

Symposium



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Symposium Plato - 360 B. C. E. Socrates The protagonist of the Symposium, as with most of Plato's dialogues. Socrates is one of the most important figures in the history of Western philosophy, standing at the origin of the rational tradition initiated by himself, Plato, and Aristotle. Socrates himself arguably never advances any doctrines of his own. Further, in Plato's middle and later dialogues, the figure of Socrates no longer represents the man himself.

Instead, the figure of Socrates is used as a mouthpiece by which Plato advances his own views. Plato presents his mentor in the Symposium as a simple and hardy man, a bit of a flirt, though immune to sexual advances and alcohol alike. Diotima A woman from Mantinea whom Socrates claims once to have met, and who taught him everything he knows on the subject of Love. There is very good reason to doubt if Diotima is meant to represent any real person, especially since her speech is so authoritative and oracular.

Just as Diotima passed her wisdom on to Socrates, so Socrates passes this wisdom on to his friends. Agathon Probably the most significant Greek tragedian after Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, Agathon is presented here as celebrating after his first victory in the dramatic festival. Agathon is presented as young, beautiful, and very clever with words. He is the passive partner in a life-long relationship with Pausanias. None of Agathon's plays survive today. Aristophanes The greatest comic poet of ancient times,

Aristophanes (445 - 385 B. C.) exercised a tremendous influence on the course of comedy in the Western tradition. Many of his plays survive, and in one, *The Clouds*, he presents a satirical attack on Socrates. Nonetheless, the two are presented as friends in the Symposium, despite what effect this attack might have had on Socrates' eventual execution. In the *Apology*, Socrates suggests that Aristophanes' caricature may have had a detrimental

effect on his reputation. Alcibiades A familiar figure to any reader of Thucydides, Alcibiades (c. 450 - 404 B. C.) was a charismatic politician who played a prominent role in the Peloponnesian War. He was responsible for a disastrous attack on Sicily and even turned on Athens and sided with Sparta for a time. He was a friend of Socrates', and his dishonor was one of the factors responsible for Socrates' trial and execution. In the Symposium, he appears as a merry drunk who has a strong attraction to Socrates.

Eryximachus A doctor and a guest at the symposium. He is presented throughout as rather pompous, confident in his medical skills, and insistent on maintaining order. Pausanias Pausanias - The life-long lover of Agathon, Pausanias is another guest at the Symposium. Phaedrus Phaedrus - The main interlocutor of the Platonic dialogue that bears his name, Phaedrus is a handsome young man and an admirer of Socrates. He suggests that all the guests should make speeches in praise of Love. Aristodemus Aristodemus - Another guest at the symposium, a great admirer of Socrates, and the first-level narrator of the events. Apollodorus The second-level narrator of the Symposium, and the first character we encounter in the dialogue.

Apollodorus heard the story of the symposium from Aristodemus and recounts it once more to an unnamed companion. Summary Apollodorus relates to an unnamed companion a story he learned from Aristodemus about a symposium, or dinner-party, given in honor of the tragedian Agathon. Socrates arrives at the party late, as he was lost in thought on the neighboring porch. After they have finished eating, Eryximachus picks up on a suggestion of Phaedrus', that each person should in turn make a speech in praise of the god of Love.

Phaedrus begins by saying that Love is one of the oldest of the gods, and the one that does the most to promote virtue in people. Pausanias follows Phaedrus, drawing a distinction between Common Love, which involves simple and mindless desire, and Heavenly Love, which always takes place between a man and a boy. In the case of Heavenly Love, the boy, or loved one, sexually gratifies the man, or lover, in exchange for education in wisdom and virtue. After Pausanias, Eryximachus, the doctor, speaks, suggesting that good Love promotes moderation and orderliness. Love does not restrict itself to human interaction, but can be found in music, medicine, and much else besides.

The next to speak is the comic poet Aristophanes. Aristophanes draws an engaging myth that suggests that we were once all twice the people we are now, but that our threat to the gods prompted Zeus to cut us in half. Ever since, we have wandered the earth looking for our other half in order to rejoin with it and become whole. Agathon follows up Aristophanes, and gives a rhetorically elaborate speech that identifies Love as young, beautiful, sensitive, and wise. He also sees Love as responsible for implanting all the virtues in us. Socrates questions Agathon's speech, suggesting that Agathon has spoken about the object of Love, rather than Love itself.

In order to correct him, Socrates relates what he was once told by a wise woman named Diotima. According to Diotima, Love is not a god at all, but is rather a spirit that mediates between people and the objects of their desire. Love is neither wise nor beautiful, but is rather the desire for wisdom and beauty. Love expresses itself through pregnancy and reproduction, either through the bodily kind of sexual Love or through the sharing and

reproduction of ideas. The greatest knowledge of all, she confides, is knowledge of the Form of Beauty, which we must strive to attain.

At the end of Socrates' speech, Alcibiades bursts in, falling-down drunk, and delivers a eulogy to Socrates himself. In spite of Alcibiades' best efforts, he has never managed to seduce Socrates as Socrates has no interest at all in physical pleasure.

Soon the party descends into chaos and drinking and Aristodemus falls asleep. He awakes the next morning to find Socrates still conversing. When everyone else has finally fallen asleep, Socrates gets up and goes about his daily business as always.

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