

**What *Eros* and *Anamnesis* Can Tell us about Knowledge of Virtue in Plato's  
*Protagoras*, *Symposium*, and *Meno***

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Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the MA degree in philosophy

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

This research was partially funded by the Federal Government of Canada in the form of a SSHRC Master's scholarship, and the University of Ottawa in the form of an excellence and an admission scholarship.

I would also like to thank my thesis supervisor for providing me with numerous valuable textual resources as well as the inspiration for this project.

## ABSTRACT

The goal of this thesis is ultimately to answer the two questions raised and left unresolved in Plato's *Protagoras*: What is virtue? Is virtue teachable? Following the dramatic order of Plato's dialogues as outlined by Catherine Zuckert, I intend to show that the *Meno* returns to the issues raised and left unresolved in the *Protagoras*, but now with the idea of recollection. My intention is to look at how the idea of recollection, developed and associated with eros in the intervening dialogues, can help explain the nature of virtue and its teachability. I believe that we can come to answer both questions, "What is virtue?" and "Is virtue teachable?" posed in the *Protagoras* and the *Meno* by drawing on the ideas of *anamnesis* and *eros* as they appear in the *Meno*, *Phaedrus*, and *Symposium*.

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## INTRODUCTION

### I. The Problem: Knowledge of Virtue in the *Protagoras*, Recollection in the *Meno*

In the *Protagoras*, Socrates and the eponymous character of the dialogue address two primary questions about virtue: 1) Whether virtue is a single whole, and justice, self-control, courage, and holiness are parts of this whole, or whether these are all names for one and the same thing; 2) whether virtue can be taught. Instead of concluding with an account of what virtue *is*, or what it is *like*, however, Socrates concludes with the following remarks. “It seems to me that the present outcome of our talk is pointing at us, like a human adversary, the finger of accusation and scorn”. Socrates had begun asserting that virtue is not teachable, but at the end of argument he was trying to demonstrate that everything is knowledge, “which is the best way to prove that virtue *is* teachable”, he says. Protagoras, on the other hand, had begun by asserting that virtue is teachable and at the end he was “bent on showing that it is anything rather than knowledge....and this would make it least likely to be teachable.... For my part, Protagoras”, says Socrates, “when I see the subject in such utter confusion I feel the liveliest desire to clear it up. I should like to follow up our present talk with a determined attack on virtue itself and its essential nature. Then we could return to the question whether or not it can be taught”.<sup>1</sup>

The problem, it seems, is that Socrates and Protagoras had been trying to determine what virtue is *like* before they knew what virtue essentially *is*.

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<sup>1</sup> Plato. "Protagoras." Ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns. Trans. W.K.C. Guthrie. *The Collected Dialogues of Plato: Including the Letters*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999: 361a-c.

This question is raised again in the *Meno*, when the eponymous character of this dialogue asks, “Can you tell me, Socrates – is virtue something that can be taught”.<sup>2</sup> Socrates replies that he neither knows whether virtue can be taught nor what virtue is.<sup>3</sup> He then dismantles Meno’s supposed knowledge of what virtue is, at which point Meno presents us with a paradox: How is it that we can search for something when we do not know at all what it is?<sup>4</sup> If Socrates claims not to know what virtue is, then how will he recognize it once he has found it?

Socrates puts forth his ‘theory’ of recollection as a response to Meno’s paradox. After his demonstration of recollection with Meno’s slave, however, Socrates declines to commit himself to the truth of his thesis, claiming that “I shouldn’t like to take my oath on the whole story, but one thing I am ready to fight for as long as I can, in word and act – that is, that we shall be better, braver, and more active men if we believe it right to look for what we don’t know than if we believe there is no point in looking because we can never discover”.<sup>5</sup>

Following the dramatic order of Plato’s dialogues as outlined by Catherine Zuckert, I intend to show that the *Meno* returns to the issues raised and left unresolved in the *Protagoras*, but now with the idea of recollection. My intention is to look at how the idea of recollection, developed and associated with eros in the intervening dialogues, can help explain the nature of virtue and its teachability. I believe that we can come to answer both questions, “What is virtue?” and “Is virtue teachable?” posed in the *Protagoras* and the

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<sup>2</sup> Plato. "Meno." Ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns. Trans. W.K.C. Guthrie. *The Collected Dialogues of Plato: including the Letters*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999: 70a1-2.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 71a4-5.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 80d4-5.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 86b6-c2.

*Meno* by drawing on the ideas of *anamnesis* and *eros* as they appear in the *Meno* and in the intervening dialogues.

My principle line of argumentation is this. The *Protagoras*, *Symposium*, *Phaedrus*, and *Meno* seem to form a series that is made up of three stages of what Catherine Zuckert calls Socratic philosophizing. I intend to show that, i) Socrates demonstrates the inadequacy of the understanding of virtue held by Protagoras in the eponymous dialogue; ii) Socrates puts forward a positive teaching of his own in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, in the form of images and myths; iii) in the *Meno* Plato then returns the reader's attention back to the Socratic search for wisdom, especially concerning the good life for human beings. It is in this return that we will find the answers to the questions about the nature of virtue and its teachability. It is this latter part that will be my original contribution to the existing scholarship on this problem.

With the help of secondary sources, what I intend to demonstrate is the following. Socrates' positive account, in the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*, consists of the erotic ascent; this is accomplished through an *anamnestic eros*, as described in both Rhodes and Gonzalez.<sup>6</sup> *Anamnesis* must be present at the beginning of the ascent, as an awakening of the desire for truth. We see this initially in the *Protagoras* where Socrates is always *returning*<sup>7</sup> – returning, I will argue, to the *pathos* which originally gives rise to philosophical discourse, which is in essence a desire for truth. After the desire for truth is awakened, we, as readers, may ascend with Socrates to the hyperuranian realm, and come to love or desire beauty itself. This process is largely described in the *Symposium*, though we see it as well in the *Phaedrus*.

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<sup>6</sup> James M. Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence: Plato's Erotic Dialogues*. Columbia, Massachusetts: University of Missouri, 2003. Francisco J. Gonzalez, "How is the Truth of Beings in the Soul? Interpreting *Anamnesis* in Plato." *Elenchos: Rivista di studi sul pensiero antico* 28 (2007).

<sup>7</sup> See chapter one, pp.29-30 for examples.

True knowledge of virtue comes at the height of this ascent. This knowledge is knowledge-by-acquaintance<sup>8</sup> because our souls have been informed by virtue. Our souls are informed by virtue when we come to desire beauty itself because knowledge of virtue is gained in the erotic ascent. Having reached its height, then, we can say that we are acquainted with virtue. In the *Meno*, we have a return to Socratic philosophizing as virtue enacted. We also return to the question of virtue and, after having undergone the erotic ascent, we may recall what we learned at its height which will ultimately require a return to the question of virtue. We also see why Meno fails to follow Socrates in this dialogue and we gain a better understanding of Socrates' method of hypothesis, where he concludes that virtue is gotten by divine dispensation. This is my original contribution. I intend to answer the two questions posed about virtue by drawing on the idea of recollection, as it appears in the *Meno* and as it is developed and associated with *eros* in the intervening dialogues. In suggesting an answer to these questions, I will be placing the *Meno* at the end of the *Protagoras-Symposium-Phaedrus* series outline by Rhodes in *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*. Knowledge of virtue, once one reaches the height of the ascent, then requires a return to the original *pathos* that gave rise to philosophical discourse, i.e. a recognition of one's own ignorance and a desire to persistently examine oneself and the world.

## II. Method: Zuckert's Dramatic Dating

My interpretation of the three dialogues in question relies on our arranging them in a certain manner. I believe that these dialogues are thematically related and that we can see a progression from the *Protagoras* to the *Symposium* and finally to the *Meno* when we read

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<sup>8</sup> By knowledge-by-acquaintance I mean the same thing that Plato said in the *Meno*: that to know Meno, one must be acquainted with Meno; it is not enough for one to know a list of propositions about Meno.



these three dialogues together. Although this relationship of the dialogues does not rely on Zuckert's method of dating,<sup>9</sup> the interpretation that I am putting forward is strengthened by it.

In *Plato's Philosophers*, Catherine Zuckert argues that Plato's dialogues are best understood if we arrange them according to their dramatic dates. She takes Plato's indications of the times at which the conversations took place as hints of the order in which he wishes his readers to progress through the dialogues.<sup>10</sup> If taken in the order indicated, Zuckert holds that the dialogues form a coherent whole and that we can divide them according to: i) Plato's initial presentation of the problems to which Socrates is responding, and ii) the four stages of Socrates' philosophizing: 1. Socrates demonstrates the inadequacy of the understandings of virtue, the noble, and the good held by his contemporaries; 2. Socrates begins to put forth a positive teaching of his own, in the form of images and myths; 3. Plato turns his readers' attention [back from Timeaen contemplation] to the Socratic search for wisdom, especially concerning the best life for human beings; 4. Plato presents a defense of Socrates in the dialogues depicting his trial and death. For the purposes of this project, I will concern myself with the first three of Zuckert's stages of Socratic philosophizing, especially as they concern the *Protagoras*, the *Symposium*, the *Phaedrus*, and the *Meno*.

The *Protagoras*, says Zuckert, falls into the first stage of Socratic philosophizing, where Socrates demonstrates the inadequacy of his interlocutors' understandings of virtue,

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<sup>9</sup> An argument could be made for reading these dialogues in this manner independent of concerns of dramatic date, though this argument would not stand if we were to accept dramatic dates that rearrange these dialogues.

<sup>10</sup> It is important to note here that Zuckert is making claims about the dates at which the drama in the dialogues take place (e.g. Agathon's dinner party after his first victory at the Lenaea in the *Symposium*). This method of dating the dialogues says nothing about the order in which Plato wrote them.

the noble, and the good held by his contemporaries. She places the action of the dialogue at 433-432 BCE and gives two reasons for this date. First, at the beginning of this dialogue, Plato indicates that Socrates does not yet have much of a following or a reputation. Zuckert says that, “Hippocrates obviously knows Socrates well enough to burst into his bedroom before it is light, but the young man shows no sign of thinking that associating with Socrates will make him wise. By the end of the dialogue, however, we realize that Plato has shown us how Socrates used the opportunity to make a reputation for himself”.<sup>11</sup> The second reason that Zuckert gives for this date is that the anonymous Athenian to whom Socrates recounts his story assumes that Socrates has been pursuing Alcibiades. Socrates admits that he has just been with the young man but that he has nearly forgotten all about him since he learned that Protagoras, who is more handsome and wise than Alcibiades, is in town. Zuckert says, of both this dialogue and the *Alcibiades I*, that we are reminded in both dialogues that “Socrates has been pursuing Alcibiades for a long time and that the youth has now come into late adolescence. If Alcibiades is nineteen years of age, the year is 433 [See Nails, *People*, 310-11.]”<sup>12</sup> Zuckert further says that the conversation that occurs in the *Protagoras* takes place before the one in the *Alcibiades I*,

because in the *Protagoras* Socrates first demonstrates the refutative ability that led politically ambitious young men like Alcibiades and Critias (both of whom are present in the *Protagoras*) to want to associate with him. At the end of the *Alcibiades I* (135d), the young man tells Socrates that they are about to switch roles. Whereas Socrates had previously pursued Alcibiades as a lover, the youth will now follow Socrates. That reversal of roles has not yet occurred when the conversation in the *Protagoras* takes place.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Catherine H. Zuckert, *Plato's Philosophers: the Coherence of the Dialogues*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009: 218. Although Socrates claims twice over the course of the dialogue that he must leave to keep another appointment, he apparently has time at the end to sit down immediately and give a full account of his victory over Protagoras to one of his fellow citizens (we can gather this from the narrative framing at the beginning of the dialogue).

<sup>12</sup> Zuckert, *Plato's Philosophers*, 217 n5.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 218 n5.

The *Symposium*, under Zuckert's reading, falls into the second stage of Socratic philosophizing, where Socrates begins to put forth a positive teaching of his own, in the form of images and myths. She dates the drama of this dialogue at 416 BCE, on the grounds that Agathon's first victory occurred in 416 and we know from the dialogue that Agathon's banquet takes place two days after this.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to the dramatic date that Zuckert attributes to this dialogue, she also notes an important point regarding the connection between the *Protagoras* and the *Symposium*. In support of her classification of the *Symposium* as a 'second stage' work, Zuckert says that, in this dialogue "Plato indicates that he is depicting a new stage in the emergence of Socratic philosophizing".<sup>15</sup> He does this by drawing a series of parallels between Socrates' initial confrontation with the sophists in the *Protagoras* and his first contest with the poets in the *Symposium*.

First, all the speakers at Agathon's dinner party were present at Socrates' initial confrontation with Protagoras except Aristophanes. Second, both dialogues occur a year before the onset of war – the war between the Peloponnesians and Athens, in the first case, and the Athenian invasion of Sicily in the second. Third, both dialogues are narrated; indeed, both have a two-part dramatic introduction preceding the account of the major speeches or contest. Fourth, in both dialogues Socrates takes a young companion with him to hear the speeches of famous men of words.<sup>16</sup>

We will see, later, Rhodes draw additional parallels between the *Protagoras* and the *Symposium*. This will be significant for reading the *Symposium* as occurring between the *Protagoras* and the *Meno*, and impacting on both of them.

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<sup>14</sup> It is important to note here that this is the date that Zuckert gives for the original dinner party given by Agathon. The date of the retelling of the story by Apollodorus is a more contentious matter. However, as Apollodorus speaks of his discipleship in the present tense (172e), it seems clear that this narrative frame could not have occurred anytime after Socrates' death in 399 BCE. R.G. Bury suggests a date of 400 BCE while Martha Nussbaum dates it as early as 405 BCE (see Zuckert, *Plato's Philosophers*, 283n4). The date of this narrative frame is not of central concern for the purposes of my project. However, it is interesting to keep in mind the role of *anamnesis*, or recollection, at this later date.

<sup>15</sup> Zuckert, *Plato's Philosophers*, 282.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. Zuckert elaborates on the parallels (and the differences) between these two dialogues on pp.282-286.

Finally, Zuckert places the *Meno* in what she calls the third stage of Socratic philosophizing, where Plato turns his readers' attention back to the Socratic search for wisdom, especially concerning the best life for human beings. She dates the action of this dialogue at 402-401 BCE, stating that "there is little controversy about the dramatic date of the *Meno*. In *Anabasis* 2.6.21-8 Xenophon reports that Meno joined the forces of Cyrus in Asia Minor in 401 and disappeared, if he did not die shortly thereafter. Commentators generally believe that the dialogue is supposed to have occurred shortly before he left Greece in 402/401".<sup>17</sup> Further, Zuckert places the *Meno* after the *Protagoras* because, by the end of the fifth century, when Zuckert says this encounter between Socrates and Meno occurs, Socrates no longer had to build his own reputation as he had to in the *Protagoras*, by relating the story of his defeat of the famous sophist almost immediately to a fellow Athenian. Instead, young men and their fathers came to Socrates, asking him to instruct them as they believed that he could teach them something useful.<sup>18</sup> We see this, for instance, with Meno.

Another assumption that this method makes is that the dramatic action of the dialogue is essential to the argument – i.e. the drama is essential to the reading of the dialogues. Because Plato wrote dialogues, we must take these works as a whole and understand them as literary works in which the author is trying to communicate something through the dialogue and the action of the characters. This means that dramatic details such as action and character are essential to what Plato has to say. This assumes that Plato's authorial voice is to be found in each dialogue as a coherent whole, and in his corpus taken as a whole, not in the individual arguments that he puts into the mouths of specific characters.

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<sup>17</sup> Zuckert, *Plato's Philosophers*, 484 n2.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 485.

James Rhodes makes this point about Plato's *Symposium*, though I contend that it applies equally as well to each of the dialogues.

“It seems to me that the most obvious thing about the first of Plato's erotic works, the *Symposium*, is that the dialogue is a dramatic poem, a play filled with interactions among the characters and with speeches that contain myths, arguments, and reminiscences. I think that in order to help Plato educate us as he wishes, we must take the *Symposium* as we find it. We must study it as a drama, examining its characters, actions, myths, arguments, and memories, and heeding the complex ways in which its author weaves these strands of his artistic creation together”.<sup>19</sup>

I will be doing this with the three main dialogues in question: the *Protagoras*, *Symposium*, and *Meno*, while drawing only briefly on the *Phaedrus*. Taking these dialogues as dramatic works and examining the dramatic details as well as the arguments put forward in each dialogue, I believe that I can make a case for understanding *eros*, *anamnesis*, and knowledge of virtue together, in the manner described above.

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<sup>19</sup> Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 183.

## CHAPTER ONE: Knowledge of Virtue in Plato's *Protagoras*

### I. Questions of Virtue in the *Protagoras*

In the *Protagoras*, Socrates addresses two primary questions about virtue: 1) Whether virtue is a single whole, and justice, self-control, courage, and holiness are parts of this whole, or whether these are all names for one and the same thing; 2) whether virtue can be taught. These questions arise in the context of Hippocrates' search for a teacher.

Hippocrates approaches Socrates and tells him that he has heard great things about Protagoras, "the cleverest of speakers".<sup>20</sup> Protagoras is in town, and Hippocrates wishes to pay him a visit, in order to convince him (Protagoras), with the help of Socrates, to take him (Hippocrates) on as a pupil, so that he may grow more wise. Socrates, however, is concerned that Hippocrates is entrusting the care of his soul to Protagoras too quickly, before he even knows whether Protagoras represents something good or something bad. It is out of this concern that Socrates and Hippocrates go to speak with Protagoras, where Socrates then questions Protagoras as to what effect his teaching would have on Hippocrates.

Protagoras, claiming to be a master of the art of politics, states that his instruction would have a positive effect on Hippocrates, were he to become his pupil. Protagoras claims to instruct his pupils on the proper care of one's personal affairs, and also of the state's affairs, so that a man may manage his household well and become a real power in the city. In doing so, he is making good citizens of his students, so that they become better men with every day spent with him. Socrates, however, says that he does not think that virtue is something that can be taught; it is not the case that one man can make another good. In fact, what Socrates says is that he believes that "it [virtue] cannot be taught nor furnished by one

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<sup>20</sup> Plato, *Protagoras*, 310e.

man to another”.<sup>21</sup> Throughout the rest of the dialogue, Protagoras and Socrates enter into a discussion about the nature of virtue (what virtue essentially is and whether it is a single whole) and whether it can be taught.

The argument begins with Protagoras telling a story, the essence of which is that the god Epimetheus, in distributing suitable powers to all the mortal creatures on earth, had none left for human beings at the end. Prometheus, overseeing Epimetheus, stole the gift of skills in the arts from Hephaestus and Athena, and gave it to man. This was not enough, however, to ensure the continued existence of the species, and so Zeus sent Hermes to impart men with respect for others and a sense of justice. As these things were distributed to all alike, men now “listen to every man’s opinion, for they think that everyone must share in this kind of virtue”.<sup>22</sup>

Protagoras uses this illustration, combined with his “plain argument”<sup>23</sup> to show three things: i) that virtue is distributed to all, though unequally; ii) that learning virtue is like learning a language, that one learns from all of society and not just one man; and iii) that virtue is teachable, like language, if only one finds someone “only a little better than others at advancing us on the road to virtue”.<sup>24</sup> Protagoras claims to be of this sort: a little better than others at advancing us on the road to virtue. It is in this way that he is qualified to teach others [about] virtue.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 319b.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 323a.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 324d.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 328a.

<sup>25</sup> In addition to telling a story, Protagoras gives a ‘plain argument’ for the teachability of virtue. He says first, that people are not punished for things (characteristics) which are innate or automatic (323d). Injustice, irreligion, and everything contrary to civic virtue, however, “call forth indignation and punishment and admonition” (323e2). Punishment is inflicted, he says, in order to prevent either the same man or someone else from doing the same wrong again (324a). Second, he says, “As soon as a child can understand what is said to him, nurse, mother, tutor, and father himself vie with each other to make him as good as possible” (325c6-d2). In school, the child’s teachers lay more emphasis on good behaviour than on letters or music

At the end of his speech, Socrates praises Protagoras (though we must hold judgement for the moment on whether this praise is sincere or sarcastic),<sup>26</sup> saying that, “To have heard what Protagoras has just said is something I value very highly. I used to think that it was by no human diligence that good men acquired their goodness, but now I am convinced. There is just one small thing holding me back, which Protagoras I know will easily explain, now that he has instructed us on so many points”.<sup>27</sup> Socrates then introduces his “additional question”:<sup>28</sup> Protagoras, in his speech, spoke of justice, self-control and holiness as if they made up one thing. Socrates then suggests, before accepting Protagoras’ account, that they address whether virtue is a single whole, and justice, self-control, courage, and holiness are parts of this whole, or whether these are all names for one and the same thing. Protagoras responds, saying “that is easy to answer.... Virtue is one, and the qualities you ask about are parts of it”.<sup>29</sup> He further asserts that virtue’s parts are related to each other like the parts of a face – eyes, mouth, nose, etc. – that they are parts of a whole but differ in function and do not resemble each other.<sup>30</sup> Here Socrates begins to show the problems with Protagoras’ claims. The parts of virtue cannot be thusly related, as this would make justice not-holy and holiness not-just. Neither can we say that the parts of virtue are all separate

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(325d7-e1). The works of the poets that they learn contain much admonition, and many stories of the good men of old, so that the children may be inspired to become like them (326a1-5). Each child is also sent to a trainer “so that a good mind may have a good body to serve it” (326b7-8). Finally, when children are finished with school, “the state compels them to learn the laws and use them as a pattern for their life, lest left to themselves they should drift aimlessly” (326c5-6). Protagoras holds that this shows both that virtue is teachable, and that the Athenians believe it to be so.

<sup>26</sup> As we will see later on, Socrates’ praise of Protagoras’ speech may be his enacting the very characteristic (virtue) for which he and Protagoras are seeking. Protagoras, on the other hand, will be shown not to have knowledge of virtue, on the basis of his insistence on his borrowed ‘knowledge’ (that is, Protagoras thinks that he has knowledge of virtue, but will be shown to have none).

<sup>27</sup> Plato, *Protagoras*, 328e1-6.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 329a.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 329d3-4.

<sup>30</sup> Plato, *Protagoras*, 329a8-e1



parts, if we grant that each thing has only one contrary (which Protagoras does), as then wisdom *and* temperance become the contraries of folly.<sup>31</sup>

Protagoras, though, insists on holding, throughout the dialogue, that justice, temperance, courage, and wisdom are *parts* of virtue, separable from each other. He holds, for instance, that a man may be unjust, unholy, intemperate, and ignorant, and yet outstandingly courageous.<sup>32</sup> Socrates, however, shows that, on Protagoras' own account, this cannot be the case. If one identifies pleasure with good and pain with evil, as Protagoras does,<sup>33</sup> then one always pursues the more pleasurable course of action, but may be lead astray (one may do evil, that which creates more pain than pleasure) because one measures incorrectly. A wrong action, in this case, is done out of ignorance and ignorance is defined as being mistaken on matters, or measuring incorrectly.<sup>34</sup> It follows, then, that no one willingly goes to meet evil or what he believes to be evil.

This brings us to the case of the brave man and the coward: the brave man makes for what is honorable, better, and pleasanter, and he does so out of knowledge of what is and is not to be feared, whereas the coward acts out of ignorance, as do the rash and the mad. Courage, then, is knowledge of what is and is not to be feared and thus the courageous man cannot be ignorant.<sup>35</sup> We saw earlier, as well, that temperance and wisdom, under Protagoras' account, were shown to be the same, and were also knowledge of a certain sort.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 329d-333b.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 349d3-5.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 354c-e.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 358c.

<sup>35</sup> It should be noted here that this definition of courage conflicts with what Socrates says in the *Laches*. However, as Socrates is not giving a positive account of virtue here (at least not directly) but instead trying to show Protagoras that he does not have the certain knowledge of virtue that he thinks he possesses, I do not take this to be a problem. The purpose of this claim is not to show that courage is knowledge of what is and is not to be feared. Its purpose is rather to show that Protagoras does not have the certain grasp on virtue that he thinks he does.

<sup>36</sup> Plato, *Protagoras*, 332a-333e.

What account of virtue are we left with, then? Socrates has shown Protagoras' understanding of virtue to be inadequate. And instead of concluding with an account of what virtue *is*, or what it is *like*, Socrates concludes with the following remarks.

It seems to me that the present outcome of our talk is pointing at us, like a human adversary, the finger of accusation and scorn. If it had a voice it would say 'What an absurd pair you are, Socrates and Protagoras. One of you, having said at the beginning that virtue is not teachable, now is bent upon contradicting himself by trying to demonstrate that everything is knowledge...which is the best way to prove that virtue *is* teachable. If virtue were something other than knowledge, as Protagoras tried to prove, obviously it could not be taught. But if it turns out to be, as a single whole, knowledge...then it will be most surprising if it cannot be taught. Protagoras, on the other hand, who at the beginning supposed it to be teachable, now on the contrary seems to be bent on showing that it is anything rather than knowledge, and this would make it least likely to be teachable.

For my part, Protagoras, when I see the subject in such utter confusion I feel the liveliest desire to clear it up. I should like to follow up our present talk with a determined attack on virtue itself and its essential nature. Then we could return to the question whether or not it can be taught.<sup>37</sup>

The problem, it seems, is that Socrates and Protagoras had been trying to determine what virtue is *like* before they knew what virtue essentially *is*. How can we know if virtue is teachable before we know what it is?<sup>38</sup>

This question is addressed again in the *Meno*, when Socrates asks the eponymous character of this dialogue, "how can I know a property of something when I don't even know what it is?"<sup>39</sup> It is in this problem that we find Socrates' priority principle: I must first know what x is before I can know any of its properties.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 361a-c.

<sup>38</sup> It is interesting to note at this point that knowledge of virtue itself and its essential nature seems to be something different from knowing whether virtue is a single whole and justice, self-control, courage and holiness are its parts. If anything is to count as knowledge of virtue (at least as propositional knowledge of virtue) however, this seems to be a likely candidate. This distinction between propositional and non-propositional knowledge will become important later.

<sup>39</sup> Plato, *Meno*, 71b3-4.

Drawing largely on Gonzalez' "Failed Virtue and Failed Knowledge in the *Meno*",<sup>40</sup> I intend to show how Socrates' priority principle is relevant to both the *Protagoras* and the *Meno*, and how it helps us both to understand virtue in the *Protagoras*, and Socrates' and Protagoras' failure to define virtue in this dialogue. I intend to demonstrate at this point that knowledge of virtue is knowledge by acquaintance<sup>41</sup> (this also means that knowledge of virtue is non-propositional) and that what we are acquainted with is the *pathos* which gives rise to philosophical discourse, namely a recognition of one's own ignorance and an attendant desire to examine oneself and the world.<sup>42</sup> This will help us to understand the aporetic ending of the *Protagoras* and the further connections that I intend to draw between this dialogue and the *Meno*.

In order to truly address this problem in the *Protagoras*, then, we need to draw on the *Meno*. I believe that I am justified in doing this for two reasons. First, Socrates returns to the question of virtue in the *Meno*, addressing here the same questions that went unresolved in the *Protagoras*. Second, in the *Meno*, Socrates refers to Protagoras in the past tense,

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<sup>40</sup> In Francisco J. Gonzalez, *Dialectic and Dialogue: Plato's Practice of Philosophical Inquiry*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1998.

<sup>41</sup> I will be using the term 'acquaintance' here as Gonzalez does in *Dialectic and Dialogue*: "the word 'acquaintance' should be understood here in its rich, everyday meaning, rather than in the extremely narrow sense it tends to have in contemporary philosophy, according to which 'acquaintance' is simply a direct cognition relation to sense data or simple objects. Being 'acquainted' with Meno in the ordinary sense of the word involves more than perceiving sense data and even more than perceiving an 'object': to be acquainted with Meno is to have some intercourse with him, to enter into some relation with him (however superficial). This sense of knowledge by acquaintance differs from the narrow philosophical sense in admitting variation in degree: from barely being acquainted with Meno to knowing him very well" (157).

<sup>42</sup> Gonzalez, *Dialectic and Dialogue*, 172. Gonzalez identifies knowledge of virtue as knowledge by acquaintance (he says that knowing virtue is indistinguishable from becoming virtuous, 158) and states that becoming virtuous involves recognition of one's own ignorance and an attendant desire to examine oneself and the world (172). In this chapter I will push this interpretation further, showing that it applies not only to the *Meno* but also to the *Protagoras*. I also intend to show that this recognition and desire constitute the *pathos* that gives rise to philosophical discourse. I will show further that this requires a return to the origin of philosophical discourse and when we reach the third chapter on the *Meno* we will see that this return links the *Meno* to the *Protagoras* in a more than superficial manner (i.e. it is not just the common subject matter that links the two dialogues).

saying that he has taught in Athens for forty years and is now dead.<sup>43</sup> This tells us that the drama of the *Meno* occurs after that of the *Protagoras*, and thus we can say that the *Meno* picks up the same questions that went unanswered in the *Protagoras*. Thus it seems a natural progression to pick up in the *Meno* where we left off in the *Protagoras*.<sup>44</sup>

## II. Lessons Learned from the *Meno*

The *Meno* begins with the eponymous character of the dialogue asking Socrates the question, “is virtue something that can be taught?”<sup>45</sup> Socrates answers by saying, “I have no knowledge about virtue at all. And how can I know a property of something when I don’t even know what it is? Do you suppose that somebody entirely ignorant of who Meno is could say whether he is handsome and rich and wellborn or the reverse? Is that possible, do you think?”<sup>46</sup> Meno answers that it is not. This begins a discussion regarding virtue: whether there is one virtue or many and what the common characteristic is that is shared by all things considered virtues.<sup>47</sup> Meno then attempts to give an account of what virtue *is*, as a whole, though he ultimately fails, and then accuses Socrates of being a sting ray, reducing others to perplexity and numbing their minds and their lips so that they have no reply. It is here where we are introduced to Meno’s famous paradox. Socrates responds that he is a sting ray only if the sting ray paralyzes others only through being paralyzed itself, as Socrates infects others with the same perplexity that he feels. “So with virtue now. I don’t know what it is. You may have known before you came into contact with me, but now you

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<sup>43</sup> Plato, *Meno*, 91d-92a.

<sup>44</sup> This method of reading these two dialogues is also supported by Catherine Zuckert’s dramatic dating of Plato’s dialogues, as outlined above.

<sup>45</sup> Plato, *Meno*, 70a1-2.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 71b2-6.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 71d-76e.

look as if you don't. Nevertheless I am ready to carry out, together with you, a joint investigation and inquiry into what it is".<sup>48</sup> "But how will you look for something when you don't in the least know what it is?" replies Meno.<sup>49</sup> It is in Socrates' answer to this question that we get his theory of recollection, which will ultimately lead us to an answer regarding virtue.

Socrates begins this exchange in the *Meno* with the following question regarding virtue: "how can I know a property of something when I don't even know what it is?"<sup>50</sup> Gonzalez calls this Socrates' priority principle: we cannot know how a thing is qualified before we know what it essentially is. This is not to say that we must know some essential property about the thing in question,<sup>51</sup> but rather, it seems, knowing what a thing essentially *is* is being acquainted with the thing in question. Two examples appear in the *Meno* that give credence to this interpretation: Socrates at one point states that one cannot know whether Meno is handsome, rich, and wellborn or the opposite if one does not know altogether *who* Meno is.<sup>52</sup> I can, of course, know things *about* Meno without actually knowing Meno himself, but these two sorts of knowledge are very different things. Knowledge in the latter case seems to be some form of acquaintance: I know Meno if I am acquainted with him. This knowledge by acquaintance has priority over the knowledge of something's properties

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 80c10-d3.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 80d4-5.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 71b2-3.

<sup>51</sup> Not only would this not make sense with Socrates' example of knowing Meno (see below), but there is evidence in the *Republic* that this essentialist interpretation is false: Socrates there asserts that he cannot possibly know whether justice is a virtue if he does not first know *what* justice *is*. To know that justice is a virtue is to know only something *about* it, not *what it is*. Yet if anything deserves to be called an essential property of justice, it is 'being a virtue' (Gonzalez, 155-56).

<sup>52</sup> Plato, *Meno*, 71b. That is to say that one cannot know these things about Meno if one is entirely unacquainted with him.

such that I cannot really say that I know Meno before I am acquainted with him.<sup>53</sup> As Gonzalez claims, we may know all sorts of things about Meno, but “we cannot know that Meno is this kind of person until we actually meet him and ‘see for ourselves’. This acquaintance with Meno serves as the ground for knowing his properties and is clearly distinct from knowing his properties”.<sup>54</sup> The same can be said about virtue.

Both of these claims, that ‘knowing Meno’, in the sense that Socrates means it, is being acquainted with Meno, and that knowing virtue (knowing what virtue *is*) is similarly being acquainted with virtue, are contentious. Gonzalez addresses the contenders, in defense of his identifying knowledge of virtue with knowledge by acquaintance. He says that we cannot take Socrates’ distinction [between what a thing is and what *kind* of thing it is] as a distinction between essential and accidental properties.

First, though the view it attributes to Socrates is perhaps philosophically defensible, it certainly is not self-evident. Yet both Socrates and Meno appear to see the priority principle as requiring no defense. Second, this interpretation does not make any sense of Socrates’ example. How could it be true to say that we cannot know whether or not Meno is rich until we know his essential properties (whatever those might be)? Can we accept an interpretation of Socrates’ distinction which renders nonsensical his own illustration of it?<sup>55</sup>

Note also that knowledge of virtue itself and its essential nature seems to be something different from knowing whether virtue is a single whole and justice, self-control, courage and holiness are its parts. If anything is to count as essential knowledge of virtue, however, this seems to be a likely candidate. “In excluding whatever is known *about* a thing, Socrates appears to be distinguishing *all* of a thing’s properties from what the thing *itself is*”.<sup>56</sup> The

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<sup>53</sup> We will see later that the distinction between being acquainted with Meno and knowing things about Meno is important for knowledge of virtue. In the *Laches*, Socrates shows how it is that propositional knowledge, here in the form of a *techne*, is incompatible with knowledge of virtue (or courage, in the case of the *Laches*).

<sup>54</sup> Gonzalez, *Dialectic and Dialogue*, 156.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

only other way in which we must first *know* Meno, says Gonzalez, before knowing any of his properties, is if we take this knowledge to be some form of acquaintance.<sup>57</sup>

This is in contrast to Fine, for instance, who says that, “I know who he [Meno] is from having read Plato’s dialogues”,<sup>58</sup> and Nehamas, who claims that, “Socrates is not appealing to a distinction between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description.... His point is simple and intuitive: if he has *no* idea who Meno is, how can he answer questions about him?”<sup>59</sup> Fine’s interpretation, however, does not make sense of Socrates’ example of knowing Meno, nor his priority principle.

In claiming to know who Meno is by reading about him, Fine presumably means that she knows he is a student of Gorgias, a Thessalian aristocrat, arrogant, and so on. Yet this knowledge does not appear in any way to differ from, nor therefore to be prior to, what Socrates would call knowing what *kind* of a person Meno is. We do not run into this problem if we take Socrates to mean that while we may read, or hear through second hand reports, that Meno is noble or rich, we cannot *know* that Meno is this kind of a person until we actually meet him and ‘see for ourselves’.<sup>60</sup>

The rest of this chapter will function as a response to Nehamas, as we will see how it is that Gonzalez’s interpretation makes the most sense of Socrates’ ‘knowing Meno’ example, and how reading Plato in this way also allows us to make sense of the *aporia* in the *Protagoras*. Says Gonzalez,

According to a strict analogy with “knowing Meno,” it [acquaintance with virtue] would involve knowing virtue firsthand, that is, presumably, *having* virtue. In other words, knowing what virtue is “by acquaintance” would be indistinguishable from *becoming* virtuous.... The point of Socrates’ priority principle thus may be that to know propositions about virtue, even if these propositions constitute an elaborate moral theory, is not equivalent to knowing virtue itself, that is, being acquainted with it firsthand, and that indeed that kind of knowledge is worth nothing if it is not based on the second.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Gail Fine “Inquiry in the Meno.” *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*. Ed. Richard Kraut. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008. 200-226: p.226 note 42.

<sup>59</sup> Alexander Nehamas, “Meno’s Paradox and Socrates as Teacher”. *Virtues of Authenticity: Essays on Plato and Socrates*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999, 6.

<sup>60</sup> Gonzalez, *Dialectic and Dialogue*, 156.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 158

Of course, to say that knowledge of what a thing *is* is prior to knowledge of its attributes presents a problem. Even if knowing virtue is being acquainted with virtue, it is not exactly like being acquainted with Meno: we cannot just walk up to virtue like we can with Meno. Thus, Meno asks, how do we come to know something if we know absolutely nothing about it?<sup>62</sup> Socrates addresses this problem with an account of learning as recollection: We do not start out with a total absence of knowledge, on this account. We know *what* virtue is, for example, because we retain this information, on the typical reading of Plato, from the prenatal life of the soul. The task in this life is just to remember, or recollect, what we already know.<sup>63</sup>

To demonstrate that learning is recollection, Socrates poses a geometrical problem to Meno's slave, who has no prior knowledge of geometry. Socrates first asks the slave to imagine a square two feet by two feet. When asked for the area of the square, Meno's slave figures out for himself that it must be four feet. Socrates then asks the slave to imagine a square twice that large, with an area of eight feet. When asked what length the sides of this square must be, the slave first says four feet, and then three feet, when he realizes the first answer was mistaken. Three feet, however, is also not the answer to this problem. The slave is perplexed. If four feet is too large, two feet is too small, and three feet won't do either,

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<sup>62</sup> It might be the case here that Meno is assuming that knowing virtue involves knowing the definition, or the essential properties, of virtue. This would indeed be problematic in the sense that Meno thinks it is: i.e. How could we know virtue (its essential properties) before we know anything about virtue? We see here another advantage of Gonzalez's interpretation: "it saves Socrates from the so-called Socratic fallacy, that is, the view that we cannot know anything about virtue until we know the definition of virtue" (Gonzalez, *Dialectic and Dialogue*, 159). We will see, in the example with Meno's slave, Socrates trying to disabuse Meno (and Plato's readers) of this problematic understanding of knowledge of what virtue *is*.

<sup>63</sup> What is important for us at this point is not the details of Socrates' theory of recollection, but rather how he demonstrates this theory with Meno's slave and what this tells us about knowledge by acquaintance. We will return to *anamnesis* later in chapter three, where we will revise this understanding and address more fully Plato's account of *anamnesis* and its relation to virtue. At this point, however, it is sufficient to take Plato's theory of recollection at face value, until we can revise it to gain a richer understanding of both *anamnesis* and virtue.



then what answer is left?<sup>64</sup> “Socrates remarks that the boy’s perplexity is similar to Meno’s and that this is a good state to be in, since it makes one aware of one’s own ignorance”.<sup>65</sup> Socrates does not leave the slave in perplexity, however, but leads him toward the answer. Socrates gets the slave to see, with the help of a diagram, that the side of a square with the area of eight feet is equal to the diagonal of a square with an area of four feet. Although Socrates clearly leads the slave to this answer, it is the slave who points to the diagonal and recognizes it as the side he is looking for. This is what is meant by knowledge-by-acquaintance: although Meno’s slave would not be able to formulate an answer to the geometrical problem posed to him by Socrates, he can now recognize and point to the answer that he is looking for.<sup>66</sup>

Gonzalez here and elsewhere<sup>67</sup> demonstrates that knowledge of virtue is like this: it is knowledge-by-acquaintance. “[K]nowledge of virtue, rather than having the character of mastery or certainty, contains an irreducible component of ignorance and perplexity”.<sup>68</sup> In an analysis of the *Laches* and the *Charmides*, Gonzalez shows that this ignorance and perplexity are what virtue consists in.<sup>69</sup>

In the *Laches*, both Laches and Nicias fail to give an adequate account of courage. Laches puts all his trust in a presumed expertise given by experience (an experience which is

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<sup>64</sup> It is important to note here that this problem cannot be answered using the mathematics available at the time (though it can be solved by modern mathematics). What Socrates is asking for is an irrational number (the square root of eight). The slave must necessarily fail to give the answer, though he tries every whole, rational number that approximates it. Socrates thus poses a question to the slave that *cannot be answered*, at least not directly.

<sup>65</sup> Gonzalez, *Dialectic and Dialogue*, 167.

<sup>66</sup> We will see that Socrates is doing something similar with Protagoras in the eponymous dialogue. Like in the *Laches*, he is enacting virtue in the inquiry and as such trying to lead Protagoras to the answer to the question, What is virtue? If Protagoras were to follow Socrates in his demonstration, he would not, at the end, be able to formulate a definition of virtue but he would be able to recognize and point to it when he sees it.

<sup>67</sup> See “Dialectic at Work in the *Laches* and the *Charmides*” in *Dialectic and Dialogue*.

<sup>68</sup> Gonzalez, *Dialectic and Dialogue*, 169.

<sup>69</sup> Zuckert (13) places the *Laches* and the *Meno* in the same stage of Socratic philosophizing as, and within ten years’ time of, the *Protagoras*.

largely unreflective). Nicias, in contrast, relies on a presumed knowledge of the definition of courage, one that proves too abstract to be useful, and one that is entirely second hand.

Nicias believes that he has acquired knowledge of courage by gathering a definition of courage gleaned from others. “Nicias’ definition is a mere formula that has provided him with no genuine insight”.<sup>70</sup> Like in the *Protagoras*, Socrates questions Laches and Nicias on their presumed knowledge of courage and like in the *Protagoras* the dialogue ends aporetically, with none of the participants being able to say what courage is.

Gonzalez, however, shows us how it is that Socrates, in contrast to his two interlocutors, displays courage, and knowledge of courage (that is, an answer to the question “What is courage?”) in the inquiry itself. Earlier in this dialogue, we encounter an aporia regarding knowledge and courage.<sup>71</sup> Socrates demonstrates with Laches that courage is incompatible with a technical knowledge (*technē*), as “courage involves taking a risk, hurling oneself into the unknown...enduring in a situation where one is exposed to the unpredictable. Courage is therefore a virtue only of the ignorant”.<sup>72</sup> As it is the purpose of a *technē* to predict and give one control over a situation, we cannot then say that *technē* bestows courage; in fact, the two are incompatible. However, courage must involve *some* kind of knowledge in order to distinguish it from rashness.<sup>73</sup> Gonzalez shows how this knowledge must be non-propositional “in the sense that its theoretical ‘content’ cannot be expressed in propositions/definitions”;<sup>74</sup> thus, the inevitable aporia at the end of the dialogue. This knowledge, however, can be, and *is*, demonstrated by Socrates in the very inquiry. “Because

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<sup>70</sup> Gonzalez, *Dialectic and Dialogue*, 35.

<sup>71</sup> Plato. “Laches.” Ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns. Trans. Benjamin Jowett. *The Collected Dialogues of Plato: including the Letters*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999: 192c-193e.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 30-31.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

courage has been found neither in ignorant endurance nor in a sophistical conceit of wisdom, it must have something to do with the search for truth”.<sup>75</sup> In fact, Socrates’ courage here is “inseparable from his confession of ignorance”.<sup>76 77</sup> While Socrates comes to no conclusions about courage, his ignorance is clearly different from that of his interlocutors. “At the end of the dialogue Socrates claims to be as ignorant as his interlocutors. In one important sense this is true: Socrates, like Laches and Nicias, has failed to find an irrefutable definition of courage”.<sup>78</sup> However, both Laches and Nicias are “motivated in the present discussion only by contentiousness (*philonikia*)”.<sup>79</sup> Socrates’ involvement in the discussion, on the other hand, “clearly differs from the *philonikia* of the two generals. He is willing to listen to arguments in a way that Laches is not, and he is willing to let go of presumed knowledge in a way that Nicias is not”.<sup>80</sup> Socrates’ method “is one exposed to risk and danger, aware that the truth is as elusive as the contingencies of battle and can never be mastered through rules or definitions. Socrates therefore has the courage of recognizing the fallibility of his argumentative expertise and therefore his own vulnerability before the truth”.<sup>81</sup> Throughout the course of the discussion, then, “Socrates’ ignorance somehow shows itself to be more ‘knowing’ than the ignorance of his interlocutors”.<sup>82</sup>

Gonzalez gives further evidence for this in the *Meno*, citing Socrates’ definitions of shape and colour as evidence for keeping virtue whole, rather than breaking it down into

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>77</sup> This will be especially important later when we look at ignorance and knowledge of virtue.

<sup>78</sup> Gonzalez, *Dialectic and Dialogue*, 36.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid. This is especially important in relation to Socrates’ appraisal of Protagoras’ speech in the eponymous dialogue. We see Socrates there as well willing to give up his own opinions in the course of the inquiry.

<sup>81</sup> Gonzalez, *Dialectic and Dialogue*, 37. We see this in the *Protagoras* as well when Socrates is willing to give up his own opinions about virtue in the face of the truth (that is, he expresses willingness to give up his prior opinions if Protagoras can give him an adequate account of virtue) (328e).

<sup>82</sup> Gonzalez, *Dialectic and Dialogue*, 36.

parts<sup>83</sup> and citing the demonstration with Meno's slave as evidence for suggesting that knowledge of virtue is knowledge by acquaintance and non-propositional.<sup>84</sup> As we've seen, Meno's slave, at the end of the demonstration, cannot express propositionally an answer to Socrates' question, but he can recognize and point to the correct answer when he sees it.

Gonzalez says that,

it cannot be denied that in the present episode we do get an answer of sorts: in the end the slave can point to the right side; he can recognize it. His knowledge thus has the character of 'acquaintance', though not in the narrow sense of direct cognition of some sensible object: the boy now has genuine insight into the nature of the side he points to, something he could not have gained by simply seeing a drawing of it. Thus we receive further confirmation and explanation of the suggestion made above, that is, that as we know through acquaintance who Meno is, so do we know in an analogous way what virtue itself is.<sup>85</sup>

Meno's slave can recognize the diagonal of a square with an area of four feet as the side of a square with the area of eight feet. What are we supposed to recognize, though, when we are looking for virtue (virtue's self or what virtue *is*)?

Regarding both the *Laches* and the *Meno*, Gonzalez says that "virtue is found in the inquiry itself. We become more virtuous in the very process of seeking to know what virtue is".<sup>86</sup> We see this in the *Meno*, with Socrates and the slave. "What does the slave learn through the process of refutation that he could not know if he had simply been taught the definition?"<sup>87 88</sup> Before arriving at the correct answer to Socrates' question, Meno's slave

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 162-64.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 165-72.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 168. Note also that acquaintance with Meno means that we can recognize and point to him when we see him, which is different than knowing a list of Meno's properties.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 172.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>88</sup> Earlier in the dialogue, when Meno asked to be taught how it is that learning can be the same as recollection (Plato, *Meno*, 81e), Socrates accused him (Meno) of trying to trick him (Socrates) into contradicting himself. Meno says that this was an honest mistake and instead of 'teaching' him this Socrates then tries to show him how learning is recollection in his demonstration with the slave. "The kind of 'teaching' that is ruled out with the identification of learning with recollection is the kind that seeks to 'put into' the mind of the student an understanding that is not already there" (Gonzalez, *Dialectic and Dialogue*, 166). In order to escape Meno's paradox, then, Socrates can neither 'teach' Meno in this sense, nor the slave. Instead, he proposes to awaken knowledge in the slave without teaching him anything.

first had to recognize his own ignorance. He had to have his wrong answers refuted before he could recognize and point to the right answer. “These reflections show how Socrates’ priority principle is maintained”, says Gonzalez. “As long as the slave continued to think that the side in question was four feet or three feet long, he could not be said to know that it is the diagonal of a square with an area of four feet. He can now at the end of the inquiry know this *about* the side only because the failure of the attempt to express directly its length has enabled him to *recognize* it for what it is”.<sup>89</sup> Once Socrates has reduced the slave to perplexity, he then leads him to the correct answer. The slave can then recognize the correct answer, says Gonzalez, not because he has some “‘belief that’ concerning the side in question, nor obviously, ‘knowledge that’, but rather a certain awareness of space and its properties”.<sup>90</sup>

This is not to say that the slave already knew *that*, or even believed *that*, the side could have neither length, but that he already had the implicit intuition of space which would by itself, with the help of only questions, enable him to recognize this. In general terms, the solution to Meno’s paradox is that we are always in contact with the truth, a contact not mediated by propositions because *presupposed* by our ability to recognize the truth or falsity of propositions, a contact that lies hidden and needs to be recovered through persistent inquiry.<sup>91</sup>

As shown in both the *Laches* and the *Meno*, then, “Virtue is acquired through the recognition of one’s ignorance and the attendant desire to examine both oneself and the world”.<sup>92</sup> If this is the case, then virtue is not something that can be furnished by one man to another;<sup>93</sup> it is “not some definition held out as a reward at the end of the path of enquiry”,<sup>94</sup> but rather it is learned in the inquiry itself. Virtue is inseparable from the inquiry; it is

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<sup>89</sup> Gonzalez, *Dialectic and Dialogue*, 170.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 171.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 172.

<sup>92</sup> Gonzalez, *Dialectic and Dialogue*, 172.

<sup>93</sup> Socrates says as much in the *Protagoras* (319b).

<sup>94</sup> Gonzalez, *Dialectic and Dialogue*, 172.

something with which we become acquainted only through inquiry, as was the case with Meno's slave.

This makes sense of Socrates' disclaimer at the end of his account of recollection, where he states that "I will not insist on the other points of my account, but what I will fight with all my might in both word and deed to defend, as far as I am able, is that we shall be better, braver, and less lazy men...if we believe that we should search for what we don't know than if we believe there is no point in searching because what we don't know we can never discover".<sup>95</sup> <sup>96</sup> What is important is that we will become *better* men [sic] if we search for what we do not know; in other words, virtue is inseparable from the inquiry.

### III. Knowledge of Virtue in the *Protagoras*

What would this mean, then, to say that virtue is a recognition of one's own ignorance and a desire to persistently and constantly examine oneself and the world? That it is inseparable from the inquiry itself? And that it is something inexpressible through propositions but knowable only through acquaintance?<sup>97</sup> And is this true of the *Protagoras*?

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<sup>95</sup> Plato, *Meno*, 86b-c, qtd. In Gonzalez, *Dialectic and Dialogue*, 172.

<sup>96</sup> We will return to this disclaimed later, in chapter three, when we address *anamnesis* and its relation to virtue.

<sup>97</sup> Here, we find a problem: the claim that virtue is a recognition of one's own ignorance and a desire to persistently and constantly examine oneself and the world is itself knowledge *about* virtue and, if knowledge of virtue is non-propositional, would not count as such. We could, however, still distinguish between knowing *about* virtue and *knowing virtue*: my knowledge that virtue is a recognition of one's own ignorance, etc., (if it is) would be knowledge *about* virtue, but this itself would only be a second hand report. I could not know that this is what virtue in fact is unless, and until, I become acquainted with it. Of course, this leaves us with a problem of verification: How do I know that it is virtue with which I am acquainted? This situation seems self-verifying: if someone were to disagree about the nature of virtue, one could argue that this person is simply not acquainted with virtue and thus does not recognize it for what it is. This problem of verification, however, is beyond the scope of this project. For the purpose of knowledge of virtue in the *Protagoras*, it must be sufficient here to show that knowledge of virtue is non-propositional and is of a certain character and not whether this picture of virtue stands up to independent philosophical scrutiny.

My argument here is that knowledge of virtue is an acquaintance with the *pathos* which gives birth to philosophical discourse and, as such, is only expressible through philosophical discourse in approximations and through ‘pointing’, i.e. pointing the way towards knowledge of virtue in a way that always involves a return to the origin of philosophical discourse, but in a way that always also involves an *aporia*.

First, we can address whether knowledge of virtue is an acquaintance. Gonzalez has shown that this is a satisfying account of virtue in the *Meno*. Is this also the case with the *Protagoras*?

Socrates uses the word “acquaintance” only once in the dialogue. In their discussion of poetry, of Simonides’ poem on virtue, Protagoras says that “[t]he poet must be very stupid if he says that it is such a light matter to hold on to virtue, when everyone agrees that there is nothing more difficult,” to which Socrates responds, “I have a notion that his branch of wisdom is an old and god-given one, beginning perhaps with Simonides or going even further back. Your learning covers many things but not, it appears, this. You are not acquainted with it as I have become through being a pupil of Prodicus”.<sup>98</sup> This seems to confirm Gonzalez’s reading of virtue. Simonides’ (and Prodicus’) branch of knowledge is a god-given one: as god-given it is divinely-inspired; this inspiration suggests an *awareness* of what virtue *is*, originally obtained through the soul’s divine prenatal life, through divine dispensation, and then recollected through recognition.<sup>99</sup> Socrates also says that Protagoras

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<sup>98</sup> Plato, *Protagoras*, 340e-341a.

<sup>99</sup> Note that this notion of knowledge of virtue as acquaintance may not depend on recollection as a remembering of the Forms from a divine prenatal existence of the soul. This problem will be further treated in chapter three on the *Meno*.

It is further significant that Socrates says that Simonides’ branch of knowledge is a god-given one. We will further address divine inspiration, and divine dispensation, in chapter three on the *Meno*.

is not *acquainted* with this branch of knowledge. Presumably, if he were, he would not be having such a difficult time.

With respect to knowledge of virtue as a recognition of one's own ignorance, we can see Socrates enacting virtue in this dialogue, as well as Protagoras' resistance to following Socrates towards an understanding of virtue. Where Socrates never expresses himself with certainty, Protagoras seems nothing but certain throughout the text: Where Socrates uses phrases like "I have a notion",<sup>100</sup> "I believe that",<sup>101</sup> and "I do not believe",<sup>102</sup> Protagoras uses phrases like "I know very well",<sup>103</sup> and acts as though he has the answer and it just so happens that he is kind enough to bestow his wisdom on others if they would just sit still and listen.<sup>104</sup> This is Protagoras' first mistake.

Protagoras' second mistake is that he is working only with second-hand reports. If we see knowledge of virtue as an acquaintance, then we can say that Protagoras is operating like a person with a map who is unfamiliar with the actual terrain, relying only on second-hand information. If knowledge of virtue is a sort of acquaintance, then Protagoras will only ever have an approximation, at best, if he continues to use second-hand reports. This seems to be the point of Socrates and Protagoras' diversion into poetry. When Protagoras gains the role of questioner, he poses questions to Socrates about poetry, in particular about Simonides' poem addressing virtue. Protagoras is appealing to the work of others for an understanding of virtue. As with Meno<sup>105</sup>, his knowledge is entirely borrowed. He is "trying

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<sup>100</sup> Plato, *Protagoras*, 340e.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 341d.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 320b.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 341d.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 320c, 324d.

<sup>105</sup> See Gonzalez, *Dialectic and Dialogue*, 185.

Meno's favouring Gorgias-type answers: 76-77



to walk on the road to virtue with the guidance of nothing but second-hand reports”.<sup>106</sup> As such, he is unable to have any original insight, unable to discover anything on his own. In fact, much of the dialogue is taken up in addressing “the proposition of the many”,<sup>107</sup> which is likely why none of Protagoras’ accounts of virtue are successful: knowledge of virtue is neither propositional, nor can it be obtained using second-hand reports. We see Socrates in a number of places<sup>108</sup> trying to steer Protagoras away from such a strategy, advising him not to rely on “extraneous voices”,<sup>109</sup> but rather *to see the matter for himself*. We see, however, that Protagoras has failed on all fronts.

We have addressed, then, the issue of the knowledge of virtue and suggested that this knowledge is knowledge-by-acquaintance. Acquaintance with what, though, and why can Socrates not just come out and say this directly?

#### **IV. Knowledge of Virtue as Knowledge-by-Acquaintance**

If virtue consists in recognizing one’s own ignorance and the desire to persistently and constantly examine oneself and the world, then we could say that an acquaintance with virtue is what gives birth to philosophical discourse, which itself is a sort of seeking, an examination of oneself and the world. Acquaintance with virtue is also something found *within* philosophical discourse, *within* the seeking itself; it *is* the inquiry. Socrates does not, and cannot, speak of virtue directly as virtue consists in the very inquiry into virtue; it *consists* in the inquiry itself *and is* that *pathos* which gives birth to inquiry. To ‘turn around’ and address the very thing which makes possible the inquiry, and *is* the inquiry, only yields

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<sup>106</sup> Gonzalez, *Dialectic and Dialogue*, 185.

<sup>107</sup> Plato, *Protagoras*, 333c.

<sup>108</sup> e.g. *ibid.*, 339b-c, 347e.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 347e.

approximations. Philosophical discourse cannot recuperate its own ground of possibility back into its own being.

Virtue, in this sense, is incommensurable.<sup>110</sup> “Required for such insight [into virtue] is not the certainty that some propositions *about* virtue are true, nor the systematization of such propositions, but rather ‘acquaintance’ with what virtue itself *is*, an ‘acquaintance’ acquired only through persistent inquiry in the face of virtue’s ‘incommensurability’.”<sup>111</sup> As incommensurable, virtue cannot be measured, nor can it be fully recuperated back into philosophical discourse.<sup>112</sup>

If this is the case, if knowledge of virtue is an acquaintance with that which gives birth to philosophical discourse, then philosophical discourse, in addressing virtue, must always be returning to its origins. We see this throughout the *Protagoras*. At the beginning

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<sup>110</sup> Gonzalez talks about virtue’s “incommensurability” (184). This term comes out of Socrates’ demonstration with Meno’s slave: the side of the square in question is incommensurable in that it cannot be measured, at least using the math available at Plato’s time (i.e. any measurement yields only an approximation). In using this term, Gonzalez is suggesting the same thing about virtue, that any attempt to measure, or define, it yields only approximations.

<sup>111</sup> Gonzalez, *Dialectic and Dialogue*, 184.

<sup>112</sup> If virtue were something which we could be certain about, then one could appropriate fully this knowledge into one’s own being. As virtue always involves another (other person or the world itself) in that it is a response to the world which speaks to us, and which is inhabited by other beings who must also speak and respond, and as such it *cannot* be entirely recuperated, as to do so would be to fully appropriate – and thus to annihilate – the other into my own being. The other is incommensurable, incomparable insofar as s/he is other: I cannot bring the other fully into my own being; s/he always resists my attempts to define, understand, and measure (this last idea, that human beings cannot be measured against each other, reflects the basic intuition that human beings are not commodities; this also calls to mind the fundamental problem in utilitarian ethics of how to measure one person’s good against that of others). The incommensurability of virtue thus reflects the incommensurability of the other and has the character of recognition of one’s own ignorance in the face of the other. This is what gives birth to philosophical discourse – an inability to recuperate the other person, or the world in which one finds oneself, back into one’s own being or experience – and as such is incommensurable within philosophical discourse itself. Although a full account of this phenomenon is beyond the scope of this paper, it is worthwhile to note that this may be a way out of the problem of verification identified earlier. If the virtue involves a recognition of one’s own ignorance in the face of the incommensurable other, then I cannot rest assured that I have found virtue, that I am familiar with virtue and that the other, the one who objects, is wrong. I must always take into account the point of view of the other. What this would involve as a positive ‘account’ of virtue is problematic, but at least it avoids the problem of dismissing outright those who disagree.

We will encounter another reason why virtue can be said to be incommensurable (why any attempt to measure, or define, it yield only approximations) later in chapters two and three (see esp. chapter two n402). This latter reason will be more in line with the opinion of traditional Platonic scholarship.

of the digression into poetry, for instance, Socrates says “let us start from the beginning”;<sup>113</sup> at the end of the digression into poetry, Socrates says that “I want then to go back to the beginning, to my first questions to you on this subject”.<sup>114</sup> On 353c, he uses the term “to return”, and at the end of the dialogue he says that we should follow up this discussion “with a determined attack on virtue itself and its essential nature. Then we could return to the question of whether or not it can be taught”.<sup>115</sup> Socrates is constantly *returning*. Returning to what? It seems that he is returning to a state of perplexity – a recognition of his own ignorance and a desire to persistently and constantly examine himself and the world – which gives birth to philosophical discourse and is thus something to which one must *return*.

This is, perhaps, why Protagoras continually fails to give an adequate account of virtue: he relies on propositional knowledge and second-hand reports. He is too certain of his own position to give it up. Instead of seeking virtue for himself, he is merely recycling others’ propositions about virtue. Thus, he is unable to follow Socrates towards a recognition of virtue, a recognition of the terrain. He is unable to return to the origins of philosophical discourse and gain an acquaintance with the *pathos* which made it possible in the first place.

By examining both the *Protagoras* and the *Meno*, we have seen how it is that knowledge of virtue might be knowledge by acquaintance with the *pathos* that gives rise to philosophical discourse. We briefly touched on Socrates’ theory of recollection (*anamnesis*) and its relationship to virtue and knowledge by acquaintance.<sup>116</sup> Much more needs to be said

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<sup>113</sup> Plato, *Protagoras*, 333d.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 349a.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 361c.

<sup>116</sup> It is through Socrates’ demonstration with Meno’s slave that we come to understand what is meant by knowledge by acquaintance and how it is that knowledge of virtue involves perplexity and a recognition of one’s own ignorance.

about *anamnesis* and its relationship to virtue.<sup>117</sup> By way of transition into the next chapter, we can anticipate a point made by Gonzalez regarding the *Meno*. In “How is the Truth of Beings in the Soul? Interpreting *Anamnesis* in Plato”, he says that “[a]*namnesis* is not the unearthing of buried propositions or beliefs, but rather the awakening of a tacit desire that already has the soul in contact with the truth”.<sup>118</sup> We begin to see this in the *Protagoras* where knowledge of virtue involves a desire to examine oneself and the world, a desire that already has the soul in contact with the truth of virtue (or what virtue *is*).

Gonzalez further speaks here of a tacit knowledge of virtue, but says that,

If we wish to speak of “tacit knowledge” here, we must do so with the understanding that the “knowledge” in question is more a tacit *ability and practice* than a statement or intuition that is somehow buried deep in our souls. Indeed, this knowledge must at least be very closely akin to the only kind of knowledge Socrates in the *Symposium* claims to have: the knowledge of how to love (177d7-8). If it is love that keeps the soul in contact with the truth of beings, then recollecting the truth of beings is a matter of transforming this love into explicit practice and know-how.<sup>119</sup>

This is how it is that “[a]*namnesis* is not the unearthing of buried propositions or beliefs, but rather the awakening of a tacit desire that already has the soul in contact with the truth”.<sup>120</sup>

If knowledge of virtue involves this desire to examine oneself and the world, if *anamnesis* is the awakening of this desire in the soul, and if knowledge of virtue, as Gonzalez suggests, is closely akin to knowledge of how to love, then it seems that we must examine the *Symposium* in relation to the *Protagoras* and the *Meno* in order to get an adequate account of virtue. In fact, in chapter three on the *Meno* we will see how it is that the *Symposium* solves some problems in the *Meno* with Socrates’ theory

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<sup>117</sup> We will pick up this thread again in chapter three.

<sup>118</sup> Gonzalez, “Interpreting *Anamnesis* in Plato”, 289.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 298.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

of recollection, and thus how it is that the *Symposium* and *eros* completes our examination of *anamnesis* and knowledge of virtue.

That we need to examine the *Protagoras* and the *Symposium* together is also supported by James Rhodes in *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*. Rhodes begins with the *Protagoras* and suggests that Plato invites his readers to move from this dialogue to the *Symposium*. Plato does this by means of tying the two dialogues together through a dramatic inversion: “If budding young tyrants force Socrates into nonerotic conversations with sophists because they ignorantly want a spurious political wisdom, failing to get it because Socrates deliberately contrives ambiguous results, perhaps a discussion about eros with sophists that Socrates freely joins will offer real political wisdom to aspiring tyrants who intellectually reject it”.<sup>121</sup> <sup>122</sup> Thus, Rhodes suggests, the *Symposium* is a therapy for a tyrannical eros and, consequently, the completion of the *Protagoras*.

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<sup>121</sup> Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom and Silence*, 18.

<sup>122</sup> See Ibid., 16-17 for the seven major dramatic inversions that tie together the *Protagoras* with the *Symposium*.

## CHAPTER TWO: *Eros* and *Anamnesis* in Plato's *Symposium*. Socrates' Positive Account: The Erotic Ascent

We saw in the *Protagoras* Socrates demonstrate the inadequacy of Protagoras' understanding of virtue. Jumping ahead to the *Meno*, we also saw why it was that the *Protagoras* ended in *aporia*. What I intend to demonstrate with the *Symposium* is that this dialogue is, in a sense, a completion of the *Protagoras*. This is because, while in the *Protagoras* Socrates demonstrates the inadequacy of his interlocutor's understanding of virtue, in the *Symposium* he gives a positive account of *eros*,<sup>123</sup> though in the form of images and myths.<sup>124</sup>

I will largely be relying on James Rhodes' interpretation of the *Symposium* in this chapter, though we will encounter competing interpretations of many aspects of this dialogue. While much of Rhodes is contentious and can be otherwise explained, I believe that both Rhodes and the competing interpretations examined here agree on the essentials while differing on peripheral issues. Thus I intend to defend a core reading while allowing the reader to take or leave many of the extraneous details.

### I. Socrates' Positive Account: The Erotic Ascent

Rhodes suggests that the *Symposium* is a comedy-tragedy about *eros*<sup>125</sup> and that it dramatizes the struggle that really occurred between the good, Socratic *eros* and the evil,

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<sup>123</sup> Though the *Symposium* deals primarily with *eros*, we will see later in the third chapter on the *Meno* how it is that *eros*, *anamnesis* and virtue are intertwined and how a positive account of *eros*, in this case, is also a positive account of virtue, when read with the *Protagoras* and the *Meno*. It is also worthy of note that Diotima, as we will see, anticipates this point in a comment about *eros* and its relation to virtue.

<sup>124</sup> We saw in the *Protagoras* why it is that Socrates can only speak indirectly of virtue.

<sup>125</sup> Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 186.

tyrannical eros. Socrates' comrades here are erotically ill (they suffer from a disordered eros) and as a result, the entire city of Athens is being perverted and pushed onto the path of disaster.<sup>126</sup>

I think that Plato's scheme of dramatic symbols quietly suggests this argument: The fall of Athens was tied to the earlier war between the good and bad erotes. When Athens was in its last agony, those who desperately wished to rescue the polis by giving it over to Critias or Alcibiades were twelve years too late and hoping in false saviours. The battle to save Athens was already lost on the occasion of Agathon's debut, when Agathon, Alcibiades, and Socrates were vying to determine the direction of its eros and the citizens gave their hearts to Agathon and Alcibiades. By loving these men, the city rendered Syracuse and Aegospotami inevitable, provoking the unjust, harmful reaction of Critias. Perhaps Athens could still have been saved had the most excellent young men of its next generation allowed Socrates to guide their eros. Glaucon's encounter with Socrates, dramatized in the *Republic*, was critical. Glaucon's eros was victory-loving and tyrannical. Socrates tried to cure it, but Glaucon proved untreatable. He spurned Socrates and joined the scramble for power, trying to outdo Critias. Ultimately, Glaucon became irrelevant and Critias won the day. Consequently, Socrates and his wisdom were absent from the public realm during the crisis of 404, except insofar as oligarchs culled thirdhand reports of private conversations for evidence of sedition. However, even this was hopeful. The resurrection of an Athenian phoenix, whether that of the city itself or that of its better philosophic part, still had to begin with the Socratic wisdom that was present only in the faintest traces. If anything was to be saved, one had to work from these shadows back to the substance that cast them.<sup>127</sup>

Thus, Apollodorus relates the events of Agathon's dinner party to his anonymous questioners.<sup>128</sup> This is also where we get our first glimpse of *anamnesis* in this

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 188. See also Debra Nails, "Tragedy Off-Stage." *Plato's Symposium: Issues in Interpretation and Reception*. Washington, DC: Centre for Hellenic Studies, 2006:179, for a discussion of the combined role of comedy and tragedy in the *Symposium*.

<sup>127</sup> Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 193. This is the significance, says Rhodes, of the opening scene of the *Symposium* where Apollodorus is relating the event of Agathon's dinner party to anonymous questioners (Apollodorus uses the second person plural verbs and pronouns) (Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 191-193). With a retelling of the events of Agathon's symposium, Apollodorus' audience might return to the Socratic wisdom that was present at the dinner party. The motives, however, of Apollodorus' audience are ultimately irrelevant, though they may be interesting, to my present thesis.

<sup>128</sup> Scott and Welton give a similar reading regarding the decline of Athens: "The *Symposium* presents a glimpse of the moment just prior to the decline of Athens. For the conversation at the banquet that forms the heart of the dialogue is shortly before Alcibiades sets out to lead the city on the most ambitious and disastrous military expedition of the war (the Sicilian Expedition), when Athenian imperialism overreached its capacity" (Gary Alan Scott and William A. Welton. *Erotic Wisdom: Philosophy and Intermediacy in Plato's Symposium*. New York: State University of New York, 2009: 3). Scott and Welton suggest that the dialogue thus offers a defense of Socrates and his role in supposedly corrupting the youth (especially with respect to his relationship with Alcibiades – see Scott and Welton, *Erotic Wisdom*, 155-180 for why Socrates is not responsible for Alcibiades' actions or his character), a possible explanation of the imperialist ambition that led

dialogue. We will return to this point later when we examine the complex structure of the *Symposium* which, says Rhodes, “is a series of memories of memories of memories”.<sup>129</sup>

At the request of an anonymous audience, Apollodorus relates the story of Agathon’s dinner party, already setting us up in a complex dialogic structure: Apollodorus is telling an anonymous audience about his meeting Glaucon on the road the day before yesterday, and relating to him [Glaucon] a story that he [Apollodorus] heard from Aristodemus of Cydathenaeum, who was there himself (i.e. Apollodorus is recounting a story that he told to Glaucon two days ago, where he is recalling a story that was told to him by Aristodemus of Cydathenaeum, who is remembering an event that he originally experienced.).<sup>130</sup>

The rest of the dialogue is concerned with the dinner party itself, where each guest gives a “eulogy of Eros”.<sup>131</sup> As Rhodes demonstrates, however, this is not just a collection of stories about *eros*. We will see presently how it is that the story that Apollodorus recounts depicts the struggle between a Socratic and a tyrannical *eros*.<sup>132</sup>

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ultimately to Athens’ downfall, and portrait of that *eros* (what Rhodes calls a Socratic *eros*) which could save future generations from similar disasters.

<sup>129</sup> Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 410.

<sup>130</sup> “Apollodorus recalls what Aristodemus related. Aristodemus remembers what he heard in person. Socrates harks back to what he learned from Diotima. Most of the speakers recall mythical beginnings of gods and men. Alcibiades reminisces about his experiences of Socrates. At some point in the play, the reader is contemplating memories of memories of memories of memories, which are myths of myths of myths of myths. Eventually, it will be necessary to wonder why Plato creates this complicated anamnestic and mythical structure” (Rhodes, 194).

<sup>131</sup> Plato, *Symposium*. Ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns. Trans. Michael Joyce. *The Collected Dialogues of Plato: including the Letters*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999: 77e6-7.

<sup>132</sup> Although Apollodorus’ audience’ motives and the political ramifications of Agathon’s dinner party are ultimately irrelevant to my present thesis, this assertion, that we see depicted in the *Symposium* a conflict between a Socratic and a tyrannical *eros* and that it is this struggle that gives structure to the collection of speeches, is key. I will defend this assertion below.



This struggle occurs in three campaigns. The first campaign is where we encounter what Rhodes calls a Titanic eros.<sup>133</sup> This campaign consists of the first five speeches given by Phaedrus, Pausanias, Aristophanes, Eriximachus, and Agathon. The speeches, says Rhodes, are both an ascent (in terms of intellectual excellence and the beauty of the speeches) and a descent (insofar as the greatest injustices occur when the best souls go wrong). Thus Aristophanes' and Agathon's speeches are the most dangerous to the health and right order of souls and societies.<sup>134</sup> "Whether or not the sophists and Aristophanes recognize and intend it, the erotic illness that they suffer and communicate prepares the city culturally for the political and military adventures into which Alcibiades later leads it".<sup>135</sup>

In the second campaign we see a prophetic eros acting as a cure for a tyrannical eros. Here, says Rhodes, "Socrates lovingly counterattacks the sophists and Aristophanes, struggling to pull them back from the brink of the abyss. Speaking through Diotima, Socrates ascends to the vision of eternal beauty".<sup>136</sup> Socrates' positive account of eros is found in this ascent. We will see later how eros is tied into *anamnesis* and virtue. Ultimately, we will see Socrates leading his companions, and ourselves as readers, toward a vision of eternal beauty. Should they follow him in the ascent, once they reach the summit they will be able to return with Socrates, in the *Meno*, to the question of virtue and they will be able to answer both questions, "What is virtue?" and "Is virtue teachable?" We see in the *Symposium*, however, Agathon's failure to follow Socrates and we will see in the *Meno* his [Meno's] failure as well.

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<sup>133</sup> Rhodes calls this a Titanic, tyrannical eros at 298 in *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*.

<sup>134</sup> Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 188.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 188-189.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 189.

Socrates hints that Agathon might not be able to follow him in the ascent during what Rhodes identifies as the second campaign. Agathon's fate is sealed, however, in the third campaign where we encounter what Rhodes calls a Dionysian eros. This is where Alcibiades arrives at the banquet ("at the head of a rabble"<sup>137</sup>) and gives a speech in which he "paradoxically loves and attacks Socrates, thus creating a perverse mirror image of his former teacher's campaign".<sup>138</sup> Alcibiades' speech is a descent, says Rhodes, where he plunges headlong toward "the personal and political disasters that he precipitates in his real life".<sup>139</sup> He cannot be recalled by Socrates (or the others). And though Aristophanes and Agathon stay and drink with Socrates, they too eventually doze off while "Alcibiades and his mob have gone to their suicidal follies".<sup>140</sup>

I have outlined what Rhodes identifies as the three campaigns which make up the *Symposium* and the political motivations and ramifications involved. It is worth noting here that much of this material is ultimately irrelevant to my present thesis, though it is interesting, it fleshes out Rhodes' own account, and, if true, it is historically and politically important. What is important for my present purposes, and what will here be defended, is that in the *Symposium* we see a Socratic *eros* in conflict with a tyrannical *eros*, the latter of which is displayed by each of Socrates' interlocutors. I will assert and defend the view that Socrates' positive account is found largely in Diotima's speech and that the erotic ascent that she describes offers a cure to the Titanic, tyrannical *eros* displayed by Agathon primarily, and also the others. Thus, I ask the reader to critically examine those parts that are relevant

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 189.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 189.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

to my thesis and to either take or leave the additional details which are largely mentioned for interest's sake.

We can begin this examination of the *Symposium* with a look at Socrates' interlocutors in the dialogue. As mentioned above, each of Socrates' interlocutors display a Titanic, tyrannical *eros* in their speeches. This tyrannical drive perverts eros into a tool for enslaving others in order to gratify selfish desires.<sup>141</sup> Each of Socrates' *sympotai* displays this tyrannical eros:

Plato has shown us a Phaedrus who wants to use his *erastes* [lover] as an instrument of his aggrandizement and glory, a Pausanias who proposes to make his *eromenos* [beloved] a prostitute who exchanges sexual favors for an education that testifies to the instructor's divine creativity, an Erixymachus who applies his *techne* to his beloved's eros in order to control his behaviour, an Aristophanes who interprets his beloved as an extension of himself, and an Agathon who casts his lovers as ugly ciphers whose lusts for him demonstrate his supremely beautiful divinity.<sup>142</sup>

Tyrannical eros also appears as Titanism: Phaedrus, Pausanias, Erixymachus, Aristophanes, and Agathon all use eros as an instrument for dethroning Zeus and deifying themselves.

"This eros is tyrannical inasmuch as it embodies the master passions of tyrants, an overwhelming craving for power over the order of being".<sup>143</sup>

We can see this most clearly in Aristophanes' account where the ancestors of human beings – who represent the original human nature – actually tried "to scale the heights of heaven and set upon the gods".<sup>144</sup> Erotic love, says Aristophanes, "is a relic of that original state of ours".<sup>145</sup> Phaedrus, also, displays this Titanism in his speech, in "[h]is elevation of Eros to the rank of the most powerful god, which directly implies an attack on the kingship of Zeus, his removal of the Olympians from the Greek pantheon, and his intention to ride the

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<sup>141</sup> See Ibid., 366.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 366.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 367.

<sup>144</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 190b6.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 193a1.

wings of Eros to the pleasure of divine status himself”.<sup>146</sup> Pausanias, at 183a1-c2, applauds the fact that, in Athens, the lover is encouraged to pursue his beloved, urging his need for sexual gratification on the boy through prayers, entreaties, and vows which are expected to be broken; and at 184c1-e4 he suggests that it is noble for the beloved to submit himself to the lover who can make him wise and good, “the [lover] lawfully enslaving himself to the youth he loves, in return for his compliance, the latter lawfully devoting his services to the friend who is helping him to become wise and good – the one sharing his wealth of wisdom and virtue, and the other drawing, in his poverty, upon his friend for a liberal education”.<sup>147</sup> Erixymachus owns up to his desire to control his beloved’s behaviour at 186d3-6, where he claims that the expert physician, acting to restore harmony of the body, and thus acting under the sole direction of eros, should be able to replace one desire with another, produce the requisite desire, or remove an unwanted desire from his subject. Agathon, too, displays a tyrannical, Titanic eros in his speech. The other speeches all “fail in the same way to achieve the perfect deification of human beings: in none of them does a man go beyond the rebellious appropriation of a divine function to himself, arriving at pure identity with a godly essence”<sup>148</sup>. Agathon, however, goes further than the other speakers and identifies himself directly with the god Eros. He does this, says Rhodes, by demolishing the essential nature of Eros and “leaving only traits as the foundations of divinity”.<sup>149</sup> Thus, Eros, like Agathon, is blessed,<sup>150</sup> young,<sup>151</sup> soft and dainty,<sup>152</sup> and a divine poet.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*. 213. See Plato, *Symposium*, 180b4-6 and 179d1-b3.

<sup>147</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 184d5-e2.

<sup>148</sup> Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*. 281-2.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 282.

<sup>150</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 195a10.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 195c1. Although Agathon is not the youngest at the banquet, Aristodemus reports that Agathon received raucous applause for his speech because “his youthful eloquence did honor to himself as well as to the god” (Plato, *Symposium*, 198a2-3). Rhodes has this as “‘the youth’ had spoken in a manner ‘suitable to himself and the god’” (198a1-3 R.G. Bury transl.; qtd. In Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 284). In the

A Socratic *eros*, in contrast, regulates cities in moderation and justice and contributes to the education [of beloveds] to virtue.<sup>154</sup> Whereas a Titanic *eros* aspires to self-deification, Socrates “leads his beloved to a joint fulfillment in the *metaxy*”.<sup>155</sup>

Although we might say that each of Socrates’ interlocutors at the symposium is erotically ailing, in this dialogue, Socrates primarily addresses Agathon – that is, we see him try to dissuade Agathon from his tyrannical *eros* and his self-deification by first dismantling his opinions about *eros* and then leading him up the ladder of *eros* to a vision of beauty (*to kalon*) itself. Socrates ultimately fails in this task, however, as Agathon is unable to follow him in his ascent.<sup>156</sup>

## II. Why Agathon? First campaign: Titanic Eros – Agathon’s attack on Socrates

Rhodes suggests that Socrates primarily addresses Agathon in this dialogue for a number of reasons. First, Plato’s Socrates knows how to persuade only one man at a time: “For I know how to produce one witness to the truth of what I say, the man with whom I am

*Thesmophoriazusae*, Aristophanes has Euripides’ in-law call Agathon, who is then thirty-five or older, ‘young sir’ (134; see also Rhodes, 287).

<sup>152</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 195d5-e1. Also in the *Thesmophoriazusae*, Aristophanes has Euripides’ in-law ask Agathon why he dresses in women’s clothing. Agathon here explains “that he wears what corresponds to his intention” (Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 287), and that, through mimesis or imitation he can acquire those traits which he lacks. As Aristophanes writes plays, we must be careful, as we are with Plato’s dialogues, not to take his characters as necessarily accurate depictions of the historical personages. However, it seems that Agathon’s youthfulness and his desire to emulate softness, beauty, and eternal youth were widely recognized (Ibid., 287-284). Further, the desire to become divine through imitation of the divine resembles the belief of the earliest worshippers of the cosmological gods, “who win sacred being and resist profane life by imitating the sacred” (Ibid., 288; See Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*), and thus “Hellenic believers would see little difficulty in the proposition that Agathon can share in the life of Eros through mimesis” (Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 288).

<sup>153</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 196e2-3.

<sup>154</sup> Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 367.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid. We see this sort of Socratic *eros* as well in *Erotic Wisdom*, where G.A. Scott and W.A. Welton describe the intermediacy of human *eros* and philosophy. *Metaxy* is a transliteration of the Greek word μετὰξύ, meaning ‘in the midst’ or ‘in between’ (Liddell and Scott, 1115).

<sup>156</sup> This will all be demonstrated, with respect to the text, below.

debating, but the others I ignore”.<sup>157</sup> Further, Rhodes contends that Socrates undoubtedly remembers the Agathon whom he met sixteen years ago at the house of Callias in the *Protagoras*.<sup>158</sup> At this point in time, Agathon was a young man of “noble and good” nature.<sup>159</sup> From the *Republic*,<sup>160</sup> we can say that “Socrates knows that it is the noblest natures that can fall the furthest and be turned to the greatest crimes”,<sup>161</sup> as “mediocrities never achieve anything great, whether good or evil”.<sup>162</sup> Given Agathon’s prominent position among the Athenians, then, we can surmise that Socrates wants to save Agathon, as “[i]f he succeeds, he might be able to get Agathon to undo the evil spell that he is casting on the demos now. Socrates cannot influence the many, but this might be in Agathon’s power because the people love him”.<sup>163</sup> Further, we will see below how, if Socrates is offering a positive account here through Diotima (as I intend to demonstrate), his method demands that he address a single individual as he leads this one interlocutor toward a vision of beauty itself; this method is unsuited to persuading a group. Finally, we see in the dialogue that Agathon is both “the only speaker who is made to endure a brief cross-examination by Socrates”<sup>164</sup> and also the one with whom Socrates identifies himself in Diotima’s speech.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Plato, *Gorgias* 474a5-b1, qtd. In Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 195.

<sup>158</sup> Rhodes’ dating of these two dialogues corresponds to Zuckert’s.

<sup>159</sup> Plato, *Protagoras*, 315d9-10.

<sup>160</sup> Plato, *Republic*. Ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns. Trans. Paul Shorey. *The Collected Dialogues of Plato: including the Letters*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999: 491e1-6.

<sup>161</sup> Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 198.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

<sup>164</sup> Scott and Welton, *Erotic Wisdom*, 81.

<sup>165</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 201e1-7.

We can see now why Socrates primarily addresses Agathon in the *Symposium*. If knowledge of virtue is knowledge by acquaintance which is gained in the desire for virtue, the accompanying desire to persistently examine oneself and the world, and the erotic ascent, then Socrates must work with one individual, beginning from his premises and leading him toward a vision of the things themselves. This method is unsuited to persuading a group because it is not something that can be furnished by one man to another like information. The Socratic elenchus and the erotic ascent are uniquely individual experiences where one man may follow while another fails to do so. We can imagine further in the *Symposium* how Socrates’ method of working from Agathon’s premises would fail to convince others, who do not strictly identify with the god Eros nor

Agathon, on the other hand, “invites Socrates to his party”, says Rhodes, because he realizes that his recent conquest of Athens is unfinished and he has a carefully laid plan to complete it. Every Athenian but one, Socrates, has hailed him. He intends to subdue this man who has not yet yielded to him. So, Agathon has decided that he will sue Socrates in Dionysius’s court long before Eryximachus proposes a night of tributes to the god Eros. Dionysius is Agathon’s patron as the god of tragedians. Agathon expects to win because the judge is prejudiced.<sup>166</sup>

Rhodes holds that Agathon has invited Socrates to his party in order to sue him in the court of Dionysius,<sup>167</sup> Socrates being the only Athenian who has not acknowledged Agathon’s cultural hegemony. One might object that this assertion – that Agathon has premeditated this campaign against Socrates – is controversial at best. Agathon is not the one who chooses the topic of discussion, nor is he the one who even suggests having a discussion.<sup>168</sup> Rhodes suggests that this campaign is not just the doing of Agathon, however, but rather that it was planned by him and his friends, suggesting that the other *sympotai* were in on Agathon’s plan.<sup>169</sup> This seems controversial and difficult to prove at best, far-fetched and unverifiable at worst, as there is no mention nor even suspicion of such motivation in the dialogue. Further, Agathon’s attitude toward Socrates is often gracious and approving throughout the dialogue, even when Socrates refutes him.<sup>170</sup> There are some points, however, that support Rhodes’ interpretation and Rhodes himself asserts that even if this discussion of Eros was not planned, it is still the case that the tyrannical *eros* of Agathon and his friends meets in combat with the Socratic *eros*.<sup>171</sup>

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imagine themselves to be eternally beautiful and youthful. Destroying Agathon’s premises in order to rebuild a better set of opinions will have no effect on the other *sympotai*. We will see this fleshed out in the rest of this chapter and chapter three.

<sup>166</sup> Rhodes *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 200.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, 300.

<sup>168</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 176e4-177d6.

<sup>169</sup> See Rhodes *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 188, 200, 300.

<sup>170</sup> See Plato, *Symposium*, 199d-201d.

<sup>171</sup> On pp.207-299, Rhodes outlines each of the speeches given by Pausanias, Phaedrus, Eryximachus, Aristophanes, and Agathon, and demonstrates how each of the speakers exemplifies a tyrannical, Titanic *eros*. I have summarized Rhodes’ view and the evidence from the text above.

Thus, I intend to touch on the points in the text that do support Rhodes' interpretation. However, it is not essential that we accept what he says about Agathon's motives. The premeditation of the attack on Socrates, though it adds an interesting element to our understanding of the *Symposium* and its relation to Plato's other dialogues (here the *Protagoras* and the *Meno*), it is not essential to my thesis. What is required for the purposes of this project is that we accept that in the *Symposium* we see Socrates' attempt to cure Agathon of a Titanic, tyrannical *eros*, that the erotic ascent (which, after dismantling Agathon's current opinions about *eros*, is supposed to redirect his own erotic desires) is applicable to more than just Agathon and his friends, and that it gives us insight into the question of virtue posed in the *Protagoras* and to which we return in the *Meno*. I intend to demonstrate each of these essential premises below.

The first hint of a conflict between Socrates and Agathon comes in the exchange between the two men at 175c5-e10, where Socrates comes into the party late and sits beside Agathon. When Agathon requests that Socrates do so, so that he [Agathon] might share in "this great thought that's just struck you in the porch next door",<sup>172</sup> Socrates replies that if wisdom worked that way, flowing from the one who was full to the one who was empty, that he would be the one to gain in sitting beside Agathon, "for you'd soon have me brimming over with the most exquisite kind of wisdom. My own understanding is a shadowy thing at best, as equivocal as a dream, but yours, Agathon, glitters and dilates – as which of us can forget that saw you the other day, resplendent in your youth, visibly kindled before the eyes of more than thirty thousand of your fellow Greeks".<sup>173</sup> "Now Socrates", replies Agathon.

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<sup>172</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 175c7-8.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 175e1-7.



“I know you’re making fun of me; however, I shall take up this question of wisdom with you later on, and let Bacchus judge between us”.<sup>174</sup>

Rhodes contends that, not only does Agathon intend to sue Socrates in the court of Dionysus, but also that he has premeditated his campaign. “He is convinced that he can humiliate Socrates by beating him at his own game, and relishes the prospect”.<sup>175</sup>

Agathon’s strategy is this: Phaedrus will present the sophistical wisdom of an *eromenos* (beloved) whose ideas are grounded on the science of Hippias (ontological primacy of earth).<sup>176</sup> Pausanias will answer with the insights of an *erastes* (lover) whose views are founded upon the sciences of Prodicus and Gorgias (ontological primacy of Uranus or Sky).<sup>177</sup> Both of these speakers will advocate a utilitarian egoism. This will upset Aristophanes, who will attempt to protect customary law, Olympian theology, and communitarian morals. “Aristophanes will have to be handled like a warhorse that is held tightly in the ranks”, says Rhodes, “in order that his force may be directed against the enemy and not against his own troops”.<sup>178</sup> As Aristophanes’ views have sophistical premises, Eryximachus and Agathon can then demonstrate that his axioms lead to a sophistical communitarian view. Eryximachus then presents a revised account of an *erastes* who adheres to the science of Hippias, while advocating the medical welfare of both individuals and polities. Agathon finally presents a revised account of an *eromenos* who is both a follower of Gorgias and a self-styled saviour of individuals, cities, and mankind. “The total

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<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 175e8-10. See *Encyclopedia Mythica* on “Dionysus”.

That Agathon intends to sue Socrates in the court of Dionysus is also supported by Scott and Welton (*Erotic Wisdom*, 39), and it is clear in the text, when Agathon says that he shall let Bacchus (in the Joyce translation) be the judge between them, though it is not clear that this is why Agathon invited Socrates to the banquet in the first place.

<sup>175</sup> Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 200.

<sup>176</sup> See Plato, *Symposium*, 178b2-c1 where he bases his reasoning on Hesiod’s poems.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid., 180d4-e6.

<sup>178</sup> Rhodes *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 206.

effect will be three ascents to amended accounts of eros in which the defects of intellectually inferior arguments are surmounted while their strengths are both retained in and complemented by intellectually superior views”.<sup>179</sup> Agathon expects his program to “cover every possible premise relevant to eros, so that Socrates will be hemmed in by sophistical arguments no matter where he turns”.<sup>180</sup>

Socrates responds hubristically to this premeditated campaign, as he foresees that his eros will be met by Agathon’s hostility and animosity. On Rhodes’ account, Socrates does four things to prepare for this battle: i) he orders Aristodemus to come with him to Agathon’s for dinner, even though Aristodemus has not been invited. Socrates cites Homer in his invitation to Aristodemus, suggesting that they are descending into enemy territory;<sup>181</sup> ii) Socrates stands outside Agathon’s house thinking until the dinner is half over;<sup>182</sup> iii) When Socrates finally does appear, Agathon offers him a seat next to his, as he wants to touch Socrates in order to share in the insight that Socrates won outside. Socrates rejects Agathon’s invitation in a tone that Rhodes suggests sounds gracious yet is actually mocking, rejecting Agathon’s reasoning about how wisdom can be transferred, and thus calling into question Agathon’s own wisdom (or lack of it);<sup>183</sup> iv) Socrates readily agrees to the program of oratory and “arrogantly decrees that nobody should vote against the proposal as well”.<sup>184</sup> The reason for these shockingly bad manners, holds Rhodes, is that Socrates is responding to the individual situation, tailoring his means to achieve his ends. “Socrates wants

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 207.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid. . I feel it is useful to make a similar qualification here as earlier: the order of speeches and the points that Rhodes makes regarding the science of Gorgias and Hippias are not essential to my thesis. What is essential is that these speeches display a Titanic, tyrannical *eros* to which Socrates will respond through Diotima.

<sup>181</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 174b5; Rhodes *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 201.

<sup>182</sup> Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 201.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid., 202.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

simultaneously to ward off Agathon's attacks and to press his amorous suit on the beauty, a tricky task. Agathon is hostile and contemptuous but also docile. To succeed, Socrates needs to shock, disconcert, and perhaps even hurt Agathon, in order to shatter his hard exterior shell. Then he can shape Agathon's soft core".<sup>185 186</sup> With regard to the speeches, Socratic education, says Rhodes, must always meet the student where he is. In agreeing to the program of speeches, Socrates can "grant Agathon's positions provisionally and then lead him from those to better but still inadequate opinions that he finds acceptable, until he is finally compelled to leap to the truth itself".<sup>187</sup>

Of course, Agathon's campaign does not go as planned. At the end of Pausanias' speech, Aristophanes gets the hiccups. This upsets the order in which Agathon had planned his guests to speak, "thus ruining the symmetry of Agathon's design and setting the spooked warhorse loose in the ranks where it can trample everybody".<sup>188</sup> Rhodes further notes that "In Plato, unknown causes are often supernatural interventions".<sup>189</sup> The other cause, he suggests, is Eros, who is rearranging the set of speeches to suit his own desire. Thus, Socrates manages to escape Agathon's trap and is able to practice what Rhodes calls "right pederasty"<sup>190</sup> on his *sympotai* in an attempt to redirect their own eros.<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> Ibid., 203.

<sup>186</sup> We will see Socrates doing this – dismantling Agathon's current opinions in order to rebuild something better – below, in his cross-examination of Agathon and in Diotima's speech.

<sup>187</sup> Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 203.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid., 207.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

<sup>190</sup> Rhodes uses the term "right pederasty" for the Socratic *eros* that we see in the *Symposium*, one which "ascends from the love of the beautiful youth through the love of all beautiful bodies, the love of beautiful souls...to an ultimate vision of beauty and the acquisition and cultivation of real virtues" (Rhodes 114). This is in contrast to "wrong pederasty" which, Rhodes contends, is exhibited by each of Socrates' interlocutors and which seeks to exploit the beloved to the lover's advantage (see above).

<sup>191</sup> It is interesting to note at this point Rhodes' comment on supernatural intervention. We will see Socrates in the *Meno* say that virtue is gotten by divine dispensation (Plato, *Meno*, 99c3-4). If Socrates is trying to lead Agathon toward a vision of beauty, which is accompanied by an encounter with virtue's self (Plato, *Symposium*, 212a1-3), then divine intervention is fitting at this point. It is also worthy of note that Rhodes'

Scott and Welton give an alternative interpretation of this narrative frame, suggesting that it is meant to “raise questions about Socrates’ attitude toward the poets” and to “prepare Plato’s audience to think about the relationship between philosophy and poetry”.<sup>192</sup> They too draw our attention to Agathon’s desire to sue Socrates in the court of Dionysus<sup>193</sup> and the conflict between Socrates and Agathon (a Socratic *eros* and a tyrannical *eros*), and suggest that “[a]ny interpretation of the *Symposium* must try to understand the significance of this image in the context of the dialogue as a whole”.<sup>194</sup> Scott and Welton suggest that the rivalry between Socrates and Agathon over wisdom represents the rivalry between philosophy and poetry.

This conclusion is supported by the remark Socrates makes about Agathon’s wisdom having displayed itself before thirty thousand Greeks, which points to a characteristic difference between poetic “wisdom” and philosophical “wisdom”: poetic wisdom depends upon or exists in the realm of mere appearance. Moreover, Socrates’ remarks about the paltry character of his own “wisdom” are reminiscent of his remarks in the *Apology* regarding his merely “human” wisdom; in both cases Socrates seems to downgrade or belittle his own wisdom, and yet to do so in a way that is simultaneously ironic and sincere.<sup>195</sup>

We will see later how Socrates and Diotima settle this dispute, suggesting that neither Socrates nor Agathon are wise, as those who seek do not possess wisdom. However, we will also see that Socrates’ claim to ignorance shows him to be more wise than Agathon.

Ruby Blondell, also, in “Where is Socrates on the ‘Ladder of Love’?” offers an alternate interpretation of this opening scene and its dramatic details. The literal journey found in the frame dialogue and Socrates’ journey to the house of Agathon both foreshadow

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interpretation, though controversial, does make sense of a number of perplexing dramatic details in the *Symposium*, including Agathon’s desire to sue Socrates in the court of Dionysus and Aristophanes’ hiccup (though Scott and Welton offer an alternate interpretation to each of these, suggesting that in the dispute over wisdom we see a conflict between poetry and philosophy, and the love of wisdom in conflict with political ambition (*Erotic Wisdom*, 161), and that Aristophanes’ hiccup serve to undermine the seriousness of Erixymachus’ speech (*Ibid.*, 57)).

<sup>192</sup> Scott and Welton, *Erotic Wisdom*, 33.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

“questions that we will want to ask of Socrates in connection with the more profound, figurative journey of the ‘ladder of love’”.<sup>196</sup>

Appolodorus’ recollection of his trip from home to town in the company of Glaucon,<sup>197</sup> holds Blondell, “becomes a metaphor for interpersonal relationships and the pursuit of ideas, in part by becoming an opportunity to seek out and reiterate the ideas of others, most notably Socrates”.<sup>198</sup> She further states that this episode “raises all the most basic questions one might ask of such a journey: who is in front, who behind, who is stationary, who wants to know and who can tell him, who is interested in philosophy and, above all, who is intimate, or even ‘in love’, with Socrates”.<sup>199</sup>

Further, this preliminary journey introduces the next one: Socrates’ journey to the house of Agathon for the dinner party. This too, says Blondell, is a “metaphor for human relationships and philosophical progress”.<sup>200</sup> What we learn here, on this reading, is that Socrates is autonomous in both choosing a destination and in proceeding towards it. This explains his absence at Agathon’s victory party the day before, his bringing an uninvited guest to Agathon’s banquet, and his showing up late to the party. We see in Socrates’ spoiling the proverb about party-crashing,<sup>201</sup> and in Aristophanes’ nervousness and embarrassment, Socrates’ light-hearted disrespect for traditional wisdom and his challenge to symposiastic exclusivity and decorum.<sup>202</sup> Further, though he initially tells Aristophanes to “follow” him,<sup>203</sup> “he quotes Homer to suggest collaboration as equals: ‘going along the road

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<sup>196</sup> Ruby Blondell, “Where is Socrates on the ‘Ladder of Love’?” *Plato’s Symposium: Issues in Interpretation and Reception*. Washington, DC: Centre for Hellenic Studies, 2006: 150.

<sup>197</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 172a-173b.

<sup>198</sup> Blondell, “Ladder of Love”, 148.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

<sup>201</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 174b-c.

<sup>202</sup> Blondell, “Ladder of Love”, 148.

<sup>203</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 174b2-3.

together as a pair, we'll plan what we shall say'".<sup>204</sup> This anticipates a point that Blondell will make about Diotima's ladder of love. The erotic ascent, says Blondell, is "more like a staircase than a ladder, since it leaves room on each step for company...and suggests ascent to a temple and thus to divinity".<sup>205</sup> We will see this more clearly by the end of this chapter.<sup>206</sup> Aristodemus, however, does not take up Socrates' method but instead follows mechanically throughout the dialogue.<sup>207</sup> "Here in the prologue he refuses to take responsibility for himself, saying he will do whatever Socrates 'orders' (174b2) and warning him that he will have to take responsibility for 'leading' him to Agathon's (174c7-d1)".<sup>208</sup> Socrates further upsets the leader-follower hierarchy when he orders Aristodemus to go on ahead.<sup>209</sup> "Aristodemus will prove laughably bad at this enforced exercise in Socratic autonomy and unwanted leadership, failing to notice that he has left Socrates behind and feeling ridiculous upon arriving without him (174d-e)".<sup>210</sup> Blondell concludes that "Aristodemus has apparently failed as a 'leader', since unbeknownst to him, Socrates is not 'following' (174e10)".<sup>211</sup>

For a brief period, after Aristodemus arrives at Agathon's without Socrates, no one knows where Socrates is. It is only after a slave is sent to find him<sup>212</sup> that we learn that

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<sup>204</sup> Ibid., 174d2-3, qtd. In Blondell, "Ladder of Love", 149.

<sup>205</sup> Blondell, "Ladder of Love", 147n2.

<sup>206</sup> Blondell says of the erotic ascent and the Socratic elenchus that, "[i]n contrast to the passive education exemplified by tradition and the sophists, Socrates' 'leadership' is a collaborative enterprise in which the leader encourages the follower to figure things out for herself" ("Ladder of Love", 151). This further suggests that Socrates is primarily addressing Agathon in the *Symposium*, as this dynamic is best suited to pairs, not groups as traditional passive education would be.

<sup>207</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 172c5-6 and 223d10.

<sup>208</sup> Blondell, "Ladder of Love", 149.

<sup>209</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 174d.

<sup>210</sup> Blondell, "Ladder of Love", 149.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid. Scott and Welton have a similar criticism of Aristodemus and state that "[i]t could be that one of the functions of Plato's dramatizations is to define what should count as following Socrates in a worthy way and to distinguish it from the devotion of those who would erect a cult of personality around Socrates" (30).

<sup>212</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 174e-175a.

Socrates has been standing in a neighbour's doorway, resisting any invitation to come in,<sup>213</sup> apparently lost in thought, "with his mind (*nous*) only on himself".<sup>214</sup> This entire event, says Blondell, has been foreshadowing what I have called Socrates' positive account in the speech of Diotima. We will thus return to Blondell once we encounter Diotima and the ladder of love.

### **III. Second Campaign: Socratic Eros – Socrates' Counterattack**

For the purposes of this project, it is what Rhodes calls the second campaign, Socrates' counterattack, with which I am most concerned. We have seen each of Socrates' interlocutors offer an account of *eros* that reflects their tyrannical and Titanic desires, aiming away from what we will come to identify as true virtue and the things themselves (Beauty, the Good, *to on*). We have also seen a conflict arise between Agathon and Socrates where Agathon suggests "that he and Socrates will 'go to law' ...in a dispute over wisdom and that somehow, Dionysus, the god of wine, masks, and theatre, will be the judge of this dispute between them".<sup>215</sup>

After each of Agathon's other dinner guests, and Agathon himself, gives a speech praising Eros, Socrates, before giving his own speech, engages Agathon in a brief cross-examination. This occurs immediately before we are introduced to Diotima, the prophetess from Mantinea, who taught Socrates what he now knows about eros, similar to what Socrates

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<sup>213</sup> .

<sup>214</sup> See Ibid., 175a7-9. Blondell, "Ladder of Love", 149.

<sup>215</sup> On Rhodes' account, we have also seen Agathon acknowledge his desire to sue Socrates in the court of Dionysus and we have seen the failure of his premeditated campaign. We have also seen each of Socrates' interlocutors pervert *eros* "into a tool for enslaving others in order to gratify selfish desires" (Rhodes, 366).

is now doing with Agathon.<sup>216</sup> In the brief interlude between Agathon and Socrates, we see Socrates systematically dismantle each of Agathon's premises concerning Eros.<sup>217</sup> I intend to show below that this is done in order to reorient Agathon and to instil in him better (truer) opinions of Eros.

In order to do this, Socrates must try to lead Agathon "up through improved but still deficient postures, repeating the process until Agathon is forced to leap to the truth itself.... It will be so much the better if this pedagogy also engages Aristophanes and the other *sympotai*, but Agathon is the primary target".<sup>218</sup> This is what we see Socrates doing after Agathon's speech, where he tries to engage Agathon in dialectical questioning and also in his account of his own encounter with Diotima.<sup>219</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> Rhodes contends that the drama of the *Symposium* consists in Socrates' effort to save his beloved Agathon from the evil that he has devised. "Agathon was once a noble and good-natured youth, but now he is in no mood to be rescued. He and his friends have embarked on a project of Titanic self-deification. Their enterprise is driven by a tyrannical eros and takes diverse forms of what I have called 'wrong pederasty'. Through cultural appeals to the demos, Agathon and his allies have drawn the many into their metaphysical rebellion, their tyrannical loves, and their tastes for perverse sorts of pederasty. The result seems to be that they have transformed Athens into a theocracy, unwittingly unleashing political passions that endanger the city. Socrates hopes to redeem Agathon by leading him toward a nobler eros and a right pederasty. If Socrates can win Agathon, he might be able to save Athens, too, for Agathon has the ear of the many" (Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 300).

<sup>217</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 199c10-201c12.

<sup>218</sup> Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 301.

<sup>219</sup> Regarding this brief interlude, Scott and Welton note that "Socrates goes on to criticize Agathon's speech so thoroughly that it is clear that he finds very little of redeeming value in it. Moreover, although the philosopher will say many things in his speech that dispute points other speakers have made, Agathon is the only speaker made to endure a brief cross-examination by Socrates. Agathon is the only one whom Socrates brings to an admission of ignorance or perplexity (*aporia*) in this dialogue" (81). We will return to this last point in chapter three. Also, note that Diotima says, at the end of this brief exchange, that we are only at the bottom of the ladder, the bottom of the scale of perfection. We will see in chapter three how *anamnesis*, an awakening of the desire for wisdom or virtue, places one at the bottom of the erotic ascent. One has thus begun to become virtuous, but the rest of the ascent remains before one can become acquainted with true virtue – i.e. we may have a vague acquaintance with virtue before this, but it is vague and unreliable.



## Socrates and Agathon

After Agathon concludes his speech about Eros, he receives a round of applause.

Socrates, being expected to follow Agathon, says that he could never match the beauty and grandeur of Agathon's speech and that he would never have agreed to give a eulogy of Eros if he had known that the intention was to flatter rather than to praise the god of love.<sup>220 221</sup>

Having thus criticized Agathon's speech, stating that it is beautiful but not true, Socrates begins his dialectical questioning of Agathon.

Socrates first asks Agathon whether Eros is a being or a relation: "Do you think it is the nature of Love to be the love of somebody or of nobody?"<sup>222</sup> Agathon answers that Love (Eros) must be the love *of* something or somebody.<sup>223</sup> Further, Socrates has Agathon agree that Eros must long for what he lacks, as a person never longs for that which he already has.<sup>224</sup> Given that Agathon has previously stated, in his speech, that Love is the love of beauty, not of ugliness, he then agrees to the premise that Eros cannot be beautiful,<sup>225</sup> nor can he be good.<sup>226</sup>

As Agathon has previously identified himself with Eros,<sup>227</sup> a demotion of Eros, from that which is beautiful and good, to that which is neither, is simultaneously a demotion for Agathon. Here we see Socrates begin to disabuse Agathon of his delusions of divinity.<sup>228</sup>

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<sup>220</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 198b1-199b6.

<sup>221</sup> The distinction between flattery and praise that Socrates makes is this: in praising eros one would be expected to "[state] the facts about the matter in hand, and then [proceed] to pick out the most attractive points and display them to the best advantage" (Plato, *Symposium*, 198d5-7). What each of the *sympotai* have done, however, has been to "run through all the attributes of power and virtue, however irrelevant they may be" (Ibid., 198d10-11).

<sup>222</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 199c16-d1.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid., 200a1.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid., 200b10-e6.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid., 201b4-5.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid., 201c6-10.

<sup>227</sup> Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 314. See Rhodes 283-284 for all of the parallels that Agathon draws between himself and Eros. "In his analysis of Eros as beautiful, the poet has projected his own qualities onto

## Diotima

After this brief exchange between Socrates and Agathon, Socrates introduces Diotima, saying that,

now I'm going to leave you in peace, because I want to talk about some lessons I was given, once upon a time, by a Mantinean woman called Diotima – a woman who was deeply versed in this and many other fields of knowledge. It was she who brought about a ten years' postponement of the great plague of Athens on the occasion of a certain sacrifice, and it was she who taught me the philosophy of Love.<sup>229</sup>

It is important to stop here for a moment and reflect on the fact that Socrates has just credited Diotima with teaching him the art of love (the philosophy of love), the only matter that Socrates claims to understand. This amounts, say Scott and Welton, to “crediting Diotima with teaching him all that he knows”.<sup>230</sup> We will return to this important point in chapter three.

The role of Diotima in the *Symposium* is a topic of much contention. I will be taking Rhodes' view that “Diotima's primary task is to cure Agathon of Titanism”.<sup>231</sup> In making his case for casting Diotima in this role, Rhodes addresses a number of other prominent interpretations. He shows how we cannot take her a fictitious character acting as one of Plato's mouthpieces,<sup>232</sup> nor as a genuine historical figure whose ideas Plato has either

the god. He will do this again in his analysis of Eros as best. He is cultivating his serious aim, emotionally contriving the qualitative assimilation of his being to that of the god. He is also promoting his lawsuit against Socrates, denying divinity to a man whom he regards as ugly, old, hard, stiff, ungraceful, and sallow” (Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 284). We saw some of these parallels above (chapter two, page 40).

We see this identification, further, in other speeches given in the *Symposium*. Erixymachus praises the medical aspect of Eros, making the god into a physician, so that “medicine is under the sole direction of the god of love” (Plato, *Symposium*, 196e2-3), who produces harmony among discordant elements in the body. Phaedrus describes the heavenly Eros as entirely male (Ibid., 181c2-3). Diotima says that Eros is both a prophet (Ibid., 202e4-203a8) and a philosopher (Ibid., 204a1-b8). As this latter speech is given in response to Agathon's, it further denies Agathon the chance to identify himself with Eros.

<sup>228</sup> Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 314-15.

<sup>229</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 201c13-d3.

<sup>230</sup> Scott and Welton, *Erotic Wisdom*, 88.

<sup>231</sup> Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 313.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid., 302.

adopted or garbled,<sup>233</sup> nor as a priestess of a female divinity whose Minoan cult has staunchly resisted father gods,<sup>234</sup> nor as any militant feminist Sybil.<sup>235</sup> If we examine Diotima's dramatic import within the context of the *Symposium* as a dramatic dialogue – that is, paying attention to character development and interaction, dramatic detail, myths, arguments, and reminiscences – we can make a strong case for Rhodes' interpretation. Further, we will see how it is that the cure for a tyrannical *eros*, found in both the cross-examination of Agathon and Diotima's speech, is related to knowledge of virtue and *anamnesis* (which will be addressed in chapter three). I intend to demonstrate that, in the *Symposium* Socrates attempts with Agathon to awaken within him in a desire for knowledge. This is the beginning of the ascent of which Diotima speaks when she says, at the end of her questioning the young Socrates, "we are only at the bottom of the true scale of perfection".<sup>236</sup>

### **Diotima as a Character**

In examining the role of Diotima in the *Symposium*, we might first look at Diotima as a character. Rhodes says that, "If Diotima is a real person in Socrates' past, Plato is lucky that he can adapt her name to his purpose. If there is no historical Diotima, as I suspect, Plato would want to make Socrates invent her to achieve the desired effect".<sup>237</sup>

Diotima's name combines the words 'Zeus' and 'Honor'. Regarding this, Rhodes says, "Socrates indicates that it is only within the framework of piety, that is, of a humble

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<sup>233</sup> Ibid.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid., 302-303.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid., 303.

<sup>236</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 210a3-4.

<sup>237</sup> Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 304.

acceptance of the given order of being, that the human race can profitably heed its erotic inclinations”.<sup>238</sup> It is significant, further, that Diotima is a prophet and that she is a woman.

In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates-Stesichorus<sup>239</sup> ranks human souls according to merit. The hierarchy, in descending order, is as follows: 1) a philosopher or lover of beauty, or a musical and erotic individual; 2) a lawful king or warlike ruler; 3) a statesman, household manager, or financier; 4) a lover of gymnastic labour or a doctor for the body; 5) a prophet or celebrant of mysteries; 6) a poet or other mimetic artist; 7) a craftsman or farmer; 8) a sophist or demagogue; 9) a tyrant.<sup>240</sup> To improve Agathon’s soul, Socrates and Diotima must first elevate him from the level of poetry to that of prophetic insight.<sup>241</sup> This is why Diotima is a prophet. “Socrates’ pedagogical strategy requires him to set every opinion that Agathon loves for its poetic chutzpah in flight toward prophecy”.<sup>242</sup>

That Diotima is a woman is significant because the sophists’ Titanism and misogyny have become increasingly virulent.<sup>243</sup> “Diotima’s superior wisdom will teach them that in the affairs of the psyche, they must practice ‘feminine’ receptivity to win their proper felicity”.<sup>244</sup>

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<sup>238</sup> Ibid., 303-304. We will see this idea laid out more explicitly by Diotima herself later in the dialogue, when she claims for herself less than divine, and even less than daimonic, status (Plato, *Symposium*, 203a5-6), demonstrating piety in the face of the other speakers’ Titanism.

<sup>239</sup> In the passage in question, Socrates is relating to Phaedrus the opinion of Stesichorus on *eros*, and concludes his account saying, “[y]ou may believe that or not, as you please; at all events the cause and nature of the lover’s experience are in fact what I have said” (Plato, “*Phaedrus*”, Ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns. Trans. R. Hackforth. *The Collected Dialogues of Plato: including the Letters*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999: 252c1-2).

<sup>240</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 248d1-e5.

<sup>241</sup> Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 304-305.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid., 305.

<sup>243</sup> Rhodes says that “Agathon and his partners view the phallus as the symbol of their despotic will and pederasty as the symbol of human auto-salvation” (*Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 305). Perhaps this is most clear in *Phaedrus*, who claims that the heavenly *Eros* is entirely male (Plato, *Symposium*, 181c2-3).

<sup>244</sup> Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 306.

It is also worth noting that Diotima is a spiritual androgyne – that is, she has a ‘male’ aspect of her soul and a ‘female’ aspect. She implicitly identifies herself as a *daimonios anēr*,<sup>245</sup> a daimonic man, but she also has presented herself as a woman who has risen further than Agathon toward the same rank as Eros.<sup>246</sup>

Thus, it seems likely that Diotima was invented in order to cure Agathon of his Titanism.

Further, within the Diotima story, Socrates seems to be acting both as Agathon, and as Diotima.<sup>247</sup> Where Diotima engages Socrates in dialectical questioning, he is acting both as himself and as Agathon: We see Socrates easily transition from questioning Agathon on Eros to adopting Agathon’s opinions and presenting them to Diotima as his own.<sup>248</sup> Diotima is also Socrates’ alter-ego, insofar as she is attempting to cure Agathon of his Titanism and lead him to truer opinions of Eros.<sup>249</sup>

Socrates picks up with Diotima where he left off with Agathon, asking, if Eros is neither beautiful nor good, must it be bad and ugly? “Heaven forbid”, replies Diotima, “But do you really think that if a thing isn’t beautiful it’s therefore bound to be ugly?”<sup>250</sup> Diotima then proceeds to show that Eros is neither beautiful nor ugly, neither good nor bad, but something

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<sup>245</sup> Ibid., 316-17.

<sup>246</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 203a1-7; Rhodes, 317. See also Scott and Welton, *Erotic Wisdom*, 40 and 160-61 on the merits of poetry versus philosophy. We will see shortly that this androgyne allows Diotima to act as Socrates’ alter ego.

<sup>247</sup> See Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silene*, 315 and 317; and Scott and Welton, *Erotic Wisdom*, 91.

<sup>248</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 201c-202a.

<sup>249</sup> “Once Socrates mentions his acquaintance with Diotima, he reveals that the exchange he has just conducted with Agathon duplicates the exchange Diotima conducted with him all those years ago” (Nancy Evans. “Diotima and Demeter as Mystagogues in Plato’s *Symposium*.” *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, vol. 21, no. 2, pp. 1-27, Spring 2006: 8-9). Socrates once believed Eros to be much like Agathon has described. It was Diotima who changed his opinions about Eros. We can see, then, Socrates acting as Agathon as he submits to questioning from Diotima, adopting Agathon’s premises, and also Socrates acting as Diotima, as he himself questions Agathon and as he, through Diotima, tries to elevate Agathon’s opinions about Eros.

This assertion is also supported by Blondell, “Ladder of Love”, 152.

<sup>250</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 202a1-2.

in between the two and that, as Eros inhabits this in-between state, he cannot be a god,<sup>251</sup> but must be a daimon.<sup>252</sup> Diotima thus extends her earlier postulate of the existence of in-between qualities<sup>253</sup> into an affirmation of in-between ontological states, when she claims that the daimonic exists halfway between god and man,<sup>254</sup> and that it is the role of daimons to mediate between the mortal and the immortal.<sup>255</sup>

Agathon has gone to great lengths to identify himself with Eros, symbolizing his will to be the supreme deity himself,<sup>256</sup> as Eros is the happiest, the most beautiful, and the best (most virtuous) of the gods. In demoting Eros to the status of a *daimon*, something less than a god, something which is neither divine, nor good, nor beautiful,<sup>257</sup> Agathon is denied his divine supremacy.<sup>258</sup>

### Diotima's myth: the birth of Eros

After having seen Eros' demotion from a god to a daimon, Socrates, still speaking for Agathon here, asks what power the whole of the daimonic has.<sup>259</sup> Diotima replies that daimons act as interpreters, conveying human things to the gods and divine things back down

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<sup>251</sup> Ibid., 202c11-d9.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid., 202e1-2.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid., 202a4-12.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid., 202e1-2.

<sup>255</sup> Ibid., 202e4-203a8. Diotima appears to present Eros as a substantial being, applying a noun to Eros.

However, the use of the term *daimon*, (on Rhodes' account) is not intended to disclose the content or structure of an essence or a substantial being, as Diotima does not tell Socrates what a daimon is, but rather it is used as an index of Eros' metaphysical status, ranking below a god and having a middling place in reality (Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 315).

<sup>256</sup> Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 314. See also Stanley Rosen. *Plato's "Symposium."* 2d ed. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987; reprint, South Bend: St. Augustine's Press, 1999: 163 and 191, and chapter two above (p.40).

<sup>257</sup> Perhaps one should qualify, neither wholly divine, nor wholly good, nor wholly beautiful.

<sup>258</sup> Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 315. It is also significant that Diotima describes Eros as a prophet (Plato, *Symposium*, 202e4-203a8) and a philosopher (Ibid., 204a1-b8), further denying Agathon the divine status that he claimed for himself.

<sup>259</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 202e3.

to humans. Since the divine will not mingle directly with the human, the daimonic forms the medium of the prophetic arts, binding both the human and the divine to itself. It is thus “only through the mediation of the spirit world that man can have any intercourse...with the gods”.<sup>260</sup>

Just as Erixymachus has made Eros a physician, and Agathon has made him a poet, so has Diotima made Eros a prophet. Further, she states that “the man who is versed in such matters is said to have spiritual powers”;<sup>261</sup> this is the daimonic man, the *daimonios anēr* (δαίμωνιος ἀνὴρ), which she implicitly identifies herself to be.<sup>262</sup> Rhodes says that Diotima’s classification of Eros as a prophet and herself as a *daimonios anēr* would not surprise those at Agathon’s banquet. “If anything, they would be disdainful of her self-restraint in claiming something less than divinity, or even something less than the middling status of the daimon, for a *daimonios anēr* seems to be slightly below a daimon, even if above an ordinary man”.<sup>263</sup> In this context, says Rhodes, we see that Diotima is not advocating hubris, but piety.<sup>264</sup> This is because, since the human and the divine do not mingle directly, “the noblest rank to which mortals can aspire is that of the *daimonios anēr*. The sophists should be happy with it if they can get it, renouncing their quest to be gods”.<sup>265</sup>

Diotima will continue trying to cure Agathon of his Titanism with her story of Eros’ parentage.<sup>266</sup> On the day of Aphrodite’s birth, the gods were celebrating and among them

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<sup>260</sup> Ibid., 203a3-4.

<sup>261</sup> Ibid., 203a5-6.

<sup>262</sup> Rhodes claims that this shows us that Diotima is a spiritual androgyne, possessing both a ‘male’ and a ‘female’ aspect of her soul. Her androgyny, moreover, claims Rhodes, mirrors that of her alter ego Socrates, who is both himself and Diotima (see below for why this is so). Even if we take this as a gender neutral term, the important point here is that Diotima claims for herself something less than godly, or even daimonic, status, perhaps, we might venture, displaying piety in the face of the others’ Titanic claims to self-deification.

<sup>263</sup> Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 317.

<sup>264</sup> See above.

<sup>265</sup> Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 317.

<sup>266</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 203b1-204a8.

was Resource (*Poros*). When they dined, Need (or Poverty, *Penia*) came begging. Poros, having drunk too much heavenly nectar, wandered out into the garden of Zeus and fell asleep. Penia, thinking that having a child by Poros would alleviate her poverty, lay down beside him and in time Eros was conceived. As the son of Poros and Penia, it was thus Eros' fate to be always needy, "nor is he delicate and lovely as most of us believe, but harsh and arid, barefoot and homeless, sleeping on the naked earth, in doorways, or in the very street beneath the stars of heaven, and always partaking of his mother's poverty".<sup>267</sup> Eros also possesses some of his father's resourcefulness, of which he brings "to his designs upon the beautiful and the good".<sup>268</sup> He is "at once desirous and full of wisdom, a lifelong seeker after truth".<sup>269</sup> He is neither mortal nor immortal, for in the space of a day he dies and is born again, "while what he gains will always ebb away as fast".<sup>270</sup> Finally, he is in between ignorance and wisdom, being a seeker of the truth.

Rhodes draws our attention to the poetic-prophetic significance of Diotima's myth.

First, this myth is great poetry. This might make Agathon, Aristophanes, and their sophist friends feel less menaced by Diotima.<sup>271</sup>

Further, as a poetic prophetess, Diotima will not insist on the literal truth of her tale. It is intended as a mythical symbolization of divine-human realities. "She intends to draw Agathon away from willfulness and towards truth".<sup>272</sup>

Socrates-Diotima escapes the trap set for him by the sophists, as they each wait to see which of their theogonies has snared him. This is because the birth of Eros is not a theogony

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<sup>267</sup> Ibid., 203c6-d2.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid., 203d3-4.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid., 203d5-6. It is worth noting here that Diotima has just claimed that Eros is *both* ("at once") desirous *and* full of wisdom. This suggests, first, that Eros does not entirely lack what he desires, and second that in desiring, he perhaps somehow has what he desires. We will return to this in chapter three.

<sup>270</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 203e3-4.

<sup>271</sup> Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 319.

<sup>272</sup> Ibid., 319.



at all, Eros being a demigod. Further, Diotima signals that prophecy must remain silent on the topic of theogony, as knowledge of the process (e.g. how the gods came to be) is not given in the in-between.<sup>273</sup>

With her account, Diotima answers Phaedrus, Pausanias, and Eryximachus, and rejects each of their cosmologies and theogonies. “Through her silence, she declares Chaos, Gaia, and Uranus irrelevant to knowledge of Eros; rejects the cosmologies and theogonies based on the pseudoscience of Hippias and Prodicus; and informs the first three speakers that their theogonies merit no comment. She also advises Eryximachus that Eros is a natural unity of opposites that exists without internal warfare thanks to a divine resource and, hence, without the intervention of quasi-magical Asclepiad medicine”.<sup>274</sup> Diotima also answers Aristophanes<sup>275</sup> and rejects his account. “It is not true that in the mythical Ur-time, the Olympians could have been hard-pressed to stamp out an insurrection by a first human nature that was full of its own hubris. It is even less true that the existence of Eros demonstrates the incompetence of divine skill and, consequently, that it deifies men”.<sup>276</sup>

In Diotima’s account, “Eros becomes a simultaneously divine and mortal ‘fetus’ which matures in each human body-soul womb until it is born into man’s erotic actions, which are both spiritual and material manifestations of the daimon’s powerful presence”,<sup>277</sup> just as Divine Resource inseminates the womb of resourceful resourcelessness, or potency, Penia, the original human nature.<sup>278</sup> This is a reply to Agathon, granting that he is right to claim that there is the presence of something divine in human beings. However, it is not true

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<sup>273</sup> Ibid., 319-20.

<sup>274</sup> Ibid., 320.

<sup>275</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 205e1-206a3.

<sup>276</sup> Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 321.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid., 322.

<sup>278</sup> We can see this, in Diotima’s speech, when she speaks about begetting in the beautiful (Plato, *Symposium*, 206b9-207a2).

that this supernatural something is a self-deifying, and thus divine, human poetic *techné*; neither is it caused by the self-creative will of the mortal. “Rather, it flows from the god into the individual human nature”.<sup>279</sup>

Diotima’s fiction thus totally repudiates Titanism, denying Agathon’s self-deification and his claim to be able to revise the order of being. “In this reality”, says Rhodes,

‘god’ and ‘man’ are both unmingled and mingled poles in a natural continuum. They cannot be either simply identified or simply hypostatized as two separate entities. ‘God’ is still not ‘man’, and ‘man’ is still not ‘god’, but the two blend into one another, in a manner analogous to that in which the characteristics of human fathers and mothers blend indistinguishably into their children, making it impossible to tell where ‘god’ leaves off and ‘man’ begins. In this sense, every human being is divine in principle. We all need to become aware of that to lead divine lives.<sup>280</sup>

Diotima will go further, however, in repudiating Agathon’s Titanism. First, she supplies some symbolic information about the conditions necessary for the proper development of Eros in the human body-soul womb: born of Poros and Penia, the former having drunk heavily of the heavenly nectar, Eros flourishes in the context of a divine madness inspired by beauty and superabundant immortalizing substance, not in that of an alcoholic fog.<sup>281</sup> “We can now think a little about erotic excellence”, says Rhodes. “This virtue is clearly a product of intoxication by nectar”.<sup>282</sup> We can see how Socrates can be subject to erotic mania, be the best drinker of wine, and yet hold out against Bacchic drunkenness forever: “A philosopher who is seized most completely by erotic madness has been touched more potently by Aphrodite and has drunk more nectar than his fellows. The

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<sup>279</sup> Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 322. Also note the striking difference between Diotima’s account and Aristophanes’: for the former, the original human nature is poor in relation to the divine, while for the latter it is hubristic and Titanic, attempting to usurp the gods.

<sup>280</sup> Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 322. However, we have also seen that this involves accepting one’s place in the ontological ranking of human and divine, i.e. piety, as Diotima advocates throughout her speech (see especially Plato, *Symposium*, 203a-c).

<sup>281</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 203b1-c4.

<sup>282</sup> Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 323.

goddess and the immortalizing drink of the gods are too powerful to allow Dionysius and wine to have their usual effects”.<sup>283</sup>

Finally, with regards to the significance of Diotima’s myth, if she is to finally cure Agathon of his Titanism, she must first establish two things: that Eros is eternally young only because he suffers a continual out-flowing of his resources, dies, and then rises again; and that Eros cannot be supremely wise.<sup>284</sup> In his conversation with Diotima, Socrates, speaking as Agathon, had previously agreed that Eros cannot be supremely wise. Diotima reminds Socrates-Agathon of this and then baits Agathon by claiming that the gods, being wise, do not philosophize (they do not “seek the truth”<sup>285</sup>). Neither do ignorant men.<sup>286</sup> Only men who are neither wise nor ignorant philosophize. Thus, no man who philosophizes in any manner can pretend to be wise. Diotima has thus filed Socrates’ reply to Agathon’s lawsuit.<sup>287</sup>

Socrates refuted the central thesis of Agathon’s speech by showing that Eros could not be beautiful and good. Then Diotima frustrated Agathon repeatedly. She proved that Eros is not a god. She characterized Eros as a daimon of middling qualities. She described Eros’s power as that of an intermediary who binds gods and men together and who represents them to one another without mixing them. She portrayed prophecy and the *techne* of the *daimonios anēr* as superior to poetry and the vulgar *techne* of the poet [203a5-7; Rhodes, 316]. She endowed Eros with a genealogy that interprets the Olympian order of being as inviolable; makes Eros a willing servant of Aphrodite; and leaves human beings ontologically inferior to gods, poor, and dependent upon an infusion of divine resources for their existence, or at least their happiness. She raised Agathon’s hopes by letting Eros be as sly as Odysseus. However, she demonstrated that for all his wit, Eros is a philosopher [a ‘seeker of the truth’] who cannot be wise [204b3]. The consequence was that Agathon’s claims to wisdom were severely challenged. Certainly, Agathon could not be Eros and a wise god, too. Socrates-Agathon therefore gave up Agathon’s identification with Eros, but inquired: Of what use to

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<sup>283</sup> Ibid., 323. Blondell (“Ladder of Love”, 156) agrees on this point, suggesting that once one has reached the summit of the erotic ascent, one becomes indifferent to the bodily effects of alcohol. See also Scott and Welton, *Erotic Wisdom*, 41. This will be important when we come to the end of the dialogue (see chapter two n455).

<sup>284</sup> Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 325.

<sup>285</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 204a4.

<sup>286</sup> Ibid., 204a1-5.

<sup>287</sup> Remember that Agathon has previously said that “I shall take up this question of wisdom with you later on, and let Bacchus judge between us” (Plato, *Symposium*, 175e9-10).

human beings is Eros – that is, of what use is a mediocre Eros who does not deify his followers? [204c6-7]<sup>288</sup>

Diotima's response is to suggest that the utility of Eros is to allow lovers to achieve the mortal equivalents of divine generation and immortality.<sup>289</sup> The lover [of the beautiful], says Socrates-Agathon, in response to Diotima's questioning, longs to make the beautiful his own,<sup>290</sup> and in doing so he will gain happiness.<sup>291</sup> Having established this, Diotima then asks what the activity of Eros is: "what course will Love's followers pursue, and in what particular field will eagerness and exertion be known as Love?"<sup>292</sup> Socrates-Agathon declines to answer this question, at which point Diotima suggests that, "To love is to bring forth upon the beautiful, both in body and in soul".<sup>293</sup> Thus, a longing for the beautiful is not a longing for the beautiful itself, "but for the conception and generation that the beautiful effects".<sup>294</sup>

"And why all this longing for propagation? Because this is the one deathless and eternal element in our mortality. And since we have agreed that the lover longs for the good to be his own forever, it follows that we are bound to long for immortality as well as for the

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<sup>288</sup> Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 338.

<sup>289</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 204d1-209e5; Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 340-42.

<sup>290</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 204d7.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid., 204e5-6.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid., 206b1-2.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid., 206b8-9. Regarding this statement, Diotima says that "We are all of us prolific, Socrates, in body and in soul, and when we reach a certain age our nature urges us to procreation. Nor can we be quickened by ugliness, but only by the beautiful. Conception, we know, takes place when man and woman come together, but there's a divinity in human propagation, an immortal something in the midst of man's mortality which is incompatible with any kind of discord. And ugliness is at odds with the divine, while beauty is in perfect harmony. In propagation, then, Beauty is the goddess of both fate and travail, and so when procreancy draws near the beautiful it grows genial and blithe, and birth follows on conception. But when it meets with ugliness it is overcome with heaviness and gloom, and turning away it shrinks into itself and is not brought to bed, but still labors under its painful burden. And so, when the procreant is big with child, he is strangely stirred by the beautiful, because he knows that beauty's tenant will bring his travail to an end. So you see, Socrates, that Love is not exactly a longing for the beautiful, as you suggested" (Plato, *Symposium*, 206c2-e2). Instead, Love is a longing "for the conception and generation that the beautiful effects" (Ibid., 206e4-5).

<sup>294</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 206e4-5.

good”.<sup>295</sup> This longing for immortality shows up in animal procreation – their desire to mate and to rear their litters, and their willingness to suffer and even to die for their young.<sup>296</sup> In the continuation of the species, then, “the mortal does all it can to put on immortality”.<sup>297</sup> This principle applies to the individual and to human knowledge as well, says Diotima, where the new is always taking the place of the old:

although we speak of an individual as being the same so long as he continues to exist in the same form, and therefore assume that a man is the same person in his dotage as in his infancy, yet for all we call him the same, every bit of him is different, and every day he is becoming a new man, while the old man is ceasing to exist, as you can see from his hair, his flesh, his bones, his blood, and all the rest of his body. And not only his body, for the same thing happens to his soul. And neither his manners, nor his disposition, nor his thoughts, nor his desires, nor his pleasures, nor his sufferings, nor his fears are the same throughout his life.<sup>298</sup>

And with knowledge, “some of the things we know increase, while some of them are lost, so that even in our knowledge we are not always the same”,<sup>299</sup> and thus we can say that in learning, or studying, we are constantly replacing what is lost.<sup>300</sup>

“Everything mortal is preserved this way”, says Rhodes, “not by keeping it completely the same, like the divine, but by replacing the old and the lost with the new”.<sup>301</sup> “This is how every mortal creatures perpetuates itself”, says Diotima. “It cannot, like the divine, be still the same throughout eternity; it can only leave behind new life to fill the vacancy that is left.... This, my dear Socrates, is how the body and all else that is temporal partakes of the eternal; there is no other way. And so it is no wonder that every creature prizes its own issue, since the whole creation is inspired by this love, this passion for

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<sup>295</sup> Ibid., 206e7-207a2.

<sup>296</sup> Ibid., 207b1-5.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid., 207d1.

<sup>298</sup> Ibid., 207d4-e4.

<sup>299</sup> Ibid., 207e7-9.

<sup>300</sup> Ibid., 207e10-208a2.

<sup>301</sup> Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 342.

immortality”.<sup>302</sup> Thus, just as Eros achieves eternal youth through cycles of rebirth, so too the human being can achieve immortality only through procreation and propagation. “It is in vain that the pathetic Agathon tries to forge and symbolize his eternal youth by dabbing makeup on his wrinkled face, draping young women’s clothing on his middle-aged body, and writing his self-deifying poems. All his efforts are carried away by Heraclitus’s river”.<sup>303</sup>

Diotima goes on from here to address spiritual procreation as well as physical, saying that “those whose procreancy is of the spirit rather than of the flesh...conceive and bear the things of the spirit”.<sup>304</sup> These spiritual offspring are “[w]isdom and all her sister virtues”<sup>305</sup> and these are the offspring of the poets and of every creative artist.<sup>306</sup> This manner of spiritual procreation, producing wisdom, justice, moderation, and the like, is so much the more valuable than physical offspring,<sup>307</sup> as spiritual offspring (the works of Hesiod and Homer, for instance, and the laws of Lycurgus) bring more and longer lasting fame to their progenitors.<sup>308</sup> “Every one of us”, says Diotima, “no matter what he does, is longing for endless fame, the incomparable glory that is theirs, and the nobler he is, the greater his ambition, because he is in love with the eternal”.<sup>309</sup>

This might strike us as suspicious, at first, that Diotima claims that there is a universal desire for endless fame and that the nobler a person is, the more ambitious he will be in trying to attain this immortality, as she and Socrates have just denied Agathon his attempt at immortality, the most ambitious attempt given by any of the speakers at the banquet, because of his *eros* for the eternal. Rhodes says, with regard to this, that in aid of

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<sup>302</sup> Ibid., 208a3-b4.

<sup>303</sup> Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 343. See also chapter 2 n157.

<sup>304</sup> Ibid., 209a1-3.

<sup>305</sup> Ibid., 209a4.

<sup>306</sup> Ibid., 209a.

<sup>307</sup> Ibid., 209c11-d3.

<sup>308</sup> Ibid., 209d-e.

<sup>309</sup> Ibid., 208a6-e1.

curing Agathon of his Titanism, Diotima commits what Rhodes calls one of the most egregious sophisms in the history of philosophy”.<sup>310</sup> In discussing the utility of the daimonic Eros, Diotima cites the passion for immortality as a universal desire. She further asserts that this desire expresses itself in human beings as the love of glory and the longing for endless fame.<sup>311</sup> Plato causes Socrates to call attention to this,<sup>312</sup> “for fear that seekers of doctrines will miss it”.<sup>313</sup>

The problem is this. Rhodes gives us two sophisms that he contends are committed by Diotima: first, he says “If we wanted to prove that human beings engender merely to achieve the lesser immortality of the mortal, it would be illegitimate to do this by citing the universal human desire for fame – the eternity of the species and the replacement of the old and extinct by the young or new are not exactly the same sorts of lower immortality as a long-lived name and endless glory”.<sup>314</sup> We could, if pressed, however, grant that these are similar. Rhodes says that “I desire in either case to replace my old and soon-to-be-lost self with a new symbol of my being that survives me, either for a short while or indefinitely”.<sup>315</sup>

The more important sophism, on Rhodes’ account, is this: To Diotima, Rhodes objects that there *is no universal* human longing for immortal fame. However, Diotima sees that she is dealing with men who do crave eternal fame “and that people who are ruled by their appetites tend to project them onto everyone”.<sup>316</sup> Says Rhodes, “Diotima’s actual

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<sup>310</sup> Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 344. We will see Socrates do this again in the *Meno*, using eloquent speech and elaborate examples (that Meno seems to favour over accurate discourse) in order to lead Meno to better opinions (see chapter 3 pp.95).

<sup>311</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 208c5-e1.

<sup>312</sup> *Ibid.*, 208c1.

<sup>313</sup> Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 344.

<sup>314</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>315</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>316</sup> *Ibid.*

offense is manipulating passions to secure the victory of a lie”.<sup>317</sup> Thus, she can get away with this sophism with the hope of leading Agathon toward truer opinions of Eros and curing him of his tyrannical Titanism.

There is, I believe, a better explanation for what Diotima says here than Rhodes’ claim that she is using sophistry to have her interlocutors agree to her account of Eros. What Diotima says may be true with respect to the level at which Agathon finds himself on the ladder of love. Desire for endless fame in the form of spiritual progeny brings him closer to the top of the ascent. The spiritual progeny of the likes of Homer, Hesiod, and Lycurgus contribute more to each man’s immortality than do his children. Physical offspring are themselves subject to decay and death, while good laws may regulate a city in moderation and justice for generations to come, bringing honour to their progenitor, for decades, centuries, or longer. Further, spiritual progeny, we will see later, are closer to the divine, or the things themselves, than are physical progeny.<sup>318</sup>

I think that for the purposes of this project, we can take this all to be the case. Diotima’s ladder of love will further suggest that we should, for a man comes closer to true virtue (*aretē*) and to immortality, as he approaches the height of the erotic ascent, which, says Diotima, leads one through the love of beautiful bodies (involved in physical procreation) to the love of beautiful souls, laws and institutions (involved in spiritual procreation) and finally to the love of beauty itself. And “if ever it is given to man to put on immortality”,<sup>319</sup> it will be given to the lover at the height of this ascent. Thus, Homer, being more ambitious, achieved a more valuable immortality than the man who simply begets

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<sup>317</sup> Ibid.

<sup>318</sup> Whether or not every human being has this desire for immortal fame seems an irresolvable debate, for one might object that those who claim to not have this drive are simply fooling themselves, and citing the fame of those who do great things is self-verifying.

<sup>319</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 212a6.



children. Agathon would be well advised to shift his focus from physical beauty to that of ideas, laws, and institutions. Socrates, however, as we will see, achieves the most valuable sort of immortality, surpassing these other men, in his reaching the summit of the erotic ascent.

There is another reason to take what Diotima says about endless fame as it is presented (i.e. not as a sophism). Scott and Welton discuss this desire for eternal fame – what they call “the love of honor”<sup>320</sup> – with respect to Platonic psychology. “The desire for honor is particularly important in Plato’s reflection on human psychology, and it is connected with the spiritedness that forms the second and intermediate part in the *Republic*’s account of the psyche”.<sup>321</sup> The love of honour, note Scott and Welton, as it is displayed through the spirited element of the soul, may help us to overcome the love of gain, the fear of death, and other desires – i.e. the spirited part may, in aid of the rational element of the soul, resist the power of the lower appetites.<sup>322</sup> “For instance”, say Scott and Welton, “we may starve ourselves on a diet, denying bodily appetites, owing to a feeling of shame or the desire to be ‘honored’, that is, admired, for our appearance. Therefore, honor-love is naturally the ally of the calculative part of the psyche in its struggles with appetites and fears, since rationally informed honor-love can enable one to resist desires and fears”.<sup>323</sup>

What we have seen, then, unequivocally, is that even if we grant this point about glory, honour and immortality, the only immortality that is available to Agathon is one in which his old self is constantly being replaced by something new. This is a far cry from the

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<sup>320</sup> Scott and Welton, *Erotic Wisdom*, 125.

<sup>321</sup> Ibid.

<sup>322</sup> See Plato, “Republic”, Book IV. Ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns. Trans. Paul Shorey. *The Collected Dialogues of Plato: including the Letters*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999 (1961): 439e-441c; Plato, “Laws”, Book I. Ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns. Trans. A.E. Taylor. *The Collected Dialogues of Plato: including the Letters*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999: 647a-b; Scott and Welton, *Erotic Wisdom*, 125-27.

<sup>323</sup> Scott and Welton, *Erotic Wisdom*, 127.

divine immortality of the gods. Diotima says that every mortal creature perpetuates itself this way, replacing the old with the new, with respect to its body and its soul, or psyche.<sup>324</sup> “It cannot, like the divine, be still the same throughout eternity; it can only leave behind new life to fill the vacancy that is left in its species by obsolescence”.<sup>325</sup>

### Socrates as Mystagogue

After Agathon’s argument has been dismantled, Socrates-Diotima attempts to lead him in an ascent of what will come to be called the “ladder of love”,<sup>326</sup> or “ladder of beauty”:<sup>327</sup> “Well now, my dear Socrates, I have no doubt that even you might be initiated into these, the more elementary mysteries of Love. But I don’t know whether you could apprehend the final revelation, for so far, you know, we are only at the bottom of the true scale of perfection”.<sup>328</sup> She urges Socrates to try to follow her, if he can.<sup>329</sup>

Before we address Diotima’s ladder of beauty, or ladder of love, we should return to Scott and Welton on the role of Diotima in Plato’s *Symposium*. It is significant, I believe, that at this point Diotima says that “we are only at the bottom of the true scale of perfection”.<sup>330</sup> I believe that what she is saying is that Socrates-Agathon is now at the

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<sup>324</sup> “Now, although we speak of an individual as being the same so long as he continues to exist in the same form, and therefore assume that a man is the same person in his dotage as in his infancy, yet, for all we call him the same, every bit of him is different, and every day he is becoming a new man, while the old man is ceasing to exist, as you can see from his hair, his flesh, his bones, his blood, and all the rest of his body.... And the application of this principle to human knowledge is even more remarkable, for not only do some of the things we know increase, while some of them are lost, so that even in our knowledge we are not always the same, but the principle applies as well to every single branch of knowledge” (207d4-e10).

<sup>325</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 208a3-b1.

<sup>326</sup> Blondell, “Ladder of Love”, 147.

<sup>327</sup> Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 351; Plato, *Symposium*, 211c.

<sup>328</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 209e6-a4.

<sup>329</sup> Ibid., 210a5-6.

<sup>330</sup> Ibid., 209a3-4.

bottom of the ladder of love, as the foregoing exchange should have awakened in Socrates-Agathon an awareness of his own ignorance and a desire for knowledge. What is left is for Socrates-Agathon to mount the ladder of love toward a vision of beauty itself, which will cultivate in his soul true virtue. Scott and Welton say of this process that, “the truest erotic is the philosopher who recognizes his ignorance and permits this awareness to motivate and guide him in the search for wisdom”,<sup>331</sup> and that “[i]t is Socrates’ knowledge of *Erôs* that makes Socratic self-examination such a powerful form of self-cultivation. Only reflection that confronts one with one’s own ignorance can awaken a desire for wisdom and its beauty”.<sup>332</sup> We will return to the topic of the ladder of love (i.e. the erotic ascent), desire and ignorance in chapter three.

The reason that Diotima urges Socrates to follow her in the final revelation, but expresses doubt that he can do so<sup>333</sup> is three-fold: i) Diotima is not sure that Socrates-Agathon has grasped the foregoing erotic; ii) Diotima doubts that Socrates-Agathon is ready to hear higher revelations; iii) Diotima fears that Socrates-Agathon will not be able to follow her new arguments.<sup>334</sup>

Nevertheless, Diotima continues with her ‘final revelation’. She proceeds to describe what is often called the ladder of beauty, or ladder of love. First, she says, the candidate for this initiation into the mysteries of Eros must begin “to devote himself to the beauties of the body”,<sup>335</sup> falling in love with one individual body, and then, seeing how nearly related the beauty of one body is to the beauty of another, he must become a lover of every beautiful body, or beautiful bodies in general. From here, he will proceed to the love of beautiful

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<sup>331</sup> Scott and Welton, *Erotic Wisdom*, 139.

<sup>332</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>333</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 210a5-6.

<sup>334</sup> Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 351-52. We will see the same problem with Meno in chapter three.

<sup>335</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 210a8-9.

souls, and then to love the beauty of laws and institutions, and from institutions to sciences, and finally to the love of beauty itself.<sup>336</sup> “And now, Socrates”, says Diotima, “there bursts upon him that wondrous vision which is the very soul of the beauty he has toiled so long for. It is an everlasting loveliness which neither comes nor goes, which neither flowers nor fades, for such beauty is the same on every hand, the same then as now, here as there, this way as that way, the same to every worshiper as it is to every other”.<sup>337</sup> “And remember”, she continues, “that it is only when he discerns beauty itself through what makes it visible that a man will be quickened with the true, and not the seeming, virtue – for it is virtue’s self that quickens him, not virtue’s semblance. And when he has brought forth and reared this perfect virtue, he shall be called the friend of the god, and if ever it is given to man to put on immortality, it shall be given to him”.<sup>338</sup>

Socrates thus concludes his eulogy to Eros, saying “This...was the doctrine of Diotima. I was convinced, and in that conviction I try to bring others to the same creed, and to convince them that, if we are to make this gift our own, love will help our mortal nature more than all the world”.<sup>339</sup>

It is important to note that Diotima does not say what the object of her vision is, “probably because she cannot. This seems to mean that eros leads us to a wisdom that is silent because it is ineffable, not because it is secret”.<sup>340</sup>

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<sup>336</sup> Ibid., 211c2-8.

<sup>337</sup> Ibid., 210e4-211a4.

<sup>338</sup> Ibid., 212a1-7.

<sup>339</sup> Ibid., 212b1-4.

<sup>340</sup> Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 360. Blondell echoes this sentiment when she tells us that, “[s]ince the Form exists outside space and time, it is not comparable to, or on any level with...beautiful objects or people (211d3-5). It is perceptible only with the mind or soul (212a3). Those who can gaze upon it by such means...will give birth to true *aretē*, not mere images of it, and become ‘god-loved’ and as immortal (i.e. divine) as a human can be (212a).... Moreover since the lover is now producing true *aretē*, instead of mere (verbal) “images”, he no longer needs anyone to listen to his words. Accordingly, there is no sign of discourse at the summit” (“Ladder of Love” 155).

Although Diotima's vision might be silent and knowledge of beauty itself ineffable, Rhodes draws our attention to the fact that Diotima might have

quite a lot to say about the object of a vision that is supposedly ineffable. She declares that it always is, neither coming to be nor passing away, neither waxing nor waning, neither beautiful in one part nor ugly in another, nor at one time and not another, nor in one respect and not another, nor in one place and not another, nor to some and not to others. It is not visible in a face or hands or in any other part of the human body. It is neither a logos nor a science, nor is it anything, such as an animal, earth, heaven, or anything else. It is ever itself according to itself, with itself, one in form (*monoeides*). Although all beautiful things participate in it, coming to be and passing away, it grows neither greater nor less and suffers nothing.<sup>341</sup>

Rhodes notes that we are told everything that the highest beauty is not, but we are not told what it is. What we are told is that it has no spatiotemporal presence and it is nowhere, and in no time. “[I]f we attribute existence to it at all, we can only do so analogically. The beauty is beyond being”.<sup>342</sup> Further, Diotima tells Socrates that when he ascends through the stages that she has outlined by means of the “right pederasty”,<sup>343</sup> he will be “almost” at the end. “And so, when his prescribed devotion to boyish beauties has carried our candidate so far that the universal beauty dawns upon his inward sight, he is almost within reach of the final revelation. And this is the way, the only way, he must approach, or be led toward, the sanctuary of Love”.<sup>344</sup>

Scott and Welton have this to say about Diotima's ladder of love and the vision of beauty at the top: “Diotima seems to indicate that the psyche comes as close as it can to ‘possessing the good always’ precisely through its vision of Beauty Itself [206a-b, 212a]. To sort this out, we should recall that to possess the good always implies immortality and that the mortal being's way of approximating to immortality is through ‘giving birth in

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<sup>341</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 210e6-211b5, qtd. in Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 360-61.

<sup>342</sup> Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 361.

<sup>343</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 211b5-6.

<sup>344</sup> *Ibid.*, 211b5-9.

beauty””.<sup>345</sup> Scott and Welton also say that this vision of beauty itself “will inspire great fecundity on the part of the psyche that has it” and that what the psyche gives birth to are true virtues.<sup>346</sup>

I believe that we have reason to take Diotima’s final revelation as more than just a response to Agathon’s Titanic, tyrannical eros. In “Diotima and Demeter as Mystagogues in Plato’s *Symposium*”, Nancy Evans suggests that both Diotima and Socrates are acting as mystagogues in Plato’s *Symposium*,<sup>347</sup> as ones who initiate individuals into the Mysteries and mediate between the human and the divine.<sup>348</sup> This is especially clear when Diotima moves from questioning Socrates-Agathon to her final revelation: “Well now, my dear Socrates”, she says. “I have no doubt that even you might be initiated into these, the more elementary mysteries of Love. But I don’t know whether you could apprehend the final revelation, for so far, you know, we are only at the bottom of the true scale of perfection”.<sup>349</sup> In using this language, Socrates would call to mind for his audience Demeter’s rites of initiation and

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<sup>345</sup> Scott and Welton, *Erotic Wisdom*, 130-131.

<sup>346</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>347</sup> Evans, “Mystagogues”, 19.

<sup>348</sup> Evans, “Mystagogues”, 2. “The Greek mystery cults were often public, communal, and even civic phenomena that articulated the cultural boundaries of human religious experience differently from the rites of civic animal sacrifice” (Evans, “Mystagogues”, 3). One of these mystery cults was the cult of Demeter at Eleusis (Ibid., 5). “At the Athenian civic festival of the Eleusinian Mysteries, held annually during the fall, initiates...were accompanied by mystagogues...to a unique building of the theatre type called the Telesterion...where they all witnessed a spectacle of sorts.... All the groups present in the Telesterion at Eleusis...learned something – we don’t know what – that changed their lot after death” (Ibid., 5-6). Evans contends that it is this Eleusinian mystery cult that Plato refers to in this dialogue. The Eleusinian Mysteries dealt with issues of humanity, change, divinity, and mortality (Ibid., 6). Regarding Socrates’ speech in Plato’s *Symposium*, “[t]he encounter with Beauty and Being” [to on, the neuter substantive plural, translated here as the things themselves], says Evans, “is depicted as a rite that one can be initiated into as one was initiated into the rites of Demeter at Eleusis” (Ibid., 6-7). The Eleusinian Mysteries, like Diotima’s erotic ascent, “allowed initiates, both male and female, to experience the divine immediately and with their own eyes” (Ibid., 7). As Eleusinian cult practices were a centuries-old tradition within classical Athenian civic religion (Ibid., 2), “Plato’s fourth-century audience would have immediately made the connection between Diotima’s rites of love...and Demeter’s rites of initiation” (Ibid., 18). C.D.C. Reeve says something similar about Socrates when he speaks of the *agalmata* that Alcibiades says he has seen in Socrates (Plato, *Symposium*, 216e-217a) as bridges to the divine.

<sup>349</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 209e6 – 210a4.

suggest that the listeners (the *sympotai* and us as readers) are like the initiates into Demeter's rites, here being led in Diotima's rites of love by Socrates-Diotima.<sup>350</sup> This would make Diotima's ascent passage a positive account and one applicable to more than just Agathon.<sup>351</sup> We can see this not only in Socrates' use of the language of the Eleusinian Mysteries, but also directly in Socrates' (and Diotima's) speech itself.

While earlier in Socrates' speech, Diotima is responding to Socrates-Agathon's opinions and reasoning from his premises, when she moves to her final revelation, she says that, with the more elementary mysteries of Eros, they were "only at the bottom of the true scale of perfection".<sup>352</sup>

At the bottom of the scale, Diotima would need to dismantle Agathon's opinions of Eros before she could lead him toward better (truer) opinions. Once this is done, she then urges Socrates-Agathon to try to follow her in her final revelation.<sup>353</sup> The material that she presents, describing this erotic ascent, differs greatly from Agathon's initial premises. The ladder of love, moreover, sounds very much like a method for curing a Titanic tyrannical eros. In fact, I intend to show that this is just what Diotima's erotic ascent does, and more,

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<sup>350</sup> It is not just the language used in the passage cited above that calls to mind the rites of Demeter at Eleusis. Evans ("Mystagogues", 17-18) notes that Diotima's higher levels of initiation are called *epoptika* in the Greek, derived from the verb that means "to look upon", and that this term "has no other meaning in classical Greek outside of meanings uniquely attached to the Eleusinian Mysteries" (Ibid., 18). She draws our attention to further parallels between Diotima's account and Demeter's rites throughout her article.

<sup>351</sup> At 76e5-8, Socrates also uses this language in speaking with Meno, suggesting that he [Meno] would be able to see why Socrates' definition of shape is better than the revised Gorgias-style definition if he had not left "before the Mysteries, but could stay and be initiated". We will return to this point in examining the Meno.

<sup>352</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 210a3. Rhodes has this to say regarding Diotima's final revelation: "Having heard Agathon, [Socrates] compelled him to submit to dialectical therapy first in his direct dialogue with him and then in the fictitious exchange between Diotima and the younger Socrates. He abandoned the dialectic only upon reaching the beginning of Diotima's ascent to the vision of beauty, a point at which Agathon had run out of premises that could be examined dialectically" (*Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 363).

<sup>353</sup> Evans puts it this way: "Socrates' speech moves in three steps: first from Socrates' cross-examination (*elenchus*) of Agathon, next to Diotima's *elenchus* of Socrates, and finally to Diotima's lessons in erotics, which culminates in the so-called ascent passage" ("Mystagogues", 8). We can see, in Socrates' speech, Agathon's premises becoming less central as Socrates-Diotima leads him in the erotic ascent.

that this ascent will give us insight into the problems of virtue in both the *Protagoras* and the *Meno*.

Virtue, we see, is what is gained at the height of this ascent. It is significant that Diotima says that virtue's self (and not its semblance) is what quickens the man who discerns beauty itself [through what makes it visible].<sup>354</sup> "If the two poets [Agathon and Aristophanes] want to be immortal, their only means to the end in this life is to allow their souls to be permeated with the vision of the ever abiding beauty".<sup>355</sup> This is because, "if ever it is given to man to put on immortality, it shall be given to him".<sup>356</sup> In order for this to happen, they [Agathon and Aristophanes, and we as readers] must ascend "the heavenly ladder",<sup>357</sup> moving from the love of beautiful bodies eventually to the love of the beautiful itself. Upon gazing on "beauty's very self",<sup>358</sup> the men will then be quickened by the real virtue. Thus, the ascent of the ladder of love provides a cure for a tyrannical *eros*, as one moves ever closer to the real virtue in this ascent and away from a Titanic, tyrannical *eros*.<sup>359</sup> This is the importance of Socrates acting as a mystagogue: Socrates is leading his interlocutors (and us) toward knowledge of the things themselves (*to on*). This is depicted in the language of the Eleusinian Mysteries, suggesting that Socrates is initiating his followers into certain rites that allow them to experience the divine immediately. Read in combination with the *Protagoras* and the *Meno*, we can see how it is that Socrates first tries to awaken a desire for knowledge in the soul and then leads his interlocutors in an ascent where they may immediately experience the things themselves (e.g. beauty and virtue), thus becoming

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<sup>354</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 212a1-3.

<sup>355</sup> Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 362.

<sup>356</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 212a6-7.

<sup>357</sup> *Ibid.*, 211c3.

<sup>358</sup> *Ibid.*, 211e1.

<sup>359</sup> This is why Socrates' positive account of *eros* is also a positive (if perhaps partial) account of virtue.



acquainted with, e.g., virtue. In the *Protagoras* and the *Meno* we see that this acquaintance then requires a return to the *pathos* that gave rise to philosophical discourse. It is this, I believe, that explains the dramatic structure and the relationship of the *Protagoras*, *Symposium*, and *Meno*.<sup>360</sup>

We may return, at this point, to Blondell's reading of Plato's *Symposium* and her reflections on Socrates' literal and metaphorical journeys.

After addressing the two literal journeys that we find in Plato's *Symposium*,<sup>361</sup> Blondell moves onto the erotic ascent, outlining the eight steps that Diotima identifies<sup>362</sup> and the six steps in the reprise.<sup>363</sup> She then examines Socrates' place in this metaphorical journey, saying that "[t]he placement of Socrates at Step 8 is by the most popular among commentators for a wide range of reasons".<sup>364</sup> We can first address the reasons that Blondell gives for placing Socrates at step eight and then her reinterpretation of this evidence which will put Socrates, at various points, at each of the other seven steps. This will also give us a different understanding of some of the dramatic points than that which we get from Rhodes.

First, it is worth noting that step eight in the erotic ascent is characterized by a vision of beauty itself. Blondell notes the difference between step seven, where one might catch a glimpse of the eternal Form of Beauty and step eight, where one has grasped it and can consequently give birth in the beautiful to true virtues.

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<sup>360</sup> We will return to this point shortly when we examine *eros* and *anamnesis* in the *Meno*.

<sup>361</sup> See above.

<sup>362</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 210a4-212a7. 1) love of one particular beautiful body; 2) love of all beautiful bodies; 3) love of beautiful souls; 4) love of beauty in activities; 5) love of kinds of knowledge; 6) turn towards the great sea of beauty – this is where the erotic man may give birth to numerous beautiful *logoi* and thoughts; 7) the lover will suddenly catch sight of something amazingly beautiful in its nature (beauty itself); 8) the "final revelation" (211b7) where he may gaze on beauty's very self.

<sup>363</sup> Ibid., 211b7-d1. One body, then two bodies, then all bodies, then kinds of learning, and finally the *mathema* ("special lore" in Joyce translation) of beauty itself.

<sup>364</sup> Blondell, "Ladder of Love", 156. See, for instance, Burnet 1928:140; Taylor 1960:232-233; Nussbaum 1986:193-184; Price 1997:49.

The first bit of evidence that Socrates has reached the summit of this ascent comes during his journey to the house of Agathon. Socrates arrives late to the banquet because he had stopped and stood in a neighbour's doorway, "resisting any invitation to come in (175a7-9), with his mind (*nous*) only on himself (174d)".<sup>365</sup> We can realize the significance of this event if we stop for a moment to consider the Form of Beauty itself.

Since the Form exists outside space and time,<sup>366</sup> it is not comparable to, or on any level with...beautiful objects or people (211d3-5). It is perceptible only with the mind or soul (212a3). Those who can gaze upon it by such means...will give birth to true *aretē*, not mere images of it, and become 'god-loved' and as immortal (i.e. divine) as a human can be (212a). The successful lover is alone at the top.... The lover no longer has need of other human beings – or indeed of anything in the material world – to inspire his procreativity. The metaphor of raising a child is carried over from its initial appearance in the "lesser mysteries" (210a6; cf. 209c), but there is no longer any sign of a second human parent.... Moreover since the lover is now producing true *aretē*, instead of mere (verbal) "images", he no longer needs anyone to listen to his words. Accordingly, there is no sign of discourse at the summit.<sup>367</sup> Presumably, "true" virtue is a state of soul that causes one to act virtuously with full and complete understanding of the "beauty" and excellence of one's deeds.<sup>368</sup>

There is an immediate difficulty with this interpretation – namely, how it is that the lover might no longer have any need of other human beings. If justice, piety, courage, and the like are parts of virtue,<sup>369</sup> then it seems that the lover of beauty itself, who has given birth to true *aretē*, necessarily has need of other human beings. How can we conceive of justice, for instance, with reference only to oneself? This difficulty might be solved by what Blondell says later about Socrates' opacity to us.

First, however, we should return to Socrates' literal journey to the house of Agathon. The significance, says Blondell, of Socrates stopping in the neighbour's doorway is that it shows Socrates turning inward, "abandoning the physical gaze entirely in favour of the

<sup>365</sup> Blondell, "Ladder of Love", 149.

<sup>366</sup> See Christopher J. Rowe, trans. *Plato: Symposium*. Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1998, on 211a7-b8.

<sup>367</sup> See e.g. Giovannia R.F. Ferrari. "Platonic Love." In *Cambridge Companion to Plato*, ed. R. Kraut Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992:259-260.

<sup>368</sup> Blondell, "Ladder of Love", 155.

<sup>369</sup> Ignoring for a moment how exactly they are related or what 'part' of virtue each would be.

intellectual. Intellectual perception is required on lower rungs of the ladder too, of course (cf. e.g. 210c3-5). But only when the Form itself is sighted does all need for other people for such activity – whether as participants in philosophy or as recipients of improving *logoi* – come to a full stop”.<sup>370</sup> Socrates is “standing still, as if at the *telos* of his journey (175a8, b2, 220c4, 5, 7, d3)”.<sup>371</sup>

It is significant that those witnesses to this event<sup>372</sup> assume that Socrates is engaged in the sort of mental activity – philosophical inquiry – that they expect from him.<sup>373</sup> This is why Agathon requests that Socrates sit next to him once he comes in from the neighbour’s porch, so that he can share in the wisdom he imagines Socrates to have acquired. However, as Blondell points out,

in so far as Socrates, throughout Plato’s dialogues, treats philosophical inquiry as something to be undertaken through verbal interaction with other human beings, what he is doing in the doorway *cannot* be ‘seeking’, or solving a problem, since it entails neither words nor other people.<sup>374</sup> If he is no longer ‘seeking’ then, according to Diotima, he is no longer philosophizing (cf. 204a). It seems plausible to infer that he is, instead, gazing on the Form of Beauty. The fact is, however, that we do not know what is going on in Socrates’ soul when he stands in that doorway, or stands in the cold all night at Potidaea. These incidents are opaque to us.<sup>375</sup>

This is why Socrates avoids giving an account of what happened during this event. His experience must necessarily remain opaque to us, as we cannot know what is going on in his soul.<sup>376</sup> Futher, “[i]f Socrates has indeed been gazing on the Form of Beauty, the offspring

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<sup>370</sup> Blondell, “Ladder of Love”, 158.

<sup>371</sup> Ibid.

<sup>372</sup> And the soldiers at Potidaea, during a similar episode.

<sup>373</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 175c5-d1.

<sup>374</sup> Note how at step six our erotic man may produce beautiful *logoi* (Plato, *Symposium*, 210c7-d6) but at steps seven and eight he no longer has recourse to words (Ibid., 211a5-b4) but produces instead true virtue. Note also that this supports the view being put forward here that knowledge of virtue is non-propositional, as true virtue is produced at the height of the ascent and is not expressible in beautiful words and thoughts.

<sup>375</sup> Blondell, “Ladder of Love”, 159.

<sup>376</sup> It is interesting to note here that we could consider the entirety of Socrates’ cross-examination of Agathon, and Diotima’s speech, an account of this event articulated in images and myths, insofar as it describes the process by which one might come to grasp the Form of Beauty oneself.

he produces will not be *logoi*, but interior virtues. Such virtues may, however, be manifested in action”.<sup>377</sup>

What this opacity might tell us about *aretē* and human relationships is that, although the experience of the summit of the erotic ascent is a solitary event, it is not something that can be sustained. Once one grasps the Form of Beauty and gives birth to true *aretē*, one must necessarily return to the ‘real world’. True *aretē* is manifested in action which occurs in a human community. We will see later in chapter three as well that reaching the height of this ascent requires a return to its beginning, thus placing us firmly in the realm of human community rather than leaving the lover at the isolated, solitary summit.<sup>378</sup>

Blondell as well anticipates this when she reinterprets the evidence for placing Socrates at stage eight in the ladder of love, in favour of placing him at various moments at each of the others stages.

Perhaps when Socrates stood in the doorway he was engaged not in contemplation of the Form of Beauty but in an interior dialogue, as per the definition of thinking in the *Theatetus* (190a). And if Alcibiades really did see into Socrates’ soul, what he saw there might have been the (potential) virtue with which Socrates was already pregnant prior to beginning the ascent, as opposed to the kind of virtue that one gives birth to and “nourishes” at the summit (212a5-6). Socrates himself casts Alcibiades’ assessment of his “true” beauty into question, warning that he may actually be “nothing” (219a). As for his extraordinary claim to “know” erotics (177d; cf. 198d), this may very plausibly be taken to mean that he understands the process of philosophizing, which, paradoxically, entails understanding that one does *not* have determinate knowledge or “wisdom”.<sup>379</sup>

As further evidence for placing Socrates elsewhere than the summit of the ascent, we see Alcibiades characterize Socrates as someone who behaves as though he is always in love and smitten with beautiful people,<sup>380</sup> suggesting that he is at stage two, and in both the

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<sup>377</sup> Blondell, “Ladder of Love”, 159.

<sup>378</sup> Blondell says that Socrates’ having reached the summit of this ascent and the accompanying virtues that he displays, including his ability to produce beautiful and true *logoi*, is what earns him the crown that Alcibiades bestows on him near the end of the dialogue (Plato, *Symposium*, 213e; Blondell, “Ladder of Love”, 156).

<sup>379</sup> Blondell, “Ladder of Love”, 160.

<sup>380</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 216d.

*Charmides*<sup>381</sup> and the *Symposium*,<sup>382</sup> we see Socrates<sup>383</sup> struck by the physical desire for one body, suggesting stage one. This is just to name a few examples.

What this tells us, says Blondell, is that we cannot chart Socrates' position on the ladder against time in an orderly and linear fashion.<sup>384</sup> Instead, she suggests, with S. Lowenstram,<sup>385</sup> that "Socrates should be construed as shimmying up and down the ladder",<sup>386</sup> first because "it is not possible for a human being to reside permanently at the top of the ladder",<sup>387</sup> and second because this fits with Socrates' identification with the daimon Eros, "who runs up and down between mortal and divine realms in a dynamic process of interpretation, communication, 'intercourse and conversation' (...202e-203a)".<sup>388</sup> Moreover, Plato paints an impressionistic picture of Socrates, "or perhaps better, a cubist one which departs from the logic of a unifying perspective to show us different aspects of its subject simultaneously from different points of view, resulting in a composite image that conveys more than verisimilitude ever could".<sup>389</sup> This is because, even when he tumbles down to the first rung on the ladder of love, Socrates does not appear to start climbing the ladder again with each step in its proper order.<sup>390</sup>

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<sup>381</sup> Plato, *Charmides*, 154 b-d, 155d.

<sup>382</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 211d.

<sup>383</sup> Young Socrates in the *Symposium*.

<sup>384</sup> Blondell, "Ladder of Love", 174. We see evidence for this, e.g. in the *Charmides* where Socrates is struck by the beauty of one body, and then does not proceed back up the ladder of love linearly, considering first the beauty of all bodies, then one soul and all souls, etc. but rather he seems to jump ahead to consider *sophrosyne* (temperance) directly (Plato. "Charmides." Ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns. Trans. Benjamin Jowett. *The Collected Dialogues of Plato: Including the Letters*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999: 157d-e).

<sup>385</sup> See S. Lowenstram, "Paradoxes in Plato's *Symposium*." *Ramus* 1985, 14:85-104.

<sup>386</sup> Blondell, "Ladder of Love", 176.

<sup>387</sup> Ibid.

<sup>388</sup> Ibid.

<sup>389</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>390</sup> See the above note on the *Charmides*. "Nor is there any sign," says Blondell, "that the retreat into the neighbouring porch...comes as the climax of a series of ascending steps" ("Ladder of Love", 176).

What we might take from this is that Socrates “is both the lens through which we perceive all the different steps of the ascent, and the paradigm by which we may judge their ‘correct’ performance”.<sup>391</sup> Thus, Plato deflects our attempts to “grasp” Socrates directly, as Alcibiades and Agathon try to do in the *Symposium*.<sup>392</sup>

[Plato] prohibits us from taking [Socrates] as our ‘leader’ in the mindless manner of an Aristodemus, who is unnerved when left to forge his own path. We must start at the bottom of the ladder ourselves (as he, putatively, once did) and respond actively to his enigmatic mode of ‘leadership’, emulating his independence by seeking to ‘grasp’ not Socrates, but the truth from which he insists on distinguishing himself (209c), which may ultimately allow us to ‘grasp’ Beauty itself (211b7, 212a4-5).<sup>393</sup>

At this point I would like to return to what Blondell has stated regarding Socrates and knowledge of virtue. In recasting the evidence for placing Socrates at stage eight, Blondell said that, “as for his extraordinary claim to ‘know’ erotics (177d; cf. 198d), this may very plausible be taken to mean that he understands the process of philosophizing, which, paradoxically, entails understanding that one does *not* have determinate knowledge or ‘wisdom’”,<sup>394</sup> while earlier she says that Socrates “notoriously tells us that he *knows* τα ἐρωτικά (...177d8) – a remarkably strong claim for Plato’s Socrates. Perhaps this ‘knowledge’ is equivalent to the ‘single knowledge’ that is of the Form (210d7; cf. 211c6-d1)”.<sup>395</sup>

This, along with Blondell’s discussion of the impressionistic picture that we get of Socrates as both a seeker and one who has reached the summit, “someone who repeatedly

<sup>391</sup> Blondell, “Ladder of Love”, 177.

<sup>392</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 175c-d, 219b. See Alcibiades’ seduction of Socrates and Agathon’s retrieval and request regarding seating.

<sup>393</sup> Blondell, “Ladder of Love”, 178. Scott and Welton also call out attention to this aspect of the dialogue. “The dialogue form forces the reader to think for him or herself; the author does not place his personality and opinions on center stage, but instead presents the problems themselves, and various characters discussing them.... Hence, the effect of the dialogue form upon the reader’s mind has often been likened to the effect of Socrates upon his interlocutors” (Scott and Welton, *Erotic Wisdom*, 7).

<sup>394</sup> Blondell, “Ladder of Love”, 160.

<sup>395</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

ascends and descends”,<sup>396</sup> I believe, supports my thesis regarding *eros*, *anamnesis*, and knowledge of virtue. Socrates’ claim to “know” erotics may simultaneously refer to his “single knowledge” of the Form of Beauty and his “understanding that one does not have determinate knowledge or ‘wisdom’”,<sup>397</sup> if knowledge of erotics – i.e. grasping the eternal Form of Beauty which allows one to give birth to true virtues – involves a recognition of one’s own ignorance. In this case, the wise man truly does know that he knows nothing.<sup>398</sup>

Scott and Welton, as well, draw our attention to the fact that “both the theme of Socratic Ignorance and the hypothesis of the Forms are prominent in the dialogue, and Plato did precious little to prioritize one over the other. In fact, in the *Symposium* and elsewhere these themes are strangely juxtaposed”.<sup>399</sup> I believe that this is because of the relationship between ignorance and the Form of Beauty, or the things themselves:<sup>400</sup> acquaintance with virtue which comes at the height of the erotic ascent involves a recognition of one’s own ignorance and an attendant desire to examine oneself and the world. Thus, knowledge of the Forms (e.g. beauty itself) is not entirely distinct from Socratic Ignorance, if giving birth to true virtue when one grasps beauty itself involves a recognition of one’s own ignorance. Scott and Welton also say as much when they suggest that “Socrates could be ignorant with his self-aware ignorance *precisely because he is in touch with Forms* while yet being aware of the inability of the human mind to express the Forms directly in language”.<sup>401</sup>

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<sup>396</sup> Ibid., 177

<sup>397</sup> Ibid., 160

<sup>398</sup> See Blondell, “Ladder of Love”, and Scott and Welton, *Erotic Wisdom*, for more on this. “The deeply felt disagreement among commentators reflects Plato’s success in suggesting that Socrates, though in his essence a seeker, has also been to the top” (Blondell, “Ladder of Love”, 160).

<sup>399</sup> Scott and Welton, *Erotic Wisdom*, 20.

<sup>400</sup> Regarding the relationship of the Form of Beauty to the things themselves (i.e. the other Forms) Scott and Welton note that “[w]hereas Beauty is the harbinger of the Forms, provoking *Erôs* that is the messenger of the Forms, the divine madness of their inspiration, that is, their recollection, the Good is the ‘sun’ that is the source of the Forms and is somehow also responsible for their ultimate comprehension” (*Erotic Wisdom*, 131).

<sup>401</sup> Scott and Welton, *Erotic Wisdom*, 22.

#### IV. Third campaign: Dionysian Eros – The Judgement of Alcibiades-Dionysus<sup>402</sup>

At the end of Socrates' speech, he takes his seat "amid applause from everyone but Aristophanes, who was just going to take up the reference Socrates had made to his own theories, when suddenly there came a knocking on the outer door, followed by the notes of a flute and the sound of festive brawling in the street".<sup>403</sup> When the servant opens the door, Alcibiades enters with a flute girl and some of his other followers.<sup>404</sup> Says Rhodes, "[t]he entry of the flute girl signals that the program of encomiums on Eros has reached its climax and that Agathon's lawsuit against Socrates has ended with it".<sup>405</sup> He says, further, that "Alcibiades is acting as the head of a Dionysian procession",<sup>406</sup> and that his intoxication and his wreath of ivy represent Dionysius while his crown of violets represents Aphrodite.

We have also learned from Mircea Elide and many other sources that in all ancient religions, the high priest who conducts the rites of his god becomes the deity, without ceasing to be himself. Thus Dionysus has appeared, coming "suddenly" (212c6).... Like all gods, he will immediately exact his due from the mortals. Also, Agathon has declared that in his action against Socrates about their wisdom, Dionysus would be judge. We may assume that the god will reveal a verdict.<sup>407</sup>

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<sup>402</sup> Regarding the term Dionysian *eros*, Rhodes has this to say: "The cultural war between Socratic right pederasty and Titanism, in which the right pederasty was gaining ground, was complicated by a political struggle between the right pederasty and Alcibiades' imperialistic strain of the tyrannical eros, which, in view of Plato's casting of Alcibiades in the drama, I shall call Dionysian eros" (*Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 371). Regarding Alcibiades, he says, "His tyrannical temper was really Dionysian, reflecting not only the god's drunken exuberance but also his character as a murderous horror" (Ibid., 383).

<sup>403</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 212c3-7.

<sup>404</sup> Ibid. 212d.

<sup>405</sup> Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 367.

<sup>406</sup> Ibid. . Rosen and Nussbaum both agree on this point. It is also worth noting here that Dionysus is commonly associated with the mystery religions, such as those practiced at Eleusis (see Encyclopedia Mythica on "Dionysus").

<sup>407</sup> Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 367-68. "With regard to the lawsuit, it is not a good sign for Agathon that Dionysus has arrived with violets in his wreath. Deities who are the lords of their own persons do not display the symbols of other divinities in their crowns. Dionysus is apparently subordinate to Aphrodite, who will not look kindly upon human efforts to elevate Eros above her" (Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 368).



Alcibiades takes the wreath (in Greek, *tainias*) from his head and entwines it around Agathon's head, whom he declares to be the cleverest and most attractive<sup>408</sup> (Rhodes has this as "wisest and most beautiful"<sup>409</sup>), as a reward for his victory at the Linaea. "Agathon probably thinks that the god is both affirming the triumph of his tragedy and judging today's lawsuit in his favour",<sup>410</sup> says Rhodes. However, when Alcibiades notices Socrates sitting beside him he demands the return of some of the *tainias* he had given to Agathon so that he can entwine Socrates' head as well, saying that Socrates "is victorious in speeches over all men, not once like you the other day, but always".<sup>411</sup> Alcibiades-Dionysus thus "allows Agathon to keep some *tainias* in recognition of his victory at the Linaea, but he determines that Socrates has defeated the tragedian without having bothered to hear the arguments".<sup>412</sup>

Regarding the dramatic action of this last part of the dialogue, Rhodes has this to say about Alcibiades' arrival and his speech: Alcibiades is cast in the role of Dionysius.<sup>413</sup> Thus he enters leading the Dionysian procession and wearing the ivy wreath of Dionysius. Alcibiades "has become a drunken and murderous terror"; he is "inordinately proud of his victories"; he is immoderate. "He wants to give *tainias* to Agathon and calls the poet 'the wisest and most beautiful' because he understands that he needs to court a popular man who teaches the many a version of the tyrannical eros akin to his own".<sup>414</sup> He is too busy working the crowd to notice Socrates, and he does not know that Socrates is present because he has long since ceased to attend to him. Plato permits Alcibiades to give the last speech, because

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<sup>408</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 212e7.

<sup>409</sup> Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 369.

<sup>410</sup> Ibid.

<sup>411</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 213e3-4, qtd. In Rhodes 369.

<sup>412</sup> Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 369.

<sup>413</sup> Ibid., 386.

<sup>414</sup> Ibid.

he incarnates the “last tyrannical eros that Socratic right pederasty must resist”.<sup>415</sup>

Alcibiades arrives only after Socrates has given his speech because, after 417, “Alcibiades never truly hears Socrates again”.<sup>416</sup>

Regarding the trial and judgement of Dionysus, Scott and Welton suggest that Socrates is on trial for hubris,<sup>417</sup> for corrupting the youth (i.e. that the trial foreshadows Socrates’ real trial),<sup>418</sup> that he and Alcibiades are involved in a contest over the Good,<sup>419</sup> and that the *Symposium* as a whole offers a defence of Socrates.<sup>420</sup> In all of these cases, they judge Socrates to be victorious.<sup>421</sup>

The supposed mutual jealousy between Socrates and Alcibiades would suggest that each of them regards Agathon as a rival for the other’s affections; yet it soon becomes clear that they are rivals of each other, fighting over Agathon. 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 the love of wisdom surpasses mere political ambition in attaining the Good and surpasses poetry in exerting potentially beneficial affects upon noble youth. It is true that Socrates will ultimately fail with Alcibiades; but this fact must be balanced against the fact that according to Alcibiades no speaker has ever so profoundly moved him as has Socrates, and no one but Socrates has ever succeeded in making him feel ashamed.<sup>422</sup>

## V. The Aftermath

What is most important to take away from this third campaign, for the purposes of my project, is that Alcibiades-Dionysus judges Socrates to be victorious in his reply to

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<sup>415</sup> Ibid., 387.

<sup>416</sup> Ibid.

<sup>417</sup> Scott and Welton, *Erotic Wisdom*, 174.

<sup>418</sup> Ibid.

<sup>419</sup> Ibid., 161 and 179.

<sup>420</sup> Ibid., 176-177.

<sup>421</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>422</sup> Ibid., 161.

Agathon's lawsuit.<sup>423</sup> However, as we see at the end of the dialogue, all but Aristophanes and Agathon leave the symposium after all the revellers come in and join the party.

Aristophanes and Agathon sit and speak with Socrates, but before daybreak they too drift off to sleep.<sup>424</sup>

When Alcibiades had entered the party and given his speech (his eulogy of Socrates, which, it was determined, he could give in place of a eulogy of Eros),<sup>425</sup> he framed it as a contest over Agathon.<sup>426</sup> Alcibiades' suit against Socrates is ultimately unsuccessful.<sup>427</sup> Socrates thus manages to prevent an alliance between Agathon and Alcibiades, though he could not contract one between Agathon and himself (as Agathon falls asleep before morning, succumbing to a Dionysian stupor).

Rhodes' concludes his look at the *Symposium* by drawing our attention to the fact that the dialogue has been a series of memories of memories of memories of memories.<sup>428</sup> This is worth noting now, as we will see this connection between *eros* and *anamnesis* become increasingly important as we address the *Meno* in chapter three.

Why does the *Symposium* have this complicated structure, Rhodes asks.

This question can be answered now that we have discovered the dialogue's aim. Plato wished to understand the disorders that brought his city down. That required analysis of the essential natures of those disorders, as they were reflected in the persons who perpetrated and bore them. That, in turn, necessitated anamnesis. However, disorder cannot be understood

<sup>423</sup> Recall that this lawsuit was brought by Agathon over his and Socrates' supposed wisdom.

<sup>424</sup> Ultimately, this shows that Agathon and Aristophanes could not follow Socrates in his ascent. As they have not drank from the heavenly nectar like Socrates, they eventually succumb to a Dionysian (Bacchic) stupor. See also Scott and Welton, *Erotic Wisdom*, 179.

<sup>425</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 214c-e.

<sup>426</sup> See *ibid.*, 222a-d..

<sup>427</sup> See *ibid.*, 222d-e where Agathon assures Socrates that Alcibiades will not come between them.

<sup>428</sup> "Apollodorus recalls what Aristodemus related. Aristodemus remembers what he heard in person. Socrates harks back to what he learned from Diotima. Most of the speakers recall mythical beginnings of gods and men. Alcibiades reminisces about his experiences of Socrates. At some point in the play, the reader is contemplating memories of memories of memories of memories, which are myths of myths of myths of myths. Eventually, it will be necessary to wonder why Plato creates this complicated anamnestic and mythical structure" (Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 194).

except against the background of the order of which it is a perversion. The disorders that destroyed Athens, the Titanic eros and the Dionysian eros, cannot be comprehended except in contrast to the right order that should have prevailed, a polity founded upon the true eros that leads to real virtue and the vision of beauty. The disorder that ruined the natural leaders of Athens, which I have called ‘wrong pederasty,’ cannot be understood except in light of the order that should have prevailed in those men, which Socrates calls ‘right pederasty.’ However, right order is not known easily. The philosopher must seek it in the reality that first suggests to him that such order is there to find, that is, in his soul. However, what is perceived in the soul is seen only dimly, cannot be spoken directly, and can be communicated only poetically. The philosopher must therefore invoke the Muse. However, Hesiod tells us that Zeus fathered the Muses upon Mnemosyne (*Theogony* 53ff). This teaches the philosopher that the introspective search for the ineffable order that can be symbolized only poetically must honor the Great Mother. The quest must be anamnestic.<sup>429</sup>

We will see this again in the *Phaedrus* and the *Meno*, that eros comes to us through *anamnesis*. It is in the erotic ascent that we may approach the divine and give birth to true virtue,<sup>430</sup> and it is through *anamnesis* that we may begin (and begin again in the return) this ascent.<sup>431</sup> Thus *anamnesis* – recollection or memory – is essential in our ascent to true virtue.<sup>432</sup> We will see this more clearly when we address the *Meno* and the *Phaedrus* below.

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<sup>429</sup> Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 410. My current thesis does not depend on Rhodes’ comments about the political concerns in Plato’s *Symposium* (though it does draw heavily on Rhodes’ interpretation of the clash between the two *erotes* in this dialogue). I believe that my interpretation – regarding the connection between eros, *anamnesis*, and virtue, and the role of the *Symposium* in these matters – stands on its own without them. However, Rhodes’ political analysis gives us another layer in our understanding of eros and virtue in Plato’s dialogues.

<sup>430</sup> See Blondell, “Ladder of Love”, 147n2, and Diotima in Plato’s *Symposium*, 211b5-212a7.

<sup>431</sup> See Gonzalez, Scott and Welton, and Socrates in the *Phaedrus* below.

<sup>432</sup> See also Diotima and the recovery of knowledge – explained below.

### **CHAPTER THREE: *Anamnesis* and *Eros* in Plato's *Meno*: a Response to the *Protagoras***

Many of the points that I intend to demonstrate with regard to the *Meno* have been anticipated in the previous two chapters. This final chapter will address three central themes in the *Meno*: *anamnesis*, *eros*, and knowledge of virtue. I intend to show that, in the *Meno*, we have a return to Socratic philosophizing as virtue enacted. We also return to the question of virtue and, after having undergone the erotic ascent, we may recall what we learned at its height which ultimately requires a return to the question of virtue. We also see why Meno fails to follow Socrates in this dialogue and we gain a better understanding of Socrates' method of hypothesis, where he concludes that virtue is gotten by divine dispensation. I intend, further, to answer the two questions posed about virtue by drawing on the idea of recollection, as it appears in the *Meno* and as it is developed and associated with *eros* in the intervening dialogues.

#### **I. Gonzalez: Interpreting *Anamnesis* in the *Meno***

In the *Meno*, Socrates introduces the thesis that learning is *anamnesis* (recollection) in response to Meno's objection that it is impossible to search for something when one does not know at all what it is.<sup>433</sup> Socrates attempts to demonstrate this thesis by having Meno's slave, who has not learned geometry, 'recollect' the answer to a geometrical question. Meno's slave can do this, apparently, because "the truth of beings always exists in the soul",<sup>434</sup> and 'learning' is just a matter of recollecting what one already knows. However, at the end of this demonstration, Socrates declines to commit himself to the truth of this thesis,

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<sup>433</sup> Plato, *Meno*, 80d 5-6.

<sup>434</sup> *Ibid.*, 86b1-2.

stating that he would not insist on the details of the argument, but only that we would be “better, braver, and more active men”<sup>435</sup> if we believe this story and look for what we do not know, than if we don’t.

This disclaimer is important for understanding knowledge of virtue and the *Protagoras*’ relation to the *Meno*. In chapter one, I suggested that Socrates’ demonstration with Meno’s slave has a dual purpose: i) to answer Meno’s question regarding how we can search for something when we do not know what it is; ii) to deepen our understanding of knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge of virtue. We have already seen that knowledge of what virtue *is* (virtue’s self), on Socrates’ account, is prior to knowledge of its’ properties.<sup>436</sup> This is similar to how it is that knowledge of who Meno is (an acquaintance with Meno) is prior to knowledge of his properties. This prompts Meno’s question (Meno’s paradox): How can we search for something when we know absolutely nothing about it? Socrates’ answer to this is to suggest that we recollect things we already know. He then has Meno’s slave ‘recollect’ the answer to a geometrical question. In chapter one, we saw Gonzalez suggest that the slave can do this because he already has an implicit intuition of space which, with the help of questions from Socrates’, enables him to recognize the answer when he sees it (though he cannot explicitly formulate an answer to the question). Knowledge of virtue is like this: it is knowledge-by-acquaintance, in that we may become acquainted with virtue and recognize and point to it when we see it, though we cannot express what virtue *is* propositionally.<sup>437</sup> We saw that knowledge of virtue, also, contains an

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<sup>435</sup> Ibid., 86b.

<sup>436</sup> This is Socrates’ priority principle.

<sup>437</sup> This might be because, at the height of the erotic ascent, when one is quickened with virtue’s self and not its semblance, “the lover is now producing true *aretē* instead of mere (verbal) images” (Blondell, “Ladder of Love”, 155). This might also be because knowing a list of propositions about virtue is not the same as *knowing virtue* (see chapter one on knowing Meno).

irreducible component of ignorance and perplexity. If we gather all these things from Socrates' account of *anamnesis*, however, then we have to address Socrates' disclaimer at the end of his account.

In "How is the Truth of Beings in the Soul? Interpreting *Anamnesis* in Plato", F.J. Gonzalez writes on this problem, putting forth the thesis that "the truth of beings always exists in the soul"<sup>438</sup> is best interpreted to mean that "the truth of beings exists in the soul as an object of desire",<sup>439</sup> and that "[a]*namnesis* is not the unearthing of buried propositions or beliefs, but rather the awakening of a tacit desire that has the soul already in contact with the truth".<sup>440</sup>

A number of theories have been put forward as to how to interpret Socrates' theory of anamnesis. Gonzalez goes over the difficulties with six common approaches to this problem, and concludes that Socrates' statement that 'the truth of beings always exists in the soul' must be taken seriously (i.e. we cannot deny the literal truth of anamnesis for a metaphorical reading or on the grounds that the argument is *ad hominem*);<sup>441</sup> that the truth of beings which exists in the soul cannot be something completely latent and unavailable;<sup>442</sup> and that we cannot take this claim to mean either that some explicit statements or propositions, whether known or just believed, exist in the soul,<sup>443</sup> nor that a non-propositional intuition of beings exists in the soul.<sup>444</sup>

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<sup>438</sup> Plato, *Meno*, 86b1-2

<sup>439</sup> Francisco J. Gonzalez, "How is the Truth of Beings in the Soul? Interpreting *Anamnesis* in Plato." *Elenchos: Rivista di studi sul pensiero antico* 28 (2007): 289.

<sup>440</sup> *Ibid.*, 298.

<sup>441</sup> *Ibid.*, 276; 282-288.

<sup>442</sup> *Ibid.*, 280-282.

<sup>443</sup> *Ibid.*, 276-280.

<sup>444</sup> *Ibid.*, 282.

### Problems with commonly held interpretations

I will begin with the interpretation that I believe is the most troublesome for my interpretation of *anamnesis* and its relationship to knowledge of virtue.

Theodor Ebert, in “The Theory of Recollection in Plato's *Meno*: Against a Myth of Platonic Scholarship”,<sup>445</sup> and in “Plato’s Theory of Recollection Reconsidered: An Interpretation of *Meno* 80a-86c”,<sup>446</sup> denies the literal truth of *anamnesis* on the grounds that the argument is *ad hominem*. In both of these works, Ebert’s general strategy is to show the fallacies and inconsistencies within the argument, and to point out that Socrates is only asking Meno questions and is not necessarily himself committed to the outcome. This is supposed to show that the whole argument is purely *ad hominem*. Ebert suggests that Socrates is appealing to what Meno is familiar with, drawing from the Pythagorean tradition of his time, without endorsing it. Socrates does this, holds Ebert, and is justified in doing this, because he has to fight Meno’s eristic argument which is introduced solely for the purpose of avoiding further talk about the definition of virtue.

We will see presently how this interpretation of Plato’s theory of *anamnesis* initially poses a problem for our account of virtue. Socrates puts forth the account of recollection in response to Meno’s question regarding how we can search for something when we do not know at all what it is. We can recognize virtue when we see it, says Socrates, because “seeking and learning are in fact nothing but recollection”<sup>447</sup> and recollection is “the

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<sup>445</sup> Theodor Ebert. “The Theory of Recollection in Plato's *Meno*: Against a Myth of Platonic Scholarship.” *Gorgias - Menon: Selected Papers from the Seventh Symposium Platonicum*. By Michael Erler and Luc Brisson. Sankt Augustin: Academia Verlag, 2007: 184-198.

<sup>446</sup> Theodor Ebert. “Plato’s Theory of Recollection Reconsidered: An Interpretation of *Meno* 80a-86c.” *Man and World*. Vol. 6 Number 2, 1997: 163-181.

<sup>447</sup> Plato, *Meno*, 81d5.



spontaneous recovery of knowledge”.<sup>448</sup> Socrates then says that either the slave has at some point in time acquired this knowledge or he has always possessed it.<sup>449</sup> Meno says that no one has taught the slave these things (i.e. geometry) and so, says Socrates, since the slave did not acquire this knowledge in this life, “isn’t it immediately clear that he possessed and has learned them during some other period?”<sup>450</sup> Meno agrees to this and also to Socrates’ suggestion that the slave had learned these things “[w]hen he was not in human shape”.<sup>451</sup> Socrates then says, “If, then, there are going to exist in him, both while he is and while he is not a man, true opinions which can be aroused by questioning and turned into knowledge, may we say that his soul has been forever in a state of knowledge? Clearly he always either is or is not a man?” To which Meno responds, “Clearly”. “And if the truth about reality is always in our soul”, says Socrates, “the soul must be immortal, and one must take courage and try to discover – that is, to recollect – what one doesn’t happen to know, or, more correctly, remember, at the moment”.<sup>452</sup>

The problem with this account, according to Ebert, is that “Meno’s argument against the possibility of searching for things one does not know...is not meant to be a serious epistemological problem”.<sup>453</sup> Socrates twice in the dialogue calls it an “eristic argument”.<sup>454</sup> However, Meno’s objection poses a serious problem *within the dialogue*, “since Socrates is now confronted with an interlocutor who has made it clear that he is willing to use any

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<sup>448</sup> Ibid., 85a6.

<sup>449</sup> Ibid., 85d9-10.

<sup>450</sup> Ibid., 85e9-86a2.

<sup>451</sup> Ibid., 86a4.

<sup>452</sup> Ibid., 86a6-b5. Note that courage here seems to be the same as it is displayed by Socrates in the *Laches*.

<sup>453</sup> Theodor Ebert, "The Theory of Recollection in Plato's Meno: Against a Myth of Platonic Scholarship." *Gorgias - Menon: Selected Papers from the Seventh Symposium Platonicum*. By Michael Erler and Luc Brisson. Sankt Augustin: Academia Verlag, 2007: 187.

<sup>454</sup> Plato, *Meno*, 80e2 and 81d6.

means to avoid what for him would be a further defeat. For that purpose Meno is willing to turn to sheer obstruction”.<sup>455</sup>

In order to overcome this impasse, Socrates appeals to Empedoclean theory, “i.e. the soul’s immortality and its transmigration as well as the kinship of all nature”, and uses “a lengthy quote from Pindar, this time used to prop up Empedoclean metaphysics, and stylistic devices typical of Gorgias”,<sup>456</sup> combined with the Pythagorean tradition, according to which “Pythagoras is able to remember all persons he has been in earlier lives”.<sup>457</sup> Each of these theories and persons Meno is familiar with and reveres. Socrates introduces this material with the preface, “I have heard from men and women who understand the truths of religion”,<sup>458</sup> citing “priests and priestesses”<sup>459</sup> and giving a fairly extended quote from Pindar.<sup>460</sup> This disarms Meno, appealing to things that he already believes and thinkers he respects (we have already seen how Meno favours an answer in the style of thinkers he reveres regardless of the quality of those answers),<sup>461</sup> so that he will eventually accept Socrates’ account.

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<sup>455</sup> Ebert, “Recollection in Plato's Meno”, 187.

<sup>456</sup> Ibid., 187-88.

<sup>457</sup> Ibid., 188.

<sup>458</sup> Plato, *Meno*, 81a4-5.

<sup>459</sup> Ibid., 81a9.

<sup>460</sup> Ibid., 81b8-c3.

<sup>461</sup> In trying to come to a definition of virtue, Socrates makes a point about shape. In defining virtue, he requests of Meno, do not break it up and give examples of virtue, as one might say that roundness is a shape when asked, ‘What is shape?’ Instead, say what virtue is as a whole (“what is the same in all of them?” Plato, *Meno*, 75a4). Meno requests that Socrates do this first for shape, and then with colour, and then he agrees to give an answer about virtue (Ibid., 75a-76e). Meno rejects the answer that Socrates gives, however – that shape is “the only thing which always accompanies colour” (Ibid., 75b10-11) – and only accepts Socrates’ definitions when they are of the sort that he [Meno] is used to (Ibid., 76d9). Socrates, however, says that he “is convinced that the other is better and I believe you would agree with me if you had not, as you told me yesterday, to leave before the Mysteries but could stay and be initiated” (Ibid., 76e6-9). We will return to this point about the Mysteries shortly. For now, though, we should notice that Socrates calls the definition of which Meno approves “high-sounding” (Ibid., 76e3) and says that Meno approves because it is the sort of definition with which he is familiar (Ibid., 76c-e). In fact, he deliberately constructs his definition of colour – “colour is an effluence from shapes commensurate with sight and perceptible by it” (Ibid., 76a6-7) – based on Empedocles’ theory of effluences because Meno believes this theory, not because it is true.

However, as Ebert notes in several places,<sup>462</sup> Socrates' argument itself is eristic.<sup>463</sup> Ebert for instance,<sup>464</sup> shows how Socrates leads Meno in a circle, "[s]tarting from the (exclusive) disjunction at 85d9-11 (question 8) – either acquired or always possessed – and using the first disjunct as assumption, he has now agreed to the second disjunct, (falsely) taking it to be a consequence of the first one",<sup>465</sup> i.e. Meno agreed to the suggestion that the slave "either once acquired the knowledge he now has or always [has] been in possession of it",<sup>466</sup> and since no one had taught him it in this present life, he must have acquired it at a previous time.<sup>467 468</sup> Socrates here is taking the first disjunct as an assumption and then finally has Meno agree that if this is the case then this knowledge must always have been possessed by the slave,<sup>469</sup> and further that this implies (falsely) that the soul is immortal.<sup>470</sup>

Ebert contends that Socrates is justified in using all of these logical fallacies in order to have Meno agree to an account of learning as recollection "because he has to fight Meno's eristic argument which is introduced by Meno for the sole purpose of avoiding further discussion about the definition of virtue".<sup>471</sup>

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<sup>462</sup> See Ebert, "Recollection in Plato's *Meno*", 187-189 for a full discussion of this.

<sup>463</sup> See *ibid.*, 192-196 for a full explanation.

<sup>464</sup> *Ibid.*, 192-196.

<sup>465</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

<sup>466</sup> Plato, *Meno*, 85d9-10.

<sup>467</sup> *Ibid.*, 5e9-86a1.

<sup>468</sup> "But this only seems so," says Ebert, "for notice, first, that the conditional suggested by this question (and assented to by Meno at 86a2, again using a φαίνεται, 'so it seems') is false and does not follow from what has been conceded so far. It is false because even if the knowledge/opinions the slave is said to possess are not acquired in this life, he could still always have been in possession of them. It does not follow from the concessions granted, since all that would follow is the conditional: 'If the slave has acquired his knowledge/opinions and if he has not acquired it/them in this present life, then he must have got them at some other time'" ("Recollection in Plato's *Meno*", 195).

<sup>469</sup> For, "If then there are going to exist in him, both while he is and while he is not a man, true opinions which can be aroused by questioning and turned into knowledge, may we say that his soul has been forever in a state of knowledge? Clearly he always either is or is not a man" (Plato, *Meno*, 86a6-9). However, see below for why this does not hold.

<sup>470</sup> S Plato, *Meno*, 86a6-10; 86b1-2. see below for why this is so.

<sup>471</sup> Ebert, "Recollection in Plato's *Meno*", 197.

The problem starts, says Ebert, when Meno agrees at 85c4-5 that the slave already had these opinions (about the geometrical problem that is posed to him) in him.<sup>472</sup> Ebert then contends that “the opinions the slave has uttered during the geometry-lesson clearly were not in him” and “[t]his mathematical truth quite clearly was discovered by him for the first time in this lesson.” He further claims that “[i]f having an opinion is equivalent to, or implies entertaining the truth of this opinion – as I for one cannot see what else ‘having an opinion’ should mean – then the slave-boy did not have the opinion about the doubling of the square. How else could he have confessed his ignorance at 84a1-2 after his second proposal has been proved wrong?”<sup>473</sup>

Gonzalez, in his critique of Ebert’s position, says that “for Ebert it is ‘clear’ that the slave arrived at his knowledge through nothing but ‘trial and error’ (p.50), even though this is clear neither to myself nor to many other readers”, and that “such claims, I would suggest, express more Ebert’s repugnance for what is said than that of Socrates or Plato”.<sup>474</sup> Whether it is clear or not, however, that these opinions are in the slave, one point remains: even if we agree with Ebert that learning is not literally recollection and that opinions (propositions) about geometry and the solution to the geometrical problem were not in the slave prior to his “geometry-lesson” with Socrates, we need not throw out entirely Socrates’ account of recollection.<sup>475</sup> In fact, we see in the quote above<sup>476</sup> that Ebert seems to suggest that *anamnesis* is the unearthing of buried propositions (having an opinion, he says, is equivalent

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<sup>472</sup> Ibid., 192-93.

<sup>473</sup> Ibid., 193.

<sup>474</sup> Gonzalez, “Interpreting *Anamnesis* in Plato”, 284.

<sup>475</sup> Gonzalez makes this point on p.284 in *Dialectic and Dialogue*. “One might agree with Ebert that learning is not literally remembering something...i.e., that learning and *anamnesis* are only *analogous*. But this does not mean that the analogy has to be as weak as the metaphor Ebert suggests”.

<sup>476</sup> Ebert, “Recollection in Plato’s *Meno*”, 193.

to entertaining the truth of this opinion), and we will see shortly the problem with this interpretation.

The recovery of knowledge, as we will see shortly, need not be the recovery of opinions in this sense. In fact, at one point Ebert anticipates an alternative solution to this problem of how to interpret Socrates' account of *anamnesis*. Ebert draws our attention to an important point about Socrates' account of recollection when he says that recollecting something we have forgotten occurs in two steps<sup>477</sup>: first, we have to become aware of the fact that we have forgotten, e.g. in this case, what virtue is, and then (and only then) can we recollect the thing that we have forgotten. What makes this important for my reading of the *Meno* is that "realization of a lack of knowledge plays a crucial role" in *anamnesis*.<sup>478</sup>

Thus, Socrates, although he takes the idea of recollection from the Pythagorean-Empedoclean tradition so well known to Meno, uses this idea in a specific Socratic way, giving it a turn that suits the Socratic insistence on realizing your lack of knowledge as a presupposition of coming to know the truth. In doing so, Socrates does away with the mythological implications inherent in the Pythagorean-Empedoclean idea of recollecting things from previous lives.<sup>479 480</sup>

Socrates' argument here seems to be eristic, at least in part. Even if it is not 'clear' whether or not the slave can be said to have had opinions about the geometrical problem in him prior to his encounter with Socrates, what is clear is that Socrates cannot move from saying that "the truth about reality is always in our soul"<sup>481</sup> to saying that "the soul must be immortal",<sup>482</sup> as to say that, if the truth of things always exists in our soul then our soul would always exist is to move from a restricted use of the term 'always' ('as long as our soul

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<sup>477</sup> Ibid., 192.

<sup>478</sup> Ibid.

<sup>479</sup> Ibid.

<sup>480</sup> We will return to these points on lack of knowledge shortly.

<sup>481</sup> Plato, *Meno*, 86b1.

<sup>482</sup> Ibid., 86b2.

exists') to an unrestricted use.<sup>483</sup> However, even if this is limited to the immortality of the soul, it poses a problem for knowledge of virtue: It cannot be the case that we recognize virtue when we see it (and that we can even begin to search for virtue) because we have knowledge of virtue from the prenatal life of our souls. We will see shortly, however, how it is that we might hold the theory of *anamnesis* without asserting the immortality of the soul.<sup>484</sup> Before we do this, I will return to the other common interpretations of Socrates' claim that the truth of beings always exists in the soul.

Rachel Weiss puts forward an interpretation similar to Ebert's, claiming that the soul does not always possess knowledge, in the form of explicit knowledge, and that knowledge is thus not what is recollected. Rather, she claims that it is true opinions which are held by the soul and which are uncovered through the Socratic elenchus. The problem with her first claim, that the truth of beings does not always exist in the soul, at least in the form of knowledge, is that it equivocates on the term 'knowledge'.<sup>485</sup> As Gonzalez points out, Socrates' claim at 85 C 2 that the slave did not know the answer to a particular question is compatible with the characterization of the slave as always knowing the answer "in *the sense of always possessing this knowledge implicitly within his soul*".<sup>486</sup> Socrates also says at 86a8-9 that the soul of the slave "has been forever in a state of *knowledge*" [*italics mine*]. Weiss further does not address why it is that true opinions can be held in our souls without

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<sup>483</sup> Says Ebert, "the existence of the truth of all things is restricted to the (presumably limited) existence of our soul. The consequent affirms that our soul always exists, for an unlimited period of time. If this conditional were true, we might as well affirm: If human beings always exist with their heads on their rumps, human beings would be immortal" ("Recollection in Plato's *Meno*", 196).

<sup>484</sup> Gonzalez, for instance, suggests that the logical holes that Ebert draws our attention to are mainly regarding the inference of the immortality of the soul from the theory of *anamnesis*, and that even if the argument regarding the soul's immortality is *ad hominem*, this does not mean necessarily that the characterization of learning as *anamnesis* is *ad hominem* ("Interpreting *Anamnesis* in Plato", 283-284). We will address this again shortly.

<sup>485</sup> See Gonzalez, "Interpreting *Anamnesis* in Plato", 285 for why this is so.

<sup>486</sup> *Ibid.*, 285.

our being aware of them, nor can she explain how we can distinguish true beliefs from false ones, if we have no *knowledge* of the thing in question.<sup>487</sup>

The common problem with claims of this sort, that Socrates does not hold that “the truth of beings always exists in the soul”, is that it leaves Socrates unable to offer any real solution to Meno’s paradox. All that he can do, if he is not actually asserting the claim about the truth of beings always existing in the soul, is to stubbornly insist that inquiry is worthwhile.<sup>488</sup>

Further, Socrates’ disclaimer at 86b6-c2 that he would not fight for the details of his account of *anamnesis*, does not necessarily show that he considers the entire account to be false. Gonzalez draws our attention to the fact that Socrates expresses this unwillingness only after agreeing with Meno’s perception that what Socrates says is correct.<sup>489</sup>

The view that “the truth of beings always exists in the soul” means that some explicit propositions are held in the soul is held by a variety of Plato scholars. We can address here two versions of this interpretation: first, that “some known propositions always exist in the soul”,<sup>490</sup> and second, that “some true beliefs about beings always exist in the soul”.<sup>491</sup>

Gregory Vlastos holds this first view in “Anamnesis in the *Meno*.”<sup>492</sup> A major flaw in this argument is Socrates’ insistence that we can know nothing about virtue before we know what virtue itself is. “It is precisely this insistence”, says Gonzalez,

that is behind his [Socrates’] repeated objection that the definitions of virtue Meno proposes presuppose knowledge of some part of virtue (see 79A-C). It is therefore this insistence that provokes Meno’s objection... ‘How will you look for it, Socrates, when you do not know at all what it is?’ (80D5-6; Grube trans.). If Socrates had granted that we already possess

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<sup>487</sup> For the problems with claiming that it is true opinions which are uncovered, see below (critique of Fine and Irwin).

<sup>488</sup> See Gonzalez, “Interpreting *Anamnesis* in Plato”, 287.

<sup>489</sup> *Ibid.*, 286.

<sup>490</sup> Gonzalez, “Interpreting *Anamnesis* in Plato”, 276.

<sup>491</sup> *Ibid.*, 278

<sup>492</sup> Gregory Vlastos, “Anamnesis in the *Meno*.” *Dialogue*, IV (1965).

known propositions about virtue from which other propositions can be logically derived, there would have been no occasion for Meno's objection.<sup>493</sup>

Gail Fine and Terrance Irwin both put forward the interpretation that "the truth of beings always exists in the soul"<sup>494</sup> is best interpreted to mean that "some true beliefs about beings always exist in the soul".<sup>495</sup> There are three major problems with this interpretation.<sup>496</sup> First, this interpretation requires true beliefs to be explicitly available to the slave at the beginning of the inquiry. Socrates, though, describes the slave as recovering true beliefs only at the end of the inquiry.<sup>497</sup> Second, Socrates claims that there is *knowledge* already 'in' the slave,<sup>498</sup> not only true beliefs. Finally, Gonzalez shows how any true beliefs had at the beginning of the inquiry cannot be recognized as true, and thus cannot be distinguished from false beliefs.<sup>499</sup>

Gonzalez himself defended the view that "a non-propositional intuition of beings exists in the soul", in "Nonpropositional Knowledge in Plato".<sup>500</sup> The major flaw in this interpretation is that it would render superfluous the inquiry that it is supposed to render possible: "If I already have a nonpropositional intuition of what virtue is, then why inquire into what virtue is"?<sup>501</sup>

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<sup>493</sup> Gonzalez, "Interpreting *Anamnesis* in Plato", 277-78.

<sup>494</sup> Plato, *Meno*, 86b1-2

<sup>495</sup> Gonzalez, "Interpreting *Anamnesis* in Plato", 278.

<sup>496</sup> See *Ibid.*, 278-280.

<sup>497</sup> Plato, *Meno*, 85C9-10.

<sup>498</sup> *Ibid.*, 85D4, 85d6-7, 85D9.

<sup>499</sup> See Gonzalez, "Interpreting *Anamnesis* in Plato", 279.

<sup>500</sup> Francisco Gonzalez, "Nonpropositional Knowledge in Plato." *Apeiron*, XXXI, 1998: 272-276.

<sup>501</sup> Gonzalez, "Interpreting *Anamnesis* in Plato", 280. One might imagine that the argument put forth in my thesis may fall victim to a similar objection (If we already have a non-propositional acquaintance with virtue). However, as we will see later, we still have need to inquire into virtue as I intend to show that what is present at the beginning of the inquiry – what is awakened via *anamnesis* – is a tacit desire that already has the soul in contact with the truth of beings. We must then follow Socrates in an erotic ascent if we are to become well-acquainted with virtue. Knowledge of virtue, then, is not fully present at the beginning of the inquiry, but only at the end (at the height of the ascent). Further, as we have seen already, knowledge of virtue and *being* virtuous are inseparable from the inquiry. They thus cannot make the inquiry superfluous.



The problem with these three interpretations taken as a whole is that they identify the truth of beings existing in the soul with something fully available and explicitly possessed. They thus all locate at the beginning of the inquiry a state that should instead characterize the outcome of the inquiry, whether this be known propositions, true beliefs, or some sort of non-propositional knowledge.

That, “the truth of beings always exists in the soul”<sup>502</sup> is best interpreted to mean that “[t]he truth of beings exists in the soul as something completely latent and thus not available”<sup>503</sup> is also not a viable interpretation. This interpretation receives its strongest support from the explicit claim in the *Phaedo* that knowledge can be said to be recollected in the course of inquiry only if it has been forgotten before the start of the inquiry.<sup>504</sup> However, if the truth has been unqualifiedly lost, then the theory of *anamnesis* does not solve Meno’s paradox: Someone who knew the truth and then completely forgot it would be in no better position to recognize the truth when he found it than would someone who had never known the truth. In order to render inquiry possible, some trace of the truth must remain in the soul and be available to us. The difficulty is then in identifying what these traces could be and how the soul could ‘hit upon’ them, and have notions of them, prior to having any clear and articulate concepts about them.<sup>505</sup>

Neither can we deny the literal truth of *anamnesis* for a metaphorical reading, claiming that “it is as if the truth of beings always existed in the soul”. Gonzalez briefly touches on

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<sup>502</sup> Plato, *Meno*, 86b1-2

<sup>503</sup> Gonzalez, “Interpreting *Anamnesis* in Plato”, 280.

<sup>504</sup> Plato, *Phaedo*, 75D.

<sup>505</sup> Gonzalez, “Interpreting *Anamnesis* in Plato”, 281-282.

this problem, where he states that the obvious difficulty here is that “there is not the slightest indication of such a qualification in what Socrates says”.<sup>506</sup>

### Reading *Anamnesis* through Eros

After problematizing each of the preceeding interpretations, Gonzalez puts forward an alternate reading, suggesting that the truth of beings must be *had* by the soul without being *possessed* by it as something explicitly believed or known.<sup>507</sup> The truth of beings, on this account, exists in the soul as an object of desire.<sup>508</sup>

We can see how an object of desire might be *had* by the soul in the *Symposium*, where Diotima talks about eros. It is wrong, says Diotima, to conclude that eros in no sense whatsoever has what it desires. A person utterly ignorant (and therefore completely devoid of wisdom) for instance, would not even seek and pursue wisdom; that one might desire and strive for wisdom suggests that one somehow ‘has’, or is in touch with, what one desires, though in such a way as not to *possess* it. Eros, in Diotima’s story, is such a being, in that Eros is both a ‘have’ and a ‘have-not’ (Eros is the child of Poros [Wealth] and Penia [Poverty]).<sup>509</sup>

This point is also made in the *Lysis*, where we are led to see that we can strive for something only if we feel the want, or lack, of it, and “we can feel the want only of

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<sup>506</sup> Ibid., 283.

<sup>507</sup> Ibid., 288.

<sup>508</sup> Ibid., 289. This idea that the truth of beings exists in the soul as an object of desire will be central to my thesis that *anamnesis*, as it is developed and associated with *eros* (in the *Protagoras*, *Symposium*, and *Meno*), can help explain the nature of virtue and its teachability.

<sup>509</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 203c5.

something which in someway intimately belongs to us”,<sup>510</sup> such that the object of eros is both what is lacked by us and what is our own.

Meno’s objection, on the other hand, assumes that either one already possesses what is sought or that one exists in no relation whatsoever to it. In both cases, it would be impossible to search for the thing which one either already has, or which one will not recognize when it is found. Meno does not recognize the in between state of eros which characterizes *anamnesis*.<sup>511</sup> We will see this idea as well with Scott and Welton, who suggest that “recollection provides another sense in which one might be said to be between ignorance and wisdom, or between ignorance and knowledge in general. For the notion of recollection implies that one both knows, in one sense, and yet does not know, in another sense, whatever one has not yet recollected”.<sup>512</sup> “Like Recollection”, say Scott and Welton,

*Erôs* is between ignorance and wisdom and combines both. Recollection is said to recollect eternal forms; and in the *Phaedrus* (249c-256e), *Erôs* is said to be a messenger bringing messages from the divine; Plato clearly associates the Forms with the divine in many dialogues. In the *Symposium* *Erôs* is also said to have inherited resources from his father, Resource; and clearly the Forms would be akin to the “Resource”-dimension of *Erôs*. Finally, Diotima’s teachings of *Erôs* issues in the vision of a Form, and her account of the lover’s ascent can easily be seen as an account of recollection.<sup>513</sup>

I intend to show with respect to *eros* and *anamnesis*, that when Socrates says that the truth of beings always exists in the soul, he means that the soul always exists in some relation to the truth of beings, though without grasping this truth. This relation can be

<sup>510</sup> Gonzalez, “Interpreting *Anamnesis* in Plato”, 291.

<sup>511</sup> Of course, we have to be careful when applying what Diotima says to other dialogues. However, we will see that Meno makes the same mistakes as Protagoras. We also saw Rhodes suggest that the *Symposium* is a completion of the *Protagoras*, and Zuckert suggest that in the *Symposium* we have a new stage of Socratic philosophizing, which is also in a sense a completion of the first stage (it provides a positive account after demonstrating the inadequacy of other opinions, in this case, of virtue). With this in mind, we can see how the *Symposium* builds on the *Protagoras*, and how Diotima’s speech in the *Symposium* might be applicable to Protagoras and, we will see, to Meno. I intend to show, then, that what Diotima says to Agathon and what Socrates says to Protagoras would apply here as well, and, I believe, even if this is not a complete account of *eros*, it does move us in the direction of truth. We will also see that this account given by Diotima solves a number of problems presented in the *Meno*.

<sup>512</sup> Scott and Welton, *Erotic Wisdom*, 204.

<sup>513</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.

characterized as desire, present in every human soul.<sup>514</sup> We saw this in chapter two when Diotima said that Eros is “at once desirous and full of wisdom”.<sup>515</sup> We further noted there that this suggests two things: that Eros does not entirely lack what he desires, and that in desiring [wisdom] he somehow has that which he desires. Regarding this phenomenon, Gonzalez says of *eros* that “as desirous of wisdom [Eros] somehow has the very wisdom [he] lacks”.<sup>516</sup> What often suppresses this desire and its inherent insight is the presumption of knowledge. All that is required for learning, then, is the refutation of this presumed knowledge: “When Socrates refutes all of the slave’s attempts to answer his question, this awakens in the slave what one could call an informed desire for the truth...that enables him to recognize it when it is found”.<sup>517</sup> What is suppressed in Meno is precisely this eros. Thus, we can then say that virtue “is both what we desire to procure and the way in which we desire to procure it, so that it is in some sense procured in the very desire for it”.<sup>518</sup> This is because in desiring virtue, our souls are already in contact with virtue so that desiring virtue and having virtue are not two completely separate things.<sup>519</sup>

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<sup>514</sup> We see this in the *Protagoras* (and the *Meno*) if we hold that knowledge of virtue involves a recognition of one’s own ignorance and an attendant desire to examine oneself and the world.

<sup>515</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 203d5-6.

<sup>516</sup> Gonzalez, “Interpreting *Anamnesis* in Plato”, 292.

<sup>517</sup> *Ibid.*, 292.

<sup>518</sup> *Ibid.*, 293.

<sup>519</sup> We have to be careful translating the Greek word *arete* as ‘virtue’, as the former has a much wider meaning in ancient Athens than the latter does for us today (See Nehamas, *Virtues*, 4-5 for a full discussion of this issue). In the *Laches*, for instance, we see that desiring courage and having courage are not the same thing (the former is not sufficient for the latter). However, courage is demonstrated in Socrates’ recognition of his ignorance and his desire to persistently inquire into himself and the world (our definition of virtue, or *aretē*, generally). In the same way we might say that other virtues – piety, for instance – are not acquired in the desire for the specific virtue (desiring piety does not necessarily make one pious) but the inquiry into virtue generally (*aretē*) is an expression of individual virtues (one might be pious, for instance, in the recognition of one’s ignorance in the face of the divine. This calls to mind Diotima’s piety in accepting her lesser ontological status in the human-divine scale.).

This interpretation, that the truth of beings exists in the soul as an object of desire, Gonzalez claims, not only avoids the problems of previous interpretations,<sup>520</sup> but it can also finally explain what most other scholars have failed to explain: why Socrates identifies with *anamnesis* not only with learning but also with *searching*.<sup>521</sup> Socrates' failure to make any sharp distinctions between searching and learning (*anamnesis* is both as a whole), becomes clear if searching for truth is already in some sense having it.

This is how we can make sense of Socrates' disclaimer in the *Meno*.<sup>522</sup> Desiring virtue and having virtue are not two completely distinct and opposed relations: "if the desire for the truth of beings thus belongs to the very being of the soul, it is also the case that the specific 'object' of this desire at issue in the *Meno*, *i.e.*, virtue, is itself not outside of or external to this desire but is at least in part constituted by it".<sup>523</sup> Diotima in the *Symposium* has already suggested that in desiring something we may in some sense already have it. However, I do not believe that in desiring virtue one necessarily has virtue. We noted already, e.g., that desiring piety (or courage, justice, etc.) does not make one pious (courageous, just). The desire for virtue, however, is also not completely distinct from having virtue. The truth of beings exists in the soul as an object of desire and all that is required to awaken this desire is the refutation of presumed knowledge. This places one at the bottom of the scale of perfection, or Diotima's erotic ascent. Once an *eros* for knowledge is awakened in the soul, one may then ascend the ladder of love. Thus, we will

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<sup>520</sup> This interpretation does not locate at the beginning of the inquiry what should characterize the end, we are still able to answer Meno's paradox with this account, and we are able to account for all that Socrates says in the *Meno* (see below).

<sup>521</sup> Gonzalez, "Interpreting *Anamnesis* in Plato", 293; Plato, *Meno*, 81d4-5.

<sup>522</sup> Plato, *Meno*, 86b6-c2.

<sup>523</sup> Gonzalez, "Interpreting *Anamnesis* in Plato", 297.

become more virtuous, or “better, braver, and more active men”,<sup>524</sup> if we search for virtue than if we do not.

We can see now exactly how crucial a realization of one’s lack of knowledge is to *anamnesis* and knowledge of virtue.<sup>525</sup> Even if Socrates is appealing to what Meno knows without asserting the literal truth of the theory of *anamnesis*, we can see how learning, especially regarding knowledge of virtue, the issue in question in the *Meno*, is analogous to this literal recollection<sup>526</sup> and we can see, further, how Socrates uses this theory in an attempt to elevate Meno’s opinions and to lead him closer to the truth.<sup>527</sup>

I believe that Gonzalez is correct in saying that *anamnesis* is the awakening of a desire (*eros*) for the truth and that this is possible because we are related to the truth of beings, the divine, by nature. This is something we learn in the *Symposium* about *eros* – namely, that *eros* is the divine element in human nature and that it is what orients us, rightly or wrongly, to what is variously characterized as the hyperuranian realm, the divine, and the things themselves, e.g. beauty and virtue. The theory of *anamnesis* thus recalls what we learn in the *Symposium* and, as we will see shortly, also the *Phaedrus*.<sup>528</sup>

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<sup>524</sup> Plato, *Meno*, 86b

<sup>525</sup> It is in realizing one’s ignorance and questioning oneself and the world that one display *arete* generally. See the *Laches* for courage, Diotima’s speech in the *Symposium* for piety, and the *Protagoras* (read in combination with the *Meno*) for virtue generally.

<sup>526</sup> Learning is analogous to literal recollection in this sense because in both cases one must realize one’s own ignorance before one can begin to search for the answer. We will see later how these two processes are further analogous.

<sup>527</sup> Socrates is trying to lead Meno to a better (truer) opinion of virtue than those he expresses at the beginning of the dialogue. This will be addressed in full below.

<sup>528</sup> See below for an account of *eros* and its relationship to *anamnesis* in the *Phaedrus*.

## II. Eros, *Anamnesis*, and Knowledge of Virtue

Gonzalez suggests that *anamnesis* is the awakening of a tacit desire that has the soul already in contact with the truth of beings. This *eros* is desirous of wisdom and in being so, it somehow has the very wisdom it lacks.

This would be the case for virtue if knowledge of virtue involves a desire to examine oneself and the world. In desiring virtue, or knowledge of virtue, one's soul is in contact with the truth of beings in that it has awakened an *eros* which is essential to virtue.<sup>529</sup> A non-propositional acquaintance with virtue is not present at the beginning of this inquiry, however.<sup>530</sup> Once the desire for truth, e.g. [the desire for] knowledge of virtue, is awakened in the soul, one must follow Socrates in the erotic ascent before one becomes well-acquainted with virtue.<sup>531</sup> *Anamnesis* is thus the awakening of a desire for truth, which is possible because we are related to the truth of beings by nature (we see this in the *Symposium* where we are related to the truth of beings though *eros*).<sup>532</sup> *Eros* is thus what orients us, rightly or wrongly, in relation to the divine and the things themselves. In coming to love beauty itself, and discerning beauty through what makes it visible, one is quickened with virtue's self (i.e. virtue is found at the height of the erotic ascent). This process gives us the

<sup>529</sup> This is because acquaintance with virtue involves a desire (*eros*) to examine oneself and the world.

<sup>530</sup> It is useful to note here that degrees of acquaintance help us to understand knowledge of virtue and the erotic ascent. At the beginning of the inquiry, our souls are in contact with the truth (or virtue) via *eros*, but we are not yet well acquainted with it, if at all. Gonzalez says, "[t]hat we have some ability to recognize instances and properties of the virtue [courage] is due to our possession of some awareness, however obscure, of what virtue is...this everyday awareness can nevertheless be terribly confused and unreliable" (*Dialectic and Dialogue*, 28). Thus, the Socratic method presupposes some prior awareness of the thing in question, something which is already implicit in our ordinary experience, though this awareness may be confused and unreliable. In ascending toward the things themselves, we become more acquainted with virtue so that there is a tacit desire at the beginning of the ascent which, through philosophical questioning, might become knowledge.

<sup>531</sup> We saw this in the *Symposium* where Socrates brought Agathon to an admission of his own ignorance or perplexity before laying out the account given to him by Diotima of the erotic ascent.

<sup>532</sup> At 206c-e, for instance, Diotima suggests that *eros* is the divine element in us – "there's a divinity in human propagation, an immortal something in the midst of man's mortality" (206c6-7) – (we also see this suggested elsewhere in the dialogue, e.g. with the ladder of beauty) and thus it is what relates us to what is variously characterized as the divine, the hyperuranian realm, and the things themselves (*to on*).

acquaintance with virtue that we saw in chapter one. Knowledge of virtue, once one reaches the height of this ascent, then requires a return to the original *pathos* which gave rise to philosophical discourse. This was anticipated in chapter one when I suggested that knowledge of virtue requires a return to the original *pathos* that gave rise to philosophical discourse. We can see more clearly now why this is so. If we become acquainted with virtue (quickened by virtue's self, and not its semblance) at the height of the erotic ascent, and if this acquaintance with virtue involves a recognition of one's own ignorance and an attendant desire to examine oneself and the world, then once we have ascended the ladder of beauty, through *eros*, and reached the height of this ascent, what is left, and what is necessary if we are quickened by virtue's self, is a return to the original question that gave rise to philosophical discourse ('Is virtue teachable?' and 'What is virtue?' in the *Protagoras* and the *Meno*), a return to the act of questioning, and a return to the beginning of discourse. We saw this also in Blondell who suggested that the experience at the height of the ascent cannot be sustained indefinitely and that one would tumble down the ladder only to climb back up again, or, in the case of Socrates, would be constantly shimmying up and down the ladder of love. We also saw in chapter two that true *aretē* is manifested in action which occurs in a human community, and thus the man who has reached the height of the erotic ascent must return (to discourse and human community) from his solitary state.

We may recall, at this point, Diotima in the *Symposium* saying that, just as the individual remains the same person by constantly changing and replacing the old with the new,<sup>533</sup> so with knowledge, "some of the things we know increase, while some of them are

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<sup>533</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 207d4-e4. Also see chapter two.



lost, so that even in our knowledge we are not always the same”,<sup>534</sup> and it is in this way that “the mortal does all it can to put on immortality.”<sup>535</sup>

If we take the Nehamas/Woodruff translation, we see Diotima make a still stronger claim, at 207e-208a, that “not only does one branch of knowledge come to be in us while another passes away and that we are never the same even in respect to our knowledge, but that each single piece of knowledge has the same fate”.<sup>536</sup> Thus it is only through continual care that we might regain each piece of knowledge which continually sinks into oblivion. This gives us another reason why we may not remain at the summit of the erotic ascent, gazing on beauty’s very self, but we must return to “the bottom of the true scale of perfection”.<sup>537</sup> It is only through continual care that we may replace in our souls what we continually lose (being temporal beings and unable to participate in the unchanging immortality of the divine). This is one reason why, even after the ascent to true virtue has been completed, the search must continue.

It is thus why I believe that Socrates *returns* to the question of virtue in the *Meno*. It is also thus why I believe that learning is further analogous to literal recollection, if we take learning here to apply to virtue and an acquaintance with virtue: If we are able to follow Socrates through the *Protagoras*, and the *Symposium*, then we can, in the *Meno*, recollect what we learned at the height of this ascent. This is why Plato returns his reader’s attention back to the Socratic search for wisdom (especially concerning the good life for human beings): it is in this return that we see virtue enacted. This also gives us a double reading of *anamnesis*, so that it is not just as awakening of the desire for truth, but once this desire is

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<sup>534</sup> Ibid., 207e7-9.

<sup>535</sup> Ibid., 207d1.

<sup>536</sup> Plato. Ed. John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson. Trans. Woodruff and Nehamas. Indianapolis. *Complete Works*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1997.

<sup>537</sup> Ibid., 210a3-4.

awakened and we ascend to the hyperuranian realm, we can say that it is also a recollection of what we learned at the height of this ascent (which itself is importantly inseparable from the original awakening of the desire for truth).

### III. An Anamnestic Eros: Plato's *Phaedrus*

This reading of *anamnesis* is further supported by Plato's *Phaedrus*.<sup>538</sup> Here, we see an *anamnestic eros* illustrated in Socrates' chariot analogy. At 246a7-9 Socrates compares the soul to a charioteer and two winged horses. One of these horses is noble and good, being of good stock, while the other has the opposite character, being of bad stock.<sup>539</sup> It is the task of the charioteer to control the bad horse and direct the chariot (the soul) toward the heavens. Moreover, we see here as well that when the soul ascends to the heavens and then to "that place beyond the heavens",<sup>540</sup> it will "discern justice, its very self, and likewise temperance, and knowledge".<sup>541</sup> This calls to mind the erotic ascent in the *Symposium*.

In both cases, in the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*, the soul is pulled by *eros* toward the hyperuranian realm (the realm of the divine, or the things themselves, *to on*). We see this with the chariot analogy, where the 'good horse' pulls the soul upwards toward the heavens. As the charioteer beholds his beloved, his whole soul is filled with longing. The black horse proposes the delights of sexual gratification (suggesting terrible, unlawful things, says Rhodes).<sup>542</sup> As the lover approaches the beloved and looks into his face, the youth's visage

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<sup>538</sup> Rhodes reads the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* together, as they both display an *anamnestic eros* (he develops further parallels as well, in his book on the subject). Zuckert, also, places these two dialogues in the same stage of Socratic philosophizing, where she says that Socrates presents a positive account of his own.

<sup>539</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 246b3-6

<sup>540</sup> Ibid., 247c3.

<sup>541</sup> Ibid., 247d6-7.

<sup>542</sup> See Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 505.

“flashes light lightening”<sup>543</sup> and the lover is driven back and is reminded (*anamnesis*) of beauty and sane self-control. He recoils and pulls on the reins of his horses (this is the initial divine shock, where the soul acquires its first ordering virtue not through its own devices but through a divine dispensation).<sup>544</sup> The black horse reproaches the charioteer and the white horse for being cowardly and then approaches the beloved again, only again to be driven back “until the black horse virtually dies of fright whenever he sees the beloved”.<sup>545</sup> Divine intervention thus tames the lover’s black horse, “making his whole soul eager to serve”.<sup>546</sup> What the charioteer is reminded of when gazing upon the beloved is the “form of beauty”,<sup>547</sup> which the soul encountered at the height of an ascent that was begun in what we might call the pre-natal life of the soul.<sup>548</sup> Thus, it is an *anamnestic eros*, or memory of true beauty, that compels the soul to take flight toward the hyperuranian realm. Says Rhodes, “Eros comes to us as anamnesis”.<sup>549</sup>

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<sup>543</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 254b5.

<sup>544</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 493a1-2; Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 505.

<sup>545</sup> Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 506.

<sup>546</sup> Ibid. This will be significant when we return to the *Meno* and Socrates’ method of hypothesis.

<sup>547</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 254b6.

<sup>548</sup> Similar to the account of *anamnesis* in the *Meno*, Plato says that the task of the charioteer, in this analogy, is to direct its horses towards the heavens. Whatever soul is able to accomplish this and follows “in the train of a god, and discern[s] something of truth, shall be kept from sorrow until a new revolution [begins], and if she can do this always, she shall remain always free from hurt” (Plato, *Phaedrus*, 248c4-6), but the soul who meets with some misfortune and is “burdened with a load of forgetfulness and wrongdoing” (Ibid., 248c8-9) will lose its wings and fall to earth, being born into the body of a human being (Ibid., 248c-e).

Says Rhodes, “It is in the nature of this mania [the fourth kind of madness, eros] that when the philosophic, *philokalic*, and musical or erotic man sees a beauty, he recalls true beauty, feels his wings growing, and yearns to ascend, but cannot do so. (His memory of the true beauty connects the ascent of the *Symposium* with that of the *Phaedrus*. However, the ascent of the *Phaedrus* has surpassed that of the *Symposium*, flying higher than the vision of beauty, all the way up to the Essence Really Being.) The person who recalls true beauty gazes upward longingly like a bird, caring nothing for what is here below, and is therefore called insane. However, eros is a sharing in ‘the best enthusiasms’.... It is a perversion of our souls in the form of a salvific anamnesis of our true homes and is identical with philosophy” (*Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 496).

<sup>549</sup> Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 497. With regard to the *Phaedrus*’ relation to the *Symposium*, Rhodes says that, “In natural love, there must be wing that lifts us up to anamnesis of the hyperuranian reality of beauty, causing us to revere its earthly image. The price for developing the wing that ascends to the memory, which is the greatest of divine blessings, is the erotic experience of extreme pain and abject servility, which is a far cry from a personal godhood that can control the order of being” (*Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 501). We see here another refutation of Agathon’s desire to become like a god. Further, “In the case of the false eros,

What Socrates says about the prenatal life of the soul is also reminiscent of what we learn in the *Symposium*.

For only the soul that has beheld the truth may enter into this our human form – seeing that man must needs understand the language of the forms, passing from a plurality of perceptions to a unity gathered together by reasoning – and such understanding is a recollection of those things which our soul beheld aforetime as they journeyed with their god, looking down upon the things which now we suppose to be, and gazing up to that which truly is.

Therefore it is meet and right that the soul of the philosopher alone should recover her wings, for she, so far as may be, is ever near in memory to those things a god's nearness whereunto makes him truly god. Wherefore if a man makes right use of such means of remembrance, and ever approaches to the full vision of the perfect mysteries, he and he alone becomes truly perfect.<sup>550</sup>

We saw this in Socrates standing in the neighbour's porch prior to, and during, Agathon's dinner party. We saw this also in Diotima's speech, with the erotic man moving from the love of a plurality (all beautiful bodies, institutions, ideas), eventually to the love of beauty itself. Blondell has outlined the various steps in Diotima's erotic ascent and has shown us how we might see Socrates shimmying up and down the ladder of love, at the summit of which the erotic man will grasp beauty itself. Here in the *Phaedrus* we see that this ascent is done through recollection (*anamnesis*) and we have seen Gonzalez contend that *anamnesis* is the awakening of a tacit desire that has the soul already in contact with the truth of beings.

Regarding *eros* and *anamnesis* in the *Phaedrus*, Scott and Welton have this to say.

In the *Phaedrus* beauty is said to be the most visible of Forms here in the world of change (250d). According to the myth of the "super-celestial" (*hyperouranian*) realm presented there, beauty leads human beings to recollect the other Forms they once beheld before their imprisonment in a physical body. Beauty has the power to kindle in humans the divine madness that is *Erôs*; this divine madness is a form of inspiration. The divine inspiration of

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he who is not newly initiated (by whom Socrates seems to mean he who has not recently had *anamnesis* of the time when we were aloft looking around in the pure bright light) or he who has been corrupted is not able to rise from the sight of an earthly beauty to the eternal reality of beauty. Thus, he does not revere worldly beauty but yields to pleasure and 'proceeds like a quadruped to beget children' (Plato, *Phaedrus*, 250e5; Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 498)". This is the lower form of immortality that we see Agathon desires in the *Symposium*, because he is not able to rise from the sight of earthly beauty to the eternal reality of beauty itself.

<sup>550</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 249b5-c11.

*Erôs* leads human beings to “recollect” the Forms. Yet, of course, this is merely another way of speaking about the function of *Erôs* as a messenger from gods to mortals. Beauty speaks to the human mind of a higher realm. If one pursues beauty where it leads attentively, it leads higher and higher. In the *Symposium* it leads in the direction of the true good, away from those pseudo-goods that merely appear good from a limited perspective, but which turn out not to be good.<sup>551</sup>

Remember also that Diotima in the *Symposium* has said that “it is only when he discerns beauty itself through what makes it visible that a man will be quickened by the true, and not the seeming, virtue – for it is virtue’s self that quickens him, not virtue’s semblance. And when he has brought forth and reared this perfect virtue, he shall be called the friend of the god, and if ever it is given to man to put on immortality, it shall be given to him”.<sup>552</sup> That is, it is at the height of the erotic ascent, which is driven by *anamnesis*, when a man has passed from a plurality of perceptions to a unity gathered together by reasoning, that he will be “ever near in memory to those things a god’s nearness whereunto makes him truly god”.<sup>553</sup>

*Anamnesis*, I contend, must be present at the beginning of this ascent, as an awakening of the desire for truth. All that is required for this,<sup>554</sup> is the refutation of presumed knowledge. This is why Protagoras fails to get anywhere in the eponymous dialogue. Once the desire for truth is awakened in the soul, we may then follow Socrates in the erotic ascent to knowledge of the things themselves.<sup>555</sup> If virtue is a recognition of one’s own ignorance and an attendant desire to examine oneself and the world, then this requires a return to the original *pathos* which gave rise to philosophical discourse. If we take the

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<sup>551</sup> Scott and Welton, *Erotic Wisdom*, 142.

<sup>552</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 212a1-7.

<sup>553</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 249c7-9.

<sup>554</sup> See Gonzalez, “Interpreting *Anamnesis* in Plato”, 292.

<sup>555</sup> Regarding the erotic ascent and *anamnesis*, after refuting Agathon’s premises in the *Symposium*, Diotima says that we are at the bottom of the scale of perfection. The next step is the ascent to the love of beauty itself where we become acquainted with virtue. We can see here how a desire for truth must first be awakened in the soul before one can ascend with Socrates-Diotima to knowledge of the things themselves (*to on*).

*Protagoras*, *Symposium*, and *Meno* to form a series, then if we follow Socrates throughout we have a desire for truth awakened in us (*Protagoras*), the erotic ascent where we might become acquainted with virtue's self (*Symposium*), and finally a return to the original question that gave rise to philosophical discourse (*Meno*).

That knowledge of virtue (and having virtue) requires a return to the original *pathos* that gives rise to philosophical discourse is suggested again in the *Meno*,<sup>556</sup> where Socrates is again *returning* to his original question: "Then go back to the beginning and answer my question. What do you and your friend say that virtue is?"<sup>557</sup>

We can see the difference between the end of the ascent and the beginning (between the man who has returned to the beginning and the man who has not yet undergone the ascent) most clearly in the difference between Socrates and Protagoras and that between Socrates and Meno. While Protagoras assumes that he knows and relies constantly on second-hand knowledge, Socrates never expresses himself with certainty, using phrases like "I have a notion",<sup>558</sup> "I believe that",<sup>559</sup> and "I do not believe",<sup>560</sup> while Protagoras uses phrases like "I know very well",<sup>561</sup> and acts as though he has the answer and it just so happens that he is kind enough to bestow his wisdom on others if they would just sit still and listen.<sup>562</sup> Socrates also insists that Protagoras not rely on extraneous voices,<sup>563</sup> and he demonstrates to us throughout how one might have first-hand knowledge of virtue.

We ought to recall here what we already noted about the beginning of the ascent. At the beginning of the inquiry our souls are in contact with the truth (or virtue) via *eros*, but we

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<sup>556</sup> We see numerous instances of this in the *Protagoras*.

<sup>557</sup> Plato, *Meno*, 79e4-5.

<sup>558</sup> Plato, *Protagoras*, 340e.

<sup>559</sup> Ibid., 341d.

<sup>560</sup> Ibid., 320b.

<sup>561</sup> Ibid., 341d.

<sup>562</sup> Ibid., 320c, 324d.

<sup>563</sup> Ibid., 347e.

are not yet well acquainted with it, if at all. “That we have some ability to recognize instances and properties of the virtue is due to our possession of some awareness, however obscure, of what virtue is...this everyday awareness can nevertheless be terribly confused and unreliable”.<sup>564</sup> Thus, the Socratic method presupposes some prior awareness of the thing in question, something which is already implicit in our ordinary experience, though this awareness may be confused and unreliable. In ascending toward the things themselves, we become more acquainted with virtue so that there is a tacit desire at the beginning of the ascent which, through philosophical questioning, might become knowledge. There is a difference, then, between the man who has grasped beauty itself and gives birth to true virtue and he who has a tacit desire in his soul which has him in contact with virtue and the truth of beings.

Meno as well, though he displays a desire for knowledge,<sup>565</sup> also displays a stubborn resistance to Socrates’ method of investigation and his criteria for knowledge.<sup>566</sup> Thus, Meno and Protagoras may be able to ask questions about virtue, to identify justice, piety, and moderation as parts of virtue, and inquire into virtue generally because their souls are in contact with the truth of virtue via *eros*, but they do not demonstrate a first-hand acquaintance with virtue in their interactions with Socrates. There is clearly a difference between the man who ascends and returns, or who we find shimmying up and down the ladder of love (e.g. Socrates), and the man who has not yet reached the summit of the ascent (e.g. Protagoras, Agathon, Meno).

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<sup>564</sup> Gonzalez, *Dialectic and Dialogue*, 28.

<sup>565</sup> See Plato, *Meno*, 70a1-3, 81e4-6, and 86c-d.

<sup>566</sup> See below.

It is important to recall here the fact that Socrates, in the *Symposium*,<sup>567</sup> credits Diotima with teaching him the art of love, the only matter that Socrates claims to understand. This amounts, say Scott and Welton, to “crediting Diotima with teaching him all that he knows”.<sup>568</sup>

It could be that this art of love is the secret lore that enables Socrates to carry out his god-given mission by means of his method of cross-examination. For in this method he makes others like himself, numbing them as though he were a stingray, and bringing them into his own confused condition with respect to many kinds of questions (see *Meno* 80a-d). In this way, he awakens in others a desire for knowledge, a love of wisdom akin to his own. This awakening of love could be part of the erotic art that Socrates claims is the only thing he understands.<sup>569</sup>

Other commentators have noted the intimate relationship between Socrates’ profession of ignorance and his claim to know the art of love.<sup>570</sup>

It is here that we truly begin to see the connections between the *Symposium* and the *Meno*. Like with *Meno*, Socrates has brought Agathon to a state of aporia, demonstrating his ignorance on matters that he thought he knew. Scott and Welton note that, in bringing his interlocutors into his own confused condition, he awakens in them a desire for knowledge. It is in this way that we might understand the connection between *eros*, *anamnesis*, and knowledge of virtue, and thus also between Plato’s *Protagoras*, *Symposium*, and *Meno*.

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<sup>567</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 201c3-d3.

<sup>568</sup> Scott and Welton, *Erotic Wisdom*, 88.

<sup>569</sup> Ibid.

<sup>570</sup> See Bloom, *Love and Friendship*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993: 432; Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 352; David Roochnik, *Of Art and Wisdom* University Park: The Pennsylvania University Press, 1999; Drew Hyland, *Finitude and Transcendence in the Platonic Dialogues*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995; Robert Lloyd Mitchell, *Hymn to Eros: A Reading of Plato’s Symposium*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1993. Scott and Welton further note the connection between the Socratic elenchus, midwifery, and spiritual procreation (247).



#### IV. The Method of Hypothesis: Meno Fails to Follow Socrates

At the end of Socrates' account of recollection and his demonstration with Meno's slave, Socrates gives his disclaimer, saying that he wouldn't insist on the details of his account but that the one thing that he is ready to fight for is that "we shall be better, braver, and more active men if we believe it right to look for what we do not know than if we believe there is no point in looking because what we don't know we can never discover".<sup>571</sup> Meno replies, saying, "[t]here too I am sure you are right".<sup>572</sup> So Socrates asks Meno if he is ready to face the question, "what is virtue?" This is the critical point in the *Meno* where we see the eponymous character fail to follow Socrates. I will quote this passage in full.

Socrates: Then since we are agreed that it is right to inquire into something that one does not know, are you ready to face with me the question, 'What is virtue?'

Meno: Quite ready. All the same, I would rather consider the question as I put it at the beginning, and hear your views on it – that is, are we to pursue virtue as something that can be taught, or do men have it as a gift of nature or how?

Socrates: If I were your master as well as my own, Meno, we should not have inquired whether or not virtue can be taught until we had first asked the main question – what it is. But not only do you make no attempt to govern your own actions – you prize your freedom, I suppose – but you attempt to govern mine. And you succeed too, so I shall let you have your way. There's nothing else for it, and it seems we must inquire into a single property of something about whose essential nature we are still in the dark. Just grant me one small relaxation of your sway, and allow me, in considering whether or not it can be taught, to make use of a hypothesis.<sup>573</sup>

In establishing his hypothesis, Socrates asks, if virtue is to be teachable, which attribute of the soul must it be? Socrates and Meno then establish that if virtue is teachable, it must be knowledge, and conversely if it were knowledge, then it would be teachable.<sup>574</sup> Next they agree that if there were teachers of virtue, then it could be taught, but not if there were none,<sup>575</sup> and at 94e2-3 Socrates concludes that "it looks as if [virtue] cannot be taught". "At

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<sup>571</sup> Plato, *Meno*, 86b8-c2.

<sup>572</sup> Ibid., 86c3.

<sup>573</sup> Ibid., 86c4-e4.

<sup>574</sup> Ibid., 87b5-c10.

<sup>575</sup> Ibid., 90b-94e.

the same time”, says Socrates, “we agreed that it is something good, and that to be useful and good consists in giving right guidance”,<sup>576</sup> and that there are only two things – knowledge and true opinion – which “direct us aright and the possession of which makes a man a true guide”.<sup>577</sup>

Socrates: Now since virtue cannot be taught, we can no longer believe it to be knowledge, so that one of our two good and useful principles is excluded, and knowledge is not the guide in public life.

Meno: No.

Socrates: It is not then by possession of any wisdom that such men as Themistocles, and the others whom Anytus mentioned just now, became leaders in their cities. This fact, that they do not owe their eminence to knowledge, will explain why they are unable to make others like themselves.

Meno: No doubt it is as you say.<sup>578</sup>

This leaves us with one alternative, says Socrates, that it is true opinion or “well-aimed conjecture”<sup>579</sup> which these men employ in upholding the welfare of their countries. “Their position in relation to knowledge is no different from that of prophets and tellers of oracles, who under divine inspiration utter many truths, but have no knowledge of what they are saying”.<sup>580</sup> Meno agrees to this, saying, “It must be something like that”.<sup>581</sup> And if these men are repeatedly and outstandingly successful with no conscious thought, Socrates contends, and Meno agrees, that we ought “to reckon those men divine”.<sup>582</sup> Socrates says that “[w]e are right therefore to give this title to the oracular priests and the prophets that I mentioned, and to poets of every description. Statesmen too, when by their speeches they

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<sup>576</sup> Ibid., 98e7-8.

<sup>577</sup> Ibid., 99a2-3. This is demonstrated at Ibid., 97a11-c5.

<sup>578</sup> Ibid., 99 b1-11.

<sup>579</sup> Ibid., 99c1.

<sup>580</sup> Ibid., 99c2-5. With some important differences, we should be reminded here of Diotima in the *Symposium*. In the *Symposium*, Diotima counts herself as a prophet, as one who communicates between the human and the divine. Although she *does* have knowledge, *which involves* embracing the gift of Poros, and in this sense is gotten by divine dispensation, we should note that Socrates here must say that prophets have *no knowledge* in order to have Meno agree to everything else.

<sup>581</sup> Plato, *Meno*, 99c6

<sup>582</sup> Ibid., 99c7

get great things done yet know nothing of what they are saying, are to be considered as acting no less under divine influence, inspired and possessed by the divinity”.<sup>583</sup>

The dialogue then closes with Socrates saying,

Socrates: If all we have said in this discussion, and the questions we have asked, have been right, virtue will be acquired neither by nature nor by teaching. Whoever has it gets it by divine dispensation without taking thought, unless he be the kind of statesman who can create another like himself. Should there be such a man, he would be among the living practically what Homer said Tiresias was among the dead, when he described him as the only one in the underworld who kept his wits – ‘the others are mere flitting shades.’ Where virtue is concerned such a man would be just like that, a solid reality among shadows.

Meno: That is finely put, Socrates.

Socrates: On our present reasoning, then, whoever has virtue gets it by divine dispensation. But we shall not understand the truth of the matter until, before asking how men get virtue, we try to discover what virtue is in and by itself.<sup>584</sup>

We see why this dialogue fails immediately after Socrates’ disclaimer about his theory of recollection.<sup>585</sup> Although Meno agrees that it is right to inquire into something that one does not know and says that he is ready to face the question, “What is virtue?” he then insists that they address his prior question regarding whether virtue is teachable. Meno has thus failed to understand Socrates’ demonstration with the slave and the analogy with ‘knowing Meno’. He has also rejected Socrates’ priority principle and seems to have disregarded almost all that came before this very moment (for if he agrees that it is right to search for what we do not know, but takes Socrates’ disclaimer to reject all but this conclusion, which he seems to do with his reversion to his first question, then we end up back at the beginning, with no answer to Meno’s paradox but stubbornly insisting that we can search for what we do not know).

<sup>583</sup> Ibid., 99 c11-d5.

<sup>584</sup> Ibid., 99 e4 – 100 b5. Socrates continues, saying, “Now it is time for me to go, and my request to you is that you will allay the anger of your friend Anytus by convincing him that what you now believe is true. If you succeed, the Athenians may have cause to thank you” (Plato, *Meno*, 100b5-c2). We shall address this final comment shortly.

<sup>585</sup> Although Socrates and Meno do come to a conclusion about virtue in this dialogue, Socrates ends the discussion by saying that “we shall not understand the truth of the matter until, before asking how men get virtue, we try to discover what virtue is in and by itself” (Plato, *Meno*, 100b3-5), suggesting that, though they have reached a conclusion, they have not understood the truth of the matter.

What Meno should have learned from the slave example, ‘knowing Meno’, and the priority principle is as follows. The example of ‘knowing Meno’ is intended to demonstrate Socrates’ priority principle, and also suggests that knowledge of virtue is knowledge by acquaintance. Like with Meno, we cannot know anything about virtue before we are acquainted with virtue’s self. Meno has failed to grasp this. The demonstration with Meno’s slave should have shown Meno that we *can search* for what we do not know and that we can do this because our souls are somehow already in contact with the truth (“the truth of beings always exists in the soul”).<sup>586</sup> All that is needed in order to search for the object in question is the refutation of presumed knowledge, and a recognition of one’s own ignorance. Meno has failed to grasp this as well. Instead of engaging in dialogue regarding the question ‘What is virtue?’ Meno insists that they return to his original question, ‘Is virtue teachable?’ thus addressing a property of virtue before knowing what virtue is (How can we know what something is *like* before we what *what it is?*).

We can return, at this point, to Socrates and Meno on the definition of shape and colour. In attempting to define virtue, Meno gives a number of different virtues, but he cannot name what is common to them all. Socrates says that this is like naming a number of different shapes – roundness, for instance – when one is asked, ‘what is shape?’ Socrates presses Meno for an answer, asking what it is that is the same in all of them – shapes, first, and then virtues. Meno demands that Socrates first answer the question about shape and then he will answer the question about virtue. It is in this discussion about shape, and then colour, that Socrates gives his own answer – that shape is “the only thing which always accompanies colour”<sup>587</sup> – which Meno rejects, and then a second answer, that shape “is the limit of a

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<sup>586</sup> Plato, *Meno*, 86b1-2

<sup>587</sup> *Ibid.*, 75b10-11.

solid”.<sup>588</sup> Meno seems to prefer the second answer to the first, but then he immediately asks, “And how do you define colour?”<sup>589</sup> It is this definition of which Meno most approves, when Socrates says that colour is “an effluence from shapes commensurate with sight and perceptible by it”.<sup>590</sup> Meno approves of this answer because it is the sort that he is used to.<sup>591</sup> Socrates says, “Yes, it is a high-sounding answer, so you like it better than the one on shape”.<sup>592</sup> “Nevertheless”, he continues. “I am convinced that the other is better, and I believe you would agree with me if you had not, as you told me yesterday, to leave before the Mysteries, but could stay and be initiated”.<sup>593</sup>

If we follow Evans and take this to be a reference to the Eleusinian Mysteries, and to Diotima’s erotic ascent in the *Symposium*, then this ought to tell us something about the human being’s relationship to the divine (or the hyperuranian realm, the things themselves, *to on*, beauty and virtue).

There are two important lessons that we should take away from Socrates’ definitions of shape and that of colour. First, Socrates’ definition of shape, that it always accompanies colour – and to a lesser degree that it is the limit of a solid – leaves shape, the thing to be defined, whole and intact, rather than breaking it up into a multiplicity (Socrates requests that Meno do this for virtue twice at 75a4 and 77a6-9). This itself tells us two things. First, that Socrates prefers these two definitions of shape to the one of colour (which reduces the two things Socrates previously kept distinct and intact: shape and colour) suggests that “the virtue of the definition is precisely that it does not pretend to state what shape is but simply

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<sup>588</sup> Ibid., 76a6-7.

<sup>589</sup> Ibid., 76a8.

<sup>590</sup> Ibid., 76d6-7.

<sup>591</sup> Ibid., 76d8-9.

<sup>592</sup> Ibid., 76e3-4.

<sup>593</sup> Ibid., 76e6-9.

provides a means of recognizing shape in its relation to something else”.<sup>594</sup> What Gonzalez says of this is that, “[w]hat Socrates may be trying to show is that definitions can help us identify things as long as they are not mistakenly taken to express what the thing being identified *itself is*”.<sup>595</sup> Instead, what definitions can do is to help us recognize the thing when we find it (just as second-hand reports about Meno can provide information that will help us to identify him when we find him, without themselves providing the acquaintance with Meno that would give us first-hand knowledge). I think, further, that this suggests that virtue, too, must be kept intact. We saw earlier how our present definition of virtue – a recognition of one’s own ignorance and an attendant desire to examine oneself and the world – helped us to identify virtue (*aretē* generally) when we found it (e.g. courage in the *Laches*), and how it is appropriate to an understanding of virtue which keeps it intact (i.e. What is common to all the virtues?). This is also suggested in the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium* where Socrates describes recollection as an understanding which passes “from a plurality of perceptions to a unity gathered together by reasoning”,<sup>596</sup> and Diotima says that, in ascending the ladder of love, the erotic man will move from the love of a plurality (bodies, institutions, etc.) eventually to the love of beauty itself.

The second thing that we learn from Socrates’ definitions of shape is that perhaps virtue cannot be adequately defined, as any definition, rather than providing knowledge, presupposes such knowledge (Socrates’ definitions of shape presuppose knowledge of colour, limit, and solid). Gonzalez shows us how Socrates’ definition is circular<sup>597</sup> and, perhaps more disturbing, does not even answer the ‘what is x?’ question, but rather tells us

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<sup>594</sup> Gonzalez, *Dialectic and Dialogue*, 164.

<sup>595</sup> Ibid.

<sup>596</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 249c1-2.

<sup>597</sup> Gonzalez, *Dialectic and Dialogue*, 162-163.

something *about* shape without telling us *what shape itself is*. Yet, Gonzalez suggests, Socrates' intention may be to show Meno that no definition of virtue can provide us with knowledge of its nature.<sup>598</sup> This would be the case if everything that we have said so far about knowledge of virtue is true (that is, if it tells us something *about* virtue without giving us knowledge of *what virtue itself is*).<sup>599</sup> Thus, this example does tell us something important about the human being's relationship to the divine (*to on*).

We can see in Meno the same stubborn resistance to questioning that we saw in Protagoras. Where Protagoras insists that he has knowledge of the matter at hand, Meno insists on his own method (addressing the properties of a thing without addressing what the thing is) and his own criteria for an answer (he prefers Gorgias-style answers that are eloquent, that use sophisticated terminology, and that appeal to thinkers and theories that he already knows and admires).<sup>600</sup> Both Protagoras and Meno, then, prove immune to questioning.<sup>601</sup>

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<sup>598</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>599</sup> It is useful to note here that it is the man who thinks that he has an adequate definition of virtue who proves to be most immune to questioning and thus seems to lack real knowledge of virtue. See both Meno and Protagoras.

<sup>600</sup> T. Ebert makes this point on p.187 in "Recollection in Plato's *Meno*", where he says that "it is not the quality of the definition offered that makes an impression on him, but simply the use of the sort of philosophy known to him from his revered teacher Gorgias".

<sup>601</sup> Zuckert places the *Meno* in what she calls the third stage of Socratic philosophizing, where Plato turns his readers' attention back to the Socratic search for wisdom and allows them to see the philosophical and personal results of this search along with the characteristic misunderstandings. In this dialogue, we see Meno's failed attempt to follow Socrates towards a knowledge of virtue. On Zuckert's account, in the *Meno* Socrates reduces his interlocutors to a state of *aporia* and then holds out to them the promise of learning. This is the purpose, holds Zuckert, of Socrates' demonstration with Meno's slave: Socrates reduces the slave to a state of *aporia* and then leads him towards knowledge, or true opinion which might become knowledge, through dialectical questioning. This demonstration is intended to show Meno that we can indeed search for that which we do not know (in fact, Zuckert considers Meno's paradox an eristic and invalid problem [Zuckert, *Plato's Philosopher*, 571], and holds that in searching for knowledge of virtue, for instance, Socrates first shows his interlocutor that he does not know what virtue is and then tries to lead him towards knowledge, or true opinion, on the subject). After the geometrical proof with the slave, however, Meno is no more inclined to take up the question of what virtue is than he was before the proof. One acquires practical wisdom, though, through dialectical questioning of others along with oneself, a practice in which Socrates engages and Meno refuses.

With Meno, however, we see Socrates make a second attempt with his method of hypothesis. A major difficulty with this part of the dialogue is that much of Socrates' argument in demonstrating that virtue is gotten by divine dispensation is eristic. However, I contend that Socrates uses this faulty argument because Meno will not catch its flaws and that the goal of this exchange is to have Meno agree that virtue is gotten by divine dispensation and that, where virtue is concerned, a man who can create another like himself would be "a solid reality among shadows".<sup>602</sup>

The major fault with what Socrates says when hypothesizing about virtue centers around his claim at 98c3-5, that recollection is "working out the reason", he says, "as we agreed earlier". The first problem with this claim is this: If recollection is working out the reason (turning true opinion into knowledge through repeated questioning),<sup>603</sup> then we are still unable to answer Meno's paradox, i.e. we are unable to distinguish true opinions from false ones.<sup>604</sup> However, Socrates has Meno agree to this point because it is a necessary step in having him agree to the conclusion, that virtue is gotten by divine dispensation. Socrates uses this definition of *anamnesis* in order to distinguish between knowledge and true

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There is a further similarity between Protagoras and Meno. Like Protagoras, Meno is relying on external sources of information. "Meno throughout the discussion is not giving original answers based on his own self-reflection and inquiry but is instead simply relying on what he has heard the sophists say. This will prove to be the only kind of 'recollection' of which Meno is capable" (Gonzalez, *Dialectic and Dialogue*, 159). In chapter one, I suggested that Protagoras' second mistake (his first being his certainty and presumed knowledge) was that he is working only with second-hand reports; he is relying on what others have said about virtue. If knowledge of virtue is a sort of acquaintance, then neither Protagoras nor Meno will come to have real knowledge if they continually rely on the authority of others (this would be comparable to the person who insists that he knows Meno based on information that others have told him *about* Meno, while refusing to actually meet Meno and become acquainted with him). This is also Aristodemus' problem in the *Symposium*, when he refuses to figure things out for himself and relies instead on the authority of Socrates.

<sup>602</sup> Plato, *Meno*, 100a7.

<sup>603</sup> This is first asserted at *ibid.*, 85c11-d1.

<sup>604</sup> See Gonzalez, "Interpreting *Anamnesis* in Plato", 279.



opinion, which he will have to do in order for Meno to agree that, although virtue cannot be knowledge, it can be true opinion.<sup>605</sup>

Socrates commits his other blatant fallacy in support of this point. First he says that “in insisting that knowledge was a *sine qua non* for right leadership, we look like being mistaken”.<sup>606</sup> Then he suggests that true opinion is just as good a guide as knowledge for the purpose of acting rightly.<sup>607</sup> Meno, however, points out that “the man with knowledge will always be successful, and the man with right opinion only sometimes”,<sup>608</sup> to which Socrates replies, “Will he not always be successful so long as he has the right opinion?”<sup>609</sup> It seems that Socrates uses a semantic trick here in order to have Meno agree to this point, that right opinion is as good a guide as knowledge. He is correct in saying that right opinion is as good a guide as knowledge and will always be successful so long as it is *right* opinion. However, this is a trivial statement. This can be demonstrated with a little bit of elementary logic.

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<sup>605</sup> We will see later how *anamnesis* might involve turning true opinion into knowledge, though this cannot be all that *anamnesis* is. The problem, at this point in the dialogue, is that Socrates makes no mention of this being a partial explanation of *anamnesis*. We will see, further, how he uses this claim to support other faulty premises.

<sup>606</sup> Plato, *Meno*, 97a8-9.

<sup>607</sup> Socrates: Let me explain. If someone knows the way to Larissa, or anywhere else you like, then when he goes there and takes others with him he will be a good and capable guide, would you agree?

Meno: Of course.

Socrates: But if a man judges correctly which is the road, though he has never been there and doesn't know it, will he not also guide others aright?

Meno: Yes, he will.

Socrates: And as long as he has a correct opinion on the points about which the other has knowledge, he will be just as good a guide, believing the truth but not knowing it.

Meno: Just as good.

Socrates: Therefore true opinion is as good a guide as knowledge for the purpose of acting rightly (Plato, *Meno*, 97a11-b10).

Note that the example of knowing the way to Larissa suggests knowledge by acquaintance (I am acquainted with the road because I have travelled it before). The man who is acquainted with the road to Larissa is by far the best guide (rather than the man who has second hand knowledge

<sup>608</sup> Plato, *Meno*, 97c6-7.

<sup>609</sup> *Ibid.*, 97c8-9.

Socrates' argument is essentially this: "True opinion is as good a guide as knowledge; it leads you to the same (correct) destination. This is true because, if the destination were not reached, the opinion could not have been true."

Let P = "the opinion is true".

Let Q = "we arrive at the correct destination".

Argument:  $p \rightarrow q$  because  $\sim q \rightarrow \sim p$  (where  $\sim p = \text{not } p$ )

i.e. if  $(\sim q \rightarrow \sim p)$  then  $(p \rightarrow q)$

However,  $p \rightarrow q$  is logically equivalent to  $\sim q \rightarrow \sim p$  (contrapositive)

Let  $r = p \rightarrow q$

$r \equiv \sim q \rightarrow \sim p$

( $r = p \rightarrow q$ , and  $p \rightarrow q \equiv \sim q \rightarrow \sim p$ , then  $r \equiv \sim q \rightarrow \sim p$ )

Then the statement says, if r then r.

Thus, this is a trivial statement and nothing is proven.

There is further trouble with this example. Even if we were to grant these points about true opinion on the basis of Socrates' example of the road to Larissa, there remains an even more obvious problem. Socrates says that we can distinguish true from false opinions on the basis of which ones work (which get us to Larissa) – i.e. if it gets me there, it is a true opinion. However, regarding virtue, how do we know when we have reached our goal and which goals are good? We cannot distinguish true from false opinions on the basis of which work best because we first must establish the goal, which must be a good/excellent (*aretē*) goal. Thus Socrates' argument becomes circular if we use the road to Larissa criteria.

Meno, however, makes only one objection<sup>610</sup> and is quickly silenced. He then goes on to agree with everything that Socrates says.<sup>611</sup>

We saw earlier Ebert demonstrate logical fallacies in Socrates' account of recollection and we saw Meno there as well fail to catch them. Rhodes<sup>612</sup> also suggests that, in the *Symposium*, Socrates uses fallacies in his exchange with Agathon, and there too Agathon fails to catch them.<sup>613</sup> In all cases, however, we can see how Socrates is trying to elevate his interlocutors' opinions. Although his methods may be dubious (using fallacies to trick your partner into agreeing to something), there can be little doubt that he does this.<sup>614</sup> With Agathon, we saw Socrates trying to show the poet that he does not have the knowledge of Eros that he presumed he had. With Meno, in this latter case with the method of hypothesis, I believe that he is attempting to have Meno agree that virtue is gotten by divine dispensation and that the virtuous man who can create another like himself would be like a solid reality among shadows.<sup>615</sup> In fact, if Meno adopts this opinion and then submits to further questioning, he may eventually turn true opinion into knowledge.<sup>616</sup>

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<sup>610</sup> Plato, *Meno*, 97c 6-7.

<sup>611</sup> T. Ebert draws our attention to Meno's numerous failures to catch Socrates' logical tricks, and jokes that "the art of dialectical arguing as yet has not reach Thessaly" ("*Recollection in Plato's Meno*", 196).

<sup>612</sup> Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 309-312.

<sup>613</sup> See chapter two, pp.67-68 and Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 309-312. We need not necessarily take the fallacies as such, though, to see this point in the *Meno*.

<sup>614</sup> It is interesting to note here that Socrates might simply be using good persuasion techniques. When speaking with someone who holds an opinion different from yours, it is better to suggest to them something close to what they believe in order to sway them in your direction. I think that this is clearly what Socrates is doing with Meno. We might also refer back here to chapter two (p.67-68) regarding what Rhodes calls Diotima's sophism when speaking to Agathon: As with Agathon, what Socrates says here may be true with respect to the level at which Meno finds himself.

<sup>615</sup> Plato, *Meno*, 100a1-7.

<sup>616</sup> Although we have seen that turning true opinion into knowledge cannot be *all* that *anamnesis* is (as this does not explain how we can distinguish true opinions from false ones), Socrates does say twice that *anamnesis* involves "working out the reason" (Plato, *Meno*, 98a3), or turning true opinion into knowledge. This is compatible with the interpretation being put forward here, as we saw how it is that we come to knowledge of virtue through *anamnesis*, and we can see now how a true opinion (or any opinion for that matter) might inspire a desire for truth and, upon being subjected to philosophical scrutiny, might lead one to knowledge, like with Meno's slave (of course an opinion might accomplish the exact opposite as we saw in

This last thing that Meno agrees to, that virtue is gotten by divine dispensation, fits with our reading so far of *eros*, *anamnesis*, and knowledge of virtue in Plato's *Protagoras*, *Symposium*, and *Meno*. Further, we saw how *eros* helped us to understand *anamnesis* earlier in this dialogue. I believe this reading makes sense of this last part as well. The reason for this is as follows.

If Meno refuses to engage in the question *What is virtue?* and he misses all of the points that Socrates was trying to make regarding knowledge of virtue, then the next best thing that Socrates can do is to instill in Meno a true opinion about virtue which may eventually, upon philosophical questioning, be turned into knowledge.

At the height of the erotic ascent, as it is described in the *Symposium*, one comes into contact with the hyperuranian realm, the divine, or the things themselves [*to on*]. In Diotima's myth of Eros, we see how it is the divine element in us,<sup>617</sup> and thus it is in this sense that virtue is gotten by divine dispensation.<sup>618</sup>

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Protagoras and Meno). Socrates might thus instill a true opinion in Meno with the hope that it will eventually lead him to knowledge. Even if this does not happen, a *true opinion* (that is, Meno having an opinion which Socrates knows to be true) will at least be a better guide to action than a false opinion (Meno having an opinion which Socrates knows to be false).

It is interesting to note at this point the relationship between knowledge, true opinion, and what Socrates says about the virtuous man who can create another like himself (that he would be a solid reality among the shadows). True opinion might be a decent guide to action (though not as good as knowledge) only if there is something like this, someone who can distinguish true opinions from false ones. It would be this person alone who could sort out all the true from false opinions and thus be like a solid reality among the shadows. Of course, we have to be careful with such speculation, as this puts us in danger of an infinite regress: if it is only the man who knows who can sort out true from false opinion, then who was the 'first man' who knew? And how did he know he was correct (if he did not have another man to tell him)? This, however, is beyond the scope of this paper, and this point about the man who can sort out true opinions from false ones is not essential to the rest of this interpretation.

<sup>617</sup> With regard to Eros being the divine element in us, Rhodes says that "real virtue can be won only by embracing the gift of Poros that allows us to participate in the androgynous engendering of true speeches about wisdom, moderation, courage, and justice" (*Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 362).

We also see in Plato's *Phaedrus*, Socrates say that *eros* is a sort of madness which is a gift of the gods (Plato, *Phaedrus*, 245c1-2).

<sup>618</sup> We also saw references to divine dispensation, inspiration, and intervention numerous times throughout the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus* in reference to *eros* and virtue.

Further, Socrates says that a virtuous man who can create another like himself would be like Tiresias was among the dead, the only one in the underworld who kept his wits, “a solid reality among shadows”.<sup>619</sup> This calls to mind Socrates’ account of the cave in the *Republic*,<sup>620</sup> where a prisoner may have his shackles removed and be led out of the cave to walk around in the light of the sun. Like the erotic ascent in the *Symposium*, the person who ascends to the love of beauty itself, the person who climbs up out of the cave, may become acquainted with the real virtue, and not its semblance. This virtue, and this man [sic], would indeed be a solid reality among the shadows were he to descend again and attempt to lead others to the same vision. I believe that Socrates is referring to himself as this character, and is giving us and his interlocutors clues as to what constitutes, in this case, knowledge of virtue. His disclaimer and the end of the *Meno* reflects this: we shall not understand the truth of this matter until we discover *what virtue is* by ascending with Socrates. Unfortunately, *Meno* fails to do this.

At the very end of the dialogue, Socrates says to Meno, “Now it is time for me to go, and my request to you is that you will allay the anger of your friend Anytus by convincing him that what you now believe is true. If you succeed, the Athenians may have cause to thank you”.<sup>621</sup> I have suggested a number of things which help us to understand this last remark of Socrates.

Anytus is one of Socrates’ main accusers in the trial which eventually led to his death.<sup>622</sup> I believe that Plato is foreshadowing this even in the *Meno*, and that reading the

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<sup>619</sup> Plato, *Meno*, 100a7.

<sup>620</sup> Plato, *Republic*, Book VII.

<sup>621</sup> Plato, *Meno*, 100b5-c2.

<sup>622</sup> Debra Nails, “Socrates.” *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*. Metaphysics Research Lab, CSLI, Stanford University, 2009. Web. July 5 2011.

text thusly will help our understanding both of Socrates' remarks here and of *anamnesis*, *eros*, and virtue.<sup>623</sup>

How will Meno be able to allay the anger of Anytus with what he now believes and why might the Athenians have cause to thank him if he does so? This makes sense if we accept my suggestion that the goal of Socrates' method of hypothesis was to have Meno agree that virtue is gotten by divine dispensation and that the virtuous man who can create another like himself would be a solid reality among shadows. First, if virtue is gotten by divine dispensation, and if it is this divine intervention that tames the lover's black horse (the part of the soul that pulls toward base, earthly things, that turns away from the divine and desires a tyrannical power over others), then if Anytus accepts this – that virtue is gotten by divine dispensation – and attempts to cultivate a proper *eros* (or possibly even if he accepts this and takes no further action), then his murderous rage against Socrates would be tamed.<sup>624</sup> Why might the Athenians have cause to thank Meno for this? If Socrates believes himself to be this virtuous man, this mystagogue who can lead others to a vision of beauty itself and the hyperuranian realm, thus creating others like himself, then if he is allowed to live and continue discourse in the *polis*, he might succeed in creating another man [sic] like himself, who would be a solid reality among the shadows and, we might assume, would be an invaluable political (and otherwise) resource to his fellow Athenians.

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<sup>623</sup> I am assuming, then, that Plato wrote this dialogue after Socrates' death. As the debate over when Plato wrote the dialogues is a contentious and dangerous issue, I do not intend to enter into that discussion here. However, my suggestion of foreshadowing fits with the text and the rest of my interpretation and, as we will see, it makes sense of Socrates' last remarks in the *Meno*. I thus ask my readers to accept my assertion on this basis. Moreover, it should be noted that the rest of my interpretation does not depend on this point.

<sup>624</sup> This is because it is through divine inspiration that virtue may be had by the soul, and in this case it is a very particular sort of divine inspiration, namely the cultivation of a proper *eros* which may lead one to recollect the Forms. This *Eros* acts as a messenger from gods to mortals, leading one in the direction of true good and away from pseudo-goods that appear good from a limited perspective. This would bring Anytus one step closer to the summit of the erotic ascent, where his soul would be quickened by virtue's self and which would make him, one might imagine, less murderous.

## CONCLUSION

We have seen how reading Plato's *Protagoras*, *Symposium*, and *Meno* together gives us insight into *eros*, *anamnesis*, and knowledge of virtue. We have seen further how this reading solves numerous problems in both the *Protagoras* and the *Meno*.

I have shown that Socrates demonstrates the inadequacy of the understanding of virtue held by Protagoras in the eponymous dialogue; he puts forward a positive teaching of his own in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, in the form of images and myths; and in the *Meno* Plato then returns the reader's attention back to the Socratic search for wisdom, especially concerning the good life for human beings. It is in this return that we find the answers to the questions about the nature of virtue and its teachability.

According to this interpretation of these three dialogues, virtue *is* teachable, though not in the way that either Meno or Protagoras believe it to be. Virtue cannot be taught in the sense that teaching puts information or knowledge into someone that was not there before. One can, however, have a desire for virtue (or knowledge of virtue) awakened in one's soul and then ascend with Socrates to an acquaintance with virtue. Thus, in 'teaching' virtue, Socrates is acting more like a mystagogue than an instructor. This is because virtue is not something that can be taught in the way that Meno and Protagoras believe it can. Knowledge of virtue requires firsthand acquaintance with virtue, as virtue involves a recognition of one's own ignorance and an attendant desire to examine oneself and the world. Moreover, this acquaintance with virtue requires a return to the original *pathos* which gave rise to philosophical discourse. This explains the return to the question of virtue in the *Meno*,<sup>625</sup> and shows us how it is that we see virtue enacted in the *Meno*. This further explains why the

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<sup>625</sup> If we follow Socrates throughout we have a desire for truth awakened in us (*Protagoras*), the erotic ascent where we might become acquainted with virtue's self (*Symposium*), and finally a return to the original question that gave rise to philosophical discourse (*Meno*).

*Protagoras* ends in *aporia* and why Meno fails to follow Socrates. It also helps us to understand Socrates' method of hypothesis and his final remarks in the *Meno*. Finally, this reading of *eros*, *anamnesis*, and virtue together helps us to solve the problem of Socrates' disclaimer in the *Meno*, as it gives us insight into how we are to understand his account of recollection and what it is that always exists in the soul.

We have seen that Socrates' positive account, in the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*, consists of the erotic ascent; this is accomplished through an *anamnestic eros*, as described in both Rhodes and Gonzalez. *Anamnesis* must be present at the beginning of the ascent, as an awakening of the desire for truth. We saw this initially in the *Protagoras* where Socrates is always *returning* – returning, I contend, to the *pathos* which originally gives rise to philosophical discourse, which is in essence a desire for truth. After the desire for truth is awakened, we, as readers, may ascend with Socrates to the hyperuranian realm, and come to love or desire beauty itself. This process is largely described in the *Symposium*, though we see it as well in the *Phaedrus*. True knowledge of virtue comes at the height of this ascent. This knowledge is knowledge-by-acquaintance because our souls have been informed by virtue.

In the *Meno*, we have a return to Socratic philosophizing as virtue enacted. We also return to the question of virtue and, after having undergone the erotic ascent, we may recall what we learned at its height which will ultimately require a return to the question of virtue. We also saw why Meno fails to follow Socrates in this dialogue and we gained a better understanding of Socrates' method of hypothesis, where he concludes that virtue is gotten by divine dispensation. Thus, by drawing on the idea of recollection, as it appears in the *Meno* and as it is developed and associated with *eros* in the intervening dialogues, we were able to answer the two questions posed about virtue: What is virtue? Is virtue teachable?



This also gives us a double reading of *anamnesis*, so that it is not just as awakening of the desire for truth, but once this desire is awakened and we ascend to the hyperuranian realm, we can say that it is also a recollection of what we learned at the height of this ascent (which itself is importantly inseparable from the original awakening of the desire for truth).

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