

Socrates, Alcibiades, and the pursuit of beauty



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The logistical problems of everyday human life are often concerned with the pursuit of love and beauty. The impracticalities of actively chasing after phenomena that we do not fully understand are considerable – unless, of course, you're Socrates. In Plato's *Symposium*, Socrates, in his spoken recollection of a conversation with the priestess Diotima, attempts to define love, and outlines a clear, step-by-step method of how to fully appreciate love by pursuing beauty and knowledge. These stages of the pursuit of beauty, a "ladder of love", are analyzed as a practice when Socrates' would-be lover Alcibiades gives a speech both praising and criticizing the old philosopher and his way of life. Alcibiades' speech reveals the implications, both positive and negative, of following Socrates' teachings in a material manner, and reveals the ultimate impacts of the pursuit of beauty.

Socrates' speech is hardly ambiguous in detailing how a lover ought to engage with beauty. The speech, Socrates' retelling of a dialogue between himself and Diotima (likely an invention of Socrates), first defines Love. Love is, to Diotima, a being in between man and god, a clever child of *Wherewithal* and *Wit* who spends his time hunting for truth and wisdom. Love is a brilliant speaker, dresses crudely and walks around barefoot, and is neither materially poor nor rich (203d). The parallels between Diotima's description of Love and Socrates himself are clear – Love is a philosopher, in pursuit of knowledge, exactly like Socrates; moreover, Socrates is described earlier in the text usually barefoot and unclean (176a), and relies heavily on the hospitality of strangers, while avoiding serious poverty. Clearly, the Love Diotima is describing is representative of philosophers, and specifically

Socrates, so it follows that the pursuits of Diotima's Love may also run parallel with the pursuits of Socrates.

Living in harmony with love, Diotima goes on, is the desire to be immortal, by means of "conception and birth in beauty" and knowledge of beauty (206e). The chase after the knowledge of beauty is the fuel of love. The pursuit of beauty is a very particular process, known as the "ladder of love". The process begins with a love of the physical, then ascends to a love of the sciences and then to a love of pure beauty (209a-211a). It is important to note the symptoms Diotima describes as part of the ascension of the ladder. The lover is described as bursting to share their love, initially in a sexual manner, but eventually in terms of a relationship based purely on dialogue and the pursuit of knowledge (206e). Additionally, the lover who has ascended to the highest level of the pursuit of beauty will lose all interest in mere physical beauty; they will transcend customs and conventional beauty and instead see beauty as a purer thing, looking over manners of beauty they had previously been fixated on (211d). It is by observing beauty in this pure manner that a lover can find happiness. These symptoms of pursuing beauty are manifest in a lover, so it is reasonable to hypothesize that if "Diotima" intended Love to be Socrates, he will also possess these symptoms.

Next comes Alcibiades' drunken speech, an "ode" to the old philosopher himself that in essence acts as a response to Socrates' process of love. Alcibiades details how, as a younger, handsome man, he became seduced by Socrates' brilliant speeches, only to be rejected by the ugly old philosopher, who was immune to his physical charms (219c). In fact, Socrates, by Alcibiades' account, has little care for physical pleasures at all, never losing

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himself in them; yet, when he does begrudgingly indulge in wine and good food, he enjoys them more than anyone else (220a). Socrates has no need for physical pleasures, but he still seems to find a particular beauty in them that others do not.

Alcibiades also indicates that Socrates has little interest in the customs of society, claiming that he cares little for them, saying,

“...he couldn't give a damn whether a boy is beautiful or rich or famous or any of the things most people care about. I tell you he has contempt for all of that...” (216e)

Socrates finds some beauty in the physical, but does not lust after the physical; similarly, he does not lust after the customary or the societal. As Alcibiades evidences, Socrates appears to be a prime example of a lover of pure beauty, as outlined by Diotima; he is above both the physical and the customary.

If Socrates is this perfect lover, can Alcibiades' speech tell us more about what it means to be this kind of lover, and the difficulty of devotedly living the life of the Lover of pure beauty? Does this manner of living demand sacrifice? Most importantly, how do Diotima's heady and idealized instructions materialize in everyday life?

Firstly, it seems obvious that even if Socrates' manner of living is beneficial for himself, it can be harmful to those around him. Alcibiades was clearly emotionally damaged in a permanent way by Socrates' romantic rejection, a rejection that came directly as a result of Socrates' distance from the

physical. Alcibiades additionally alludes to the possibility that he is not the only one among the elite of Athens that has been emotionally damaged by Socrates (222b). For those who cannot understand the knowledge Socrates has acquired and are confused by his peculiarly principled lifestyle, hurt will ensue.

Moreover, towards the end of Alcibiades' speech, it is made clear that Socrates has acted in ways that seem to be in conflict with Diotima's idealized pursuit of beauty. Yes, he spends most of his time contemplating knowledge, completely isolated from the outside world, but he also risks his life to save the life of Alcibiades during war (220e). This sacrifice seems to be incompatible with the singular pursuit of beauty; how can saving the life of one superficially beautiful person compare to encountering pure beauty itself? This apparent diversion from the path towards knowledge could represent one of two things: either Socrates occasionally abandons his pursuit of knowledge for other ideals – which seems unlikely – or, most probably, his pursuit of beauty has made him into a person who is more capable of expressing love in a nuanced way. Perhaps Socrates rescued Alcibiades not because he cared for him and not because he was superficially beautiful, but because his existence itself contained pure beauty, a form reflected in all beautiful existence. By ascending the ladder, Socrates gained the ability to see the pure beauty present in all beautiful things, and thus values the beauty of life.

Socrates' speech detailing Diotima's method is an outline for how to immerse oneself in beauty; Alcibiades' speech is a portrayal of the reality of living out a life immersed in an understanding of beauty. While the life of the

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philosopher of beauty may not be as pure and uncomplicated as Diotima preaches, and may even result in the harming of others, it is ultimately a life that can result in a special empathy for the beauty of others. Socrates, in studying beauty and the forms, has discovered the universality of the beautiful; he is not attracted by the physical or ethical manifestations of beauty, but by beauty itself, and as a result, his life is one that rejects individual beautiful aspects of things, but embraces kind acts towards the ideal beauty he sees in others.