

What's love got to do
with it?



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In Plato's *The Symposium*, Plato details the events of a dinner party, a symposium for which the work derives its namesake, comprised of a group of seemingly well-educated individuals. Plato tells the story of the symposium and the dialogue of the individuals in attendance through a framed narrative, utilizing the character of Apollodorus, one of the attendees at the party, to relate the story to an unnamed companion. The party is hosted and held in honor of the tragedian Agathon, in celebration of his recent victory in a drama writing contest. In addition to Apollodorus, the party is attended by Phaedrus, Pausanias, Eryximachus, Aristophanes, Agathon, and Socrates. At Phaedrus's suggestion, the conversation switches to the topic of Eros, the Greek god of love. Each of the individuals take a turn in making a speech in praise of Eros. Socrates, poised by Plato to be the protagonist of *The Symposium* by allowing him to speak last with the longest dialogue, presents an argument regarding Eros that differentiates itself from those of his peers. Socrates's argument is unique in that he begins his argument by questioning and refuting the claims made by the previous speaker, the playwright Agathon, through a style of Socratic questioning that is characteristic of Plato's works. Furthermore, the bulk of Socrates's argument is built upon a foundation that is not wholly his, but rather of Diotima of Mantinea, a character Socrates claims to have taught him all that he knows in regards to Eros and love. Although each of speakers present a unique perspective and interpretation of Eros, the speech made by Socrates — although it might be more justly referred to as Diotima's speech — is arguably the most important made in regards to Eros in *The Symposium*. Furthermore, the evidence by which Diotima uses to substantiate her argument makes it the most convincing of those made by Socrates's colleagues.

Socrates presents the basis of Diotima's argument early in his speech, noting Diotima's belief that eros is "of the good being one's own always" (206a).

This is taken to mean that people only love that which is good for them. The object of love, then, its eternal desire, becomes the want to possess this goodness forever. With this, Diotima refutes the earlier claim made by

Aristophanes that a person will always pursue their other half. For Diotima, this person would only pursue their other half if it is what is good for them.

Diotima attempts to defend this rather bold and startling claim by raising a number of subsequent questions, the first seeking to answer that which is the purpose of love. Indeed, if the object of love is to possess that which is good, what then becomes the purpose of love in order to reach that end?

Diotima claims that this purpose is to bring "birth in beauty both in terms of the body and in terms of the soul" (206b). The difficulty, therein, becomes connecting this somewhat abstract claim to Diotima's definition of love.

Diotima believes that all human beings are pregnant, "both in terms of the body and in terms of the soul" (206c), and it is the natural process that drives their desire to give birth in both of these aspects. This birth can only

be one forged in beauty, as birthing requires the harmony of both a man and a woman. Likewise, the process of reproduction is a divine one, as it is the closest feat that mere mortals can accomplish to achieving immortality. In

that respect, reproduction is an immortal process, as it allows mortals to continue living through their offspring, both in body and in soul. Love, then,

is not purely the desire for which is beautiful, as Socrates earlier stated, but rather the want of reproduction in birth and beauty. This aspect of

immortality connects the two elements of Diotima's argument. Love's

purpose of birthing beauty substantiates Diotima's earlier notion that love is

the eternal want of that which is good, as reproduction provides mortals a means to immortality, albeit a means more of the soul than of the body. For love to want to possess good forever, it must want the immortality made possible by reproduction. The very fact that humanity has continued to reproduce throughout the history of mankind is additional evidence that defends Diotima's claim. It is human nature to desire to reproduce after reaching adolescence and young adulthood. This urge to reproduce ensures the immortality of the human race. The love that enables the continued progression of humanity, then, undoubtedly becomes the love of that which is good for oneself.

Diotima then shifts her argument from speaking on the love regarding human beings to the love that can be found within animals, stating that “ in the eros of the beasts ... the mortal nature seeks as far as possible to be forever and immortal” (207d). The same argument that was applied to humankind can be applied to lesser beings as well, further substantiating Diotima's initial claim. Like humans, animals with far less intellectual capacity have an innate desire to achieve immortality, and have found closest means to accomplish this goal to be reproduction. As this example demonstrates, the notion that love is the want of that which is good for oneself is a universal one, capable of being applied not only to human beings, but also to lesser animals and creatures.

Diotima's speech then branches on to the a more in-depth discussion of the aspect of reproduction, this means by which mortals are able to seeming obtain immortality, stating that “ it is always leaving behind another that is young to replace the old” (207d). This reproduction is not solely exclusive in

terms of reproducing new individuals through offspring, but can also take place within a single individual. This is evident by the fact that no single individual stays identical from the moment of their birth to their death. Although one might be said to be the same individual and the same being, the constant reproduction of their body and soul results in countless cycles of death and rebirth within same person. While the body ages physically, so does the soul and the mind with new knowledge and mannerisms. Diotima applies the same logic to studying, claiming that “forgetfulness is the exiting of science; and studying, by instilling a fresh memory again ... preserves the science” (208a). For the purposes of attaining immortality, this constant process of reproduction leads humans to honor that which are their offspring. It is this nature that has lead both humans and lesser beings to develop a nurturing and protective attitude towards their children, for their children are, in essence, their immortality. Diotima goes on to apply this same principle to other things that humans hold to a high standard or value, such as honor and virtue. In doing so, Diotima cites the actions of Alcestis and Achilles, stating that they were not done out of love for Admetus nor Patroclus, but rather for an “immortal remembering of their virtue” (208d). This refutes Phaedrus’s earlier claim that these actions were self-sacrificial for the good of their lover and beloved. This discussion ties into Diotima’s claim and substantiates the notion that love is the desire for what is good for oneself, as the want to attain immortality of that which humans perceive to be good for them is what ultimately drives human actions.

The next portion of Diotima’s speech contains perhaps the oddest elements of her argument, wherein she discusses the pregnancy found in men, stating

that “ they turn rather to women ... furnishing for themselves through the procreation of children immortality, remembrance, and happiness (as they believe) for all future time” (208e). Although these men act in accordance to Diotima’s claim of striving for immortality, better yet, she claims, is those who are pregnant not in body, but rather in soul. These individuals, “ all the poets and all the craftsmen” (209a) according to Diotima, seek those who are beautiful in the soul, so that they are able to procreate and birth in the soul. These individuals are able to obtain a far greater kind of immortality, as by giving birth in the soul, they are truly remembered forever, memorialized through fame and memory. Diotima’s main argument shines through in both of these instances. Regardless of the immortality that one wishes or is able to attain, it nevertheless remains an essential part of one’s well-being. The pursuit to attain it, then, becomes an act of love itself, seeking what is good for oneself and attempting to make this goodness last forever.

Diotima’s conclusion to her speech establishes an outline of what she refers to as the rites of love, a seemingly complex ladder to attain the greatest love. First, one loves one body alone. This leads one to realize that “ beauty that is in any body whatsoever is related to that in another body” (210b). This realization compels the individual to seek beauty in all bodies and become a lover of all beautiful bodies. Following this, one finds that beauty in the soul is a far more substantial one than beauty in the body. This argument is in accordance with Diotima’s earlier claim of birth of the soul being a greater feat than birth of the body. An individual, seeking love in the soul, is opened to seeing “ the beautiful in pursuits and laws ... and the beauty of sciences” (210c). The last step of Diotima’s ladder of love involves

the individual giving birth to “ many beautiful and magnificent speeches and thoughts” (210d). This, according to Diotima, allows the individual to birth true virtue, earning the favor of the gods and becoming one of the few who are truly immortal. Although this ladder initially presents itself as a complex, somewhat convoluted means of quantifying love, this odd scale works to defend Diotima’s initial claim of the true meaning of love. Only through a continual effort to seek what is good for oneself is one able to climb Diotima’s proposed ladder of love. Love, then, at every step on this ladder of love, is just that: an effort to obtain that which is good for oneself and retain it until the constant cycle of the immortal reproduction changes one to pursue a higher step on the ladder.

Although Diotima presents a rather convincing argument for love being “ of the good being one’s own always” (206a), it does not come without a number of critical flaws that might lead one to doubt the whole of her argument. Most notably, Diotima’s fundamental argument upon which she develops the rest of her case, the notion that love is always the pursuit of that which is good for oneself, can also be her largest weakness, as the argument could easily be made from an opposing stance that that which one perceives to good for oneself might not always be truly good. Clouded by the fog of judgement and denial that is also a common aspect of human nature, one might not realize that the pursuit of the perceived goodness is actually causing harm to one’s own being. Examples of this include individuals trapped in abusive relationships or unable to escape the allure of drug abuse. It is likely that Plato considered these flaws of her argument, thus, making the decision to make Socrates the last speaker so that he is able to

refute the weaker parts of the preceding speeches while not being questioned himself. Furthermore, Plato positions the entrance of the drunken Alcibiades immediately after Diotima's conclusion, shifting the topic from a discussion of Eros to one of Socrates himself. The introduction of this character, at this particular point, mitigates the opportunity for Socrates's colleagues to cross analyze Diotima's argument.

Diotima's argument is portrayed to the reader by Plato's use of a double framed narrative of sorts, going first through the character of Socrates before going through Apollodorus. It is interesting to note that Plato made the decision to further distance the reader from the dialogue, especially at what appears to be the most critical point of *The Symposium*. Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that the conversation between Diotima and Socrates never even took place, and that the character of Diotima is simply Socrates's fictitious creation, used to further his own argument. The fact that Diotima's character touches upon all of the other speakers substantiate this viewpoint. Her argument refutes claims made by Agathon and Phaedrus, she comes from Manitea, a town mentioned by Aristophanes during his speech, she "caused the onset of the disease to be delayed" (201d), demonstrating her skills as a physician akin to Eryximachus, and she is somewhat similar to the teacher that Pausanias is. Regardless of whether or not Diotima of Manitea was a real individual who conversed with Socrates, one thing remains certain: Her argument regarding the god Eros and love being the pursuit of the good for oneself, substantiated by a large amount of evidence in regards to the immortality of reproduction, has proven to be the most convincing out of those made by the members at the symposium.