

"pregnant in body
and in mind":
reproduction and
immortality in platonic
love



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Not in entire forgetfulness, And not in utter nakedness, But trailing clouds of glory do we come From God, who is our home.- William Wordsworth, Ode:

Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood, 62-65

Though Plato died nearly 2500 years ago, the English language still keeps his definition of love in common usage. To keep a relationship " platonic" means to eliminate its romantic aspect, restricting the partners to intellectual stimulation alone. Modern minds may think that this love is not as fertile as heterosexual romantic love and even consider this asexual affection something other than love, as it bears no children. Plato would respond that intellectual association leads to the creation of timeless ideas, and is therefore a greater love than the physical love which creates children. Plato explores and defends his view of love in the Symposium, specifically in the dialogue between Socrates and Diotima (Symposium, 204e 209e). Plato first defines love by examining the lover, then uses this definition to build an abstract function and purpose of love which places intellectual men above childbearing women. Diotima teaches Socrates that the lover of good things wants to possess them so that he might be happy (204e). This definition of a lover applies to everyone, for Diotima's assumption, supported by Socrates, is that " everyone wants good things to be his own forever." (205a) There is a need to refine this broad definition which would include as lovers those who try to attain the good by any means. The purview of love, in Plato as in common language, is restricted " to those whose enthusiasm is directed at one specific type who are described by the terminology that belongs to the whole class, that of love, loving, and lovers." (205d) She then goes on to knock down Aristophanes' definition of love as searching for one's other half on the grounds that this is only true if being reunited is good, using the <https://assignbuster.com/pregnant-in-body-and-in-mind-reproduction-and-immortality-in-platonic-love/>

example that amputation is acceptable if a limb is seen as diseased. In place of Aristophanes' argument that love is trying to find oneself, Diotima sets up a definition of love, the object of which is "the good" (205e). Naturally, if the object of love is "the good", people who love want to have "the good" forever (206a). The progression from the initial definition of a lover as a concrete individual who wants the good forever to the definition of love as an abstract "desire to have the good forever" (206a) sets up a similar progression from a concrete function of love to an abstract function which is at the core of Platonic love. If the object of love is to have the good forever, the function of love is "giving birth in beauty both in body and in mind." (206b) Diotima begins her explanation of how "all human beings are pregnant in body and in mind" (206c) by discussing the concrete, physical pregnancy of the body. Heterosexual relations and the child a woman bears as a result of them are a beautiful end of love because they perpetuate man. This perpetuation is essential because if love wants to possess the good forever, then love requires the immortality reproduction creates (206a). Reproduction creates immortality because just as a man's body is constantly being renewed and he is still called the man, a man who grows old and leaves a new man in his place is also renewing himself (207d-208b). The shift to the abstract "pregnancy of the mind" hinges on the extension of this analogy to the mind and knowledge, saying that it grows old and must be replaced just like the body (207e-208a). This implies the existence of conceptual children as well as physical ones, and Diotima gives an example of the former by noting man's love for honor, his desire that his name ring down through the ages "it is immortality they are in love with." (208c-e) Just as the pregnancy of a man's body is released through impregnating the

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body of a fertile woman (208e), the pregnancy of a man's mind is released through teaching the mind of another intelligent man (209b). The possibility of a woman having a fit mind for wisdom is not even considered by Plato in this argument. The ultimate function of love is given to be the labor of the pregnant mind as it attempts to bring forth " what it is suitable for a mind to bear and bring to birth," (209a) namely wisdom and other virtues. Chief among the kinds of wisdom, according to Diotima, is moderation and justice " connected with the organization of cities and households." (209a) This kind of wisdom is most important because it creates virtue in other people (209d 209e). The result of this discussion is the creation of a spectrum of love's functions, starting with sexual reproduction as its most base expression and ending with the teaching of justice and moderation as its most noble expression. The logical extension of this emphasis on intellectual reproduction is the glorification of the homoerotic teaching relationship over the familial heterosexual relationship and therefore the superiority of the intellectual man over the childbearing woman. Diotima says that men who try to gain the immortality they love by fathering children are only seeking " what they take to be happiness forever." (208e) The true avenue to eternal remembrance and happiness is to give birth to a conceptual child of virtue. The two fathers of this beautiful child " have a much closer partnership with each other and a stronger bond of friendship than parents have, because the children of their partnership are more beautiful and more immortal." (209c, my emphasis) Though the lover is initially inspired by his beloved's physical as well as mental beauty, the emphasis of the homoerotic relationship Diotima describes is not on the sexual gratification of the lover, but rather on the perpetuation of the lover's virtue and wisdom through teaching the

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beloved. Indeed, a step on the ascent to the ultimate form of love is to see “ beauty of body as something petty.” (210c) Poets like Homer and Hesiod, lawgivers like Lycurgus and Solon men like these have left children of thought to live after them, and are greatly envied, honored, and even revered for it by other men (209d 209e). The physical children of uncertain virtue a man leaves to carry on his name can hardly hold a candle to great mental children, the virtue of which a man fashioned himself. Making such a comparison, it’s no wonder Diotima states, “ Everyone would prefer to have [children of thought] rather than human ones.” (209c 209d) The proposition that the ideas a man bequeaths the world is as much his legacy as his children is not a shocking one. However, Plato’s defining the processes of passing down wisdom in terms of pregnancy and birth causes a restatement of fundamental gender roles. Not only can the man implant the seed of his pregnant body into a woman, he can implant the seed of his pregnant mind into his beloved student, who is also a man. Thus the man, who under the conventional definition of love only had the capacity to transmit physical fertility, gains the capacity both to transmit and to receive the germ of mental fertility, the revolutionary concept of Platonic love. Some have said that men are jealous of women’s procreative power and through culture attempt to minimize the importance of women. Perhaps this is an expression of “ womb envy,” giving men the gift of a kind of childbirth nobler and more important than that of women. Whatever the reason for its creation, the concept of Platonic love is a beautiful affirmation of the human mind’s fecundity. Now that culture has admitted women into the ranks of intellectual humans, maybe a man shouldn’t be so disappointed when a woman he admires turns down his sexual advances, saying she wants to <https://assignbuster.com/pregnant-in-body-and-in-mind-reproduction-and-immortality-in-platonic-love/>

keep the relationship “ Platonic.” He might end up having children with her after all, perhaps bearing them himself!