.

Phaedrus and the others agree with Socrates' proposal, and the philosopher, addressing Phaedrus, the father of the discourse, says: "Would you let me ask Agathon a few trivial questions so that I can get his agreement on some points and then make my speech on that basis?" (199b). Socrates seeks to operate beyond the established conventions, or, rather, wants to play by new rules, just as he did when finding his way out of *aporia*. He does it by asking permission to initiate a dialogue with Agathon.

Before progressing to the next preliminary dialogue, between Socrates and Agathon, it is worth noting that this passage in 199b echoes an earlier moment, also within a preliminary exchange, just before Agathon's speech, when Agathon and Socrates are conversing but get interrupted by Phaedrus:

> At this point, Aristodemus said, Phaedrus interrupted. 'My dear Agathon', he said, 'if you answer Socrates it won't matter to him any more if our arrangement comes to nothing so long as he has someone to talk to especially someone good-looking. I enjoy hearing him talk myself but I also have to think about the encomium to Love and see that I get a speech from every one of you. So when the two of you have each rendered your due to the god, then you may have your discussion'. (Pl. *Smp.* 194d)

Socrates now asks Phaedrus for permission to do precisely what Phaedrus had previously prevented: to engage Agathon in questioning. This time, however, Socrates frames the questions as the foundation of his forthcoming speech. Under this condition, Phaedrus agrees (199c). Through these two moments, Plato connects the three characters – Phaedrus, Agathon and Socrates – around the theme of the rules for the gathering, while at the same time drawing attention to the topics of education and interpersonal dynamics. By proposing an *elenchus* with Agathon, Socrates is, implicitly and simultaneously, because of the interconnection of the themes throughout the dialogue, already dialoguing with Phaedrus' earlier speech.

Before Phaedrus' interruption in 194d, Socrates was moving toward a topic central to Phaedrus' speech, which makes the interruption – motivated by adherence to the rules – all the more striking. The topic is the feeling of shame under the gaze of others, a recurring theme that echoes throughout the dialogue[57]. This concept serves as a pivot for philosophical reflection, especially in the context of interpersonal dynamics and self-awareness.

Shame, as depicted in Phaedrus' speech, acts as a moral compass, compelling individuals toward honourable behaviour and restraining them from acting disgracefully before the eyes of those they respect or love.[58] Socrates' approach alters this framework by shifting attention to the intellectual quality of the observer rather than the erotic bond. This change reconfigures the ethical dynamic, highlighting how external perception shapes self-conduct while drawing attention to the relationship between self-image and moral development. In this way, the theme of shame emerges not only as an inhibitor of dishonour but also as a catalyst for philosophical growth.

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[57] Shame is also pervasive in Alcibiades' speech. In 216b, Alcibiades says, referring to Socrates: "What I have felt in the presence of this one man is what no one would think I had it in me to feel in front of anyone, and that is shame." In 218d, Alcibiades says: "(…) I for my part would feel more ashamed at what intelligent men would say if I did not gratify a man such as you than at what the unintelligent public would say if I did gratify you".

[58] For shame in Plato's dialogues see: Freitas (2023). For emotions in Plato see: Candiotto and Renaut (2020).

In Phaedrus' speech, the symposiast asserts that someone in love is incapable of doing something shameful in front of the beloved, or even suffering shame passively without resisting:

> For those feelings which ought to be the lifelong guide of men whose aim is to live a good life cannot be implanted either by advantageous connexions or public honours or wealth or anything else so well as they are by love. And what are those feelings? Shame at dishonourable and pride in honourable behaviour. Therefore I declare that if any man who is in love were to be revealed doing something dishonourable or summitting dishonourably to someone without defending himself, because of cowardice, he would not find it as painful to be seen by his father or his friends or anyone like that as he would to be seen by his beloved. Clearly the same is true in the case of the beloved, that he feels particularly ashamed if ever he is seen by his lovers to be involved in something dishonourable. (Pl. *Smp.* 178c-178e)

The word translated as "dishonourable" (*aischros)* is the same one Socrates uses when asking Agathon whether he would feel ashamed of doing something wrong in front of intelligent (*sophos*) observers (194c). Socrates asks: "But in the case of the general public, you would not feel ashamed in front of them if you thought you were doing something wrong?" (194c). At that point, there is no answer because Phaedrus interrupts the exchange.

Still, Socrates' question reframes the issue: shame (*aischyne*) for doing something shameful (*aischros*) no longer depends on an erotic bond, as in Phaedrus' account, but on the agent's recognition of the observer's intellectual discernment. In this shift, the beloved is replaced by the *sophos* spectator. The weight of shame thus derives not from desire but from the authority of those capable of judging rightly.

The philosopher is referring to a similar mechanism to the one presented by Phaedrus, but substituting its terms. Phaedrus describes the feelings experienced under the gaze of the beloved or lover as shame at the shameful and pride (*philotimia)* in honourable behaviour (178d-e). Socrates, by contrast, establishes a different condition for the mechanism to operate: the observer must be regarded as an intelligent person by the agent, and this recognition is what produces shame. This redefinition shifts the moral and educational framework of the dialogue.

This transition also highlights how interpersonal interactions function as mirrors for self-evaluation. When the agent imagines being observed by someone intellectually authoritative, the situation becomes an occasion for ethical refinement; shame is tied not only to external decorum but also to internal development. Beyond the connection between shame and education introduced in Phaedrus' speech, Socrates' reinterpretation expands the thematic field to include relationships and self-image. These dimensions, tied to the characters'

perspectives, are subtly repositioned by the philosopher to emphasise the transformative potential of dialogue and intellectual confrontation.

Migliori (2016), examining what he calls the empirical dimension which he contraposes with the metaphysical one, which closely parallels the distinction drawn here between dramatic and theoretical dimensions, formulates two central points about Plato's philosophical practice. First, he argues that Plato "reasons" through dramaturgical devices.[59] This insight matters in the present passage because Phaedrus' account of shame is inseparable from the dramatic materials he invokes. When Phaedrus connects shame to the willingness to die for one's beloved, he not only anticipates a key theme of Socrates' own speech – mortality – but also draws on cultural references deeply embedded in Athenian civic and educational life. This is precisely the kind of empirical or contextual element that, for Migliori, cannot be ignored (2016, 66).

Phaedrus' speech explicitly mobilises figures from tragedy and epic, central pillars of Greek cultural identity. Achilles is the prime example.[60] By importing these figures into the context of erotic relationships, Phaedrus brings with him the broader ethical universe of Homeric education – especially the ideal of the "beautiful death". This ideal underwrites his claim that dying for one's beloved constitutes the highest expression of human Eros (179b). His argument is thus not only philosophical but also culturally saturated, and an Athenian audience would immediately recognise the weight of these references, and the dramatic frame relies on that shared cultural background.

The mechanism of behavioural influence that Phaedrus describes is connected to how a person perceives themselves when exposed to the gaze of another. The lover's presence becomes a powerful internal regulator, shaping conduct through the fear of appearing shameful. Yet this mechanism is not only psychological; it is fundamentally educational. As the passage shows, the feeling provoked by the beloved's gaze is intensely painful: "he would not find it as painful to be seen by his father or his friends or anyone like that as he would to be seen by his beloved." (178d-e). The intensity of this affect is such that disgrace before the beloved becomes worse than death: "a man in love who deserted his post or threw away his arms would mind

[59] The second assertion is that Plato presents opposing realities, choices and oppositions in order to reveal the limitation of binary thinking; he then resolves these contrasts by locating the underlying reason for desire. In other words, Plato's philosophical movement unfolds in the "middle." I will return to this point later.
[60] In *Iliad,* Achilles teaches that one should prefer a short, memorable life to a long but inglorious one (H. *Il.* IX, 413-415).

less being seen by the whole world than by his beloved; sooner he would choose to die a thousand deaths." (179a).

By redirecting affective mechanism – removing it from erotic bond and relocating it within the field of intellectual discernment – Plato implicitly critiques and reconfigures the educational model that underlies Phaedrus' speech. The transformation Socrates introduces does not reject the structure Phaedrus describes; instead, it exposes its limitations and reorients its pedagogical force toward a different kind of observer, a different conception of excellence, and ultimately a different understanding of love.

The concern about how one is being seen, and how one sees oneself, is voiced repeatedly throughout the *Symposium*.[61] Notably, this concern is at the beginning of the interaction between Socrates and Agathon, which precedes Agathon's speech. After hearing Socrates' praises, Agathon says: "'Your praise, Socrates, has a wicked purpose', said Agathon. You want me to make me lose my head at the thought of the audience having high expectations of a great speech from me.'" (194a). Agathon's response exposes the pressure generated by Socrates' remarks; he openly admits his anxiety about how he will appear to others. The passage foregrounds the interplay of admiration, expectation, and vulnerability – a dynamic that quietly shapes the entire dialogue.

As Luise (2021) argues, the need to be appreciated by one's peers is rooted in an imitative relationship between the Greek male citizen and ancient heroic figures established in Greek culture through poetic narration. At its foundation lies a triad of emotional states: a sense of honour (*time*), anger in its various forms (*menis, thymos, cholos, menos*) and shame (*aidos, aischyne*). (Luise 2021, 28). Phaedrus' speech draws directly on this heroic emotional economy. Achilles, held up as the supreme example of dying for the lover, becomes paradigmatic, and his actions embody this nexus of honour, anger and shame. The cultural charge of these emotions therefore shapes not only Phaedrus' argument but also the dramatic interactions that precede the speeches – Agathon's included.

Shame, at this point of the dialogue, is highlighted as a concept; rather than a mere fear of disgrace, it consists in a painful self-awareness produced by one's exposure to the evaluative

[61] Apollodorus, speaking to the unnamed interlocutors, remarks that he feels sorry for them because they believe they are achieving something when they are not (173c). He adds: "On the other hand you perhaps believe that I am the one who is unfortunate, and I suppose you are right. But in your case, I don't merely suppose you are unfortunate, I *know* it." (173d).

gaze of others.[62] In Phaedrus' speech, which, as we have seen, draws heavily on epic models, shame can be so strong that it inspires extreme courage, even the willingness to face death. "Shame appears, then, to be a passionate support for the virtue of courage, at least within the aristocratic ethical canon that preserves the Homeric model, in a social context far removed from the world of heroes." (Luise 2021, 31).

The role of shame in ancient culture, as Konstan (2006) highlights, is different from modern times. The ancient "shame culture" gradually decline in the modern age, giving way to a moral framework organised around guilt. Whereas shame deepens on the judgment of others, guilt concerns an inner responsiveness to ethical norms and is associated with the "morally autonomous self of modern man." (Konstan 2006, 91) In this sense, shame is regarded as a primitive precursor to guilt (2006, 91).[63]

It can be problematic, in this context, to approach the concept of shame strictly through the shame/guilt framework – especially when this framework is underpinned by an evolutionary narrative about cultural development.[64] This is often used as an evolutionist narrative to argue that, in Plato's dialogues, to defy a specific form of *paideia* and to aim to replace it with another form would necessarily mean moving beyond shame toward guilt. Yet, as the passages discussed above illustrate, Socrates does not abandon shame as a motivational force. Rather than replacing shame with guilt, he retains shame at the centre of the mechanism and modifies the determining variable: the agents' perception of the observer.[65]

From these observations, shame emerges in the *Symposium* as a crucial bridge connecting education, interpersonal relationships, and the construction of character. Its pedagogical role is not confined to isolated moments but echoes across the Platonic corpus,

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[62] In the *Laws,* the Athenian is concerned with avoiding being ashamed in front of friends.

[63] "The application of the shame/guilt scheme as a means to classify societies derives from the research conducted by Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict in the 1930s and 1940s. Both scholars drew a fundamental distinction between "shame culture" and "guilt culture", while applying it with particular attention to the ethical culture of Indian and Japanese societies (Mead 1937; Benedict 1946). But it was Dodds (1951) who used this scheme to describe some of the forms of behaviour distinguishing the archaic and Classical ages of the ancient Greeks. Later, his pupil Adkins (1960) extended its application and resorted to it as a tool to evaluate the morality of the Greeks from a normative perspective of Kantian origin" (Luise 2021, 32).

[64] Luise (2021) draws a comprehensive overview of the discussion, pointing to Willians' (1993) and Cairns' (1993) works to invite readers to approach the text away from this paradigm, which is heavily influenced by Kant's philosophical theories around morals.

[65] Luise (2021) argues that the emotional experience of shame is utilized by Plato to develop a view of moral responsibility that does not correspond to the model of guilt. "Plato does not propose that we refer to the objectivity of sin, both in our actions and omissions, or God as the ultimate and supreme judge of guilt or innocence. He instead proposes a reference to our self and to the future identity that our actions will make possible. (…) There is no need, therefore, for any humble submission of one's conscience to the law: in its place, we find the proud vision of an intransigent love of self" (2021, 46).

functioning, in Luise's formulation, as "both inhibitory and constructive support to maintain the right behaviour." (2021, 34). In the *Symposium*, this pedagogical dimension is inseparable from the dramatic one: shame shapes not only how characters see themselves but also how they are seen – and thus shaped – by others. The dynamic remains rooted in interpersonal relationships, emphasising how character development is shaped within a social and dialogical context. Socrates' reinterpretation of the dynamics of shame, shifting its operative context from erotic to intellectual relations, highlights the transformative potential of *elenchus* to generate self-awareness and ethical improvement.

In this way, Socrates' interactions demonstrate not only the application of dialectical inquiry but also its role in constructing and reconstructing the characters within the dialogue. The personal dimension of the speeches, intertwined with their philosophical enquiry, reveals how relationships among the characters – such as those between Socrates, Eryximachus, Phaedrus, and Agathon – are deeply bound to the evolving themes of virtue, truth, and intellectual engagement. The interplay of these elements highlights the importance of education, not as a static acquisition of knowledge but as a dynamic process of self-examination and mutual reflection, through which both the individual and their understanding of ethical conduct are reshaped.

Socrates, by challenging the previously established rules and reframing the topic of shame, introduces new perspectives and signals that understanding his account requires a shift in how things are seen. Such a shift is possible only through interaction. This becomes even clearer in his exchange with Agathon.

2.1.3 Socrates and Agathon (199c - 202d)

With Phaedrus' approval, Socrates initiates a new exchange with Agathon, framed as a sequence of questions and answers. This section is introduced through Apollodorus' voice, momentarily breaking the reader's immersion in the ongoing scene. Apollodorus mentions Aristodemus, once again, and recalls the mediated and imprecise character of the narrative, stating: "After that, according to Aristodemus, Socrates began at roughly the following point." (199c)

Socrates starts by acknowledging that Agathon's speech started in the right way: the need to identify the kind of being Eros is must precede any discussion of Eros's characteristic activity (199c). The first question Socrates asks Agathon is the following: "is Love such that

he is love of something, or is he love of nothing?" (199d), and, after explaining that he is not referring to affiliation, he repeats the question: "Is Love love of something or is he love of nothing?" (199e). These questions underscore that Socrates is acknowledging the relational nature of love; Love must necessarily be love of something, just as a father is "a father of a son or a daughter." (199d). Through this line of questioning, Socrates tries to bring Agathon to grasp what he wishes (*boulomai)* him to understand (199e).

The following questions delve deeper into the meaning of this relational nature of Eros. Socrates asks whether Eros desires the thing which he is love of (200a), using the term *epithymeo* to signify desire instead of *erao.* Hyland (1968) notes that although Plato does not always consistently distinguish these terms[66] in the context of the *Symposium,* their differentiated use appears intentional: "at least in several important passages where the distinctions would be relevant, Plato maintains them consistently." (1968, 33).

The use of *epithymeo* in this passage determines it as a predicate of Eros, which is also self-predicative, as becomes clearer in the sequence. After obtaining Agathon's agreement that Eros desires something, Socrates continues: "And does he desire and love it when he has in his possession that thing which he desires (*epithymei)* and loves (*erai)*, or when he does not have it?" (200a). Socrates does not question whether Eros both loves and desires; this is presupposed "in other words, that love is in a way self-predicative, and that besides this it also desires." (Hyland 1968, 34).

Agathon initially responds: "Probably when he does not have it (…)" (200a). Here, for the first time in this exchange, Socrates registers dissatisfaction with Agathon's answer. Rowe (1998) comments on this passage, saying that it is difficult to escape concluding that Agathon was "bludgeoned" into responding positively to Socrates' question. In Rowe's reading, the entire section from 199c5 to 201c9 – at the end of which Agathon withdraws from the conversation – resembles a Socratic *elenchus* and seems designed to show Agathon as an interlocutor uninterested in truth, the opposite of the philosophical interlocutor Socrates requires.

Apollodorus narrates Socrates' reply: "'Now, instead of saying "probably"', said Socrates, 'consider whether it isn't *necessarily* (*ananke*) true that that which desires, desires what it lacks, or, put another way, there is no desire if there is no lack. That seems to me,

[66] Hyland (1968) analyses the terms *eros, epithymia and philia,* with particular attention to selected passages in the *Symposium* and the *Lysis.*

Agathon, an inescapable conclusion.'" (200b).[67] Socrates' reply reinforces the idea that lack is a necessary condition for desire. Hyland (1968, 34) notes that, unlike the previous exchange, this passage refers only to desire (*epithyme*) and does not explicitly mention Eros. When Socrates secures Agathon's agreement, "'It seems so to me too.'" (200b), he expresses satisfaction: "Very good." (200b). The personal tone of Agathon's agreement "it seems to me too", highlights the role of individual perspective in this exchange.

Beversluis (2000) highlights the varying degrees of assent that Socrates receives from his interlocutors:

> But the phenomenon of giving (or withholding) one's assent is not a straightforward as it seems. Assent is not an either/or affair. There are *degrees* of assent, ranging from the unqualified "Certainly" (πάνυ γε) and "Yes, by Zeus" (ναὶ μὰ Δία), to the more circumspect "It seems so" (φαίνεται or ἔοικε), to the still less accommodating "I suppose" (οἶμαι), to the downright grudging "If you say so" and "So be it" (ἔστω). Except for "Certainly" and its semantic equivalents, all these locutions signal *qualified* assent; and qualified assent is not assent *simpliciter*. (Bervesluis 2000, 45).

Beversluis (2000) argues that qualified assent is not equivalent to simple agreement. This nuance is evident in the analysis of Agathon's responses to Socrates between 199e and 200e, which shift from a strong expression of certainty, '*panu ge*', at 119e and again at 200a, to a more generic and unqualified assent, '*hos to eikos*' (probably), at 200a. It is at this moment that Socrates intervenes, pressing Agathon to give a more decisive answer, and he finally expresses satisfaction only after receiving what appears to be a more fitting response '*kamoi dokei*' (200b).

There is an important difference between these two formulations. The latter, though still a weaker form of assent, introduces an explicitly personal element through the use of the personal pronoun. This shift emphasises the relevance of the personal perspective – a theme present since the prologue – and shows that even within this brief *elenchus* the subjective standpoint of the interlocutor matters.

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[67] Beversluis (2000) questions what he calls one of the "orthodoxies of contemporary Anglo-American Socratic scholarship": the requirement of the "say what you believe," a methodological principle according to which Socrates' interlocutors may not advance theses they do not believe, nor assent to thesis proposed by Socrates unless they do sincerely. Vlastos (1983) argues that this principle opens an "existential dimension" in the *elenchus*, enabling Socrates to examine the interlocutors' lives alongside their thesis. Beversluis, however, demonstrates that sincere assent is not always present in the interactions between Socrates and his interlocutors. Although Beversluis focuses on early dialogues, the exchange with Agathon can be read as an example of less-than-sincere assent.

Socrates then offers some examples to clarify the point he is trying to establish: the tall and the strong wouldn't desire to be tall or strong, since they already possess these qualities (200b-200c). These examples lead to the conclusion that desiring can still occur even while one possesses the desired object, provided the desire is oriented toward continued possession in the future. As Socrates explains: "What you really wish for is the continuing possession of these things in the future, for at the moment you have them whether you wish it or not". (200d). At this stage, he introduces another word for 'wish', *boulesthai*, to indicate a more intellectual form of desire. As Hyland (1968) explains:

> It may seem at first that βούλεσθαι and ἐπιθυμεῖν are used interchangeably in this passage, but if this were so, Socrates could be accused of ignoring the obvious difference that ἐπιθυμεῖν is primarily, if not exclusively, a passion, whereas βούλεσθαι has a more intellectual connotation of "wishing" or "willing". But he does not, I think, ignore this. (Hyland 1968, 34)

By employing *boulesthai* – a term with a more 'intellectual' connotation – Plato, or more precisely, Socrates, suggests that the desire for the continued possession of present goods, projected to the future, loses the passionate force of conveyed by *epitymia.* Shortly thereafter, Socrates returns to *eran: "*'So, then, he desires (*eran*) the possession and presence in the future of those things which he has at present, but isn't this equivalent to loving that thing which is not yet available to him and which he does not yet have?'" (200d-e). In this way, he equates future-oriented wishing with the desire for what is not yet in one's possession.

Getting closer to a conclusion Socrates says:

> Then this man and everyone who feels desire, desires what is not in his possession or presence, so that what he does not have, or what he is not, or what he lacks, these are sorts of things that are objects of desire (*epithymia*) and love (*eros*). Isn't this so? (Pl. *Smp.* 200e)

This passage identifies the shared features of the objects of desire and love: they are precisely what one does not possess, what one is not, and what one lacks. After Agathon agrees, Socrates draws two conclusions: first, that Eros is always desire of something, and second, that this something is what he lacks(200e).

Socrates then turns back to Agathon's earlier claim at 197b – that Eros is love of beauty and not of ugliness. When this claim is combined with the conclusion that Eros desires what he lacks and does not possess, Socrates necessarily concludes that Eros both lacks beauty and is

not himself beautiful (201a-201b). At this point, Socrates is guiding Agathon toward recognising that his earlier assertion – that Eros is beautiful – cannot stand. Agathon, immediately detecting the rhetorical movement in place, and after being asked if, after all these conclusions, he would affirm that Eros is beautiful, asserts: "Socrates, it rather looks as though I understood nothing of what I was saying at the time". (201c).

In a final question, Socrates asks Agathon: "doesn't what is good also seem to you beautiful?" Agathon agrees, and Socrates concludes: "So, if love is lacking in what is beautiful, and what is good is beautiful, then he will also be lacking in what is good" (201c). At this point, Agathon, seemingly defeated, says that he cannot argue against Socrates, so things should be as the philosopher has said (201c). Socrates' final remark before releasing Agathon from the question-and-answer sequence underscores his method: "There is no difficulty in arguing against Socrates, beloved Agathon; what you cannot argue against is the truth. But it is time I let you go." (201c).

Rowe (1998, 172) observes that although Agathon now recognises he did not understand what he was originally saying, he nevertheless continues to treat the exchange as a matter of Socrates' superior debating skills rather than acknowledging the impersonal force of the truth at which Socrates hints. Yet Rowe's interpretation should be approached with caution. While Socrates certainly appeals to general principles, his discourse and character are also deeply shaped by personal dimensions – visible in the construction of his character, in his distinctive rhetorical approach, and in the emphasis on personal engagement that permeates the dialogue.

This interaction between Socrates and Agathon epitomises both the theoretical force of Socrates' contribution to the *Symposium* and the capacity of the dialectical method to expose inconsistencies and refine understanding. Through his questioning, Socrates guides Agathon toward deeper reflection, gradually revealing how their inquiry unfolds relationally in the interplay between personal perspective and philosophical argument.

This exchange also reinforces themes introduced in the prologue, especially the role of the characters' perspectives and their gradual construction within the dialogue. Socrates' interaction with Agathon shows how relational dynamics shape the philosophical movement: the inquiry unfolds not in abstraction but through the specific dispositions, vulnerabilities, and responses of the interlocutors. The pursuit of truth emerges through personal engagement, revealing the interplay between argument and the characters' individual viewpoints.

Through questioning, Socrates exposes weaknesses in Agathon's claims while eliciting a more nuanced understanding of love and desire. These central themes of the dialogue are enriched by the characters' distinctive perspectives and relationships. A key insight from this section is the development of the link between Eros and beauty – central to Agathon's speech and foundational for Socrates' forthcoming speech. This connection is articulated not only through abstract reasoning but also through the dramatic interplay of the characters' perspectives.

Furthermore, Socrates' satisfaction with Agathon's personal response at 200b underscores the importance of interpersonal dynamics and individual understanding within the *elenchus*, reflecting, again, the broader themes of character development and education. This moment highlights how personal engagement is central to the transformative process of philosophical dialogue. The exchange also reinforces how the *elenchus* contributes to the construction of characters and to the transformation of their perspectives, with Socrates' interventions shaping both the personal and philosophical development of his interlocutors.

The educational dimension of the *elenchus* thus emerges as a process that refines intellectual understanding while prompting self-examination. The connection between abstract principles and personal insights illustrates the relational and subjective character of philosophical inquiry, offering yet another example of the interplay between the dialogue's dramatic and theoretical dimensions.

Conclusion

The preliminary dialogues that precede Socrates' speech follow the same logic introduced in the prologue: they assign philosophical weight to dramatic elements, favouring interaction, gesture, and interpersonal dynamics over isolated theoretical exposition. Rather than functioning merely as transitions, these preliminary dialogues continue the prologue's project of grounding philosophical inquiry in relational, embodied, and circumstantial experience. In doing so, they contribute to the construction of the dialogue's dramatic structure while also elaborating central themes of the *Symposium*, such as the nature of speech, education, interpersonal recognition, and philosophical transformation.

Among these themes, the notion of shame stands out. First introduced by Phaedrus as an erotic emotion capable of regulating behaviour through the gaze of the other, lover or beloved, shame is reconfigured by Socrates in more intellectual terms. It no longer depends

solely on an erotic bond but on the recognition of another as *sophos,* and therefore worthy of moral consideration. This shift underscores the *Symposium*'s ongoing critique of conventional *paideia* and exemplifies how education, for Plato, is relational, embodied, and dialogical. Shame becomes not a mere inhibition but a vector for transformation, one that ties the individual to their social and philosophical context.

The ethics of speech also come into focus, particularly in Socrates' questioning of the rules and his insistence on truth-telling. These moments dramatise a key opposition between rhetorical performance and philosophical commitment. Socrates does not reject the relational conditions of speech; on the contrary, he draws on them to reshape the terms of engagement. His *elenchus* with Agathon reveals the fragility of beautiful but unexamined speech and the necessity of cultivating a more reflective, dialogical mode of interaction. Significantly, Socrates expresses satisfaction only when Agathon gives a personal response – "it seems to me too" – marking not a surrender to argument, but a shift in understanding anchored in a personal transformation that occurred by being in contact with another's perspective.

These dialogues also contribute to the construction of the characters. The evolving interactions between Socrates, Eryximachus, Phaedrus, and Agathon are not merely narrative devices but scenes of philosophical positioning. They embody a method consistent with what the first chapter identified as central to Plato's philosophical composition: a commitment to dramatic forms, perspectival multiplicity, the use of embodied interaction, and interruptions as part of the dialogue's argumentative force, rather than mere narrative ornament.

Far from being mere preludes, then, these exchanges anticipate the theoretical displacements that Socrates and Alcibiades will enact later in the dialogue. They already unsettle the symposium's rules, recast the ethical stakes of speech, and foreground the affective and relational conditions under which knowledge becomes possible. Shame, irony, and *elenchus* function not merely as recurring motifs but as dramatic mechanisms through which the *Symposium* stages its mode of philosophical enquiry.

In sum, the preliminary dialogues extend the logic of the prologue, dramatising the interplay of form and argument, character and thought, embodiment and reflection. They offer a microcosm of Plato's broader strategy in the *Symposium*: to stage philosophy as an affective, relational and transformative practice – one that reshapes not only ideas but the individuals who engage in it.

2.2 The Philosopher and The Priestess

2.2.1 Multiple Socrates

Up to this point, Socrates' voice has been heard numerous times. As such, I have engaged with it in several passages while commenting on the dialogue's unfolding. Socrates' characterisation emerged early on as a central theme in the prologue and, as aforementioned, became closely tied to the broader theme of the characters' perspectives. In this section, I return to that characterisation to examine how it shapes the status of Socrates in relation to its speech.

The unnamed interlocutors who wanted to hear about the gathering mention Socrates explicitly. Along with Alcibiades and Agathon, he is presented as a protagonist, a figure whose presence structures the narrative. His character is portrayed as having a profound impact on others. Apollodorus, for instance, stresses how following Socrates for three years drastically changed his life: describes this transformation as a shift from valuing mundane pursuits to embracing philosophical enquiry, a change that enabled him to reassess social and personal ambitions (173a-173d).

Socrates' odd behaviour forms another relevant part of his character's construction. One notable instance of this is described in Aristodemus' account of their journey to Agathon's house, the episode of stillness (174d-175a). This moment reinforces Socrates' detachment from social conventions; it leaves Aristodemus to arrive alone and uninvited at Agathon's house, and it highlights the philosopher's intense inwardness and contemplative disposition.

In the *Symposium,* distinct 'versions' of Socrates appear regarding age, and this becomes a stinking feature when considering the recollection of Diotima's teaching. Within the narrative, during the encounter at Agathon's house, in the fourth layer of the dialogue, Socrates is about 53 years old, having been born in 469 BCE, while the banquet occurred in 416 BCE. Yet, in the fifth narrative layer, in the section 201d-2012c, he recalls a conversation with Diotima from his youth, years before the plague (201d), likely around 440 BCE, when he would have been in his late twenties or close to 30 years old, which was an important milestone: "At thirty, the Athenians became eligible for the Council and other offices, including military ones (…) Thirty was also the age of marriage sanctioned by tradition at least since the time of Solon." (Finkelberg 2021, 60). The temporal layering accentuates the personal character of the account: Socrates does not simply present a doctrine but recalls a formative instruction received at a formative moment. His learning, thus, appears intertwined with his life experiences.

Nails (2006, 182) provides an overview of the approximate ages of those present at Agathon's dinner. The symposiasts are already mature men, and at least three of them, namely Socrates, Alcibiades and Aristophanes, are married. Even the youngest, Phaedrus, is at least 29. Agathon is 31, Eryximachus is 32, Aristophanes and Alcibiades are 35, Pausanias is close to 40, and Socrates, as noted, is 53. Socrates stands apart as the oldest participant, yet his speech looks back to a time when he was much closer in age to the younger men, especially Phaedrus.

This autobiographical dimension of Socrates recalling his youth appears in other dialogues as well. This dimension is worth highlighting, considering its connections with the *Phaedo*. Like the *Symposium,* the *Phaedo* features multiple chronological layers in its construction, and within these layers it displays some of Socrates' autobiographical pills, recalling youth. There, Socrates is about 70 years old, as he was executed in 399 BCE he recalls an earlier phase of intellectual development while speaking with Cebes: "when I was young, I became incredibly eager for the sort of wisdom that they call research into nature." (Pl. *Phd.* 96a).[68]

These reflective passages present Socrates in two different stages of life, highlighting common human experiences such as the contrast between youthful ambition and mature reflection. In both dialogues – the *Phaedo* and the *Symposium* – this construction invites a deeper consideration of how variables such as time, personal experience, self-awareness and the act of revisiting memories shape philosophical inquiry. The *Symposium* portrays a reflective yet vigorous philosopher, whereas the *Phaedo* places him in the shadow of imminent death.[69] Despite these contrasting contexts, both moments share a central thematic concern: the pursuit of immortality. Whether expressed through philosophical investigation or through the legacy of one's teachings, this pursuit bridges the different versions of Socrates and provides connections across the dialogues.

From these chronological layers, the passage of time emerges as a decisive variable in the construction of Socrates as a complex character. The interplay between his youthful curiosity and mature wisdom prompts consideration of how the stages of life relate to philosophical development, an issue that becomes central in the erotic method articulated in the

[68] All the quotations from the *Phaedo*, unless otherwise noted, follow Sedley and Long's (2010) translation, with minor modifications.

[69] Although the reader knows what was imminent to happen in the period following Agathon's party events that would eventually contribute to the philosopher's condemnation, the characters, confined within their own narrative layer, remain entirely unaware of it.

dialogue between Socrates and Diotima. By weaving personal reminiscence into abstract reasoning, Plato foregrounds the role of individual experience in addressing enduring philosophical questions, including the nature of love and immortality.

This dynamic also reinforces the relational dimension of the dialogue, showing how Socrates' encounter with Diotima functions as a formative moment in shaping his philosophical perspective – one that he continues to transmit, almost as a form of reproduction, decades later. Socrates' framing of the earlier conversation both informs the development of his views and contributes to the construction of a model of educational practice.

2.2.2 Diotima's Voice

The characterisation of Diotima in Plato's *Symposium* encompasses multiple dimensions. She is introduced by Socrates in the following passage:

> Now I shall recount to you all a discourse about Love which I once heard given by a woman from Mantinea, who was called Diotima. She was an expert on that subject and on many other subjects too. There was one occasion in particular, before the plague, when she procured for the Athenians, after they had performed sacrifices, a ten-year postponement of that disease. It was she who taught me the whole subject of love, and it is the things she had to say about it that I shall try to recount to you. (Pl. *Smp.* 201d)

The name Diotima means "honoured by Zeus" or "she who honours Zeus", carrying either an active or passive sense. She is referred to as "Diotima of Mantinea" (201d), probably a reference to the Peloponnesian city of Mantinea, Sparta's ally during the Peloponnesian War, which identifies her as a foreigner. As a foreigner, alongside Philebus, she is "an exception to the rule of existing contemporaneous evidence confirming Plato's choosing his characters from among known persons" (Nails 216, 307).

The Greek form of the name 'Mantinea' also reveals an additional dimension: *mantinike* contains the root *mantis*, meaning "prophet" or "seer", and *nike*, meaning "victory" (Evans 2006, 8). The seer possesses a superior understanding of things past, present and future, and Diotima, within the frame of Socrates' account, exemplifies this capacity (Rowe 1998,173).

Thus, "Mantinea" may signal not only geographic origin but also Diotima's wisdom and prophetic powers as a priestess.[70]

It is unknown whether Diotima truly existed or is merely a fictional character. The only reference to her in the Platonic *corpus* appears in the *Symposium*, and the earliest mention of her after Plato appears only in the 2nd century CE. Debates over her fictional status emerged much later, beginning in the 15th century.[71]

The possible symbolic nature of the name "Diotima of Mantinea", together with the absence of any contemporary or near-contemporary evidence of her existence, is among the main arguments supporting the view that she is a fictional creation.[72] That said, and following the interpretative orientation established in the prologue, my concern throughout this thesis is not to adjudicate her historicity but to understand her construction and function as a character within the dialogue.

A Woman in (a) History

Some arguments against Diotima's historical existence reflect what can only be described as misogynistic prejudice among certain scholars – specifically, the assumption that real women could not have played central intellectual roles in Plato's works, and that one cannot seriously consider that Socrates could have learned from a woman. On this view, Diotima would be nothing more than a sarcastic mask behind which Socrates hides his own doctrine. Interestingly, a similar line of reasoning has also been used to argue in favour of her historicity: if Socrates had indeed been taught by a woman, this would have been remarkable enough that Plato would not invent it solely for dramatic purposes.

Yet nothing makes it unlikely that Socrates might have sought counsel from a female religious expert. In Plato's dialogues, Socrates is regularly shown engaging with religious authority, a domain in which women often held significant roles.[73] In the *Apology* (21a), for

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[70] As Parker notes, the religious specialists frequently mentioned by Plato in the dialogues may not belong to any of the official Athenian priestly category: "Perhaps Plato is using 'priests and priestesses' in a loose way which will include religious specialists of all type" (Parker 2005, 99).

[71] See Waithe (1987) for a comprehensive analysis of the arguments on Diotima's historicity.

[72] See Ausland (2000) on the problem of Diotima's fictionality.

[73] It is important to stress the missed opportunity in those scholars who dismiss Diotima altogether in exploring the widespread connection between women in various Greek religions contexts, who acted, during the cults, as intermediaries between the divine and those who seek them to attain a special relationship with the divine, especially in Mystery religions. For example, from offerings through votive reliefs and "(…) in Greek art and cult from Archaic times onwards" (Petridou 2013, 329) we see priestly personnel, including women, side by side or

example, Socrates recounts how Chaerephon consulted the Delphic priestess concerning his wisdom, and in the *Meno* (81a–b) Socrates explicitly states that he consulted both men and women – priests and priestesses – on religious matters.

A separate and ongoing debate concerns the hypothesis that Diotima might be a fictional mask for Aspasia (D'Angour 2019). Aspasia, like Diotima, was a foreign-born woman, and the symbolic resonance of the name "Diotima" – suggesting reciprocal honours with Zeus – may have evoked Aspasia's association with Pericles, who was frequently nicknamed "Zeus" in comedic plays and popular speech. The two shared an emotional, intellectual and political partnership until Pericles' death from the plague in 429 BCE. Arguments against identifying Diotima with Aspasia include the fact that Plato generally does not conceal historical names and directly refers to Aspasia in the *Menexenus*. On this basis, some argue that Diotima is more likely a historical religious specialist in her own right.

Nonetheless, parallels between Diotima and Aspasia remain striking. In *Menexenus*, Aspasia appears, like Diotima, as a foreigner and as Socrates' teacher. Their relationship is depicted as close enough to the point that Socrates jokes about nearly receiving a slap from her when he faltered while rehearsing a funeral oration. A similar tone of humour and playfulness shapes the exchanges between Socrates and Diotima in the *Symposium*.[74] As Nails (2016) suggests, the fact that Plato situates two foreign-born women at the centre of Socrates' education "provide support for the argument that Plato viewed the intellects of women, when freed from the subjection of Athenian education and custom, as equal to those of men". (2016, 309).

The link between Aspasia and Alcibiades also strengthens this comparison. Alcibiades' dramatic entrance follows Socrates and Diotima's speech immediately, forming a direct contrast that disrupts what had appeared to be the climax of the symposium. Aspasia was Alcibiades' great-aunt. After the death of Alcibiades' father, Cleinias, in battle in 447 BCE, he became the ward of Pericles and Aspasia. This network of associations – pedagogical, familial,

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reenacting the actions of the divine (Sourvinou-Inwood 2003, 29), in a close a direct relationship with gods (Burkert 1987, 12-15; Edmonds 2017. 196). And such relationship may bestow upon them blessings which include knowledge from the divine (Betegh 2022, 243), unavailable to the uninitiated. See Parker (1991; 2005), Richardson (1974), Foley (1993), and West (1983) for further discussion on the role of women in Mystery religions, particularly, though not exclusively, of Orphic-Eleusinian tradition.

[74] καὶ ἣ γελάσασα καὶ πῶς ἄν, ἔφη, ὦ Σώκρατες, ὁμολογοῖτο μέγας θεὸς εἶναι παρὰ τούτων, οἵ φασιν αὐτὸν οὐδὲ θεὸν εἶναι; "And she laughed. 'Well, Socrates, how could it be,' she asked, 'that everyone agrees on Eros being a great god when they say he is not a god at all?' (Pl. *Symp*. 202b-c) Da Paz's (2025) translation.

and dramatic – makes the parallel between Aspasia and Diotima a relevant and compelling line of enquiry. D'Angour suggests that:

> (…) the intimate familiarity that developed between Socrates and Alcibiades will have required the consent, if not the explicit blessing, of Alcibiades' powerful and highly-placed erstwhile guardian. Their association is also likely to have been cemented with the full knowledge and backing of Pericles' influential partner Aspasia, who was related to Alcibiades through her sister's marriage to his grandfather, also called Alcibiades." (D'Angour 2019, 106).

Regardless of whether Diotima's character is linked to any historical figure, we know for sure that Plato anchors her within the narrative to a real historical event. Socrates introduces her as the one responsible for the postponement of Athens' plague for ten years (201d). Evans (2006, 8) observes that, given Athens' defeat in the Peloponnesian War and the devastating plagues of 429 and 427 BCE, the "victory" implicit in the name Mantinea may have carried an ironic tone for Plato's contemporaries. Yet, as Nussbaum (2001, 177) notes, this fictional attribution is significant: it grants Diotima public authority and renown, making her a figure capable of benefiting not only Socrates but the city itself. This grounding reinforces the weight of the speech that follows.

Being a woman introduces further complexities into her characterisation. Agathon's banquet is staged as an almost exclusively male environment. Halperin (1990, 128 - 129) stresses that while Greek banquets were typically men's gatherings, women were not categorically absent from such events[75]. Halperin points out that Plato intentionally made the event an unusually masculine affair: at one point, the flute-girl is sent off the party (176e), weaving a dramatic movement that manifests the utmost contrast upon Diotima's indirect presence.

Female figures do appear elsewhere in the dialogue, for example, the aforementioned flute-girl; Alcestis and Euridice in Phaedrus' speech; and the all-female being in the original humans of Aristophanes' myth. However, Diotima's role is distinct. Her voice, even though mediated through Socrates, is granted discursive authority. By being a woman, Diotima's depiction as Socrates' teacher disrupts traditional pederastic and gender norms, which are preeminent in the dialogue, and contributes to Socrates' earlier declaration that he will not follow the stablished rules for the evening (199b-c): by presenting another person's teaching

[75] Here, the author is referring mainly to a presence related to sexual intercourse.

instead of offering his own encomium, Socrates challenges the boundaries of participation and authority, and Diotima becomes central to that challenge.

A priestess

Diotima's role as a priestess reflects the historical connection between women and religious practice in ancient Greece. Women frequently held influential positions within ritual life, and these roles offered them forms of social authority and avenues for political participation otherwise unavailable in civic institutions. Evans underscores that Diotima is far more than an ordinary prophet, "like the goddess Demeter, Diotima is a sort of mystagogue, one who initiates individuals into her Mysteries and who mediates to humans information about the divine." (2006, 2). In this sense, Diotima can be understood as a mystagogue who guides Socrates into becoming an initiate into the mysteries of Eros, thus mediating information between human and godly realms.[76]

Through Diotima's voice, Plato introduces a distinct religious dimension to the dialogue.[77] That becomes particularly explicit in Diotima's use of language associated with the Greek Mystery Cults. Such religious vocabulary is not unique to Plato. From a broader perspective, Casadesús (2016, 2) notes that religious and initiatory language was progressively incorporated into Greek philosophical discourse, being noted, for example, in the proem of Parmenides' poem, which is entirely devoted to an explanation of how the knowledge displayed in the poem was received from an unnamed goddess.

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[76] Simms argues that "(…) μυσταγωγός and its cognates are relatively late words, attested only twice before the first century AD: first in a fragment attributed to Menander (fr. 714 K), next more than 200 years later in an Attic decree of the first century BC LSCGS 15. Plutarch (Alc. 34.6) projects the word back to fifth-century Athens, but this is very likely an anachronism," (…) "terms are not attested before ca 300 BC because they were not in use at Eleusis, but were adopted there in Hellenistic times as a replacement for μυείν, in the sense of what the Eumolpidai and Kerykes did at the Mysteries" (Simms 1990, 193–94). Bowden adds that "(…) mystagogoi are only mentioned in connection with the Eleusinian Mysteries from the first century BC ownwards" (Bowden 2010, 32). However, as Da Paz notes, "Even if the term is an anachronism, a possible ritual role for priestly personnel to conduct sacred rites can be speculated from archaeological, literary, and mythological sources dating to ca. 750 BCE (cf. Mylonas and Travlos 1952, 53–72; Mylonas 1961; Sourvinou-Inwood 1993, 1–13; 1997, 132–64; 2003, 25–49; Graf 1974; Clinton 1974; 1993; 2005; Parker 1991, 1–17; 2005). Despite the debate on the term μυσταγωγός in the context of the Mysteries, it may be worth considering discussions on Plato's reformulation of pederasty (τὸν ὀρθῶς παιδεραστεῖν: 211b5-6)" (2005, 216). As I have been trying to bring out to our attention, (…) "In the present context the 'mystagogue' will be someone already initiated in, i.e. experienced in, 'loving correctly' (. . .) 'correct leading' will in the present case perhaps consist not so much in pointing the initiate towards beautiful bodies" (Rowe 1998, 194). See also Brisson (2006, 229–51).

[77] The very first words Diotima uses are οὐκ εὐφημήσεις, a rhetorical question to alert him to 'speak words of good omen', which appears to be an invitation mark for Socrates to partake in her peculiar religious aura from the outset.

> From the time of its origins, Greek philosophy was regarded as an elitist path to a kind of knowledge available only to those privileged few who were bold enough to follow it. Consequently, many of these philosophers presented themselves to their contemporaries as extraordinary beings, gifted with a superhuman capacity that allowed them to access almost divine knowledge, impossible to attain for the immense majority of mortals. In fact, the acquisition of knowledge brought the philosopher closer to the divinity, being the only one capable of its possession. (Casadesús 2016, 1-2)

Plato's attitude toward the mysteries is, as Betegh argues, integrative rather than confrontational (2022, 252). By incorporating elements drawn from the Mystery Cults, Plato establishes parallels between the religious process of becoming initiated and the journey of becoming a philosopher.

Mystery cults are different from the religion practised in the polis. Betegh (2022, 233) emphasises that although "polis religion"[78] held primary importance, there existed a range of other institutions, sanctuaries, festivals, and cults that transcended individual cities and played a key role in people's religious experience. Among these, the mystery cults offered a particularly intense form of religious experience:

> The term *musteria* originally referred to the festival of Demeter and her daughter Kore in Eleusis, but gradually came to cover a set of other religious activities, including Bacchic rites, rites conducted by itinerant priests under the name of Orpheus, as well as the rites of a group of minor divinities called the Corybantes. (…) Participation was not linked to membership in the political community since all Greeks could take part in them. This openness was, however, combined with a strong sense of exclusivity, emphasizing the distinction between the in-group of those who have already gone through the rites and the out-group of the "uninitiated". (Betegh 2022, 234)

Evans (2006,2) underscores how language and imagery in Diotima's speech "evoke the yearly celebration of Demeter and Kore (the Maiden, also known as Persephone) at Eleusis." The *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* – one of the central sources for understanding the Eleusinian Mysteries – focuses on female experience and directly addresses the relationship between the divine and the human. Evans (2006, 2) suggests that Plato draws on Eleusinian language and imagery because the central rituals and revelations at Eleusis challenge the conventional notions

[78] For the establishment of the notion of 'polis religion' in scholarship, see Sourvinou-Inwood (1990, 295-322; 2000a, 13-37; 2000b, 38-54). Cf. Price (1999) and Rutherford (2013). For a corrective, see Kindt (2012, 97-98).

of hierarchy in Athenian society. By contrasting the hierarchical structures and practices of the polis with the more egalitarian rites of Demeter at Eleusis, Evans highlights the significant difference between having indirect and direct contact with the divine:

> Civic priests and public officials also present performed civic sacrificial rites at Eleusis, just as they did at the civic festivals that regularly took place in the urban center in Athens. But contrary to the customs of official animal sacrifice, it was not only the priests in attendance at the mysteries who communicated with the divine at the altar on behalf of the group. (…) Rather, each individual among the initiates – male, female, slave, and free – dedicated piglets to Demeter, watched the sacred drama, and experienced knowledge of the divine directly through the power of his or her own senses. (Evans 2006, 6).

Given the contrast between the religious practices in the city of Athens, which offered a mediated experience with the divine strictly through sacred officials, and the yearly Eleusinian rites, which enabled a more personal and direct experience, the presence of mystery language in Diotima's teaching reinforces the high value placed on the initiate's own involvement and perspective. Her instruction requires active participation in the acquisition of knowledge, rather than the more passive dynamic suggested, for instance, by Agathon in the prologue (175c-d).

Although the exact rituals of the Eleusine mysteries remain unknown, certain patterns are discernible and illuminate their relevance for Plato's thought. According to Betegh, three core elements define the mystery cults:

> (i) The shared premise of these cults was that, on the basis of a personal choice and by going through a well-defined process, individuals could establish a privileged relation to divine powers, going beyond what could be achieved in the framework of the cults of the *polis*. (ii) The promise of the mystery cults was that on the basis of this special relationship, the individual could expect extraordinary prerogatives and rewards from the relevant divinities. These rewards were, moreover, framed as a "blessed" state, the best a human can expect for this life and the afterlife. (iii) The individual had to reach and maintain a certain condition in order to successfully to go through the mysteries. Traditional religious language most often referred to this condition as "purity," which could be achieved by carrying out certain prescribed actions and avoiding some others. (Betegh 2022, 235)

This pattern of an individual choosing to undergo a process that facilitates a privileged relationship with the divine – under the promise of personally experiencing a long-lasting "blessed" state – resonates strongly with Diotima's speech in the *Symposium*. Woodruff (2023,

37) explains that in the mystery religions, this "blessed" state would be called *epopteia*, the ultimate vision that "is supposed to change the way an initiate sees ordinary things".

In her speech, Diotima uses the term *epoptika* at 210a, immediately before introducing the *scala amoris*: "But for the final initiation and revelation (*epoptika*), to which all this has been merely preliminary for someone on the right track, I am not sure if you have the capability". (210a) According to Woodruff, this use of *epoptika* is intended to evoke the mystery religions (2023, 27, n.2), establishing a parallel between religious initiation and the transformative – and well-structured – experience described in the *Symposium*.[79]

Traces of this structured process can be perceived multiple times throughout Diotima's speech. One example is her use of the word *orthos.*[80] In 210a, just before entering the section of the final revelation, she remarks that everything up to that point "has been merely preliminary for someone on the right (*orthos)* track" (210a). In the very next sentence, she again emphasises *orthos,* specifying that there is a correct way to approach this final stage of philosophical initiation: "A person who would set out on this path in the right way (*orthos*) must begin in youth by directing his attention to beautiful bodies" (210a).

Later, at 210e, Diotima underscores once more the importance of correctness and sequence:

> Anyone who has been guided to this point in the study of love and has been contemplating beautiful things in the correct way (*orthos*) and in the right sequence, will suddenly perceive, as he now approaches the end of his study, a beauty that is marvellous in its nature. (Pl. *Smp.* 210e)

However, at this final stage, something of a different order occurs: the lover suddenly (*exhaiphnes*) perceives the beautiful. In this vision, beauty is described as "eternal; it does not come into being or perish, nor does it grow or waste away (…). It exists on its own, single in

[79] Burkert notes another character of the Mysteries, which may have also been explored by Plato, namely, the yearly repetition. Many authors have insisted on reconstructions featuring stages for undertaking the Eleusinian Mysteries (cf. Dowden 1980, 409-27 and Clinton 2003, 50-78). However, due to the complete lack of historical data from the Mysteries proper (Martin 2004, 12), it is interesting to think *epopteia* along with Burkert: "the *epopteia* repeats, renews, and deepens that which had been laid as a foundation in the *myesis.* Already the *mystai* were permitted to see the blissful 'sight'. The *epoptai* may simply have seen more or, more importantly, differently" (Burkert 1983, 275). Following Edmonds (2017), Da Paz (2025, 205) admits that "there are compelling reasons to admit that μύεω would not be "to introduce the worshipper into a group of other worshippers but rather to improve or perfect the worshipper's relationship to the god" (Edmonds 2017, 196).

[80] In *Republic* (516a-b) the process of ascent from the cave, in a similar manner, involves seeing things in a certain order so the eyes can adapt to the light and become able to look directly at the sun.

substance and everlasting." (211a-b). Allusions to the Eleusinian mysteries – and other ideas and practices connected to Orphic and Bacchic cults – become particularly prominent precisely when the priestess addresses "the nature and ultimate goal of philosophical contemplation, its connection to the best life, the relationship between soul and body, the soul's immortality and its relationship to the divine." (Betegh 2022, 234).

The climax of the rites – the immediate encounter with the divine (Burkert 1987,90), the *epopteia* – is presented in the dialogue as analogous to the encounter with beauty itself and to the begetting of beautiful *logoi* and actions.[81] This, too, happens suddenly (*exaiphnes,* 210a-e). When approached "in the correct way," *orthos,* such a climax never has one without the other. That is, they are two faces of the same coin. Namely, encounter with the beautiful begs for begetting of what is akin to it. And it is worth reminding that this vision and begetting are supposed to change one's perspectives on ordinary things (Woodruff 2023, 37) – at the limit, capable of turning one's life.

In conclusion, Diotima's character and the religious dimension she introduces are deeply interwoven with the theoretical construction of the erotic method. The dramatic movement that carries this distinctive character provides a framework in which the reader or listener can imagine an analogous horizon: not one approached through recurrent rites, but through the continuous practice of philosophy.

2.3 Socrates and Diotima's Speech (201c-212c)

"Now I shall recount you all a discourse about Love which I once heard given by a woman from Mantinea, who was called Diotima." (201d). With this sentence, Socrates introduces the section that contains Diotima's speech. The term *dielthein*, translated as 'recount', is significant: like other narrators in the dialogue, Socrates highlights the mediated nature of what he is about to say. Blondell (2006, 148, n.3) notes that the repetition of the term *dielthein,* between 201d and 201e, echoes the "journey" of the narrative, reinforcing the sense that the *Symposium*'s intricate structure is itself a movement through layers of memory.

[81] After all, it is difficult to argue away Betegh's reading, particularly in what regards "the transformative experience of getting close to and beholding the divine, and giving birth in that very moment to what makes a life good – indeed, we wouldn't need to know anything about what happened at Eleusis to understand and appreciate all this" (Betegh 2022, 252).

As emphasised in 'Chapter 1', this structure – especially its layering of different temporalities – begins with Apollodorus' recounting of a conversation he had with Glaucon. That opening functions as part of an explanation strategy to justify the very first line of the dialogue, in which he affirms his preparedness to recall the events of Agathon's banquet (172a). Similarly, Socrates own recounting of his conversation with Diotima is part of a strategy to justify his earlier assertion that: "the only subject I can claim to know about is love". (177 d-e).[82]

Socrates returns to this claim in 198d, after Agathon's speech, but he reframes it: he admits that, when he declared to know about love, he was mistaken about the proper way to deliver a eulogy. Immediately afterwards, he withdraws from the competition (199b) and asks permission to tell the truth about Love "in his own fashion". This move is another step in his justification strategy – one that both redefines the methodological procedure and casts doubt on the truth-value of the preceding speeches.

The "journey" of the narrative further highlights parallels with the strategies of the other narrators. Just as Apollodorus clarified that he had not been present at the banquet himself, Socrates frustrates his interlocutors by not delivering a speech of his own. In both cases, authority is displaced, and disappointment is mitigated by appealing to an external voice. Socrates' way of counterbalancing frustration is to underscore Diotima's authority, similarly to Apollodorus's clarifying that he checked details with Socrates (173b).

This structural echo positions Socrates as a narrator of an earlier conversation from his youth, thereby opening yet another layer of the dialogue – the fifth, and most distanced from the frame. Diotima is introduced as an expert not only on love but on many other matters as well (201d). "She it was who taught me the whole subject of love, and it is the things she had to say about it that I shall try to recount to you, starting from the conclusions that Agathon and I reached together but speaking now on my own as best as I can." (210d).

The movement between voices, from double (Apollodorus recalling Aristodemus) to triple indirect discourse (Socrates recalling Diotima), deepens the intricate interplay between time and narrative. Bacon (1959, 419) interprets this movement through layers emphasising that, with the introduction of Diotima and her religious dimension, the truth announced by Socrates takes on the character of a carefully guarded mystery. This mysterious register,

[82] 'The subject of love' translates [*ta*] *erotica*.

intertwined with layers of recollection, certainly helps to soften the frustration of not hearing something "original" from Socrates himself, underscoring the absence of direct authorship as a part of the dialogue's deliberate dramatic strategy.

Particularly relevant is Socrates' reference to *homologemenon* – the "conclusions reached together" with Agathon, in 201d, as the starting point of his recounting. This choice not only emphasises dialogue as the starting point of the enquiry but also indicates that the preliminary dialogues were themselves a preparation for what follows, easing the interlocutors into Socrates' story.[83]

The emphasis on dialogue as the starting point hints at a broader dimension of Plato's philosophy. Reaching a conclusion together is central to the dialectic method. As Casertano (2018,171-173) stresses, the search for truth through dialogue requires not only the logical correction of the arguments but also, at every step, the interlocutors' shared assent. This emphasis on *homologia* recurs throughout the Platonic *corpus*.[84] In the *Meno* 75d, for instance, Socrates remarks that if he and Meno, as friends, are to pursue a genuine discussion, they must proceed in a more dialectical manner, answering not only with the truth "but in addition through things which the person questioned also admits he knows." (Pl. *Men.* 75d). The focus here clearly falls on the assumptions held by the specific interlocutor.

As observed earlier in the analysis of Agathon's responses to Socrates' *elenchus* (199e - 200e), the personal dimension of the dialogue is essential. Socrates expresses satisfaction only when Agathon, even while using a weaker form of assent, introduces the personal pronoun – a sign of some degree of personal investment in the argument. The dynamics of the dialogue repeatedly reveal that philosophical inquiry depends on the subjective perspectives and commitments of its participants.

This returns the focus to Socrates' portrayal of his exchange with Diotima. Picking up from Agathon's speech and projecting Diotima's procedure, he announces the methodological framework he will adopt:

> As you demonstrated, Agathon, one should first define who Love is and what he is like, before talking about his characteristic activity. I think it will be

[83] Socrates' interaction with Agathon before Diotima's introduction (199c-202d) virtually reproduces the same back-and- forth dynamics that Socrates describes in his exchange with the priestess. I will get into this point further in this chapter.

[84] Whether or not Agathon, or Socrates' interlocutors in general, really and broadly agree with Socrates on the reached conclusions is a debated question, as commented before, recalling Beversluis' (2000) work.

> easiest to proceed as did my visitor from Mantinea with me on that occasion, by question and answer. I said much the same sort of things to her as Agathon said to me just now, that Love was a great god and that he was love of what is beautiful. She set about refuting me with those arguments that I have just used against Agathon, demonstrating that according to my own account Love was neither beautiful nor good. (Pl. *Smp.* 201e)

This passage shows that even before naming Diotima, Socrates had already begun to employ the same dialectical method through which she had once instructed him. Diotima proceeded by questioning (*anakrinousa*). The method is significant not only as a technique but as a dramatic gesture: by recounting his own refutation at the hands of Diotima, Socrates places himself in the position of his interlocutors. He invites them to identify with his earlier mistakes and to recognise the path he has already travelled. The authority of his speech lies not in detachment but in shared experience; he teaches as one who has learned. Gagarin (1977) even questions Socrates' capacities as a teacher, suggesting that while he may be the ideal student, he is perhaps not as effective a teacher as Diotima.

Blondell observes that Socrates "takes on the whole range of identities associated with Diotima's ladder." (2006, 150). Time is central to this multiplicity: the older Socrates recounts an episode of his youth while simultaneously adopting Diotima's role toward the other symposiasts. This temporal layering, constructed in the dramatic dimension, combined with the repeated recalling of the same formative event, illustrates how the philosopher is portrayed dynamically, occupying different positions even within a single framework of instruction.

Within the dramatic setting, roughly 25 years separate the young Socrates instructed by Diotima from the older Socrates who recounts the episode with Diotima at Agathon's banquet. Blondell (2006, 152) suggests that certain moments of the dialogue invite speculation about how far Socrates may have progressed during those intervening years. What remains certain is that, after decades, Socrates still chooses to recall in detail his conversation with Diotima. This emphasis underscores the formative weight of the encounter and reminds the listener that its transmission here begins not as a fixed doctrine, but as a personal experience recollected and shared.[85]

Socrates presents his interaction with Diotima as at once personal and fundamentally shareable. His account implies that his interlocutors – including Agathon – may imagine

[85] At the end of his speech, Socrates affirms that he believes in the things Diotima said to him, and that's why he tries to persuade everyone else about that matter (212b).

themselves one day in a similar position, transmitting what they have learned to others. A personal experience can be in some level shared, but it is never reproduced in identical form. What emerges, therefore, is a tension: the dialogue seems to promise a path of understanding that can be followed by anyone, yet its very enactment reveals the irreducible complexity of individual perspectives and assumptions.

The contrast with Agathon is instructive in understanding the variable of the personal perspective. When Diotima challenged the young Socrates with the claim that Love is neither beautiful nor good, he resisted, asking: "What do you mean, Diotima? Are you actually saying Love is ugly and bad?" (201e).[86] On the other hand, Agathon gave in immediately when challenged by Socrates, confessing that he had not understood what he was saying (201b) and conceding "so let it be as you say." The juxtaposition of these two different responses shows how the same argumentative structure produces different responses depending on the interlocutor's disposition – and, naturally, depending also on the teacher's own manner and personality.

This contrast between the answers reinforces the conclusion toward which the introduction to Socrates and Diotima's speech leads: the human attempt to follow a path of understanding, even one carefully structured, is always shaped by the particularities of those who walk it. What is presented as the right (*orthos*) way of proceeding cannot be detached from the shifting and unstable conditions of human learners. In this sense, the introduction already foreshadows one of the central themes of the analysis: philosophical ascent is not simply a method to be applied, but a practice that unfolds within the fragility and complexity of human life. As Roochnik (1996, 239) puts it, Socrates' claim to know "the erotic things" is tantamount to saying he knows something fundamental about human beings.

2.3.1 Preparatory Teachings

Before turning to what Diotima designates as the *telea kai epoptika* – the final initiation and revelation (210a-b) – she concludes her account of what she calls the *ta erotika*, the matters of Eros. These earlier stages do not yet describe the full ascent toward the beautiful; instead, they provide the conceptual and existential groundwork that makes such an ascent possible.

[86] Barney (2010) offers a comprehensive overview of "beautiful" and "good" in Plato.

They unsettle the binary assumptions inherited from the previous encomia, introduce the intermediate condition *metaxy* that characterises Eros, and situate human desire within the broader interplay between beauty and human nature.

2.3.1.1 The Pitfall of Binary Models

Socrates' discomfort with the conclusion that Eros is neither beautiful nor good, specifically in terms of the supposed implication that Eros is ugly and bad, opens the way for a deeper investigation of the fragility of binary models of thought. Migliori (2016, 66-67) notes that in the *Symposium,* Plato repeatedly juxtaposes reality and opposing choices, only to show that such contrasts are misleading. Dialectical reasoning exposes a more nuanced structure of reality, dissolving the initial oppositions.

This tension between polarities and their eventual dismantling is central to Diotima's instruction, which begins by challenging Socrates' binary assumptions. When Socrates protests her claim – "What do you mean, Diotima? Are you actually saying Love is ugly and bad?" – she immediately intervenes: "'Watch what you say!'[87] she exclaimed. 'Do you really think that if something is not beautiful it has to be ugly?'" (201e). Socrates responds without hesitation that yes, of course, he does (201e). This sets the stage for Diotima's crucial clarification: "and something that is not wise is ignorant, I suppose? Have you not noticed that there is something in between wisdom and ignorance?" (202a)

With this, Diotima introduces the notion of an intermediary condition, one that reshapes the conceptual terrain on which Eros is understood. Eros' lack of beauty and goodness does not entail possession of their opposites; rather, he occupies the space in between. The introduction of the *metaxy* forces a reassessment not only of the nature of Eros but of the conceptual categories themselves. Through this shift, Diotima dismantles dichotomous thinking and opens Socrates to a horizon of gradations rather than absolutes.

To deepen this point, Diotima next explores whether there is a state between wisdom (*phronesis*) and ignorance (*amathia*). She introduces the notion of *orthe doxa,* correct belief, as precisely such a middle ground:

[87] 'Watch what you say' is a translation to *ouk eufemeseis* that is an expression with religious connotation, a closer translation would be "avoid words of ill omen' or 'do not blaspheme'. (Franco and Torrano, 2021, n.87).

> I am talking about having a correct belief without being able to give a reason for it. Don't you realise that this state cannot be called knowing – for how can it be knowledge if it lacks reason? And it is not ignorance either – for how can it be ignorance if it has hit upon the truth? (Pl. *Smp.* 202a)

This example demonstrates that between the apparent poles of knowledge and ignorance lies a middle state. *Orthe doxa* differs from *episteme* because it lacks a *logos*, yet it cannot be equated with ignorance since it succeeds in aligning with the truth. As Rowe (1998) notes, Diotima employs *phronesis* here as a synonym for *sophia*, so that her point is not merely formal but conceptual: categories that appear exhaustive and mutually exclusive, in fact, admit gradations. By compelling Socrates to acknowledge this intermediate state, Diotima prepares the ground for a broader reconfiguration of desire and knowledge.

Diotima then warns Socrates to avoid hastily drawing conclusions within binary frameworks and to explore the middle ground. Her admonition makes explicit the lesson implied by *orthe doxa*.

> Don't then insist that what is not beautiful has to be ugly, and what is not good has to be bad. Similarly with Love. When you yourself admit that Love is not good and not beautiful, that is no reason for thinking he has to be ugly and bad. He is something between the two." (Pl. *Smp.* 202b)

Despite the clarity of the distinction, Socrates still resists the force of her teaching. He replies with confidence: "At any rate surely everyone agrees that he is a great god". (202b). For anyone familiar with Diotima's next argument, which will deny that Eros is a god, Socrates' cluelessness is unmistakable. Diotima asks if by 'everyone' he is referring to everyone who doesn't know or including the ones who know. Socrates answers, "I mean absolutely everyone" (202b), which makes Diotima laugh. Socrates clearly has not yet recognised the direction in which she is leading him.

Through a sequence of questions, Diotima leads Socrates to admit that all gods are happy and beautiful, that happiness depends on possessing what is good and beautiful, and that Eros, by his own earlier claims, lacks precisely those things. The conclusion follows inexorably: "'So how could one be a god who has no portion of what is beautiful or good?' 'Not possibly, as it now appears'. 'Do you see then', she said, 'that you also do not believe that Love is a god?'" (202c-d).

At this point, Diotima clarifies that Eros is not a god but a *daimon*. As she explains: "'As in the previous instances'" (…) "'something in between mortal and immortal'" (…) "'He is a great spirit (*daimon*), Socrates. All spirits are intermediate between god and mortal'" (202d).

Here, the logic of the *metaxy* reaches its ontological depth: Eros belongs to the in-between not only in relation to beauty or wisdom but in his very mode of being. He is neither mortal nor divine; he mediates between the two. This ontology of mediation resonates with the dialogue's layered narrative structure itself, where no voice appears unmediated, and no perspective stands outside the chain of transmissions. Just as the *Symposium*'s narrative unfolds through intermediaries, Diotima's teaching insists that desire and understanding must be approached through the space of the in-between.

As Diotima dismantles the apparent binaries – beautiful/ugly, good/bad, wise/ignorant, mortal/immortal – each collapse reveals a gradational structure masked by oppositions. In this movement, Eros emerges as the paradigm of the *metaxy,* always lacking, always striving, never reducible to either pole.

This dynamic reinforces the conclusion drawn earlier: the nature of what is pursued cannot be disentangled from the condition of the one who pursues it. Philosophy itself emerges in this fragile middle ground, where desire exposes its own instability and openness. Diotima's refutation of binaries thus prepares the conceptual ground for the structured ascent toward the beautiful, by showing that the path of love can only belong to beings who live, like Eros, in the fragile middle ground between extremes.

The conceptualisation of correct belief as a middle ground mirrors the ontological status of intermediates in Platonic metaphysics, such as the objects of mathematical study. For Brentlinger (1963, 151-152) these intermediaries are necessarily imperfect images of the forms, meaning that assertions about them are "true, but only partially true". This partial truth reflects the intellectual state of *dianoia*, which, like *orthe doxa*, has 'hit upon the truth' but lacks the complete justification (*logos*) that defines full wisdom. Brentlinger explains that the instruments used to attain this knowledge are inherently "inadequate as a means of expressing or setting forth by its mediation the nature of something" (1963, 162).

Thus, the philosophical relevance of this intermediate state is profound: it demonstrates that the movement toward truth is structurally and epistemologically predicated on operating within incompleteness. Because the knowledge-seeking process itself is necessarily mediated,

even if the final result is unmediated, accepting this inherent lack – the condition of *eros* as *metaxy* – is the foundational requirement for philosophical practice.

2.3.1.2 What Lies Between Godly and Human Nature

The topic of human nature comes into focus once Diotima establishes that Eros is a *daimon*[88], whose function (*dynamis*) lies in mediating the interaction between god and mortal (202e). In a stronger sense, these intermediaries are responsible for binding together in unity realms that are completely separated:

> Spirits, being intermediary, fill the space between the other two, so that all are bound together into one entity. It is by means of spirits that all divination can take place, the whole craft of seers and priests, with their sacrifices, rites and spells, and all prophecy and magic. Deity and humanity are completely separated, but through mediation of spirits all converse and communication from gods to humans, waking and sleeping, is made possible. (Pl. *Smp*. 202e-203a)

From this description, Diotima transitions toward the question of human nature. She explains that there are those wise in these matters, the *daimonion*, just like men who are wise in a skill, *techne*, or manual craft, *cheirourgia*, which she contrasts as a more materialistic form of expertise (203a). Diotima, as a priestess, certainly belongs to the first category.

The discussion of human nature is momentarily suspended when Socrates enquires into Eros' parentage. Through the myth of Eros' birth, Diotima underscores again that Eros embodies relationality and lack: "his resources always slip through his fingers, so that although he is never destitute, neither is he rich. He is always midway between the two, just as he is between wisdom and ignorance." (203e). Lack becomes the guiding concept that links Eros' condition to human nature. The parallel is explicit in the next passage:

> The truth of the matter is this. No god pursues wisdom or desires to be wise because gods are wise already, and no one who is wise already pursues wisdom. But neither do ignorant people pursue wisdom or desire to be wise, for the problem of ignorance is this, that someone who is neither fine and good (*kalos kagathos*) nor wise (*phronimos*) is still quite satisfied with himself. No one desires what he does not think he lacks. (Pl. *Smp.* 204a)

[88] In 203a Eros is said to be one of many, *poloi*, and diverse, *pantodapoi*, of this kind.

Diotima's conclusion is straightforward: an ignorant person, much like a god, cannot desire to improve. The difference lies in their reasoning – gods lack nothing, while the ignorant fail to recognise their own deficiency. Only those who inhabit the middle space between wisdom and ignorance can desire to learn. This *metaxy* condition, shared with Eros, defines the distinctively human capacity for philosophical pursuit.

The conclusion reached by Socrates and Diotima is that those who pursue wisdom must belong to the middle region between wisdom and ignorance.[89] Since wisdom is the most beautiful thing and Love is love of the beautiful, they deduce that Eros must be a philosopher, positioned between the wise and an the ignorant (204b). Possession of wisdom is what distinguishes the divine condition of the *sophos* from the human condition of the philosopher. (Trabattoni 2023, 28).

At this point, the object of inquiry increasingly resembles the philosopher himself. Both Eros and the philosopher are defined by the awareness of lack and by the desire that springs from it. Diotima stresses this contrast by revisiting Socrates' earlier mistake of imagining Love to be a beautiful god: "(…) the one which is really beautiful and delicate, flawless and endowed with every blessing, is the beloved object, while the one who loves is by contrast of an entirely different character." (204c). Both the philosopher and Eros desire what they lack – something essentially beautiful – and this lack is precisely what drives their pursuit.

Socrates' next question keeps following the rule of first talking about Eros and then about his benefits to humans (196a and 201d-e). By now, it seems that he is sufficiently satisfied with the knowledge about the nature of Eros and moves on: "'All right, Diotima", I replied. "You are very persuasive. If Love is as you say, what need does he supply in the lives of people?'" (204c). Diotima responds with a strategy reminiscent of the method Socrates himself used with Agathon – perhaps one he originally learned from her. She places herself in her student's shoes, on the other side of the dialogue, next to her interlocutor, the young Socrates. Diotima reframes the question: "But what if someone asked us, 'what does it mean, Socrates and Diotima, to say that Love is love of beautiful things?' Or to put it more clearly: what does the lover of beautiful things actually desire (*eran*)?" (204d).

[89] In this passage, there is a light-hearted interaction between Socrates and Diotima. Socrates asks who are the ones that pursue virtue and Diotima, before answering, says: "Even a child would know the answer to that by now" (Pl. *Smp.* 204b).

With this question, she shifts the focus from the nature of Eros to the structure of human desire, though without abandoning the previous line of inquiry. She begins with what Eros desires in order to illuminate what human beings desire. This movement is striking: Diotima takes Socrates' question about the function of Eros in human life and uses it to address a deeper issue – the relationship between beloved object and the lover's awareness of lack.

This reframing moves the discussion from the nature of Eros to the structure of human desire, but without losing the parallel: what Eros desires mirrors what humans desire. Step by step, Diotima guides Socrates. She leads him to acknowledge that the lover of beautiful things desires to possess them (204d). She then pushes further: "'But your answer raises yet another question: what will he gain by possessing beautiful things?"' (204d).

When Socrates hesitates, Diotima shifts the question from the beautiful to the good: "'Well', she said, 'suppose one changed the question and asked about the good instead of the beautiful: 'Come now, Socrates, what does the lover of good things actually desire?'" (204e). As Rowe (1988, 179) observes, since Socrates is already committed to the proposition that love is both of the good and the beautiful, the "move is perfectly justified" even if neither he nor Diotima pauses to articulate how the good and the beautiful relate to one another.

Socrates answers that the lover of good things desires to possess them, and when asked what such possession brings, he confidently replies: "(…) he will be *happy*" (204e). From this, they conclude that happiness depends on the possession of good things (204e). Diotima then notes that no further justification is needed: everyone desires happiness (205a).

Sheffield highlights the significance of this desire for good and beautiful things: " [it] is characterised as a movement towards the divine in the *Symposium: eros* operates between the mortal and the immortal (201d-203a), and the desire for good and beautiful things is a desire for happiness that characterises the divine state (202c10-d5). (206b, 132).

Immediately after establishing this universal desire for happiness, Diotima complicates matters by asking why, if everyone desires happiness, only some are called lovers. This introduces the theme of multiplicity. She explains that there are different kinds of love to which we use different names, much like the term 'poetry', *poiesis*, a term of wide application, which in Greek also means 'creation'. Only one type, though, concerned with song and verse, retains the original name of the whole class (205b-c).

> 'But you also know', she went on, 'that they are not all called creators. They have other names, and only that one part of creation which is separated off

> from the rest and is the part that is concerned with song and verse is called by the original name of the whole class, which is poetry, and only those to whom this part of creation belongs are called poets.' (Pl. *Smp*. 205c)

Diotima states that, similarly, those who pursue loving in other manifestations – such as "money making[90] or athletics or philosophy – are typically called 'lovers' (*erastai*) or described as 'in love.'" (205d). Only those ardently pursuing one specific form receive such terms: "'(…) they alone feel 'love', or are 'in love', or are 'lovers.'" (205d). Socrates agrees.

Diotima then introduces, and immediately refutes, a view strongly reminiscent of Aristophanes' speech: "Yes, and you will hear it said that lovers are people who are looking for their own other half." (205e). Instead of validating this myth, she redirects the focus to the goodness of the object: "'(…) the only thing people love is the good.'" (206a).[91] From this, Socrates and Diotima conclude that "'Love is the desire to possess the good always'" (206a).

At first glance, the claim that people love only the good may seem counterintuitive, especially given Diotima's inclusion of "money-making" as a possible object of desire. Sheffield (2006a, 91) clarifies that "the good" here refers to whatever the desiring agent conceives as good. The multiplicity Diotima describes, therefore, acquires a more personal dimension: each lover's pursuit reflects a particular understanding of the good, shaped by individual perception.

Yet this clarification also reintroduces the theme of human limitation. Desire is guided not by an infallible grasp of what is genuinely good but by the fragile and often mistaken ways in which each person interprets what would complete or benefit them. What one loves reveals not only the structure of desire but also the vulnerability inherent in human attempts to recognise and respond to lack.

2.3.1.3 Beauty and Human Nature

At the end of the previous section, Socrates and Diotima reach a decisive conclusion: that the only thing people love is the good and that love is the desire to possess the good always. This conclusion does not close the discussion on multiplicity but reframes it: from the variety of loves and objects of desire to the question of how the pursuit of the good is enacted in human

[90] This term recalls Apollodorus' unnamed interlocutors (173c).
[91] In 205a Diotima and Socrates already concluded that the desire to always possess good things is common to all humans.

life. To address this, Diotima turns to the activity (*ergon*) of love, asking: "can you tell me how those who pursue it go about it? What are they doing that the zeal and drive they show can be called love? What does this activity (*ergon*) really consist of? Can you say?" (206b).

As earlier in 204b, the exchange begins with playfulness, with Socrates admitting: "'If I knew the answer, Diotima' (…) 'I wouldn't be so admiring of you for your wisdom or coming to you to learn these very things'". (206b). Diotima then gives the decisive answer: "'It is giving birth in the beautiful, in respect of body and soul'" (206b). She elaborates that all human beings are pregnant, both in body and in soul, and that upon reaching maturity, they naturally desire to give birth. But this generative process has a condition: "It is not possible to give birth in what is ugly (*aischros*), only in the beautiful." (206c).

As Sheffield notes, "The dual claims that *all* human beings are pregnant, and that when we reach a certain age, we *naturally* desire to give birth (206c1-4), suggest that pregnancy and delivery are part of our natural make-up as human beings." (2006a, 87). In other words, the *ergon* of love is rooted in our human nature itself

At first glance, the claim that it is impossible to give birth in the ugly seems flagrantly inaccurate from a practical perspective – people conventionally deemed "ugly" do not encounter difficulties reproducing, and harmful or destructive things are created constantly. Unless beauty and goodness admit multiple understandings, Diotima's formulation risks appearing out of place in a discourse initially framed as a pursuit of truth. But she immediately clarifies her meaning:

> I say that because the intercourse of a man and a woman is a kind of giving birth. It is an aspect of immortality in the otherwise mortal creature, and it cannot take place in what is discordant. Now, the ugly is not in accord with anything divine, whereas the beautiful accords (*harmotton)* well." (Pl. *Smp.* 206c-d).

Here, beauty is associated with harmony, suitability and usefulness. The union of man and woman is generative, oriented toward immortality, and therefore aligned with the divine. Grube (1927, 276) underscores this as the "deep usefulness of beauty," interpreting Plato's claim as an affirmation of its practical and procreative function. In this sense, Plato would have a utilitarian, or at least functional, view of beauty. Shindler (2020,19) notes that such a utilitarian perspective isn't new, that the first text on this topic that we have access to, an affirmation about the nature of beauty, has a Pythagorean origin and says that "Order and proportion are beautiful and useful."

This emphasis on harmony resonates with Eryximachus' earlier speech, where *harmonia* served as a principle of balance and order across domains as diverse as medicine, music, and cosmic order (186e-188e). As Sheffield (2006a, 187-188) explains, for Eryximachus, beauty is inherently linked to harmony and the act of creation – physical, musical, or intellectual – must occur within such ordered balance to produce a good outcome.[92]

Plato, however, doesn't offer a fixed definition of beauty. His explorations unfold through dialogues, each approaching the concept from different angles. In the *Gorgias* 474d-e beauty is associated with usefulness and pleasure to the observer. In the *Hippias Major,* Socrates suggests three definitions of beauty, although none of them is in fact fully accepted, and the dialogue ends without an answer. These two aspects, pleasure and utility, are also developed in that dialogue. The three definitions are: (i) something adequate or 'fitting' (τὸ πρέπον); (ii) something useful (τὸ χρήσιμον); (iii) something pleasant to the eyes and (or) ears (τὸ δὶ ὄψεως χαὶ ἀχοῆς ἡδύ). Grube (1927, 272) remarks that in these early texts, Plato is working with common Greek perceptions of beauty, which he later develops in more sophisticated ways in the *Republic, Phaedrus, Symposium, Philebus* and *Timaeus.*

Within the *Symposium,* the link between beauty and generativity reappears when Diotima insists that one "will never procreate in the ugly." (209b). Whereas 206c concerned bodily generation, 209b extends the point to the soul, broadening the scope of her claim. What remains constant is that procreation – physical or intellectual – requires an orientation toward the beautiful.

This passage is a development of 206c, though applied more broadly than bodily generation alone. I will return to this passage later, but for now it is important to emphasise the personal aspect it underscores: one's concept of beauty and good is dependent on one's own understanding of happiness, which is the obvious objective (205a), and consequently on one's understanding of what it takes to reach it.

Sheffield explains that beauty in Plato's explorations is not fixed but varies depending on the level of understanding of the beholder. So, considering that the account is eudaemonist, "we should expect the virtues to be measured in large part in terms of their contribution to the good of the agent." (2006a, 135). This recalls the passage in 205a and the conclusion that "The happy are happy through the possession of good things, and there is no need to ask further why

[92] Sheffield's analysis aligns with Green's study of rhythm and melody, where the application of harmony in education fosters the soul's alignment with order and beauty (Green 2015, 153).

anyone wishes to be happy." (205a). The desire for happiness requires no further justification, yet the understanding of happiness is personal, and this understanding shapes desire itself.

The multiplicity of possible conceptions of the beautiful and the good is already anticipated at 205d, where "money-making" appears among the expressions of love. From this perspective, someone who desires financial gain, believing it essential for happiness, may value the financial dimension of a partner more than physical appearance and, according to that personal conception, "procreate in the beautiful." This possibility further complicates the combinations of desires, behaviours, and outcomes that Diotima's account allows.

2.3.1.4 Between Mortality and Immortality

From the conclusion that the object of love is procreating and giving birth in the beautiful (206e), aligned with the everlastingness of the desire to possess what is good, Diotima affirms that "the object of love must also be immortality." (207a). This conclusion is grounded in a conception of human nature as impermanent and mortal: procreation is the form of immortality accessible to mortal creatures. As she puts it, "If the object of love is indeed everlasting possession of the good, as we have already agreed, it is immortality together with the good that must necessarily be desired" (207a).[93]

It becomes clearer when Socrates recalls a particular occasion when Diotima illustrated her point by referring to animals. She describes their passionate attachment to reproduction and care for their offspring, often to the point of risking their lives, and then asks Socrates if he can explain this extraordinary drive:

> On one occasion she asked me, 'What do you think, Socrates, is the cause of this love and desire? Do you not notice what a state all beasts are in, birds as well as four-footed animals, when they feel the desire to procreate? All sick and in the grip of love, they are concerned first for copulation and then for rearing the offspring, and they are ready to fight it out on their behalf, the weakest against the strongest, even to the death, worn out themselves by hunger in the attempt to feed them, yet ready to do whatever else is necessary. One might suppose that humans do these things because they reason about it.

[93] Nightingale (2017, n.4) calls it a desire for "immortal happiness" which would be different from "the eudaemonist position adopted by Socrates and Plato, which focuses on achieving happiness in this life". This type of immortality would be attainable through giving birth to bodily and psychic immortality. "To be sure, one does not experience everlasting happiness personally, while one is alive: we are mortals, not gods." Nightingale (2017, 143).

> But animals – what cause is there for them to be so affected by love? Can you tell me why?' (Pl. *Smp.* 207a-b).

Socrates cannot answer, and Diotima further challenges him: "'And do you suppose you will ever become expert on the subject of love if you are not going to think about this matter?'" (217c). This rhetorical turn underscores that a genuine understanding of love requires a wide field of reflection, extending even to comparisons with the behaviour of animals. Socrates once again concedes her authority as teacher, and Diotima proceeds to articulate the parallel between animals and humans: both share a mortal nature that seeks a form of immortality.

> For in the animal world and among humans the same explanation applies, that mortal nature seeks as far as it can to exist for ever and to be immortal. But the only way it can achieve this is by continual generation, the process by which it always leaves behind another new thing to replace the old. (Pl. *Smp*. 207c-d).

By "continual generation", Diotima is not simply talking about reproduction as the process of giving birth to another being of the same species. In the next passage, she describes 'continual generation' within a singular person, mentioning the fact that a man is said to be the same person even though he drastically changes from childhood to old age: "Although he is referred to as the same person, he never keeps the same constituents; he is always being renewed, while things like hair, flesh, bones, blood – in fact the entire body – are constantly passing away." (207d).

The same observation applies to the soul: "[it's] habits, characteristics, beliefs, desires, pleasures, pains, fears, none of these things ever remain constant in an individual, but some are always coming into being while others pass away." (207e). Human nature, therefore, is defined by impermanence, in both body and soul. Even knowledge is subject to this rhythm:

> Not only do they too come and go, so that we do not remain the same in the case of them either, but it is also true of each single thing we know. Consider what we call revising or practising. We do this because knowledge leaves us. Forgetting is the loss of knowledge, and revising, by implanting a fresh memory in place of the one that is departing, preserves our knowledge so that it seems to be the same. In this way everything mortal is preserved, not by remaining entirely the same for ever, which is the mark of the divine, but by leaving behind another new thing of the same kind in the place of what is growing old and passing away. (Pl. *Smp*. 208a-b).

Diotima then contrasts this mortal mode of persistence with the divine: "what is immortal does so differently" (208b), and adds that the universal zeal and love, connected to Ero's *ergon* in the passage 206b: *"*is for the sake of immortality." (208b).

At this stage, her exploration of human nature highlights two essential points. First, divine beings remain entirely the same, whereas mortal beings preserve themselves only through perpetual renewal. Second, mortal creatures attempt to overcome their instability by seeking, in whatever way they can, a share in immortality. Impermanence thus emerges as the fundamental mark of human existence – not merely of the physical body but also of the soul and its dispositions.

Socrates then asks whether things really are as Diotima describes (208c). To that, Diotima replies, according to Socrates, "Like a perfect sophist" (208c), by bringing up the case of *philotimia*, the love of honour.

> Believe me, Socrates. You have only to look at humankind's love of honour and you will be surprised at your absurdity regarding the matters I have just mentioned, unless you think about it and reflect how strongly people are affected by the desire to become famous and 'to lay up immortal glory for all time. (Pl. *Smp.* 208c).

To illustrate this drive for immortality through honour as the motivator of many risky deeds, spending money, enduring suffering, and even dying for a cause, Diotima cites precisely the heroic figures evoked earlier in Phaedrus' speech:

> Do you suppose', she went on, 'that Alcestis would have died to save Admetus, or Achilles would have sacrificed his life to avenge Patroclus, or your Athenian king Codrus would have perished before his time for the sake of his sons' succession, if they had not thought that the memory of their virtue, which indeed we still have of them, would be immortal? Far from it', she said. 'I think that it is for the sake of immortal fame and this kind of glorious reputation that everyone strives to the utmost, and the better they are the more they strive: for they desire what is immortal. (Pl. *Smp*. 208d-e).

This brings a valuable development to the issue of giving birth in beauty, as it reinforces the interpretation that it depends on one's view of happiness and, consequently, their views on the good and the beautiful. Here, we have examples of tragic characters who resisted the passage of time and mortality, remaining in people's memories through their virtuous acts. The desire for honour is one example of how people act inclined to immortality. Immortality seems

to be considered good in this passage, despite not being paired with the concept of good as was the case in 206e-207a. Probably, *philotimia* is not the vehicle endorsed by Diotima in her method, but it is a strong example of the mechanism or drive she is trying to bring into Socrate' awareness.

Other examples – less flattering to Eros – could easily be offered, such as tyranny, although such cases would hardly suit the context of a eulogy. The fact remains that, alongside figures like Alcestis and Achilles, some individuals secure a form of immortality through acts far removed from virtue. Their names endure not because their deeds were beautiful or good, but because they were memorable. In this sense, *philotimia* cannot yet be strictly classified as negative. It is a motivational force that can operate in noble or ignoble ways, depending on the agent's values and the manner in which the desire for permanence is pursued.

Plato appears to be using *philotimia* to establish a productive point of contact with his interlocutors, who may still regard honour as something desirable or socially commendable, at least in part. By appealing to this familiar motivational structure, the dialogue creates space for later reorientation. Within the *Symposium*, *philotimia* emerges as a theme interwoven with moral behaviour, social recognition, and the cultivation of virtue. While deeply rooted in the aristocratic *ethos,* it becomes relevant to the philosophical analysis of Eros. Yet this does not imply that it is ultimately endorsed as a positive trait. Scholarly interpretations diverge sharply on this point, particularly in relation to the distinction between the "lower" and "higher" mysteries of love.[94]

Sheffield (2006a, 11) argues that *philotimia*, when properly directed, serves as a step in the lover's ascent toward the form of beauty. The pursuit of honour, in this view, is initially bound to external recognition but can become internalised into the cultivation of genuine virtue, aligning with the philosophical aims of Eros. Obdrzalek (2010, 421-429), by contrast, interprets *philotimia* as a "lower" form of *eros*, fundamentally tied to egoistic concerns such as the desire for fame or recognition, thus fundamentally flawed. For her, the desire for immortality through reputation or fame cannot transcend mortality because it remains tied to personal gain. Only the higher mysteries – culminating in the vision of beauty – break this cycle of self-concern and open the possibility of immortality.

[94] On additional reading that consider *philotimia* as a path to philosophia see: Ionescu (2007).

Regardless of these divergent interpretations, immortality is constantly reinforced as an object of Eros, arising as a central theme. Diotima brings the theme of mortality to outline how human beings, driven by their moral nature, strive to transcend their finite existence by seeking immortality. One vehicle is *philotimia*. But what exactly would be the object of the knowledge of lack which is necessary for the desiring? Or, in other terms, what would be the nature of this immortality available to human beings?[95]

Nightingale (2017) frames the desire for immortality as a response to the mortal soul's awareness of its finite condition. She introduces the idea of "immortal happiness," achievable through creative acts that align the mortal with enduring values: "the mortal soul strives for a symbolic form of immortality through generative acts, whether in offspring, ideas, or virtues" (Nightingale 2017, 144). In this context, Nightingale does not presuppose the immortality of the soul, as it is described in the *Phaedo*; in the *Symposium,* she reads the accessible immortality as partial and limited.

Sheffield (2006a), in contrast, seems to emphasise continuity with the *Phaedo's* account of the soul's mortality: "The lover's ascent to the Form of Beauty perfects the soul, aligning it with the eternal and offering a kind of fulfilment that transcends mortality" (Sheffield 2006a, 138). Sheffield further stresses that the ascent described in Diotima's speech is not solely about escaping mortality but fostering moral and intellectual flourishing. She argues, "The pursuit of beauty educates the soul, enabling the lover to ascend from physical attraction to the contemplation of the Form of Beauty, achieving both personal and communal flourishing" (Sheffield 2006a, 110). Sheffield underscores the continuity between lower and higher *eros*, viewing the lover's initial attraction to physical beauty as a necessary stage in the soul's development. For Sheffield, the pursuit of beauty educates the soul, enabling both personal and communal flourishing. Obdrzalek (2010, 421) again offers a more sceptical view, stressing that lower forms of *eros* remain self-centred and transient, tied to bodily procreation or fame, and fail to achieve true transcendence.[96]

Taken together, these readings illuminate the *Symposium*'s treatment of immortality as more ambiguous and complex than the straightforward immortality of the soul defended in the

[95] Or, at least, the perceived nature, since the individual's conception plays an important role as pointed out regarding goodness, beauty and happiness. Nightingale (2017) traces this discussion back to Hackforth (1950) and Luce (1952).

[96] While she acknowledges the possibility of transcendence in the higher mysteries, it is not explicit if she posits an inherent immortality of the soul comparable to the *Phaedo*.

Phaedo. By grounding immortality in mortal generative activities, Diotima's account foregrounds human limitation and fragility even in the very act of striving toward the divine. In this frame, immortality is never absolute: it is mediated, provisional, and refracted through the practices by which human beings attempt to leave behind something that endures beyond their mortal lives.

These reflections on mortality and immortality prepare the way for the next step in Diotima's account. Having established that the object of love must be immortality, and that this desire operates through various channels – whether bodily, intellectual, or civic – she now turns to specify the modes through which mortals pursue this aim. The emphasis shifts from the general condition of impermanence to the concrete ways in which human beings, always already pregnant in body and soul (206c), attempt to give birth to offspring that will outlast them.

This transition marks an important development. For Diotima, immortality is never abstract: it manifests through generative acts that take distinct forms. The next passage, therefore, distinguishes between two kinds of pregnancy – of the body and of the soul – each corresponding to different expressions of *eros* and different ways of striving for continuity within the limits of mortality.

2.3.1.5 Two Types of Pregnancy

Having established immortality as the object of love, Diotima now distinguishes two modes by which mortals strive for it: bodily pregnancy and pregnancy of the soul. This differentiation builds directly on her earlier claim that all humans are pregnant in both body and soul (206c), and that they desire to give birth when they reach maturity. At 208e-209c, she rearticulates this insight, showing how eros finds expression in different generative activities depending on whether the focus falls primarily on the body or on the soul.

> 'Those whose pregnancy is of the body', she went on, 'are drawn more towards women, and they express their love through the procreation of children, ensuring for themselves, they think, for all time to come, immortality and remembrance and happiness in this way. But [there are] those whose pregnancy is of the soul – those who are pregnant in their souls even more than in their bodies, with the kind of offspring which it is fitting for the soul to conceive and bear. What offspring are these? Wisdom (*phronesis*) and the rest of virtue, of which the poets and all procreators, as well as those craftsmen who are regarded as innovators. But by far the most important and beautiful

> expression of this wisdom is the good ordering (*diakosmesis*) of cities and households; and the names for this kind of wisdom are moderation and justice'. (Pl. *Smp.* 208e-209c).

Building up from the 206c passage, which claims that all humans are pregnant in both body and soul, Diotima reveals different objects which draw the lover according to the type of pregnancy. She explains that some are more pregnant in soul than in body. When this is the case, instead of being drawn towards women and expressing their love through procreation of children they will be drawn towards objects with which the interaction could offer the kinds of offspring that are more fitting for the soul. It is relevant to note that the affirmation that all humans are pregnant in both instances, body and soul is not replaced by two mutually excluding types of pregnancy; it is, in fact, said that there are some people "pregnant in their souls even more than in their bodies" (209a). Socrates, through Diotima, is here presenting varying degrees and thereby developing a discussion of different generative activities (Sheffield 2001,4).

Those more pregnant in the soul could generate, according to Diotima, a broad array of offspring, beginning with wisdom and the rest of virtue. From this general framework, she narrows what she considers the most important and beautiful expression of wisdom: the ordering of cities and households, naming this kind of wisdom moderation and justice. Despite dividing these types of pregnancy and procreation, both remain related to the beautiful.

> 'When someone has been pregnant in soul with these things from youth and is of the right age but unmarried, he now feels the desire to give birth and procreate. He too, I think, goes about looking for the beautiful in which to procreate; for he will never procreate in the ugly. In his pregnant state he welcomes bodies that are beautiful rather than ugly, and if he comes across one who has a beautiful, noble and gifted soul as well, then he particularly welcomes the combination. In the presence of this person his words immediately flow in abundance about virtue and about the qualities and practices that make for a good man, and he embarks on his education.' (Pl. *Smp.* 209a-c).

The issue of education and interpersonal relationships is central in this section. The lover who is more pregnant in the soul will continue looking for a beautiful soul but with particular interest for the combination of a beautiful body and soul. The settling for this person means embarking on an educational relationship. The passage seems to be suggesting the position of the younger male looking for a pupil. The relationship between the two continues even after the procreation of the offspring: "in company with that other share in nurturing what they have

created together" (209c). This couple is said to have a much closer partnership and stronger ties of affection than the parents of mortal children, "since the offspring they share in have more beauty and immortality." (209c).

Although the activity behind begetting and nurturing the offspring is described as a conjoined activity between the once-pregnant lover and its pupil, the examples introduced in the following passage focus on one 'parent' name rather than on the pair:

> For anyone who looked at Homer and Hesiod and all the other great poets would envy them because of the kind of offspring they have left behind them, and would rather be the parent of children like these, who have conferred to their progenitors immortal glory and fame, than of ordinary human children. 'For another example', she said, 'look at the sort of children Lycurgus left behind in Sparta to be the salvation of Sparta and, one might say, of Greece itself. And Solon too is honoured by you Athenians as the procreator of your laws, and other men are similarly honoured in many other places in Greece and beyond, who by their many fine achievements have procreated virtue of every kind. Many sacred cults have been set up in their honour because of the nature of those children, but none has ever yet been set up because of mortal children. (Pl. *Smp.* 209c – 209e)

In this section, Diotima mirrors bodily and spiritual generative activities without excluding the bodily dimension from the picture. The lover begins by seeking beautiful bodies and then favours those who are also beautiful in soul. Yet her focus remains on the kinds of offspring that confer a form of immortality – products of the soul that are conditioned by contact with the beautiful. Since beauty is relative to the desiring agent's perspective, the need to find an appropriate partner for procreation retains the same "utilitarian" undertone already present in the case of bodily generation: it is impossible to give birth in what one perceives as ugly.

At the same time, Diotima draws attention to specific products of spiritual pregnancy which she ties to a narrow section of a broader universe of virtues (209a). By naming some as more desirable and more beautiful, she not only highlights their superiority but also establishes a relation between these privileged objects and those left outside. She is, in other words, directing Socrates' attention to a more nuanced conception of desire, where some objects are more beautiful than others because they are correctly oriented toward what is most beautiful.

A clear illustration of this hierarchy appears in the treatment of material wealth. Although wealth can be an object of desire, it is not valued in the philosophical life. Betegh (2022) emphasises this as a decisive contrast between the promise of religious initiation and the

philosophical initiation proposed by Diotima. Referring to the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter,* the foundational text of the Eleusinian mysteries, he notes:

> (…) apart from the generic promise of a better fate in the afterlife, the only thing it says about the "blessed life" of the initiate is that those who are dear to the gods can expect a visit from Ploutos, the son of Demeter, the personification of agrarian abundance and economic wealth (486-8). (Betegh 2022, 249).

The *Symposium*, on the other hand, since the beginning shows a contrast between philosophy and material wealth: "The topic of wealth (*ploutos*) comes up repeatedly, and the speakers – their different conceptions of the good life notwithstanding – agree that the desire for material fortune is ignoble and cannot lead to a good live (*Smp.* 178c; 184e-185a)." (Betegh 2022, 249).

Ultimately, Diotima has led her student through a series of conceptual transformations: exposing the pitfalls of binary reasoning; redefining human nature and the nature of Eros; emphasising multiplicity; clarifying the relationship between beauty and human nature; and finally articulating the desire for immortality through differentiated generative activities, arranged in a hierarchy. By weaving these strands together, Diotima completes the preparatory stage of her teaching: the lover has now been readied for initiation into the *telea kai epoptika*, the "higher mysteries" of love.

2.3.2 The Higher Mysteries

Having completed the preparatory stage, Diotima now leads Socrates into what she calls the *telea kai epoptika* (210a-b), the "higher mysteries" of love. At this point, the lover is no longer confined to bodily or soul's forms of generation but is guided toward a vision of beauty itself – an ascent that both gathers the previous steps and destabilises their apparent coherence. The lover's movement forward depends on the gradual reorientation of desire: from particular beautiful bodies to beautiful souls, to practices and laws, to knowledge, and finally to beauty in itself. It is only when these earlier experiences are reinterpreted and transcended that the highest initiation becomes possible.

2.3.2.1 *Orthos Metienai* and the Reinterpreting of Desire

Turning to the *telea kai epoptika*, the final initiation, "to which all this has been merely preliminary" (210a), Diotima introduces a prerequisite for someone who ought to be initiated in the mysteries of love: *orthos metie,* which can be translated to "to proceed rightly". She is referring to a sequence of steps that must be taken before access to the final initiation is possible – a method. Her description of these steps is the formulation of the so-called, by the interpretative tradition, the "ladder of love", it unfolds between 210a and 211b and is recapitulated in a shorter version between 211b-d:

> '(…) and using these as steps, to climb ever upwards for the sake of that other beauty, going from one to two and from two to all beautiful bodies, and from beautiful bodies to beautiful practices, and from beautiful practices to beautiful kinds of knowledge, and from beautiful kinds of knowledge finally to that knowledge which is knowledge solely of the beautiful itself, so that at last he may know what the beautiful itself really is.' (Pl. *Smp*. 211c-d)

This compressed summary presents an overview of the lover's progression through desired objects: from one beautiful body to all beautiful bodies, then to beautiful practices and so on, until he reaches the knowledge of the beautiful itself. Crucially, this structure builds upon the preparatory teachings. Earlier, Diotima established multiple forms of "vicarious immortality" through bodily and psychic procreation, with the latter already surpassing the former in lastingness. With the ascent, she reorganises this dispersed field into a disciplined path toward a different kind of immortality – one linked to the vision of beauty itself (212a–b).

"To proceed rightly", however, does not merely designate following a rule or choosing the right path, as *orthos tropos* might, but emphasises movement and actions. The extended passage at 210a-e makes explicit that this progression must begin in a particular way:

> A person who would set out on this path in the right way must begin in youth by directing his attention to beautiful bodies, and first of all, if his guide is leading him aright, he should fall in love with the body of one individual only, and there procreate beautiful discourse. Then he will realise for himself that the beauty of any one body is closely akin to that of any other body, and that if what is beautiful in form is to be pursued it is folly not to regard the beauty in all bodies as one and the same. When he has understood this he should slacken his intense passion for one body, despising it and considering it a small thing, and become a lover of all beautiful bodies. (Pl. *Smp.* 210a)

Already in this first step, we can discern two essential features. First, *orthos metienai* requires sequence: the lover must begin with one beloved body, generate beautiful discourse there, and only then move forward. Desire is not suppressed but reoriented.

Second, each step retrospectively reinterprets the one before it. The singular bond is not erased but reinscribed: the beauty of one body is now seen as *adelphos*, akin, to the beauty of others. This shift exemplifies, once again, the importance of the lover's evolving perspective, recalling the dynamic highlighted in the prologue. The ascent proceeds not by abandoning earlier attachments but by redescribing them from a broadened and more reflective standpoint.

The language of kinship is crucial. By saying that the lover will realise for himself that the beauty of one body is akin to the beauty of others, Diotima describes the destabilisation of the singularity of the first beloved in the eyes of the lover. The force of desire that once seemed to fasten upon one body now finds itself diffused into a field of relations. The lover personally enters the field of multiplicity in terms of desired objects, and by doing so, he embodies the theoretical formulation of the multiplicity introduced earlier in the preparatory teachings, where the variety of personal objects of desire was shown to differ from person to person. Here, however, the lover experiences multiplicity within himself. The realisation of the multiplicity does not negate the first experience. Instead, it preserves it under a new light. The passage from one body to many depends on a correct sequence (210e), one that includes the act of procreating beautiful discourse.

Diotima presses the same dynamic further:

> After this he will realise that the beauty in souls is more to be prized than that in the body. If therefore someone's soul is good even if his physical attraction is slight, that will be enough for him, and he will love and care for that person, and seek out and give birth to the kind of discourse that will make young men better people. As a consequence he will be compelled to contemplate the beautiful as it exists in human practices and laws, to see that the beauty of it all is of one kind, and to realise that what is beautiful in a body is trivial by comparison. After this his guide must lead him to contemplate knowledge in its various branches, so that he can see beauty there too, and looking at what is now a wide range of beauty he is no longer slavishly content with the beauty of any one particular thing, such as the beauty of a young boy or some other person, or of one particular practice, and will not become petty and small-minded through this kind of servitude. Instead he will turn towards the vast sea of the beautiful and while contemplating it he will give birth to many beautiful, indeed magnificent, discourses and thoughts in a boundless love of wisdom until there, strengthened and invigorated, he discerns a unique kind of knowledge, which is knowledge of a beauty whose nature I will now describe. (Pl. *Smp.* 210c-e)

Once again, the same logic governs the ascent. Sequentially, the objects of desire are ordered: bodies, souls, practices and laws, knowledge, the vast sea of beauty, and beauty itself. Existentially, each object is reinterpreted: the body becomes trivial by comparison once the soul's beauty is seen; civic practices are recognised as sharing in the same kind of beauty; knowledge appears not as accumulation but as a new field in which desire can be cultivated, and the lover will have his comprehension of beauty expanded to then procreate. This process strengthens and invigorates the lover to be able to discern the knowledge of beauty.

The methodological and existential dimensions, therefore, converge. On the one hand, Diotima describes a structured ascent, a method in which each step prepares the next. On the other hand, this ascent is lived dramatically: the lover loves, cares, procreates and educates. Theoretical order and dramatic enactment reinforce one another; both the lover and the knowledge he possesses is changed during the process. The lover embodies the theoretically proposed, in the preparatory teachings, fragile and ever-changing human nature by living through a personal transformation that confirms it.

Read within the dialogue's dramatic architecture, *orthos metienai* is not a detachable formula but part of the narrative staging which converge theorical and dramatic content. This double register echoes patterns observed in the prologue and in the preliminary dialogues. There too, narrative frames forced us to reinterpret what had already been told, as each layer added new significance. Here, the same principle operates at the level of a philosophical life. To "proceed rightly" is not only to ascend but to revisit earlier steps from a transformed perspective as a process of personal strengthening and invigoration (210d). Each step is reinscribed under the pressure of what follows, just as each speech in the *Symposium* reorients the interpretation of the one before.

Read as form, 210a-e lays out a theoretical arc: an ordered transition from bodies to soul, then to laws and other kinds of knowledge and onward toward a widening horizon. The sequence organises domains and gives a rationale for why desire should move as it does – first recognising kinship among bodies, then preferring the beauty "in souls", then discerning beauty in institutions and knowledges. In this sense, *orthos metienai* names a methodological order: the lover learns to recognise and arrange what she sees, extending her desire from one instance of beauty to a broader field.

Simultaneously, those very lines stage a dramatic arc: the method is enacted as interpersonal action and embodied practices. The verbs are performative: “approach”, “love”, “care for”, “beget” (210a-b). The passage draws an existential experience shaped by the dialogue’s dramatic movement.

This dual register means that reinscription[97] happens in two dimensions at once. Theoretically, at each stage beauty is re-read as a concept. Dramatically, the same reinscription is enacted: the lover’s speech shifts audience and function (“there procreate beautiful discourse”; “give birth to the kind of discourse that will make young men better people”), his attachments are redistributed, and his care takes on pedagogical form; he sees things differently. What appears as a ladder of objects is equally a script of actions: the “right way” refers both to the order of objects and to the manner of undergoing the ascent.

Thus the theoretical movement orders the domains of beauty; while the dramatic movement enacts that order through the dialogue’s architecture – through remembered instruction (an older Socrates recounting), through the reconfiguration of address (from a single beloved to “all beautiful bodies”, then to young men to be improved), and through the social, pedagogical scene implied by “care for him” and “make the young better.” The ascent is not merely about desire; it uses the scenes, voices, and relations of desire to propel a deeper understanding of the method.

In conclusion, the ascent is not framed as an abstract discourse on beauty but as a lived itinerary shaped by the desire for immortality. Beauty marks each step along the way, while eros provides the impulse to move further, refusing to be satisfied with what is perishable. To proceed rightly is therefore not simply to follow a map but to train desire itself: to recognise, in each encounter with beauty, a point of departure that gestures beyond itself and beyond the lover. The methodological order and the existential reinscription are inseparable.

2.3.2.2 *Exaiphnes,* Recasting of Virtue, and the Conditional Vision of Beauty

At the climax of Diotima’s teaching, the methodological sequence that had unfolded step by step is suddenly interrupted by a new register. After the gradual ascent from one body

[97] By reinscription I mean: “In cultural and literary theory, the re-establishment of an existing concept in a different form or context from its conventional one but without any radical transformation. A transgressive reinscription would subvert the concept (see transgression).” (Chandler and Munday 2011).

to all bodies, from souls to practices, and from practices to knowledge, Diotima describes something "suddenly" (*exaiphnes*) happening:

> Anyone who has been guided to this point in the study of love and has been contemplating beautiful things in the correct way and in the right sequence, will suddenly perceive, as he now approaches the end of his study, a beauty that is marvellous in its nature – the very thing, Socrates, for the sake of which all the earlier labours were undertaken. (Pl. *Smp.* 210e)

This passage reiterates the necessity of order "in the correct way and in the right sequence". Yet it culminates not in another step but in an event described as *exaiphnes,* "suddenly", a dissonant term. The very language disrupts the progression of the method: what has been prepared in stages arrives in a flash. The final vision is not comparable to the movement that took the lover through steps until the last step on the ladder; it comes as an event, a phenomenon that exceeds the logic of sequential ascent. The lover, trained by method, is overtaken by something method cannot guarantee. The ascent culminates in an appearance that interrupts its own structure.[98]

Diotima describes this contemplation of the beauty itself as an extraordinary experience: "'That is the life, my dear Socrates', said the visitor from Mantinea, 'which most of all a human being should live, in the contemplation of beauty itself.'" (211d).

This beauty in itself is absolute, not a collective whole; it is "separated off, not relative to anything else but itself" (Shindler 2020,35). This interruption, thought, does not erase what came before but repositions it. The ascent has educated desire to see beauty in widening fields. At each stage, earlier attachments were not discarded but reinterpreted. Now, at the summit, these previous steps are gathered up in a new perspective: seen as anticipations, as images of something that only now discloses itself.

This becomes evident in Diotima's immediate linking of the vision of beauty to the task of generation. Beauty is no longer the object of desire but becomes the medium through which the deepest human longing – immortality through generativity – can be fulfilled. Shindler (2020) explains:

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[98] Perhaps what is interrupted here is not the search for beauty, but its mediation: beauty had been sought through bodies, souls, practices, laws, and knowledge; now it appears "all of a sudden" without apparatus. The interruption, then, is not a negation of the earlier steps but their suspension in view of an immediate presence.

> It is not often noticed that, while Socrates *begins* his explanation of the desire that constitutes love by insisting on the soul's *lack* of, and need for, beauty, halfway through the speech he perfectly reverses the picture: our desire, he says, is due to our being *overfull* being pregnant and needing to give birth. In this case beauty ceases to be the direct object of desire and becomes instead the *medium*: we desire to beget and give birth *in* beauty (*tes genneseos kai tou tokou en toi kaloi, Sym.* 206e). (Shindler 2020, 36)

The vision of beauty transforms the very nature of what the lover can produce:

> That it is there alone, when he sees the beautiful with that by which it has to be viewed, that he will give birth to true virtue? He will give birth not to mere images of virtue but to true virtue, because it is not an image that he is grasping but the truth. When he has given birth to and nurtured true virtue it is possible for him to be loved by the gods and to become, if any human can, immortal himself. (Pl. *Smp.* 212a)

The expression *arete alethes* introduces a decisive contrast. Earlier in the speech, Diotima had already described human beings as generative: they are pregnant in body and soul (206c), they give birth in the beautiful (206b), and they produce children of the body and of the soul (208e-209c). Yet all these earlier products are, when compared to what comes after the vision of beauty, reclassified as images of virtue (*eidola aretes*). They are not dismissed, but their status changes retrospectively. To generate in the presence of beauty itself is to generate in a fundamentally different way – not because the act of generation has changed, but because the standard by which its products are measured has changed. The lover's perspective is once again transformed, but now at a far more fundamental point of reference. As Shindler observes:

> The discontinuity of the sudden epiphany of beauty is not, however, the elimination of continuity; instead, it is the establishment of a more comprehensive continuity by virtue of having introduced a higher point of reference, a point of which those still on the "other side" are necessarily ignorant. (Shindler 2020, 41).

This dynamic recalls Apollodorus' own description of his transformative shift of perspective:

> I used to think I was achieving something when I was in fact running round in circles aimlessly, in the most miserable state, just like you now, and I thought philosophy was the last thing I should be doing (…) I feel sorry for you, my companions, because you think you are achieving something when you are achieving nothing On the other hand you perhaps believe that I am the one

> who is unfortunate, and I suppose you are right. But in your case I don't merely suppose you are unfortunate, I *know* it. (Pl. *Smp. 1*73a)

The parallel is striking. Like the lover at the summit of the ascent, Apollodorus retrospectively discovers that what he once took to be accomplishment was mere illusion. The reclassification of earlier products as *eidola* thus mirrors the reclassification of an earlier life as misdirected: the change of perspective retroactively transforms the meaning of the past.

Crucially, Diotima does not guarantee that this final stage is fully attainable. She introduces the conditional phrase "if indeed any human can". The nature of the immortality at stake here remains contested. As Betegh notes: "It is a vexed question whether Diotima only allows the immortality of the soul, or only immortality through our biological and/or intellectual progeny" (Betegh 2022, 266).

The conditional may hint at mythical precedents, such as heroes who are granted immortality by the gods. Yet one could argue that once a human is made immortal, she ceases to be human – and that such transformations lie outside Diotima's argument. Something similar is found in Gagarin's reading of the lover/philosopher:

> Thus the lover/philosopher, who begins in an intermediate state between ignorance and wisdom, by the end of his ascent has attained true knowledge. We may further conclude that since the lover/philosopher was defined as lacking beauty and knowledge, he will no longer be a lover/philosopher at the end of his journey when he possesses both of these. (Gagarin 1997, 27)

The force of the conditional thus seems twofold. First, it underscores the fragility of human participation in the immortal: even at the highest point of the ascent, it is not clear if one can escape the instability of the mortal human nature. Second, it sets the vision of beauty itself as a horizon rather than as a stable possession. What the lover gains is not divine immortality but a different kind of generativity, oriented by contact with what does not perish. And because of the generation of true virtue the human can be seen by the gods. As Rowe (1998, 201) notes, such immortality will stem from an offspring whose value will be recognised by the gods rather than by humans. This would offer some type of immortality that is closer to Nightingale's (2017) notion of the "immortal happiness, since this lover will live in the memory of the gods".

For this reason, the erotic method cannot be a teachable *techne*. Its object resists determinacy. As Roochnik writes:

> Instead, it is an understanding of what it means to be in a constant state of striving for objects. For these reasons, "human wisdom," like self-knowledge in the *Charmides*, is *atopos*; it is strange. Literally, it is knowledge somehow out or bereft of *topos*, "place". Since the very notion of place implies "boundary," and since the bounded is the determinate, if eros is indeterminate, it cannot have a place. Roochnik (1996, 240).

The method is thus not a system but a training in how to inhabit the condition of beings perpetually in-between, beings whose striving cannot be contained within determinate bounds.

In sum, the suddenness of the *exaiphnes* plays a double role. It interrupts the sequence, showing the limit of the method; and it reveals why the method was necessary in the first place. Only someone habituated to reinterpret earlier stages could receive what arrives without mediation. Shindler (2020, 39) describes it as a paradox, a simultaneous continuity and discontinuity. The ascent teaches the lover to read his own past differently, to see in earlier attachments the signs of a more encompassing order. It is in this sense both cumulative and fragile, continuous as training and discontinuous as vision, a practice of advancing and returning, remembering and re-seeing – exactly the rhythm that the dialogue itself enacts.

2.3.2.3 Philosophical Initiation: Exposure and *Melete*

At this point is worth recalling the analysis of the prologue, where the relation between practice (*metele*), Socrates' oddity (*atopia*), and the topic of the transmission of knowledge was already foreshadowed in Aristodemus' prologue, especially on the topic addressing Socrates' oddity and his proximity to Aristodemus. That network of themes becomes a focal point in Diotima's speech. Having followed Diotima's path from the preparatory teachings through the higher mysteries, it becomes clear that her speech culminates not simply in a vision of beauty itself but in a conception of human wisdom, and philosophy more specifically, as a double movement of practice and exposure. Her speech presents a model of philosophical initiation in which these two are inseparable.

This "philosophical exposure" may be understood in three overlapping senses. First, exposure to the other: the interlocutor, the beloved, the guide. Each step of the ascent requires entering a relationship that destabilises one's prior position. Second, exposure to oneself: the recognition of one's own lack, the surfacing of previously invisible assumptions, and the hard work of self-knowledge. Third, exposure to the method itself: the recognition that no procedure provides security; the lover must repeatedly risk moving beyond the known and relearn from

each rung. All three senses were already latent in the preparatory teachings – in Diotima's insistence on the "in-between" (*metaxy*), on the instability of mortal nature, and on the multiplicity of practices – but they come to the surface in her articulation of *orthos metienai,* where these teachings are embodied by the lover rather than merely heard.

The so-called ladder of love converges with a theme already latent in the earlier sections: the mortal needs to practice (*melete*). As Nussbaum (1986, 179) underscores, Diotima's language at 210a-c is filled with imperatives of deliberate action. The lover's progress is not a trance but a training, a discipline composed of repeated choices, a practice. The vocabulary and the syntax make this agency explicit. Between 210a-c, Socrates reports Diotima saying that the initiate "must" (*dei*) (210a5), and then lays out a sequence of subordinated actions: "begin in youth" (210a6); "fall in love" (*eran*) (210a8); "procreate" (*gennan*) (210a8); "realise for himself" (*auton kata noesai*) (210a9); "regard the beauty in all bodies as one and the same" (*hegeisthai*) (210b3), "become a lover of all beautiful bodies" (*katastenai erasten*) (210b4-5); "slacken his intense passion for one body" (*khalasai*) (210b5); "realise that the beauty in souls is more to be prized than that in the body" (*hegesasthai*) (210b7).

These subordinate clauses are followed by consequences (*hoste*): "love and care for that person, and seek out and give birth to the kind of discourse that will make young man better people" (210 b-c); and finalities (*hina*): "contemplate the beautiful as it exists in human practices and laws, to see that beauty of it all is of one kind, and realise that what is beautiful in a body is trivial by comparison" (210c).

Then, Diotima goes back to subordinating yet another action to the former "must" (210a5): "contemplate knowledge in its various branches" (*agagein*), and displays another finality:

> (…) so that he can see beauty there too, and looking at what is now a wide range of beauty, he is no longer slavishly content with the beauty of any one particular thing, such as the beauty of a young boy or some other person, or of one particular practice, and will not become petty and small-minded through this kind of servitude. Instead he will turn towards the vast sea of the beautiful and while contemplating it he will give birth to many beautiful, indeed magnificent, discourses and thoughts in a boundless love of wisdom until there, strengthened and invigorated, he discerns a unique kind of knowledge which is knowledge of a beauty whose nature I will now describe. (Pl. *Smp.* 210c-d).

This language of obligation and practice casts the ascent not as a static ladder but as an ongoing *melete*. Each imperative marks a deliberate turn outward, a decision to practice seeing more broadly, to loosen attachment, and to re-train desire. The lover's task is not only to contemplate but to "give birth", to test and retain what he has learned through speech and through teaching others. The philosophical initiation that Diotima outlines is thus less a mystical state than a demanding exercise: an itinerary of exposures and self-exposures.

Seen in this light, *orthos metenai* is inseparable from *melete*. It is not simply a ladder of objects but a continuous exercise of remembering, testing, and re-seeing. At every rung, the lover is exposed in three ways at once: to the other, in shifting interlocutors and beloveds; to himself, in the recognition of lack and the renouncing of exclusive claims; and to the method itself, which offers no final guarantees but requires repeated recommitment. Each upward movement is therefore also an exercise that prepares the next exposure, training *eros* to endure wider fields of beauty without losing the intensity that first animated it.

In this sense Diotima's ladder already anticipates the *exaiphnes* not as a magical rupture but as the point at which a long practice meets its own limit. The sudden vision is not granted despite the training but because of it, yet it also reveals the fragility of every method: what has been prepared step by step arrives in a flash that cannot be possessed. Philosophy, as Diotima presents it, is therefore both gradual initiation and a radical exposure – an unending *melete* of desire that neither abolishes nor guarantees its culmination.

Diotima's speech does not merely conclude Socrates' account; it reshapes it into a model of philosophical life. It gathers every preparatory element – binary critique, multiplicity, human instability, the quest for immortality – and integrates them into an exercise of exposure whose culmination is the *exaiphnes* disclosure of beauty itself. This final disclosure is less a secure possession than an event of recognition, a moment of humility in which the lover sees the imagistic and preparatory character of all previous generations and, if it is possible for a human being, opens the possibility of generating true virtue. In this way, the greater mysteries conclude not with definite resolution but with exposure, and philosophy emerges not as a doctrine but as a training of desire to live in proximity to what cannot be fully possessed.

3. ALCIBIADES' TRAGEDY: THE PROFANE ATTEMPT TO APPROPRIATE WISDOM AND AN APOLOGY FOR SOCRATES

The encounter between Socrates and Alcibiades – both as characters and through their speeches – marks the point at which the dialogue's theoretical and dramatic movements reach their most intense interplay. Whereas the speeches of Socrates and Diotima represent the theoretical high point of the *Symposium*, Alcibiades' intervention is saturated with dramatic force. It constitutes what Reeve (2006,124) calls the "theatrical apogee" of the work.[99]

As Cornelli observes, "In his great literary skill, Plato seems to be able to converge all the speeches towards the final *mise en scène* of Alcibiades' entry" (2016, 336). From a purely theoretical standpoint, Diotima's speech could be regarded as the culmination of the dialogue's inquiry into love, and the conversation could have ended there. Yet it is precisely at this moment that Alcibiades bursts onto the scene. Read in this way, his arrival functions not as an appendix but as the dramatic synthesis of the dialogue's preceding movements, where the tension between the theoretical and the performative reaches its highest point.

This chapter examines Alcibiades' speech by dividing it into thematic units, corresponding to the cues first identified in 'Chapter 1'. This methodological choice makes the present chapter formally distinct from the preceding one, which analysed Socrates' and Diotima's speech. Whereas the analysis of Diotima's account required strict attention to the correct order and sequence of the arguments – recall the discussion of *othos metienai* – Alcibiades' account is more appropriately presented through thematic organisation rather than linear progression.

This methodological difference is grounded both in the text itself and in the interpretative framework established in 'Chapter 1', where the characters' perspectives were taken as a key lens for orienting the analysis. Socrates and Alcibiades adopt distinct postures in their speeches, which reflects the very contrast between the theoretical and the dramatic movements of the dialogue. Alcibiades begins with two preliminary remarks: first, he asks Socrates to correct him if he is mistaken; second, he warns that he may mix up events – partly because he is drunk, and partly because of Socrates' *atopia*.

[99] Reeve (2006) describes what happens at the encounter between Socrates and Alcibiades as "The beautiful itself gets eclipsed by the beautiful body; the philosophical apogee trumped by the theatrical one" (2006, 124).

> ‘I will start at once’, said Alcibiades. ‘However, you must do this for me. If I say anything that is not true, please interrupt and tell me that I am mistaken, because I certainly do not intend to say what is untrue. On the other hand don’t be surprised if I get events mixed up when I try to remember them. It’s not all that easy for someone in my condition, to list the particulars of your unusual nature (*atopian*) fluently and in the right order (*euporos kai ephexes*).’ (Pl. *Smp*. 214e-215a)

The word *ephexes* (in the right order) echoes Diotima’s insistence that one must contemplate beautiful things “in the correct way and in the *right sequence*” (*ephexes*, 210e). Unlike Socrates and Diotima, Alcibiades deliberately downplays the importance of sequence. His admission that he may not follow a strict order does not, in his view, compromise the truth of what he says – a priority he had already emphasised in his first preliminary remark.[100]

In what follows, I approach Alcibiades’ speech thematically, not only to examine its specific contribution but also to bring together elements of my interpretation of the *Symposium* – especially on Socrates’ and Alcibiades’ speeches – understood through the dynamic interplay between the dialogue’s rhetorical and dramatic movements.

3.1 Characters’ Perspectives

The contrast between Socrates’ and Alcibiades’ speeches becomes immediately visible at the level of the characters’ personal perspectives, which is the first interpretative cue identified in the prologue. In Alcibiades’ account, this personal dimension is explicit and decisive; his discourse is inseparable from his emotional experience, his history with Socrates, and his ongoing turmoil. By contrast, although Socrates’ speech also contains a personal element – through the remembrance of his encounter with Diotima – the erotic method he presents ultimately presupposes an anonymous lover rather than Socrates himself undergoing the ascent.

Alcibiades not only insists on the primacy of his own perspective but also appeals to the experiences of the other symposiasts. Despite the homogeneity of their aristocratic circle, he invokes their shared initiation into philosophy as a basis for mutual understanding, situating his

[100] North (1994, 91) notes that the insistence on truth-speaking is one of the multiple traces of conventional rhetoric, either forensic of epideictic, in the speech of Alcibiades. Furthermore, she stresses that inviting correction and declaring his drunkenness and eventual mixing up of things are an effort to allay suspicion of being a skilled orator a similar move employed by Socrates at the beginning of the *Apology* (17d-18a).

speech within the common background he assumes they all share. Referring to himself and the others, Alcibiades claims that they were all bitten by a snake: "anyone who has been bitten by a snake cannot bring himself to describe what it was like except to those who have had the same experience" (217e-218a). The snake – identified with "the things they talk about in philosophy" (218a) – bites "the heart or the soul or whatever one is meant to call it" (218a). Those who have been bitten, he explains, "are the ones who will understand and make allowance for anything the victim did or said in his agony (218a)".

Through this metaphor, Alcibiades appeals to the empathy of his audience as a prerequisite for understanding his words. Echoing the prologue, where Apollodorus decides to begin his narrative from his encounter with Socrates instead of beginning from the speeches as his interlocutors expected (173e-174a), Alcibiades chooses to speak not about Eros but about Socrates, directing the listeners toward what he takes to be their deepest shared experience: being affected by philosophy through a relationship with Socrates.[101] This relationship – both with Socrates and with philosophy itself – is deeply engraved in their identities and shaped across multiple levels of interaction. As seen with Apollodorus and Aristodemus, what draws them is not only what Socrates says but also the way he lives (173a). Philosophy, in this sense, is presented as a way of life.

Socrates too is included among those who have shared "in the madness and frenzy of philosophy," and Alcibiades insists that he, like the others, is capable of understanding what he is about to say:

> And now when I look at men like Phaedrus, Agathon, Eryximachus, Pausanias, Aristodemus and Aristophanes, not to mention Socrates himself and so many others – you have all shared in the madness and frenzy of philosophy, so you will all of you hear me out, and I know you will make allowance for what was done at that time and what is going to be said now. As for you servants and anyone else who is uninitiated and won't appreciate my story, block up your ears. (Pl. *Smp.* 218a -2018b)

Although Alcibiades was not present during Socrates' speech, he echoes the vocabulary of initiation that permeates it. In doing so, he frames the symposiasts as a community bound by

[101] Here, another leading theme presented in the prologue is pervasive: the relationships between the characters. In this context, the theme is amplified by referring to their relationship with philosophy. In this case, the relationship with philosophy is responsible for significant changes in the characters' perspectives on a broad range of objects.

a shared experience: those who have undergone the "madness" of philosophy are initiated, while the uninitiated must "block up their ears." In a way, this shared experience parallels the preparatory teachings in Diotima's speech: one must know certain things – and have undergone certain transformations – to gain access to others. Yet, in stark contrast to the anonymous lover of Diotima's ascent, Alcibiades stands as the figure who fails to rise.

The multiple chronological layers of the *Symposium*, by referencing historical moments, create a dynamic picture of a time and context that precedes an off-stage tragedy[102] – arguably the greatest political catastrophe for Athens and the terminal one for several characters portrayed in the dialogue. The dinner party at Agathon's house is situated around 416 BCE, "the year when Agathon won the prize with his first tragedy" (173a). Only months later, several of the participants would face exile or trial on charges of impiety (*asebeia*). It also precedes the failed Sicilian Expedition, 415 BCE. The dialogue's frame also precedes Socrates' execution in 399 BCE.

The *Symposium,* then, foreshadows not only Socrates' death, but also the downfall of Athens itself. It stages a moment of apparent conviviality that is shadowed by what lies beyond the frame: political ruin, military disaster, and the personal downfall of many of its characters. Within this broader horizon, Alcibiades' life becomes emblematic of that catastrophe:

> The spectacular disaster of the life of Alcibiades was a problem to which Plato, and many other Socratic thinkers, returned repeatedly. Why should this brilliant aristocrat, possessed of every excellence from courage to intellect, the ward of Pericles and follower of Socrates, the bold and cunning general who transformed the course of the Peloponnesian War so many times, why should he have gone so wrong, dying at the hands of assassins after betraying every side on the war multiple times, cuckolding the king of Sparta, and profaning the most sacred rites of Athens? (Edmonds 2017, 194).

Within the *Symposium,* Alcibiades is not merely an admirer of Socrates: he is someone who came close enough to be changed yet failed to sustain the transformation that such proximity demands. Unlike Apollodorus and Aristodemus - figures who reproduce Socratic presence through retelling or habituation – Alcibiades embodies a more turbulent, politically charged response: a passionate failure.

His conflict is both internal and external. Internally, he is torn between *philotimia* – the craving for honour, prestige, and public acclaim – and *philosophia*, a love for truth that demands

[102] See: Blanckenhagen (1992), Lear (1999) and Nails (2006).

vulnerability, asymmetry, and openness to change, as noted earlier while dealing with Socrates' and Diotima's speech. Externally, his life dramatises the tension between the rhythms of philosophical self-cultivation and the unforgiving demands of the polis, where honour and recognition were essential for political survival. In this way, the dialogue stages a crisis at the heart of philosophy, one with tragic political consequences.

To better understand Alcibiades' perspective before turning to the detailed analysis of his speech, it is essential to explore the figure of Alcibiades himself. Following the layered structure established in the dialogue's framing, I will weave together the political and historical background with the dramatic characterisation offered by the *Symposium*. Moreover, because Alcibiades' speech echoes the vocabulary of religious initiation and his historical career is inextricably linked to religious scandal, particular attention must be given to his relationship with religion.

Alcibiades, Politics and Religion

Alcibiades (451-404 BCE) stands out as one of the most notorious and divisive figures of late fifth-century Athens. The very nature of Alcibiades' relationship with Athens exposed a "fundamental ambiguity", this great individual was seen as a figure who could not be regularly accommodated within the civic community. He was simultaneously "at once inside the city and outside it; its saviour but also its greatest threat; its darling but at the same time its enemy" (Gribbble 199, 8).

Already in antiquity, his biography was perceived as inseparable from the larger fate of Athens: his rise and fall closely mirrored the city's imperial expansion and eventual defeat in the Peloponnesian War.

The *Symposium* dramatises Alcibiades at a crucial moment – shortly before the Sicilian Expedition – and Plato's readers could hardly fail to recall, when he burst drunkenly into Agathon's house, the full arc of his political career, his dazzling successes, and religious scandals that precipitated his downfall.

Born into a wealthy aristocratic family – Alcmaeonid on his mother's side and Salaminian on his father's – he was deeply connected to Athens' political elite through both parents. His mother, Dinomache, was a first cousin of Pericles, the dominant statesman of mid-fifth-century Athens (Nails 2002, 12). When Alcibiades' father Cleinias died in battle at Coronea in 446 BCE, the young Alcibiades and his brother passed into Pericles' guardianship.

Raised in the house of Athens' most powerful statesman, he absorbed from an early age the atmosphere of political debate, public ambition, and imperial confidence (Nails 2002).

Ancient anecdotes also emphasise his *charis* – his striking beauty, charm, and precocity – qualities that made him an object of fascination and alarm. Plutarch recounts that Socrates, fearing these gifts might corrupt him, took particular interest in Alcibiades and sought to temper them through philosophy (*Alc*. 4).

After Pericles' died in 429 BCE left, Athens lost its long-standing leader. Cleon briefly filled the vacuum as "an unscrupulous demagogue and warmonger" (Evangeliou 2016, 115), but after Cleon died in 422 BCE, the Peace of Nicias opened space for new leadership. Alcibiades seized the opportunity: in 420 BCE, at the minimum legal age, he was elected commander (*strategos*), an early sign of both aristocratic influence and his compelling personal charisma (Thuc. 5.43.2-4; Nails 2002, 13).

From the outset of his career, Alcibiades became a counterpoint to Nicias – Athens' respected, cautious general preferred peace with Sparta (Nails 2002, 17). Their rivalry dramatised two incompatible visions of Athens' future. Nicias represented conservative restraint, piety and prudence; Alcibiades embodied restless ambition and expansive imperial vision. Thucydides dramatises this opposition in his account of the debates leading to the Sicilian Expedition (6.9-23): while Nicias warned of the dangers of overreaching, Alcibiades pressed for expansion and conquest, promising wealth and empire.

The Sicilian Expedition (415-413 BCE) became the defining catastrophe of the Peloponnesian War. Alcibiades, its most forceful advocate, persuaded the Assembly to launch an unprecedented naval campaign (Thuc. 6.15-18).[103] Yet, on the eve of departure, in the autumn of 415 BCE, Athens was shaken by two sacrileges: the mutilation of the Herms and the profanation of the Eleusinian Mysteries. Alcibiades was implicated in both. Summoned back to Athens to stand trial, he instead fled and defected to Sparta. There, he advised Athens' enemies to occupy Decelea – an action that devastated Attic territory – and urged revolts among Athens' allies (Thuc. 6.27-28; 6.61.1). His shifting loyalties, combined with later intrigues in Persia and a brief restoration in Athens, cemented his reputation as a figure of betrayal.

Because of his notorious association with Socrates, Socratic circles were repeatedly forced to defend the philosopher against charges that he corrupted the young statesman. In this

[103] Alcibiades, Nicias and Lamachus were elected generals to command the expedition (Nails 2002, 14).

light, the *Symposium* can be read as part of a broader apologia: a literary defence that rewrites the "case" by dramatising Alcibiades' own confession of his failed attempts to seduce Socrates, placing responsibility for his moral failure squarely on himself rather than on his teacher.

Within this interpretative context, Cornelli (2016) argues that *paranomia* – lawless or transgression of established norms – alongside *philotimia*, love for honours of the many (216b), are central to Alcibiades' characterisation. Drawing on Thucydides (6.15), Cornelli observes that what scandalised the Athenian was not only Alcibiades' political manoeuvring but his lifestyle (*diaita*): a *paranomia kata to eautou soma*, a transgression regarding one's own body. This expression, he notes, points to sexual and bodily deviance, already alluded to when Antisthenes described Alcibiades as '*paranomos* towards women'. The bodily and gendered dimension of this *paranomia* marked him as a man who inverted civic expectations of moderation and masculine self-control.

Cornelli (2016, 339) illustrates this through anecdotes in which sex, power, and transgression converge. At Abydos, Alcibiades provoked scandal by sleeping with his uncle's partner, Medontis, and then claiming paternity of her child. Such conduct exemplified how Alcibiades' body itself became the *locus* of lawlessness: instead of embodying the moderation and self-mastery expected of an Athenian male citizen, he transformed eros into a domain of excess, violating norms of kinship, friendship, and civic restraint. In the Melos affair (416 BCE), following Athens' massacre and enslavement of the Melians (Thuc. 5.84-116), Alcibiades allegedly took a Melian woman as captive and fathered a child with her. Here, again, political domination and sexual appropriation intertwine: the conquest of a city, both military and erotic claim. It was argued that Alcibiades, through his excesses, having a son with a Melian slave, was creating new enemies for Athens (Andocides, *In Alcibiadem* 22-23).

Through such acts, Alcibiades' *paranomia* collapsed the boundaries between the civic and the personal, the public and the private. Gribble (1999, 135) further underscores that Alcibiades' personal conduct was not merely perceived as private immorality but was "an inherently political mode of behaviour" (1999, 182). His actions constituted an "illegitimate confusion of the two spheres, his upsetting of the distinction between individual and the city, public and private, so important in democratic Athens" (1999, 132).

Religious impiety deepened the suspicions surrounding Alcibiades. Edmonds (2017) argues that the profanation of the Mysteries was not mere parody but a wrongful appropriation of sacred rites, with Alcibiades himself allegedly acting as *Hierophant* in private banquets

(2017, 204-206). Ancient sources, including Thucydides, treat these profanations as symptoms of political conflict, bound up with fears that Alcibiades aspired to tyranny; the scandal was widely interpreted as a conspiracy against democracy (Edmonds 2017, 205). The religious and the political were inseparable: as Edmond notes, "the performance of the rites by the wrong people, in the wrong place, at the wrong time" was seen as a usurpation of the polis' authority. Rumours soon circulated that Alcibiades sought tyrannical power – a suspicion Plutarch later echoes when he writes that "the people wanted him for tyrant" (Edmonds 2017, 206). Alcibiades' *paranomia* thus extended across politics, religion, and gender, merging civic fear with moral panic.

For Plato, Alcibiades' drunken intrusion in the *Symposium* is both a literary masterstroke and a political necessity. His confession redeems Socrates: Alcibiades' ruin stems not from Socratic influence but from *pleonexia*, the insatiable drive for possession. Just as he had attempted to appropriate the Mysteries, in Plato's dialogue, he attempts to possess Socrates' wisdom, treating it as a commodity to be exchanged for sexual favours (Edmonds 2017, 210).

Alcibiades' later career confirms this pattern of instability. In Sparta soon fell under suspicion, fled to Persia, courted the satrap Tissaphernes, and later engineered a brief return to Athens, where military successes earned him a temporary revival of public favour. Distrust, however, persisted, and by 406 BCE, he was once again in exile. He was assassinated in Phrygia in 404 BCE, likely at Spartan instigation – the same year Athens fell. Cornelli (2016, 399) underscores that Aristophanes' *Frogs* (405 BCE) captured the city's ambivalence: Athens "wants him, hates him, and longs for him" (1425).

As Cornelli observes, late fifth-century Athens became increasingly obsessed with the spectre of oligarchy and tyranny. Figures like Alcibiades – rich, rebellious, excessive – come to embody collective fears:

> Gradually – Thucydides is the main source on this issue – a rich, excessive, rebellious and powerful figure such as that of Alcibiades gets to meet all the conditions to concentrate on itself the fears of the democratic people (Thuc. VI 62,1). (Cornelli 2016, 337).

The figure of Alcibiades cannot be separated from his association with Socrates. Ancient authors diverge on whether he should be called a pupil. Xenophon claims that Alcibiades' ruin came from abandoning Socrates and surrendering to *philotimia* (*Mem*. 1.2.12-39). For Xenophon, Socrates tried to restrain him, directing his ambition toward self-care. Plato

dramatises this conflict in the *Symposium,* when Alcibiades confesses: "For [Socrates] compels me to admit that even with all my deficiencies I nevertheless take no care for myself, but instead I involve myself in the concerns of the Athenians" (216a). As Boeri (2016, 367) observes, "Alcibiades is not truly aware of what he ought to do, nor does he 'know' what he thinks he knows; if he did, he would act as such knowledge requires."[104] His dilemma lies precisely in the pull between philosophical self-examination and political ambition. Evangeliou sees here "the central drama of Alcibiades life, torn between the glory of politics and philosophic virtue" (2016, 114). Nichols likewise emphasises that Socratic philosophy, understood as an "in-between" practice of reciprocity, is fundamentally at odds with Alcibiades' imperialism (Nichols 2007, 504-505).

Alcibiades' trajectory thus becomes a paradigm of political and ethical excess. Fisher (1992) calls him the most hubristic Athenian of the classical period, citing a long catalogue of his acts of *hybris* and emphasising its connections to the Greek history:

> Starting with his contemptuous abuses of his boyhood friend and his lovers, he continued to treat with contumely his fellow-citizens (painters, fellow-liturgy performers, etc.) and in general their democratic and traditional values and beliefs. His *hybris* was often displayed in violence, in sexual abuses, at *symposia* and drunken *komoi,* like his career as a whole, it relied on the bases of his inherited birth, family traditions and wealth. It led him to gratuitous acts of contemptuous impiety directed at those rites of which the Athenian polis was most proud. (Fisher 1992, 148)

Plato's choice to place Alcibiades at the climax of the *Symposium* is therefore deliberate. The banquet of 416 BCE coincides with Alcibiades' peak influence, yet the dialogue's retrospective narration – composed after the Sicilian disaster and after Socrates' trial and execution – ensures that readers cannot forget the sacrilege, betrayal, and political collapse that followed. Alcibiades' sudden entrance, crowned with ivy and already intoxicated, mirrors his historical persona: brilliant, magnetic, and destabilizing. His encomium to Socrates dramatises the irreconcilable tension between *philotimia* and *philosophia*, between imperial ambition and philosophical eros.

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[104] Original in Spanish: "Pero si es así, Alcibiades no es verdaderamente consciente de loque debe hacer ni "sabe" lo que cree saber; si efectivamente lo supiera, actuaria tal modo como le indica lo que cree que hay que hacer". (Boeri 2016, 367).

Alcibiades' political and religious *paranomia* thus converge in his *Symposium* portrait. His drunken confession gathers, in a single moment, the political hubris, erotic excess, and impiety that defined his life, transforming them into dramatic symbols that anchor the dialogue's final movement.

3.2 Chronological Layers, Seating Arrangements and Rules for the Gathering

The arrival of Alcibiades at Agathon's dinner party is one of the most dramatically vivid moments of the *Symposium*. Coming immediately after the theoretical culmination of Socrates' and Diotima's speech, his entrance is abrupt and disruptive: he is "very drunk" (*sphodra methuontos*) (212c), noisy, and overflowing with excess. Foley observes that he appears as "the personification of all that is antithetical to Socrates' philosophical sobriety." (2010, 70). Surrounded by a crowd of revellers and the flute girl – who earlier had been dismissed by Eryximachus (176e), he bursts in, crowned with a wreath of ivy and violets, with ribbons trailing from his hair (212c-e). The imagery is densely symbolic: violets evoke both Athens and Aphrodite, while ivy is associated with Dionysus[105] (Scott and Welton 2008, 156; Nussbaum 1986, 193). Alcibiades' Dionysian entrance immediately transforms the tone of the gathering, introducing a new register of theatricality and embodied emotion.

Chronological Depth and Narrative Expansion

As explored in Chapter 1, the *Symposium* relies on multiple chronological layers, reaching its deepest point when Socrates recounts Diotima's teachings. Alcibiades' arrival expands this structure further: he refuses to deliver an encomium to Eros, choosing instead to speak about Socrates himself and to recall episodes drawn from different moments of their shared past. In doing so, he shifts the record of the conversation from theory and praise to history and truth (Cornelli 2016, 337). Foley similarly notes that Alcibiades rejects philosophical abstraction, opting instead to focus on particulars (Foley 2010,70). His speech is a patchwork of memories – personal, fragmented, emotionally charged – ranging from his failed attempts to seduce Socrates to recollections of their military campaigns.

[105] Edmonds (2017, 196) notes, following many other commentators, that Alcibiades drunkenness, combined with the company of the flute girl and revellers, evokes the epiphany of Dionysos.

By privileging the singular and the historical, Alcibiades dramatically amplifies the temporal complexity of the dialogue. His speech reinforces the multilayered narrative that continually collides with the future known to the reader – a tension already framed in the prologue. The dialogue invites its audience to inhabit two temporal positions at once: to experience events as the characters do, unaware of what is to come, and simultaneously as readers, fully conscious of the tragedies that lie ahead. Alcibiades' entrance is therefore not merely a disruption of order but a dramatic intensification of this temporal doubleness. As Sheffield notes, his intervention recalls "the lives that were constructed by the participants, and just what is at stake in this discussion" (2006a, 223). For Plato's audience, Alcibiades' personal testimony would have carried the unmistakable shadow of impending disaster: his own political ruin, Socrates' execution, and the catastrophic defeat of Athens in the Peloponnesian War.

The Effect on the Seating Arrangements

Alcibiades also disrupts the physical order of the dinner party. Overwhelmed by wine, ivy, violets, and ribbons, he fails to notice Socrates and sits between him and Agathon.[106] This positioning encapsulates the dramatic and theoretical tensions of the dialogue. Agathon embodies poetic beauty and rhetorical brilliance; Socrates represents philosophical inquiry and the rigorous demands of truth; Alcibiades stands as the unstable mediation between them, torn between aesthetic admiration, erotic longing, political ambition, and philosophical vulnerability. The seating thus becomes a living diagram of the dialogue's central oppositions. Through Alcibiades' placement, the *Symposium* dramatises the collision between the Dionysian and the philosophical, the tragic and the Socratic, the civic and the erotic.

Right after the end of Alcibiades' speech, a dispute breaks out over who is entitled to sit next to Agathon. The dispute intensifies as Socrates tries to invoke the rule that each participant must praise the person seated to his right, suggesting that Agathon move to his right so that he could praise him. Alcibiades protests, appealing to Zeus (222d-223a).

What appears, on the surface, to be a playful struggle for a seat carries significant symbolic weight. As Scott and Welton note, the contest for proximity to Agathon – whose name literally means "the good" – becomes a dramatisation of the struggle between philosophical and political eros:

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[106] This moment is discussed in 'Chapter 1'.

> One must wonder about the significance of the contest over "the Good" carried out between Alcibiades and Socrates. This contest is especially curious since in the process of attempting to win Agathon over Alcibiades will inadvertently settle the contest between Agathon and Socrates in favor of Socrates. At the same time, Alcibiades' courtship of Agathon will fail, leaving Socrates symbolically victorious in that contest as well. Perhaps Socrates' dual victory is meant to show that love of wisdom surpasses mere political ambition in attaining the Good and surpasses poetry in exerting potentially beneficial effects upon noble youth. (Scott and Welton 2008, 161)

Read in this light, the scene reinforces the intricacy of the interplay between Socrates' and Alcibiades' speeches, granting Socrates at least a temporary victory in the symbolic struggle for *to agathon*.

Yet this moment of apparent order is extremely brief. Just as Agathon agrees to shift to Socrates' right, a group of intoxicated revellers bursts into the room, seating themselves indiscriminately. As the narrator reports, "there was no longer any order" (223b).

This abrupt collapse of decorum dramatises the precariousness of the carefully constructed relational order of the conversation. It also prefigures, in miniature, the ethical and political disintegration that will soon engulf Athens – a dissolution mirrored in Alcibiades' own life and in the city's impending ruin.

Disruption and the Tone of Alcibiades' Speech

Alcibiades' intrusion constitutes a direct violation of the foundational rules agreed upon for the gathering – moderate drinking and discourses over excessive drinking and entertainment (176a-e). He arrives intoxicated, accompanied by the flute girl who had earlier been dismissed, and immediately demands heavy drinking, appointing himself as symposiarch asking others to join him in his altered state (213e). Gribble (1999) asserts that this entrance is an act loaded with political significance, Alcibiades demand to depose the symposiarch and consume massive quantities of unmixed wine serves as "a neat illustration of how a political mentality could be read directly off anarchic and 'tyrannical' practices with regard to pleasure and consumption" (1999, 78)

Alcibiades then explicitly refuses to praise Eros, insisting that Socrates would be jealous. He proposes to speak about Socrates and vows to speak only the truth, implying that this truth is revealed by wine (214c-d). Alcibiades' disregard for the established order sets the

serio-comic tone of his speech, which Socrates later calls a "satyric or Silenic drama" (222d). Alcibiades chaotic entrance forces the conversation back into the realm of affect, desire and emotional turbulence – revealing the enduring power of forms of eros far removed from the philosophical aim articulated by Diotima.

Through Alcibiades, Plato does not simply introduce disorder into the banquet; earlier disruptions had already revealed the fragility of the banquet's structure. Rather, Alcibiades exposes the limit of that structure. With his arrival, the dialogue's fragile equilibrium collapses entirely: what had previously been temporary interruptions now expand into complete dissolution, leaving no order intact. This final eruption of chaos mirrors the political collapse that awaited Athens, suggesting that the same forces capable of undoing philosophical order – the passions, ambitions, and excesses embodied in Alcibiades – could just as easily unmake the civic order.

Yet the collapse is not absolute. In its final moments, Plato lets a thin thread of structure persist. Socrates remains awake with Agathon and Aristophanes, still passing the cup "from left to right" (223c). Their measured persistence preserves a fleeting trace of the previous order amid the surrounding chaos. When dawn arrives, Socrates goes to the Lyceum, bathes, and spends the day as usual, resting only in the evening (223d). His calm endurance – physical as much as intellectual – concludes the scene with an image that echoes Alcibiades' account of his oddity: a man deeply present in the same world as others yet somehow untouched by the instability that overwhelms them.

3.3 Socrates' Characterisation and Relationships

Alcibiades' speech in Plato's *Symposium* provides the most detailed, varied, and enigmatically complex portrait of Socrates in the dialogues. As Scott and Welton observe:

> The image of Socrates presented here is unforgettable and hauntingly mysterious. He is depicted as virtuous with all virtue, insulated by the irony that shrouds his superhuman excellence, firmly in the world and simultaneously detached from it, and in all, absolutely unique, like no one known before. (Scott and Welton 2008, 12).

Alcibiades announces that he will praise Socrates "through images" (*dia eikonon*, 215a), meaning through comparisons (North 1994, 91). This strategy produces a portrait that is

simultaneously a loving encomium and a devastating critique – a tension Alcibiades himself explicitly acknowledged when he describes his speech as a "mixture of praise and blame" (222a). Gagarin (1977, 29) rightly emphasises that both strands must be taken seriously; to read Alcibiades as offering only admiration or only resentment would distort the complexity of his testimony.

At the centre of Alcibiades' portrayal stands Socrates' *atopia* – his unclassified strangeness. This quality, already foreshadowed in the prologue, becomes the dominant lens through which Alcibiades' experiences and interprets the philosopher. The odd Socrates inhabits the threshold between the human and the divine, embodying a paradoxical mixture of desire and detachment.

For Alcibiades, Socrates' oddity is both captivating and unbearable. It draws him in through eros while simultaneously exposing the futility of his erotic ambitions, and it reveals the deep ethical dissonance between them. Where Alcibiades seeks possession, recognition, and reciprocity, Socrates embodies an eros oriented toward transformation, self-examination, and the good. Their relationship becomes a dramatic staging of incompatible hierarchies of value – philosophy's asymmetrical, demanding love of wisdom confronting philotimia's pursuit of honour, power, and prestige.

This tension, which Alcibiades narrates with drunken passion, structures the remainder of his speech: each of the images he employs, each recollection he shares, returns to the disruptive power of Socratic strangeness and the way it unsettles all who come into genuine proximity with it.

Socrates' *Atopia*: Unique and Daimonic

Alcibiades begins his characterisation of Socrates by foregrounding his *atopia* – a radical strangeness that makes him incomparable to any ordinary human being:[107]:

> But so unusual (*atopian*) is our friend here, both in himself and what he says, that however hard you looked you would never find anyone remotely like him among men of the present or the past, unless, as I have suggested, you were to

[107] Blondell (2022, 74) comments that this validation of Socrates *atopia* regarding physical and social non-conformity "initiates a long iconographic tradition whereby certain types of philosophers may be recognized by their bizarre personal appearance."

> compare him, the man and his way of talking, not with any ordinary human being but with the sileni and satyrs. (Pl. *Smp.* 221d).

The central image Alcibiades uses is that of the Silenus statues, an image that both opens and closes his speech: "It is my contention that he is very like those Sileni that you find in statuaries' workshops which the craftsman make holding pipes or *auloi*, and when you open them up you see that they contain small statues of the gods inside." (215a-b). As North (1994) observes, this comparison introduces the "distinction between the outer and the inner, appearance and reality on which the revelation of the real nature of Socrates will be based." (North 1994, 93).[108] The grotesque exterior conceals hidden figures, "so divine and golden, so utterly beautiful and wonderful" (217a) which revel Socrates' inner *sophrosyne*, temperance (216c-219e).

Socrates' *logoi* mirror this same duality:

> 'For thought this is a point I did not mention at the beginning of my speech, it is also Socrates' discourses that are very like those images of Silenus which open up. If you let yourself listen to them they all seem utterly ridiculous at first hearing, because he wraps everything up in words and phrases which are indeed like the hide of some rude satyr. His talk is all about pack-animals and blacksmiths and cobblers and tanners, and he always seems to be saying the same things in the same words, so that any simple-minded bystander unused to this kind of thing might simply laugh at what he was saying. But if ever you see his discourse opening up and get inside it, first you will find that it is also most divine and contains the greatest number of images of virtue. Moreover, it has the widest application, or, rather, it applies to everything that one should consider if one intends to become fine and good.' (Pl. *Smp.* 221d-222a).

This passage also recalls Alcibiades' earlier warning that he may mix up events (215a). His admission that he forgot to include this point earlier is significant: as North (1994, 96) argues, this self-correction is significant – the substitution of Socrates himself for Socrates' *logoi* suggests that Alcibiades ultimately collapses the philosophical method into the man who embodies it. This collapse, according to North, parallels the movement of the *scala amoris*: to understand Socrates' words is to ascend through the layers of meaning they conceal, just as the lover ascends from bodily beauty to the beauty itself.

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[108] Alcibiades stresses that Socrates resembles the satyrs only in physical appearance (215b). Boeri (2016,366) comments that Plato frequently recalls Socrates' physical ugliness in contrast with his interior beauty. Blondell (2002, 261ss) dives into this discussion regarding Socrates' characterization in *Theaetetus*.

Through these images, Alcibiades presents Socrates as occupying a space between human and the divine, embodying the very structure of philosophical eros described by Diotima (Sheffield 2006a, 212). He calls him *daimonion* and *thaumastos* "a truly superhuman and amazing man" (219b), far more marvellous (*thaumasioteros*) than the satyr Marsyas. Like Marsyas, Socrates enchants his listeners, but whereas Marsyas needed his flute, Socrates achieves the same effect through speech alone (216c).

Yet Alcibiades' use of daimonion reveals a misunderstanding. In Diotima's account, the daimonion occupies the metaxy, the in-between space between mortals and gods. But Alcibiades collapses the distinction. Instead of recognising Socrates as someone who dwells in this in-between state – neither wise nor ignorant, neither beautiful nor ugly – Alcibiades elevates him into a quasi-divine being. Socrates' strangeness, instead of signalling philosophical metaxy, becomes evidence of divinity itself.

Socrates' *logoi*, Alcibiades confesses, are ground-breaking:

> Whenever I listen to him I am more upset than those driven to frenzy by the Corybantes. My heart pounds and tears flow, merely because of this man's words, and I notice that very many others too are affected in the same way. When I used to listen to Pericles and other great orators I naturally thought they spoke well, but I was never affected to anything like the same extent. My soul wasn't in turmoil, and I wasn't disturbed by the thought that I was a slave to my way of living. But after listening to this Marsyas here I was very often reduced to thinking that being as I was, my kind of life was not worth living. (Pl. *Smp.* 215e-216a).

Socrates' words force Alcibiades to confront the vanity of his political ambitions and the urgency of caring for himself (216a). Scott and Welton (2008, 168) observe that Socrates is holding a mirror to Alcibiades, and Alcibiades is revolted by the reflection he sees in it. His reaction confirms this reading: "So I stop my ears to his Siren song and force myself to run away so as not to spend the rest of my life sitting here at his side" (216a).

Socrates' *atopia* also manifests in his indifference to physical hardship and social convention. Alcibiades describes him as capable of enduring hunger, fatigue, and cold; walking barefoot even on ice; and resisting drunkenness with ease (219e-220b). Alcibiades describes that other soldiers "looked at him suspiciously, because they thought he was showing them up" (220b). Sheffield (2006a) warns against reading this as a contempt of arrogance:

> Socrates exhibits the barefoot, hardy nature of Eros ([Eros] ἀνυπόδητος, 203d1; [Socrates] ἀνυπόδητος, 220b6) and embodies the sentiment of the correct lover of his own speech who distains the body and thinks it a small thing (210b). We may laugh at his eccentricity, or resent his apparently base disdain, but we should take a second look and catch his beauty: courage and temperance. (Sheffield 2006a, 194).

Echoing the prologue, where a similar scene is described (174d-175b), Alcibiades recounts Socrates' extraordinary stillness during the siege of Potidaea:

> Early one morning, having put his mind to a problem, he stood on the spot thinking about it, and when he could not get anywhere with it he didn't give up but continued to stand there pondering. When it came to midday everyone was beginning to notice, telling each other in amazement that Socrates had been standing there thinking about something ever since daybreak. At last, in the evening after dinner, some of the Ionians carried their sleeping mats outside (by this time it was summer) so that they could sleep in the cold and at the same time watch him to see if he was going to stand there all night. And he did stand there until it was dawn and the sun rose. Then he made a prayer to the Sun and off he went. (Pl. *Smp.* 220c-220d).

Here, Alcibiades interprets the scene as a feat of endurance: Socrates, having fixed his mind on a problem, remains motionless for an entire day and night. Montiglio observes that "Socrates accomplished an exploit of intellectual endurance that took the form of an unshakable standing immobility." (Montiglio 2020, 95).[109] Alcibiades recalls that the soldiers gathered to watch him were astonished as though before a spectacle.

Yet given Alcibiades consideration of Socrates and his *logoi* as exceptional and his description of the philosopher as incomparable to any other human (221d), his emphasis on this episode pushes Socrates closer to figure of divine strangeness than to the philosophical practitioner described in 'Chapter 2'.

Alcibiades' portrait of Socrates wavers between revelation and distortion. He recognizes the philosopher's power but not its measure, mistaking mediation for transcendence and temperance for excess. For Plato, what could be the sign of a philosophical condition appears to Alcibiades as divine strangeness.

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[109] This observation is interesting because intellectual endurance can be perceived as an important dimension of the practice described by Diotima. Nussbaum (1986, 179) notes that the lover's progress is a training, a discipline of repeated choices. The vocabulary underscores this agency: between 210a-c, Socrates reports Diotima repeatedly saying that the initiate "must", "must begin in youth", "must realize for himself" and so on. Montiglio (2020, 98) argues that Plato romanticizes the standing thinker in contraposition with the wandering one. On the topic of wandering see: Nightingale (2001).

This misperception transforms admiration into ambivalence – love entwined with envy, reverence with resentment – and sets the stage for the next theme: the contrast between ethical hierarchies and the ironic charge of hubris.

The Contrast of Hierarchies and the Ironic Charge of Hybris

The core dramatic action in Alcibiades' speech – the failed seduction of Socrates – is presented as a mock trial in which the philosopher is charged with hubris. The conflict arises directly from Socrates' refusal to participate in Alcibiades' mistaken hierarchy of values.

The term *hybris* and its derivatives appear eight times in the *Symposium*.[110] Twice in the prologue, they already frame the dialogue within a rhetoric of rivalry and judgment. First, Socrates refers to a traditional proverb: "to good men's feasts good men go unbidden" (174b), then he says that Homer not merely spoiled the proverb but also treated it with contempt (*hybrisai*). A second instance also comes as an accusation leading to a trial: after Socrates modestly claims that his wisdom is of an inferior sort if compared to Agathon's, Agathon teasingly calls him sarcastic or insolent (*hybristes*) (175a), adding that "a little later on you and I will each plead our claim to wisdom, and Dionysus will be our judge." (175e).[111]

Fisher (1992) underscores the central meaning behind the use of the word *hybris* in classical Athens as eminently relational and connected to the pleasure derived from asserting superiority over another:

> (…) *hybris* is essentially the serious assault on the honour of another, which is likely to cause shame, and lead to anger and attempts of revenge. *Hybris* is often, but by no means necessarily, and act of violence; it is essentially deliberate activity, and the typical motive for such infliction of dishonour is the pleasure of expressing a sense of superiority, rather than compulsion, need or desire for wealth. *Hybris* is often seen to be characteristic of the young, and/or of the rich and/or upper classes; it is often associated with drunkenness. *Hybris* thus most often denotes specific acts or general behaviour directed against others, rather than attitudes, it may, though on occasions, especially in more reflective or philosophical text, denote the drive or the desire, in a specific individual, or in humans generally, to engage in such behaviour directed against others. (Fisher 1992,1).[112]

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[110] 174b, 175e, 181c, 188a, 215b, 219c, 221e, 222a.
[111] These trials recall the background of the actual trial Socrates faced.
[112] Regarding the characterisation of *hybris* in connection to the young, two passages are worth noting: Pausanias says that the older Aphrodite lacks *hybris* (181c), Eryximachus says that when the hubristic eros rules it causes destruction and harm (188a-b).

Alcibiades accuses Socrates of *hybris* three times during his speech. The first comes when he exclaims: "You treat people insolently (*hybristes*). Isn't that true?" (215b), immediately followed by the comparison between Socrates and Marsyas. Marsyas is a mythic figure who traditionally embodies *hybris*: as a satyr, his sexuality certainly plays a big part in this; however, the comparison with Socrates is focused on his music. Regarding music, Marsyas *hybris* has to do with his "wishing to be superior to the gods" since "his music was so superior to that of other mortals that he nearly outdid Apollo and was then flayed for this attempt to put himself on the level of the gods." (Gagarin 1977, 31, n.19; 39).

In this sense, Alcibiades' accusation aligns with the characterisation developed in the previous section. His portrait of Socrates as a marvellous and superior philosopher who cannot be compared to other humans, someone who has the potential to provoke a strong impact on others inevitably borders on the hubristic.[113] Socrates' exceptional *sophrosyne,* a relevant part of his characterisation, appears, paradoxically, as the very sign of excess and seems to play a part in the philosophers' alleged hubris. His control over physical desire and pain adds to the superhuman allegation, and results in his extraordinary physical endurance and 'contempt' for anyone's beauty, wealth or other advantage, a behaviour that can be interpreted as "showing of" superiority. The extreme of *sophrosyne* is thus misread as *hybris* (Gagarin 1977; North 1994, 96).

There is a deep irony in this accusation. The title of *hybristes* far better fits Alcibiades' character than Socrates'. This is something that gives Alcibiades' accusation a similar dynamic of the mirroring effect mentioned before. While making an attack on Socrates, Alcibiades is exposing himself, his own excesses. This rhetorical strategy carries "an investment on a policy of memory (…) which emphasizes the now traditional *paranomia* of Alcibiades, in order to make him guilty of an attempted excessive and outrageous seduction not only of Socrates, but of the *polis*." (Cornelli 2016, 310).

The second accusation arises during the seduction scene itself. According to conventional pederastic expectations, Alcibiades assumed Socrates should take the active erotic role and offer wisdom in return. He openly admits that he hoped to exchange sex for

[113] Fisher (1992) definition recalls the feeling of shame as something that can arise from a hubristic assault, we should remember Alcibiades' claims of feeling shame in front of Socrates (216b). See the discussion on shame on Chapter 2, in the "Preliminary dialogues" topic.

philosophical knowledge (218d). When Socrates rejects the proposal, Alcibiades decides to take the initiative:

> 'After this exchange, and having as it were shot my arrows in his direction, I thought I had scored a hit. So without waiting for him to say anything more I got up and putting my heavy cloak around him (it was winter), lay down beside him under his own short cloak and put my arms around him, this truly superhuman and amazing man. This was how I lay all night long. Again, Socrates, you cannot deny that I am telling the truth. Yet despite all that, he completely defeated me, and despised and mocked and insulted (*hubrizein*) my beauty – and in that respect I really thought I was something, gentlemen of the jury (I call you that because it is you who will deliver a verdict on Socrates' arrogant behaviour). I swear to you by all the gods and all the goddesses too that when I got up in the morning after spending the night with Socrates, nothing more had happened than if I had slept with my father or elder brother.' (Pl. *Smp.* 219b-c).

Scott and Welton (2008, 172) note that Alcibiades conceives this relationship as a kind of "market exchange", offering his body in return for Socrates' wisdom. But for Socrates, Alcibiades was aiming to win an advantage over him, intending to get gold in exchange for bronze (219a). The philosopher's refusal exposes a hierarchy of values in which wisdom and the soul transcend the body, wealth, or honour. But would Alcibiades be aware of the nature of his own proposal?

Socrates' response, which Alcibiades describes as ironic – "He listened to all this with his very characteristic air of assumed seriousness (*eironikos*), as he often does" (218d) – rejects the exchange not out of disdain but because the premise is false: wisdom cannot be traded as a commodity, a point already affirmed in the dialogue's prologue. (215d-e).

Alcibiades, however, sees this rejection as a profound insult, underscoring that Socrates was superior to him (*periegeneto*) (219b); he again accuses Socrates of *hybris* (219c). In this context, Alcibiades believes that Socrates is rising higher than his "allotted station" (Gagarin 1977, 33). This charge is ironic, once more, because Socrates' action was an exhibition of *sophrosyne* and sexual abstinence, a virtue traditionally opposed to *hybris* (cf. *Phdr.* 237e-8a). Judged by Alcibiades' values, however, Socrates' rejection of his advances "may well appear unfair." (Sheffield 2006a, 193).

Alcibiades remains bound to his aristocratic scale of worth, in which his self-worth derived from his physical beauty and political influence are on top. Even his admiration for Socrates' *sophrosyne,* courage, wisdom and endurance (219c-d) weren't enough for him to

relativise the alleged dishonour that would have resulted from the frustrated exchange episode. If philosophy aims to direct and transform eros (Sheffield 2006a, 52), then Alcibiades' reaction exemplifies a failure of transformation – a resistance to orientation.

The third and last accusation of *hybris* happens at the end of Alcibiades' speech:

> 'This, gentlemen, is what I have to say in praise of Socrates, but in order not to exclude his faults I have also told you how he insulted me (*hubrizein*). And I am not the only one he has treated like this. Charmides, son of Glaucon, and Euthydemus, son of Diocles have suffered similarly, and so have many others. They have been deceived into thinking that he was their lover, but then have found that they were in love with him instead.' (Pl. *Smp.* 222a-b)

Here, the Socrates' *hybris* consists precisely in the inversion of traditional roles. He refuses to play the part of *erastes*, thereby overturning the social and erotic hierarchy and dynamic of the traditional paideia. As Fisher (1992) explains:

> In one sense, then, it was Socrates' godlike, totally unsatyr-like, endurance and control over his desires and pleasures, that led him to 'insult' his boyfriends, and equally so to confuse them, force them to switch roles, and to feel themselves enslaved. Hence Alcibiades' multiple confusions, and his sense that he had to admire and still to 'love' (cf. 222c) the man who had outraged him. (Fisher 1992, 463)

This paradoxical view that Socrates' sophrosyne is the cause of his hubristic behaviour arises from the clash between Alcibiades' and Socrates' hierarchy of values. Alcibiades operates according to the aristocratic Athenian hierarchy based on beauty, wealth, and public honour (time), whereas Socrates embodies a philosophical hierarchy defined by the pursuit of wisdom and the care of the soul. Alcibiades' accusation thus reflects his own standards of value. Against the backdrop of Diotima's speech, the contrast reveals two incompatible economies of eros: one directed outward, toward possession and prestige, the other inward-facing, focused on self-knowledge and transformation.

In the end, Alcibiades' accusations of *hybris* reveal less about Socrates than about the accuser himself. His repeated charge that Socrates insults him stems from an inability to perceive the irony of an inverted hierarchy: what he interprets as arrogance is, in truth, the manifestation of virtue. In Alcibiades' moral economy, restraint becomes offence, and self-mastery appears as contempt. Plato exploits this confusion to dramatise the tension between

political and philosophical orders of value, exposing the fragility of a soul unable to endure the displacement of its own hierarchy.

Alcibiades' Failure: The Denial of Human Fragility

Against the background of his spectacular political and personal collapse, Alcibiades bursts into the rationally ordered symposium as the embodiment of anti-philosophical behaviour. Plato uses his entrance to dramatise the dangers of loving incorrectly and of failing to ascend the ladder of love, while simultaneously offering an implicit apologia for Socrates.

The psychological core of Alcibiades' failure lies in his singular experience of shame. He insists that Socrates is the only person in the world before whom he has ever felt shame (216b). This shame is debilitating because Socrates' *logoi* hold up a mirror, forcing Alcibiades to recognise that his political career is a waste of time and that he neglects bettering himself on his shortcomings (216a). Like the lover in Diotima's speech, he becomes aware of his own lack – but for Alcibiades this awareness, and the shame it provokes, is unbearable.

Confronted with the painful recognition that something essential in himself must be transformed before he can meaningfully engage in politics, Alcibiades refuses to let shame lead to philosophical growth (Foley 2010, 70–71). Unlike the lovers in Phaedrus' speech, whose feelings of shame under the gaze of the beloved propel them towards virtuous behaviour (178c-e), a mechanism that is reshaped by Socrates to be related to the presence of wise people instead of the lover or loved one, Alcibiades runs away.

Although Alcibiades admits that he cannot rationally oppose Socrates' arguments, he chooses to flee "like a runaway slave", stopping his ears against the philosopher's "Siren song" (216a). This is not a case of *akrasia* in the strict sense, as Sheffield (2006a, 239) notes, but a case of competing motivational tendencies – a weakness of belief rather than of will. Alcibiades is genuinely persuaded, in Socrates' presence, to desire wisdom, but once separated from him, he succumbs again to the pursuit of honour and popular acclaim (*philotimia*). His failure, therefore, is not ignorance but an inability to sustain conviction in the face of competing desires.

Scott and Welton (2008, 159) emphasise how improbable Socrates' influence was, given Alcibiades' background and the Athenian environment that idolised him

> Clearly, Socrates knew that he would have to compete with what in the *Republic* he calls "the greatest sophist," the corrupt upbringing offered young

> men by the conventional values of Athens itself (*Rep.* 492a-e). It is remarkable that Socrates was able to get through to Alcibiades at all, that is, that he could cause this brilliant young ward of the legendary Pericles to question himself and even to feel ashamed of himself. Such feat is quite remarkable when one realizes that nearly every other voice Alcibiades would have heard would have been flattering rather than critical. His beauty, intelligence, and talent were unsurpassed, and he certainly had no shortage of supporters or conspirators. The Athenians were willing to choose him as general for an extremely important expedition, an expedition they mounted on his advice. Moreover, even after this disastrous event, the failure of which had much to do with betrayal by Alcibiades, Athens was willing to forgive him and accept him as leader again later in the war. Alcibiades was not a man who was used to accepting criticism and censure, but one who demanded honor; when he did not get it, he changed sides. (Scott and Welton 2008, 159).

Alcibiades' inability to deal with the uncomfortable feeling of shame derived from the realization of his own lack of wisdom and self-control is ultimately a refusal of the human condition itself – the condition of fragility. He cannot accept the lesson implicit in Diotima's account: that human beings never truly possess the objects of their desire but exist in an intermediate, ever-tensional state, like Eros.

To evade this recognition and excuse his own moral failure, Alcibiades interprets Socrates' excellence as divine rather than human. He treats the philosopher's attainments as superhuman, thereby denying the possibility of humanly achievable virtue. In doing so, Alcibiades falls precisely into the pitfall of the binary model Diotima warned against; instead of valuing what lies between human and divine, he erases the *metaxy*. Socrates' *sophrosyne* appears to him as *hybris*, as if the philosopher were trying to occupy a godlike status. His disregard for beauty, wealth, and honour – the very things that structure Alcibiades' self-worth – becomes an insult. Alcibiades cannot value what he cannot possess.

By calling Socrates divine, Alcibiades absolves himself. If Socratic virtue is godlike, it cannot be humanly acquired, and Alcibiades is spared the responsibility of transformation. To admit Socrates' humanity would be to admit his own, along with the vulnerability it entails. In this sense, Alcibiades too enacts a form of *hybris*: he denies his human limits by aspiring to the status that others ascribe to him – beauty, wealth, and power – while rejecting the humility necessary for philosophical growth.

Alcibiades recognises the value of Socrates' virtues but misunderstands their source. He fails to see that Socrates' *sophrosyne* is not an innate superiority, but the result of a disciplined practice grounded in the acknowledgement of human limitation. Philosophy, as Diotima taught, is not the possession of wisdom but its continual pursuit – an art of losing and recalling.

Alcibiades' tragedy is to mistake this rhythm of loss for weakness and to interpret fragility not as the condition of learning, but as a wound to be denied.

The Epistemological Error: Rejecting Practice and Collaborative Creation

Alcibiades' refusal to accept vulnerability renders him unfit for progressing on the sequential process of the philosophical ascent, which depends on shared, deliberate practice between student and teacher. Yet he continues to desire the beautiful things he sees in Socrates and attempts to obtain them through a transactional exchange.

Philosophical relationship, however, is not a transaction, but a shared enterprise aimed at generating virtue. Socrates consistently models the ideal relation as mutual deliberation and joint inquiry (*synousia)*. Dialogue, for him, is an ongoing cooperative exercise, a walking together, as suggested in 174d, with a modified quoting of a Homeric proverb "As we two go further on the way (…) we shall decide on our story". In such a relationship, the philosopher functions not as a donor of knowledge but as a guide who helps the interlocutor discover truths for himself through a lifelong process. The pursuit of virtue requires cooperation with others, a point underscored by Diotima's repeated emphasis on procreation as a shared activity (209c).

Diotima defines the real purpose of eros as giving birth in beauty, whether in body or soul (206b). This creative activity is the mortal approximation to the divine state. Alcibiades fails to participate in this generative dimension. Rather than sharing in the production of logoi and the cultivation of virtue, he seeks passive acquisition. The philosophical path requires producing *logoi* and cultivating virtue, and the strongest bonds of *philia* are formed when partners nurture their shared offspring together. Alcibiades, instead, reduces relationships to competitive, zero-sum pursuits, thereby rejecting the reciprocal nature of philosophical eros.

Failing to grasp the philosopher's human instability and intermediary position, Alcibiades assumes that Socrates' wisdom can be conquered through exchange or transfer, as if it were a possession that could be handed over. He attempts to trade his physical beauty for Socrates' inner wisdom, reproducing the conventional Athenian pederastic economy in which the *erastes* imparts *paideia* in return for bodily favours. By attempting a role reversal – plotting to "capture" Socrates as prey (217c) – Alcibiades enacts his moral and epistemological confusion.

As Scott and Welton note, "the nakedly ambitious Alcibiades sets out to dominate or subjugate the only person who ever made him feel ashamed of himself" (2008, 172). His plot

is framed in imagery of sacrilege, linking his personal failure to his public impieties. Alcibiades presents his speech as a revelation of sacred mysteries, invoking the Orphic formula "Close the doors of your ears, ye profane" (218b), which, as Edmonds notes, "marks the following discourse as endowed with special authority" (2017, 208). This high rhetorical gesture inevitably recalls Alcibiades' own profanations of the Mysteries.

The comparison of Socrates to Silenus statues – grotesque on the outside but concealing divine *agalmata* within – crystallises Alcibiades' epistemic failure. He confuses the sign with its signified, mistaking the *agalmata* themselves for the divine beauty they represent. As Edmonds writes, "Alcibiades' error is to think that the beauty he perceives is a possession of Socrates that he can hand over" (2017, 209). This act of overreaching (*pleonexia*) mirrors his religious sacrilege: both involve an attempt to appropriate what is meant to remain communal and transcendent for private use.

Socrates rejects this model – a hydraulic "knowledge-transfer" concept – and the pederastic logic that supports it. He points out that if Alcibiades were right about Socrates's wisdom, the exchange would be like trading bronze for gold. This refutation demonstrates that philosophical eros follows entirely different standards from the self-serving political/pederastic exchange Alcibiades assumes.

Socrates thus offers a different kind of relationship – one that Alcibiades shows no interest in pursuing. For a man accustomed to possession, recognising value without ownership is intolerable. Alcibiades' inability to convert his fleeting awareness of Socrates' worth into lasting virtue stems directly from his rejection of the hard work and mental discipline that philosophical life requires. The wisdom Alcibiades desires "is not some piece of information that he can learn (*mathein*), but an experience he must undergo (*pathein*), like a ritual of the mysteries." (Edmonds 2017, 214). It demands devotion to continuous practice.

Philosophical progress requires careful study, unrushed and continuous mental rehearsal (*melete*), echoing the opening line of the *Symposium*, where Apollodorus emphasises that he is "not unpractised". Diotima's method insists on a slow, continuous and ordered progression. This very slowness is dramatised in the prologue itself: instead of immediately recounting the speeches, Apollodorus takes time reconstructing Aristodemus' account step by step, from the beginning, performing the very patience the dialogue demands.[114]

[114] See: Pavlou (2020) for an account on leisure and philosophy in the *Protagoras* and Sen (2000) on the 'slowness' of philosophy.

Alcibiades, by contrast, is defined by urgency, competitiveness and desire to conquer – traits antithetical to the philosophical rhythm of reflective practice. His refusal to follow the necessary sequence is not accidental; it expresses his unwillingness to confront his own flaws and to engage in the self-care (*epimeleia*) such confrontation entails. His failure, ultimately, is epistemological and existential: a denial of the human condition of incompleteness and a profound misunderstanding of the nature of wisdom itself.

The Flaw of Perception: The Dual Meaning of *Exaiphnes*

Plato's use of *exaiphnes* highlights the contrast between genuine, hard-won philosophical revelation and Alcibiades' fleeting, chaotic perception. In Socrates' and Diotima's account, the philosophical path, after long, continued toil, culminates in a moment when the true lover is suddenly (*exaiphnes*) struck by the vision of beauty itself. This is the *telos* for which all the previous labour was undertaken (210e). Such a vision is a profound and transformative cognitive event that radically alters the lover's perspectives on beauty and on the previous 'children' procreated. It makes the previous pursuit truly worthwhile, opening the possibility for the philosopher to give birth to true virtue (212a).

The term appears twice in connection with Alcibiades. First, before his entrance: "suddenly (*exaiphnes*) there was a loud banging on the outside door." (212c). Second, when he sees Socrates for the first time and exclaims: "You were lying there to ambush me again, just as you used to do, making a sudden (*exaiphnes*) appearance in a place where I least expected you." (213c). In both cases, the word *exaiphnes* marks not only the single event, the vision of the beautiful, or the vision of Socrates, but especially what comes next: the effect of this vision on the viewer. The contrast between *exaiphnes* in the ascent and with Alcibiades' view of Socrates is deliberate and revealing.

In the ascent, *exaiphnes* describes the moment when the rightly trained soul is prepared to receive an overwhelming but intelligible disclosure – an event that retrospectively reorganises every previous step and leads to the possibility to procreate true virtue. In Alcibiades' case, however, the "sudden appearance" tells us far more about the viewer than about the object viewed. Socrates was present the entire time, seated beside Agathon; Alcibiades simply failed to see him. Drunk, wreathed with ivy and violets, and "blinded" by ribbons (212c-e), he literally and symbolically cannot perceive the philosopher (213a). The wreaths themselves signify the forces competing for Alcibiades' attention: violets for Athens

and Aphrodite, ivy for Dionysus (Scott and Welton 2008, 156; Nussbaum 1986, 193). Alcibiades misperception is therefore not accidental but emblematic.

Alcibiades' failure to see Socrates – who was present yet unperceived – and his immediate interpretation of the event as an "ambush" perfectly illustrate his epistemological distortion. His beliefs and values are fundamentally unstable, leading him to constantly change his mind and regret his actions. This ethical chaos shapes his perception of Socrates. The dramatic irony is that nothing "sudden" happened at all: only Alcibiades' untrained and intoxicated soul experienced it as such. Metaphorically, he cannot "see the philosopher" because he has not ordered his life in a way that would allow him to perceive what is truly before him.

The sudden appearance of Socrates, as interpreted by Alcibiades, comes from a momentary shift in perspective forced by external circumstance, not an intentionally built viewing as described in Socrates and Diotima's account. This instability shapes his entire speech: Alcibiades sees the *agalmata* inside Socrates but jumps to the wrong conclusions, his mind quickly reverts to the logic of conquest because he has not grounded that vision with the necessary *logos* and discipline. The "suddenness" of his recognition remains surface-level – an emotional flare rather than philosophical understanding.

Plato uses this contrast to revel the ethical dimension of epistemology. True insight requires patience, repetition, and the gradual harmonisation of eros and *logos*. Alcibiades' failure to commit to such work exposes the danger of an ungoverned soul. His misreading of *exhaiphnes* – turning revelation into shock – shows how political ambition and the neglect of philosophy distort perception itself.

As Nussbaum observes, Plato's comic tragedy confronts the reader with two incompatible orientations toward knowledge:

> And now, all at once, *exaiphnes,* dawns on us the full light of Plato's design, his comic tragedy of choice and practical wisdom. We see two kinds of value, two kinds of knowledge; and we see that we must choose. One sort of understanding blocks out the other. The pure light of eternal form eclipses, or is eclipsed by, the flickering lightning of the opened and unstably moving body. You think, says Plato, that you can have this love and goodness too, this knowledge of and by flesh and good-knowledge too. Well, says Plato, you can't. You have to cling yourself to something, give up some beauty. 'The sight of reason begins to see clearly when the sight of the eyes begins to frow dim' – whether from age or because you are learning to be good. (Nussbaum 1986, 198).

By staging this contrast so vividly, Plato transforms Alcibiades' failure into Socrates' vindication. The drunken, impulsive Alcibiades embodies not human fragility itself, but the consequences that arise from refusing to acknowledge it. His erratic passions, shifting allegiances, and moral inconsistency stand in stark contrast to Socrates' disciplined endurance – the steadiness of one who has accepted the limits of human nature as the precondition of philosophical life. What Alcibiades presents as an accusation becomes, in effect, a self-indictment: his confession demonstrates that his corruption did not stem from Socrates, but from his own refusal to be transformed.

In dramatising this, Plato offers his most powerful *apologia* for Socrates: a figure whose irony, self-mastery, and unwavering care for the soul embody the insight that wisdom depends not on escaping human vulnerability but on learning to live within it.

3.4 Final Remarks

With Alcibiades' speech, the theoretical and the dramatic movements of the *Symposium* converge and collide. The ordered sequence of speeches reaches its breaking point when desire re-enters the scene in Alcibiades' intoxicated confession. What had been, with Socrates' recollection of Diotima, a carefully structured ascent towards beauty – climbed by an anonymous lover – is suddenly pulled back into the world of bodies, emotions, and political entanglements. Alcibiades' entrance does not interrupt the philosophical project: it completes it dramatically, revealing the precarious terrain on which philosophy must stand: between theory and life, speech and embodiment, self-mastery and desire.

The philosophical ascent described by Diotima finds its mirror image – and, at the same time, its distortion – in Alcibiades' passionate testimony. In Diotima's speech, the lover ascends by ordered practice, gradually training desire to recognise beauty in its increasing generality until the *exaiphnes* disclosure crowns the long labour of *melete*. Alcibiades, by contrast, moves without sequence. His perception of Socrates is sudden but misread; his longing is directed toward possession rather than generation in beauty. Where Diotima's *exaiphnes* is the reward of sustained preparation, Alcibiades' suddenness exposes instability and blindness. His failure is therefore not only erotic but epistemological: he sees without understanding and desires without accepting the transformation that genuine enquiry demands. In this reversal, Plato exposes the shortcomings of desire when it refuses education and denies its own limits.

At the centre of the contrast stands Socrates, the figure around whom the dialogue turns. His composure amid the confusion of the symposium redefines what philosophical strength means: not divine detachment, but endurance within the human. Alcibiades' account – partially intended as an accusation – ends up vindicating him. The philosopher's irony, temperance, and capacity for self-restraint prove to be a form of virtue incompatible with Alcibiades' restless pursuit of honour and recognition. In a sense, the *Symposium* doubles as an apologia: a dramatic defence that transforms the charge of corruption into the very proof of Socratic integrity. Alcibiades' own words, marked by admiration and resentment, become the means through which Plato clarifies philosophy's true character as a shared practice rather than a possession to be exploited for political or erotic dominance.

Through Alcibiades' downfall, Plato dramatises the tension between the human longing for transcendence and the necessity of accepting limitation. Socrates' *atopia* thus emerges not as divinity but as the perfected acknowledgement of fragility: the recognition that wisdom arises only within the boundaries of the human condition. The interplay between Socrates and Alcibiades shows that philosophy is not a flight from the human but its most demanding exercise – the art of remaining, amid desire and disorder, steadfastly oriented toward the good.

The *Symposium* closes where philosophy begins: in the recognition that the love of wisdom is inseparable from the acceptance of one's incompleteness, and that to pursue the good is to persist, again and again, in the work of becoming human.

CONCLUSION

The present thesis was guided by the central objective of proposing a reading of the *Symposium* focused on the analysis of the relationship between the characters and speeches of Socrates and Alcibiades. Grounded on the methodological presupposition that, in Plato's dialogues, philosophy is inseparable from its dramatic form, and on the hypothesis that the prologue functions as a guiding compass for reading and interpreting the dialogue, this study sought to construct an interpretation that, beginning with the prologue, recognises both the theoretical and the dramatic dimensions as mutually constitutive. The interplay between these dimensions reveals that the dialogue's cohesion does not arise from a linear progression of arguments, but from a dialectical composition, where each movement unsettles the previous one and gives rise to renewed reflection.

This research argued that Plato's *Symposium* performs the very structure of desire, presenting the love of wisdom as an ongoing, recursive, and fundamentally unstable philosophical exercise. Inspired by the "Third Way" approach in Platonic Studies – which affirms the unity of form and content as absolute – this study demonstrated that the dialogue's dramatic construction, including its layered narration, its character dynamics, and its recurrent interruptions, is not merely ornamental but intrinsic to its philosophical message. Plato's choice of form and the organisation of the narrative reveal that the *Symposium* is a composition that enacts, rather than simply discusses, the conditions of philosophy itself.

The thesis unfolded in three integrated chapters, progressing from the dialogue's foundational structure, established by the prologue, to its theoretical climax, and concluding with its dramatic collision.

'Chapter 1' dealt with the prologue, demonstrating that the opening of the *Symposium* provides the reader with crucial interpretative keys for navigating the dialogue as a whole. It revealed how a series of dramatic elements – such as the narrators' perspectives, the multiplicity of temporal layers, the precariousness of memory, and the narrative's reflexivity – are responsible for shaping both its fictional and its philosophical coherence. The chapter argued that the prologue is not an incidental narrative frame but the very site where the dialogue's epistemological and performative dimensions are intertwined.

In this section, I showed that the *Symposium*'s coherence derives from the dialectical friction between its multiple mediations, rooted in the tension between memory and forgetfulness. Among the principal results, it was established that the introduction of *melete* in the dialogue's opening line frames philosophical learning as a discipline of repeated exposure and recollection; that the emphasis on characters' perspectives, especially those of Apollodorus and Aristodemus, functions as an interpretative filter through which the reader is invited to view the whole dialogue; and that certain dramatic cues – such as the descriptions of seating arrangements and the rules for the gathering – anticipate the later thematic dynamic of order and disruption.

The characterisation of Socrates and his relationships with others also emerges in the prologue as a crucial focal point. Through an analysis of spatial positioning and interaction, the chapter reconstructed the physical arrangement of the scene, suggesting how the layout of the room and the symposiasts' positioning illuminate the absence of Aristodemus' speech and prepare the stage for Alcibiades' entrance. These dramatic details, far from secondary, provide

the structural and thematic groundwork for the dialogue's subsequent exploration of the relationship between philosophical practice, embodiment, and transmission of knowledge.

'Chapter 2' pursued the themes identified in the first chapter by developing a reading of Socrates' recollection of Diotima's teaching. The analysis began with the preliminary dialogues, which were shown to extend the logic of the prologue by deepening the construction of the characters and anticipating the theoretical displacements that follow. These early scenes, which continue to shape the dramatic rhythm of the dialogue, also elaborate many of its core themes – such as the nature of speech, education, interpersonal recognition, and the transformative dimension of philosophical inquiry.

The relational aspect of these scenes, and the use of contrasting perspectives, proved to be a central component. By juxtaposing Socrates' and Agathon's roles as 'students' in parallel dialogical settings, the text exposes how the same argumentative structure may yield distinct outcomes depending on the interlocutor. In the same way, the pairing of Socrates and Diotima as 'teachers' reveals philosophy's dependence on reciprocity and relationality.

This chapter examined Socrates' characterisation as reflective and self-analytical, exploring how his recollection of a past learning experience becomes both an act of philosophical practice and a model for education. The relational and temporal dimensions of this recollection underscore that the search for timeless knowledge in Plato's philosophy is always grounded in human, circumstantial experience. Diotima's characterisation, in turn, opened space for discussing questions about historicity, the use of female figures in Plato's dialogues, and the religious resonances of her priestly role.

The religious dimension of Diotima's speech allowed an exploration of the mystery-cult background evoked by her language and imagery. The Eleusinian framework – its logic of initiation, its emphasis on epopteia (the vision of what is to be seen), and its experiential transformation – proved deeply relevant to the theoretical construction of the erotic method she describes. Diotima's speech, mediated through Socrates, thus invites readers to conceive of philosophy as a practice that parallels religious initiation: a form of knowledge grounded in repetition, purification, and exposure to transcendence.

In analysing Diotima's preparatory teachings, the chapter highlighted her progressive dismantling of binary models – beautiful/ugly, good/bad, wise/ignorant, mortal/immortal. Through this dialectical process, Diotima leads Socrates towards a conception of eros as the paradigm of the *metaxy* – that which lies between, always incomplete, always in motion. This

conception redefines both desire and the human condition, showing that the pursuit of beauty and immortality is intrinsic to mortal existence. From this, two kinds of generativity emerge – bodily and spiritual – arranged hierarchically but connected through the common impulse towards immortality.

The analysis of the "ladder of love" revealed it as both a methodical ascent and an existential itinerary. Each step of the ladder involves reinterpretation and recollection of previous desires from an increasingly transformed perspective, illustrating the fragile yet generative nature of human striving. The culmination in the *exaiphnes* vision of beauty marks a rupture within continuity – a moment that exceeds the method but does not abolish it. This discontinuity redefines earlier achievements as images of virtue and opens the conditional possibility of generating true virtue. The *exaiphnes* moment does not transcend the human condition; it discloses it. It is the instant in which the lover recognises that the impulse toward beauty cannot culminate in possession but in renewed exposure – an awakening to the very instability that sustains philosophy.

'Chapter 3' examined the dramatic collision between Diotima's theoretical ideal and the embodied reality represented by Alcibiades. His disruptive entrance reintroduces noise, emotion, and corporeality into the philosophical scene, thereby completing the dialectical movement of the dialogue. Alcibiades' intoxicated outburst, while chaotic, serves as the dramatic fulfilment of the dialogue's philosophical argument, illustrating not only the difficulty of sustaining the philosophical disposition in the face of desire's instability, but also the political failure inscribed in that difficulty. His longing for Socrates is inseparable from his *philotimia* – the ambition and craving for distinction that shaped both his personal conduct and Athens' imperial project. The confusion between *philotimia* and *philosophia* turns his desire into *hybris*: an excess that seeks possession rather than transformation. In this sense, Alcibiades' speech mirrors the fate of the city itself, whose eros for glory becomes the source of its own corruption. The philosophical *melete* that he refuses – the discipline of self-transformation – stands in sharp contrast to the restless expansion of his political desire.

The analysis focused on Alcibiades' misperception and Socrates' vindication. Alcibiades' encomium, structured around the Silenus metaphor, recognises Socrates' inner *sophrosyne* and *atopia* but fails to grasp their human measure. He mistakes philosophical virtue for *hybris* and conceives the philosophical relationship as a transactional exchange rather than a collaborative practice of transformation. His inability to bear his own sense of lack leads to

shame and flight, dramatising the denial of *melete*, the disciplined exposure that sustains philosophy. His *exaiphnes* – the sudden perception of Socrates as an ambush – emerges as a false revelation, one that contrasts sharply with the transformative *exaiphnes* of true beauty described by Diotima.

This juxtaposition serves as an implicit apologia for Socrates. The tragedy of Alcibiades stems not from Socratic corruption but from his own refusal to accept the conditions of human fragility and the necessity of continual self-work. His failure becomes the mirror through which Plato's readers can discern the ethical core of philosophical practice: that wisdom demands endurance, humility, and the courage to remain in tension with one's own incompleteness.

In sum, the *Symposium* defines philosophy not as a set of doctrines but as a demanding discipline of movement and exposure, grounded in the acceptance of human limitation. By foregrounding the dialogue's dramatic construction – its temporal layering, perspectival multiplicity, and moments of disruption – this thesis has demonstrated that the pursuit of truth in Plato is inseparable from the unstable human reality it seeks to illuminate.

Philosophy, as enacted in the *Symposium*, is the art of navigating disorder: of transforming the desire for possession into a generative practice that aims at true virtue. Plato's dialogue invites us to see that the love of wisdom is never a stable state but a continual rehearsal of fragility, repetition, and renewal. To philosophise, then, is to move rightly within instability – to make of desire not an obstacle to knowledge but the very movement through which knowledge becomes possible.

Avenues for Expanded Research

Building on this thesis's central claim regarding the inseparable relation between the theoretical and dramatic dimensions of Plato's *Symposium*, future research could further explore how the dialogue's dramatic movements expose the productive tension between philosophical argument and its dramatic performance. This work demonstrated that the *Symposium* functions as a philosophical exercise shaped by the instability of desire and articulated through narrative layering, interruption, and embodied gestures. Further studies could expand this approach by deepening the analysis of temporality, embodiment, and disruption as dramatic mechanisms that continually reveal how theory emerges through, and is tested by, the fragility of human experience.

One promising direction concerns the relation between corporeality, disruption, and the ethics of *melete*. This line of inquiry could examine how Plato employs bodily experience as a non-propositional philosophical mechanism that mediates the dialogue's theoretical content. Socrates' stillness – seen by Aristodemus as a contemplative habit and by Alcibiades as *atopia* – may be contrasted with moments of bodily disturbance such as Aristophanes' hiccups or Alcibiades' intoxicated entrance. Such a comparison would show how Plato uses the body to question the stability of rational order and to demonstrate that philosophy must constantly reconstitute itself through the discipline of practice amid the instability of the mortal condition.

A second avenue involves the ethics of perception and the dual meaning of *exaiphnes*. The thesis identified how *exaiphnes* marks both the sublime revelation of beauty and the distorted perception embodied by Alcibiades. Future studies could explore how these moments frame the ethical and epistemic conditions required for genuine philosophical insight. Analysing the dialogue's multilayered narrative structure, where mediators such as Apollodorus and Aristodemus transmit only what is "particularly worth recording", could reinforce the argument that wisdom resists complete transmission, requiring instead an active interpretative participation from the reader. In this sense, the dramatic mediation of knowledge becomes itself a theoretical statement about philosophy's inherent incompleteness.

A further path for expansion could address the reconfiguration of shame and authority within the dialogue's ethical and political horizon. Diotima's role as a foreign priestess and Socrates' teacher challenges traditional Athenian models of pedagogy and power, turning marginality into a source of philosophical legitimacy. Socrates' transformation of shame – from an emotion governed by erotic hierarchy into a force of intellectual recognition – reveals how philosophy converts vulnerability into self-knowledge. Alcibiades' inability to sustain this recognition dramatises the collapse of *philotimia* into *hybris*, exposing the political implications of unrestrained desire and the ethical discipline required for its conversion into philosophia. Future research could thus expand on how Plato's dramatic form articulates the intersection of ethical transformation and political critique.

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