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Socrates in Plato's *Symposium*: a lover of wisdom who lacks wisdom on love

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Abstract: *Traditional interpretations of the Symposium tend to treat Socrates as Plato's mouthpiece, interpreting the philosophical meaning of the text based on Socrates' speech alone. The aim of this essay is to discern whether incorporating literary elements, such as Socrates' characterization and interaction with other characters, into the interpretive process changes the philosophical meaning of the Symposium. For this purpose, I examine two aspects of Socrates' character: his anatomy and his psychology. I demonstrate how Socrates' oddity poses a problem for the theory that he is a mouthpiece for Plato's philosophy verbatim and suggests that, contrary to traditional interpretations, he has not completed the erotic ascent described by Diotima and hence does not possess complete knowledge of love. In my analysis, I pay particular attention to the speech of Alcibiades and the interpretations of Martha Nussbaum and James McGuirk. I then conclude by demonstrating how an ignorant Socrates' characterization and role in the narration illuminates something essentially Platonic: the role of physical love in understanding beauty and the value of lived experience.*

Socrates exists as a fictional character in Plato's dialogues as much as he existed as a figure in Plato's life. One such dialogue is the *Symposium*¹, which recounts a conversation at a dinner party where Socrates is present. Understanding the *Symposium* is largely a matter of understanding what marks Socrates' speech apart from those of the other symposiasts. Traditional readings of the text tend to treat Socrates as Plato's mouthpiece, interpreting the philosophical meaning of the text based on Socrates' speech alone. The aim of this essay is to discern whether incorporating literary elements, such as Socrates' characterization and interaction with other characters, into the interpretive process changes the philosophical meaning of the *Symposium*. For this purpose, I examine two aspects of Socrates' character: his anatomy and psychology. I demonstrate how Socrates' oddity poses a problem for the theory that he is a mouthpiece for Plato's philosophy verbatim and suggests that, contrary to traditional interpretations, he has not completed the erotic ascent described by Diotima and hence does not possess complete knowledge of love. In my analysis, I pay particular attention to the speech of Alcibiades and its respective interpretations by Martha Nussbaum and James McGuirk. I then conclude by demonstrating how an ignorant Socrates' characterization and role in the narration illuminates something essentially Platonic: the role of physical love in understanding beauty and the value of lived experience.

Socrates' Oddity

The most defining characteristic of Socrates is his oddity: both Agathon and Alcibiades call him *átopos*, meaning 'out of place' or strange (175a, 215a). One of the most striking examples of his oddity is his body. As Bruce Rosenstock writes: Socrates "is someone who in his 'strangeness' stands apart from the human condition as subject to the body and its sensitivities".ⁱⁱ For example, when Aristodemus meets Socrates he remarks that Socrates has just bathed and put on fancy sandals, normal events for Athenians but "quite rare events with him" (174a). Indeed, Socrates' body is constantly at odds or "out-of-place" with the norm: he is absent when he is supposed to be present, and vice versaⁱⁱⁱ; he is never described as smiling or laughing, even though the Symposium is full of comic action^{iv}; and when the speeches are completed and the symposiasts drink until overpowered by wine and fatigue, Socrates takes leave, unaffected by either (223b-d). His ability to drink without becoming intoxicated (214a, 220a) shows the same disconnection from his body made apparent when Alcibiades describes Socrates' various super-human feats during wartime (219-221c). Alcibiades recalls that Socrates appeared unaffected by the weather, dressing the same in winter as in summer; and while he ate and drank when food and drink was available, a lack of food did not appear to bother him (ibid.).

The oddity of Socrates' anatomy is complemented by the oddity of his character, the most detailed description of which is given by the young and beautiful Alcibiades. Alcibiades is so in love with Socrates that instead of giving a speech praising Love like the other symposiasts he praises Socrates, whom he calls "the only worthy lover" (218c). He describes Socrates as a man so extraordinarily unlike anyone else that can produce feelings in Alcibiades that nobody else can make him feel (215e, 216b), and inspires him to be "as good a person as possible" (216a). Alcibiades' love for Socrates is based on the beauty he sees underneath his "words as coarse as the hides worn by the most vulgar satyrs" (215b). This is an analog for Socrates' notoriously ugly, satyr-like body: for Alcibiades, Socrates and his philosophical speeches are ugly in outer appearance but beautiful and virtuous inside. Yet Alcibiades also mentions aspects of Socrates that are decidedly less beautiful: notably, Alcibiades criticizes him for his dismissive attitude toward others and lack of empathy (216d-e). While Socrates values beauty and virtue, he disregards physical beauty and prefers isolation to companionship, even if it hurts others. He claimed to love Alcibiades (213c), yet he cruelly rejected him as a lover (218e-219a): he selfishly guarded his wisdom and refused to trade its gold for the bronze of Alcibiades' beauty (219a).

The Erotic Ascent

Socrates' oddity suggests that he has completed the erotic ascent that Diotima taught him. The erotic ascent is a series of steps through which one comes to discover absolute beauty, beginning with the love of a particular beautiful body (210a). The next step is to pass from the particular to the general by realizing that what is actually prized is the beauty of form: realizing this, one comes to value the beauty in all bodies (210b). The third step is passing from love of the body to love of particular souls, passing from physical to moral beauty, and turning away from the world of appearances (210b). The final step involves attaining love of wisdom by studying the beauty of literature, law, and science (210c) before coming to appreciate beauty itself. Taking into account the erotic ascent, Socrates' oddity is more than just idiosyncrasy; it is the very prod-

uct of the “ladder of love”^v, explained in Martha Nussbaum’s terms as “his psychological distance from the world and from his body as an object in the world”.^{vi} He has turned away from the world of appearances, just as the ascent requires: he “has so dissociated himself from his body that he genuinely does not feel its pain, or regard its sufferings as things genuinely happening to him”.^{vii} Hence he is unaffected by wine and weather, as well as the sexual temptation offered by Alcibiades.

Traditional interpretations of the *Symposium* tend to treat Socrates’ oddity only as an interesting piece of biography. According to Martha Nussbaum, Socrates’ oddity suggests something more: it reveals what a human life looks like as one makes the ascent. She writes: “Socrates is put before us as an example of a man in the process of making himself self-sufficient”.^{viii} This self-sufficiency is supposedly beneficial: Socrates does not appear to be affected by bodily discomforts, nor does he seem affected by the chaos and pain involved in loving and desiring another. However, this same oddity that exemplifies the benefits of the ascent also illustrates its drawbacks. As Nussbaum writes: “We are not allowed to have the cozy thought that the ascending man will be just like us, only happier. Socrates is weird”^{ix}. Indeed, Socrates’ weirdness leaves us troubled. He cannot engage in life to the same degree as the other symposiasts: he does not get drunk when he drinks wine, and he is unaffected by, and at times unresponsive to, the passions, speeches, and gestures of others. In fact, he lives so differently from others that he appears not to need or desire them at all. His coldness even makes him seem incapable of love, which is ironic given that his eloquent, wise speech and lofty position on the ascent imply he is an expert on love-matters.

The Speech of Alcibiades

Socrates’ coldness makes him appear incapable of personal love. This apparent incapacity to love another supports one of the main criticisms against the *Symposium*, which is that the ascent fails to recognize the value of individual persons. This view is exemplified by Gregory Vlastos, who argues that the erotic ascent treats the love of another as directed at properties that person possesses as opposed to the person themselves: “we are to love the persons so far, and only insofar, as they are good and beautiful...the individual, in the uniqueness and integrity of his or her individuality, will never be the object of our love”.^x Vlastos sees this unaccountability for the love of whole persons as the central flaw in Plato’s theory.^{xi} In viewing Plato’s theory as such, Vlastos treats Socrates’ speech as the location of philosophical meaning in the text. According to Nussbaum, this is problematic since “it requires us to treat as Plato’s view only the view expressed in the speech of Diotima as repeated by Socrates, and to charge him [Plato] with being unaware of the rest of what he had written”.^{xii} As such, Nussbaum rejects the thesis that the character of Socrates is a mouthpiece for Plato’s views, at least in the case of *The Symposium*. She argues that understanding Plato’s view on Socrates’ speech requires looking at the text in its entirety, and in particular at the speech that directly follows, the speech of Alcibiades.^{xiii}

Although asked to speak of Love, Alcibiades speaks of Socrates and, more specifically, his own experience of loving him. What Alcibiades loves in Socrates is his oddity, his uniqueness: he chooses “his unlikeness to anybody else, whether in the ancient or in the modern world, as calling for our greatest wonder” (221c-d). Alcibiades’ experience of love is a unique experience, both in itself and in connection with his beloved, whom he sees as unique; it is a love for a unique, whole individual; it is the type of love Vlastos claimed as incompatible with Plato’s theory. According to Nussbaum, Alcibiades’ entire speech is “an attempt to grasp and communicate that uniqueness, to make credible and imaginable for us an experience and a feeling that is by its

nature difficult to describe”.^{xiv} To do this Alcibiades makes use of stories, images, and associations. Recall that for Socrates, the beautiful only counts as truth if it is not an image (212a). For Alcibiades, images are invaluable: he “cannot describe the passion or its object in general terms, because his experience of love is an experience that has happened to him this way only once”.^{xv} He needs to appeal to imagination and emotions to communicate what loving Socrates is like as *he himself experiences it*; his experience is a lived experience, unable to be grasped by intellect alone. His speech is thus a counterexample to that of Socrates.

Nussbaum interprets the speech of Alcibiades as explicitly raising and hence officially recognizing the problem with the erotic ascent. Recall the opening remarks of Alcibiades’ speech: he asks Socrates “I shall speak the truth; now, will you permit me?” (214e) before announcing, “The way I shall take, gentlemen, in my praise of Socrates, is by similitudes. Probably he will think I do this for derision; but I choose my similitude for the sake of truth” (215a). Alcibiades presents his speech as truth, and he anticipates criticism from Socrates since the truth he will present is about an individual and told through images and likeness. Since Socratic philosophy entails a turning away from images and the imagination (219a) it “cannot allow the truths of Alcibiades to count as truths” and is hence incompatible with the truths of lived experience.^{xvi} Hence Nussbaum interprets Alcibiades’ speech as an implicit suggestion that “there are truths about love that can be learned only through the experience of a particular passion of one’s own”.^{xvii} As such, she argues that Alcibiades’ speech is Plato’s recognition that the erotic ascent is only a possible choice in the context of the pursuit of the good life, with the experience of physical, personal love offering an alternative choice.^{xviii} In this sense, the *Symposium* reveals what the (Socratic) philosopher must sacrifice: passionate, personal love and the truths it contains, “knowledge of and by flesh”^{xix}.

A Phenomenological Reading

According to James McGuirk, the problem of choice embodied by Socrates and Alcibiades is the problem of lived experience. In highlighting the oddity of Socrates’ body, Alcibiades emphasizes the fact that to be human is to be embodied: our bodies are a crucial part of our identity and experience.^{xx} Yet being embodied entails being vulnerable and capable of suffering as a bodied thing, from the elements but also from one another; and Socrates from his lofty position on the “ladder of love” seems incapable of such suffering.^{xxi} Moreover, his mistreatment of Alcibiades suggests that he is incapable of recognizing, or at the very least caring about, such suffering in others: he “does not need human intimacy and in fact is contemptuous of those who do since it entails an attachment to the flesh and mortal”.^{xxii} This does not make him appear non-human so much as *inhuman*. As McGuirk writes: “he has become like the forms he spends his time contemplating: hard, unresponsive, impassive, and stone-like. He is an immensely impressive character, but his wisdom has made him cold, unfeeling and disconnected”.^{xxiii} Socrates’ oddity can thus be understood as the inhumanity of philosophy. As such, Alcibiades’ speech offers more than just an alternative choice: it is a “critique of the temptation toward a flight from the embodied condition of humanity represented by the Socratic understanding of human love”.^{xxiv}

McGuirk ultimately stands in opposition to this interpretation. He argues that Vlastos and Nussbaum misinterpret the erotic ascent as a rejection of the lower objects of love in favour of the higher ones, when in fact the lower objects are “not so much rejected as they are relativized in terms of ultimate object”.^{xxv} To demonstrate this he employs Husserl’s notion of the phenomenological reduction or *epoché*, the purpose of which is to re-orient oneself from the natural to the

phenomenological attitude to allow for proper reflection. In performing the *epoché*, the natural attitude of our everyday existence (the world as it is *prima facie* and continually “there for us”) is put out of action, neither negated nor doubted but ‘bracketed’ from any judgement about its spatiotemporal, factual being. As McGuirk notes, this re-orientation is not a turn away from the world of the natural attitude so much as a turn towards the everyday world and one’s experience of it as constituted by consciousness.^{xxvi} By deliberately suspending judgement about phenomena in the world, one can analyze a phenomenon as it is given in consciousness; one can analyze lived experience *as one experiences it*. This makes the phenomenological reduction a useful methodological tool for illuminating how consciousness engages with the world during conscious experience and, when employed in the interpretation of the erotic ascent, useful for illuminating the ascending one’s experience of engaging with the world.

Employing the phenomenological reduction while interpreting the erotic ascent allows McGuirk to argue that what appears to be “a turning away from the lower objects of love is in fact a reflective consideration of them as ‘bracketed’ phenomena”.^{xxvii} He argues that when Diotima speaks of rejection of the attachment to a particular body (210b), she means “a rejection of the claim of the particular to ultimacy or to be the final destination of erotic desire” and not a rejection *per se*.^{xxviii} That is, the rejection of lower objects of erotic desire, such as bodies, is a rejection only insofar as it is a rejection of the claim that such objects are beautiful in themselves; it is not a literal turn away from the world of appearances. In fact, the various lower objects are required to understand beauty: whereas the idea of beauty itself is what causes particular beautiful things to appear as beautiful, the idea is only manifest through the lower objects.^{xxix} Hence McGuirk interprets Socrates’ diffidence and apparent coldness as “a function of his withholding the title of ultimacy from lower manifestations of eros and seeking to understand them in a wider context”^{xxx}; a relativization and not an outright rejection of them. It is not that Socrates is refusing to love but that he is purposely distancing himself from the lower objects in order to understand their significance.

The Problem of the Phenomenological Account

While the phenomenological reduction is a useful methodological tool for understanding the erotic ascent, it is insufficient for explaining Socrates’ behavior. As a tool whose ultimate aim is to allow for proper reflection, the reduction is not designed to produce a change in attitude towards the world in terms of behaviour but in terms of thought and understanding. While a change of thought can lead to a change of behaviour, the behaviour Socrates shows is not characteristic of the type one would expect from someone completing the erotic ascent successfully, such that he not only withholds ultimacy from the lower objects but in fact appears to withhold attachment in its entirety. Recall that the purpose of bracketing the world of the natural attitude is to neither reject nor doubt it, but to suspend one’s judgement about it. If Socrates is “bracketing” the lower objects to understand their true significance, he must only suspend his judgement about them: he needs not, and indeed necessarily must not, reject them nor doubt them. However, his method of withholding attachment from the lower objects does in fact appear to be an outright rejection of the world of appearances and embodiment. For example, Socrates might conceivably have abstained from sex while remaining attentive to Alcibiades in other ways, or he might also have had sex with Alcibiades while remaining inwardly distant, yet he avoids both and chooses instead to remain stone-like, cold, and unaffected.

Further, as Nussbaum notes: “There is more than one way to be a statue. But Socrates refuses in every way to be affected”.^{xxxii} Alcibiades compares Socratic virtues to those of the gods

(216d-217a), a fitting comparison given that Socrates' ascent towards the form has transformed him into something of a form himself: he is hard, unchanging; and like a god, he is above the everyday world of appearances and flesh. Thus he escapes the risks of that world: appearances can falter and flesh is vulnerable, something the passionate, all-too human Alcibiades knows well. Alcibiades describes how Socrates' philosophical speeches leave him "in the most painful way that one can be bitten: in my heart, or my soul, or whatever one is to call it" (218e) and he tries to affect Socrates in the same manner, hoping to "pierce" him with words shot like lightning bolts (219b). Yet his attempts are to no avail: Socrates refuses, and remains, to be unaffected in every way; even "words launched 'like bolts' have no effect on him... he is stone, and he turns to stone"^{xxxiii} in that he is infallibly impenetrable. As Nussbaum states: "it is not only Socrates' dissociation from his body. It is not only that he sleeps all night with the naked Alcibiades without arousal. There is... a deeper impenetrability of spirit"^{xxxiii} Hence his distancing goes deeper than "bracketing": his is not a temporary tool used for reflection but a way of life itself.

An Alternate Reading: A Stony and Ignorant Socrates

That Socrates' stoniness is a way of life suggests that, contrary to McGuirk's interpretation, Socrates is in fact outwardly rejecting the lower objects. His impenetrability is not just a distancing but a complete turn away from the truths of Alcibiades' knowledge; from lived experience, from sexual intimacy, even from intellectual conversation. Recall that the purpose of the phenomenological reduction is to re-orient oneself to the phenomenological in order to understand one's own conscious experiences. Yet Socrates ultimately denies himself the ability to study his experiences in outwardly rejecting the everyday world and the experiences it grants: other people, objects, his own body, even language itself. As McGuirk notes, these lower objects are in fact crucial to understanding beauty itself since beauty is only given in the form of these particulars.^{xxxiv} In denying himself the ability to experience these things, Socrates is denying himself the ability to reflect on them, and thus also denying himself the capacity to grasp the beauty that they partake in. This means that, contrary to traditional interpretations of the text, Socrates has *not* completed the erotic ascent: if otherwise, he would know that interpersonal love and wisdom are in fact compatible and could act less cold, perhaps even to the point of complying with Alcibiades' advances. Moreover, he would not withhold attachment to embodiment to the extent that he so dissociates from his own body.

In fact, Socrates' coldness is symbolic of the type of attitude required in the erotic ascent *before* one reaches the stage of being able to love other people and simultaneously be wise: it is precisely because Socrates has not completed the ascent that he is withholding attachment to begin with. His coldness is thus not the product of the ascent so much as the product of his attempt to complete it and thus of his own ignorance about love. Indeed, it is not only within the speech of Alcibiades that Socrates' ignorance about certain truths is made apparent: as Socrates himself claims, the philosopher desires wisdom because of a certain lack of it (203d-204b). Yet if an author presents one theory in which one's ignorance is explicitly made apparent and follows that theory with a counterexample in which one's ignorance on a specific matter is heavily implied, it is safe to assume that what one is ignorant of in the first theory is in fact contained in the second theory. Thus, if Plato intentionally made Socrates ignorant by his own definition within his own speech, and followed this speech with a counterexample in which his ignorance appears to be of the specific truths of lived experience, it can be assumed that what Socrates is ignorant

of is, in fact, the specific truths of lived experience. Indeed, he *must* be, since these truths are incompatible with the erotic ascent.

The Revelation of Alcibiades

If we are to agree with Nussbaum that the speech of Alcibiades represents the truths of lived experience, and that those truths are incompatible with Socratic philosophy as contained in his speech, then we can assume that what Socrates lacks is the truth of lived experience. Yet to believe that Socrates does not possess lived experience of love implies that he does not know all about love; he can know about the erotic ascent and the path towards beauty, but if he lacks bodily, lived experiences he lacks the truth of lived experience including the love of lower objects necessary to enable him to complete the ascent. The particulars or the lower objects are in fact needed in order to give rise to the general; it is through particulars that the universal appears and through particulars that one moves between stages of the ascent. Thus, contrary to Nussbaum's interpretation, lived experience *is* in fact compatible with the erotic ascent. In this sense, Socrates is not the model participant on the ascent: he is not completing it successfully but in fact misinterpreting it, understanding the ascent as Vlastos and Nussbaum do; and his misinterpretation of the ascent leaves him unable to complete it. Hence, he is stuck in this coldness, in this place with and without knowledge, attempting the ascent but ultimately unable to complete it, unable to understand beauty.

In fact, there are subtleties in the text that suggest that the erotic ascent and lived experience are in fact compatible, and that Socrates just does not understand this. Recall the final revelation in the ascent, the revelation of beauty itself, is described as a new vision (210e2-3) seen "all at once":

"when a man has been thus far tutored in the lore of love, passing from view to view of beautiful things, in the right and regular ascent, suddenly he will have revealed to him...a wondrous vision, beautiful in its nature...[not] in the guise of a face or of hands or any other position of the body, nor as a particular description of piece of knowledge...in that state of life above all others...a man finds it truly worth while to live...do but consider...that there only will it befall him, as he sees the beautiful through that which makes it visible..." (210e6-212a7)

The revelation of the beautiful is a traumatic, life-altering vision that appears by itself, not in any particular which partakes of it; and yet a vision ultimately made visible only through such particulars and the correct ascent between them, and hence made visible only through experiences of love for lower objects. Following this description of the revelation of beauty as a traumatic intrusion, Alcibiades makes an intrusion of his own, abruptly interrupting the symposium and intruding on the symposiasts' abstract, philosophical discussions with his passionate, messy love story:

"after Socrates had thus spoken, there was applause from all the company except Aristophanes...when suddenly there was a knocking at the outdoor door, which had a noisy sound like that of revellers...they heard the voice of Alcibiades in the forecourt, very drunken and bawling loud, to know where Agathon was...so he was brought into the company by the flute-girl...he stood at the door, crowned with a bushy wreath of ivy and violets, and wearing a great array of ribands on his head." (212c-e)

Alcibiades immediately stands in contrast to the vision of the beautiful; he is messy and mortal: loud, drunk and demanding, with his head crowned in ivy, violets, and ribbons. Hence, he stands

in perfect contrast to Socrates' speech even from the moment of his arrival; he is the perfect counterexample. Nussbaum interprets this as an intrusion into philosophy by lived experience, itself a revelation: "from the rarefied contemplative world of the self-sufficient philosopher we are suddenly, with an abrupt jolt, returned to the world we inhabit and invited to see this vision, too, as a dawning and a revelation".^{xxxv} Hence she interprets it as evidence that Alcibiades' speech is a counterexample to that of Socrates.

In contrast to Nussbaum's interpretation, I propose to interpret Alcibiades' interruption not as a revelation of an alternate vision but as the very revelation of the erotic ascent. Nussbaum uses Alcibiades' entrance as evidence that Alcibiades' speech is a counterexample based on the premise that Plato recognizes the speeches of Socrates and Alcibiades as representing two alternative and mutually exclusive choices, respectively: that of the (Socratic) philosopher embarking on the erotic ascent and that of lived experience. However, as demonstrated, lived experience or love of lower objects is in fact compatible with the ascent; it only appears as otherwise because Socrates misunderstands the ascent. Even Diotima gives testimony to this, asking him, "How do you design ever to become a master of love-matters, if you can form no notion of this?" Lived experience and the erotic ascent thus being compatible, the argument that Alcibiades' speech is an unequivocal counterexample to the erotic ascent falls apart; it is only incompatible with Socrates' misinterpretation of it. As such, the "new vision" and "revelation" of Alcibiades' entrance is not so much a revelation of his truths as against the ascent but only against Socrates' misinterpretation of it. If lived experience is compatible with the erotic ascent, then the "revelation" of Alcibiades' entrance is in fact compatible with the revelation of the ascent. Moreover, the coinciding of the two compatible revelations suggests that the very revelation of the ascent is in fact the revelation of Alcibiades; the revelation of mortal beauty, love of individuals, lived experience, the world of flesh.

Conclusion

While Socrates appears wise in the philosophy of love, that he has not completed the erotic ascent indicates he lacks some knowledge about love. His rejection of appearances and embodiment suggests he lacks what Nussbaum's claims Alcibiades' speech offers: that of bodily or lived experience. As Diotima explains, the aim of love is "giving birth in beauty, both in body and in mind" (206b), something that she is not certain Socrates can understand. According to Diotima, attachment to the lower objects of love, including physical individuals, is necessary to project one towards beauty and inspire one to create and therefore immortalize oneself. By introducing Diotima's theory of love and a Socrates whose characterization and role in the narration reveals he misunderstands it, Plato "gives birth" to an advance over Socratic philosophy that asserts the value of lived experience and physical love. The *Symposium* thus becomes inherently meta.

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