The Order of Speeches in Plato’s Symposium: A New Ascent Interpretation

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Abstract: An interpretation of Plato’s Symposium according to which the order of speeches represents an ascent is attractive for a number of reasons. However, two major challenges have stood in the way of such an interpretation: to explain how Aristophanes’ speech can represent an advancement over Eryximachus’ scientism, and to explain how Agathon’s poorly regarded speech can be intended to pave the way for Socrates’ solution. I argue that Aristophanes’ speech precedes that of Eryximachus in the ‘real’ order. Next, I show that Agathon’s speech contains overlooked themes that closely prefigure Socrates’ own views about education and virtue. These corrections to understanding Symposium reveal both its ascent theme and an intimate philosophical connection between Symposium, Republic, and Phaedrus.

I. Does the order of speeches in Symposium represent an ascent?

Commentators on Plato’s Symposium have long wondered whether the order of speakers in the discussion it depicts itself has any particular meaning. Given Diotima’s central use of a ladder as ascent metaphor, the repeated ascent theme in Republic and the Phaedrus, and the fact that Symposium shares with Republic and Phaedrus the characteristic of focusing on the process of attaining virtue (as opposed to the nature of virtue), the notion that the speeches trace some sort of ascent—recapitulated in Diotima’s discussion of the ladder—is very attractive. Some commentators, for these and other reasons, have argued that Symposium takes the form of a dialectical ascent, with the speeches as components.¹ But there are several

¹ For an overview of previous ascent readings of Symposium, see Rosen, pp. 30-8.
challenges to an ascent interpretation that have prevented any fully satisfactory reading of the dialogue along these lines. Despite strong textual and thematic indications to the contrary, there has so far been no successful representation of the order of the speeches in *Symposium* as an ascent. I believe that the order of speeches in *Symposium* is indeed meant to represent an ascent, and that previous commentators have made key mistakes in reading this extraordinarily elegant and carefully constructed piece.

There are two seemingly insurmountable challenges to a convincing ascent interpretation of *Symposium*:

- How could Aristophanes’ speech—revolving around instinctive physical desire—represent an advancement over Eryximachus’ scientism?

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2 In “A Dual Dialectic in *Symposium,*” Dorter argues that *Symposium* exhibits a complex double-dialectic structure: one dialectic on conceptions of the good, and one on conceptions of Eros. However, even he admits that this hypothesis “imputes to Plato a higher degree of structural planning and subtlety than most interpreters would consider plausible” (Dorter, p. 255) On the basis of the claim that Agathon’s speech is of lesser quality than Aristophanes’, and that Phaedrus’ speech supplies a superior conception of Eros to Pausanias’, some reject the notion that there is an ascending order based on quality (Bury, p. lii). Lowenstam argues that the sequence of the first five speeches, in their original (pre-hiccupping) order, is designed to introduce topics in the same order in which Socrates takes them up in his speech. However, Lowenstam’s re-creation is more complex than this. His re-creation (Lowenstam, pp. 51-2) includes not only the topics of the first five speeches, but also the topic of Alcibiades’ speech and several other topics in common interspersed among them. The complexity of this re-creation does not sit well with the notion of a simple relationship between the order of the speeches and the ascent Socrates describes. Corrigan and Glazov-Corrigan (Corrigan and Glazov-Corrigan, pp. 151-5) claim a linear ascent through the first five speeches that suffers from several serious overreaches: Phaedrus’ speech, for example, is supposed to represent the transition from love of a single body to love of bodies generally by focusing on love of a single body; Pausanias is supposed to represent love of the soul by confusing love of soul with gratification of sexual desire; and Aristophanes is supposed to represent the transition to the study of beauty itself by describing physical unions as motivated by a longing for wholeness.
• How could a clunky speech by a mere poet, Agathon, be intended to pave the way for Socrates’ solution?

The relative importance of Aristophanes’ speech, and the relative unimportance of Agathon’s, have almost become tropes or articles of faith among readers of Symposium. I shall argue that we are intended to consider Aristophanes’ speech as preceding Eryximachus’ in the ascent, and that Agathon’s speech includes often-overlooked themes that place his conception of Eros some minor correctives behind that of Socrates/Diotima. The order of the speeches in Symposium is meant to suggest an ascent based on a theory of human development through education elucidated in Republic. In other words, the order of speeches in Symposium represents an ascent in terms of both knowledge and virtue perfectly mirrored by the path to virtue described by Diotima. The structural organization of Symposium reflects the structural elements of Plato’s understanding of education and virtue; in this way, Symposium functions as a very close companion piece to Republic.

The speeches of Symposium are delivered in the following order (thanks to the fact that the inceptive order is disrupted by Aristophanes’ hiccupping): Phaedrus => Pausanias => Eryximachus => Aristophanes => Agathon => Socrates. On my reconstruction, the ascent as recapitulated by Diotima follows this order, but with the positions of Aristophanes and Eryximachus reversed (i.e., following their seating order) in revealing a path to virtue.

II. Phaedrus and Pausanias

It is easy to see how the speech of Phaedrus represents the antithesis of a proper approach to knowledge and virtue. Phaedrus is roundly criticized by Socrates in the Phaedrus for supplying a discourse that is tedious, repetitive and poorly
organized (263c-d). In Symposium his speech makes reference to both Hesiod and Homer (178b, 179d-180b), each of whom is identified in Republic as an example of a poet who promotes the wrong virtues and does not have knowledge of his subjects (377d-383c, 595b-608b). A central theme of his speech is that one of the greatest goods that comes from Eros is that lovers are motivated to appear brave because they are concerned about their image in the eyes of their beloved (178c-179b). Thus Phaedrus clearly emphasizes the importance of appearance. Citing this fact, Rosen characterizes Phaedrus’ conception of Eros as a “substitute for”—or imitation of—virtue. Even in this, however, Phaedrus may be mistaken: from Xenophon comes the point that it is dubious that “persons acquiring a habitual indifference to censure and to abandoned conduct towards one another will be most likely to be deterred by shame from any infamous act.” The focus on appearance, and consequent threat of loss of self-control, reminds us of Plato’s comments on mimesis and vice in Republic, as well as the fanciful descriptions of a lover’s failings in Phaedrus. Finally, Phaedrus makes several mistakes; most notably, he plainly contradicts himself on the subject of the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus in the Iliad.

Next up is Pausanias. His speech is to a great degree an attempt to justify his own pederasty. Bury remarks that Pausanias’ arguments “display the cleverness of a first-rate pleader.” He also notes that Pausanias “poses as a conventionalist, and a relativist, and a champion of law as against nature...; and this is of itself sufficient to

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3 See Allen, p. 12. All translations of passages from Symposium by Allen.
4 See Dorter, p. 258.
5 Rosen, p. 53.
7 See Bury, p. xxv.
8 See Allen, p. 17, and Rosen, p. 61.
show that, in Plato’s eyes, he is a specimen of the results of sophistic teaching.” He is “master of the ringing tautology”.\textsuperscript{10} Pausanias wears his rhetoric on his sleeve: his arguments shamelessly exploit sophistical methods in order to make his point. Dorter observes that he uses the terms “noble” and “shameful” in three distinctly different and inconsistent senses.\textsuperscript{11} Most shockingly, Pausanias actually claims that the lover is justified in any behavior, no matter how base or shameful, in pursuing his beloved (182e-183c).\textsuperscript{12} This is, of course, antithetical to Plato’s conception of virtue.

Pausanias is thus painted by his speech as a kind of rhetorician who is concerned more with convincing the listener than with arriving at the truth. Sophists need not have any knowledge of their topic in order to be successful: all they require is the ability to flatter and manipulate the listener, and to create the appearance of good reasoning and truth where there is none.\textsuperscript{13} In \textit{Republic} (492-494; see also 539b-c) Socrates describes in detail the difference between sophistry and knowledge, and the corrupting influence this art can have on the education of the young. Because it is also concerned with appearance rather than reality, Pausanias’ speech is an appropriate companion to Phaedrus’, and, like Phaedrus’, calls to mind the state of being on the Divided Line standing furthest from reality and true knowledge thereof.

Even for all this, there are indications that Pausanias could stand as an advancement on Phaedrus’ thinking. Pausanias criticizes Phaedrus for having omitted considerations of character. Pausanias is at least concerned with the soul and its development, and describes himself as being more concerned with the soul than with

\textsuperscript{10} Allen, p. 16.  
\textsuperscript{11} Dorter, p. 259.  
\textsuperscript{12} See Allen, p. 17, and Dorter, pp. 258-9.  
\textsuperscript{13} See, for example, \textit{Gorgias} 464b-466a.
the physical. By reading *Symposium* as an ascent, this contrast with Phaedrus may be significant.

III. Aristophanes’ hiccups

Despite—and partly owing to—the fact that Aristophanes’ hiccups prevent him from speaking before Eryximachus, I believe that the dialectical ascent of *Symposium* is meant to be represented by an order of speeches set by the seating order rather than the speaking order—i.e., the speech of Aristophanes comes before Eryximachus.

There has been plenty of disagreement on this point. Grube ignores the hiccupping incident altogether;\(^{14}\) Guthrie argues that hiccups would be common at a drinking party, and that the incident is there simply to add a touch of realism to the proceedings.\(^ {15}\) In making these judgments, these commentators fail to sufficiently credit the fact that *Symposium* is a carefully crafted work. Its artificial nature is evidenced by the double narration and the inclusion of obvious anachronism (182b, 193a).\(^ {16}\) The discussion is clearly intended to be read as a fictional account constructed to make a point. For this reason, the idea that the hiccupping incident, and the consequent switch in speaking order, is accidental or inconsequential is implausible.

The real intentions behind the inclusion of the hiccupping incident will never be known for certain; the idea I shall propose is a bit more plausible than many previous explanations of the incident. Brentlinger maintains that the hiccupping incident is mostly comic; however, he also feels (rather incongruously) that the switch with Eryximachus makes it possible for Aristophanes to serve as a “wise

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\(^ {14}\) Grube, pp. 98-9.
\(^ {15}\) Guthrie, p. 382.
\(^ {16}\) See Allen, p. 5.
critic” of the preceding three speeches. Although Aristophanes does mention Eryximachus and Pausanias in his speech, he does not offer anything that directly addresses either of their views. Aristophanes also mentions Agathon in connection with his thesis, and fails to mention Phaedrus. Brentlinger does not identify what elements of Aristophanes’ speech serve as criticism of the preceding speeches.

Rosen thinks that the substitution of Eryximachus subordinates the poetry of Aristophanes to the technism of Eryximachus, and also indicates Plato’s own preference for Aristophanes. The difficulty with this interpretation should be obvious: Rosen is suggesting that Plato intended with the same event both to denigrate and to promote a certain view. There is straightforward evidence that the doctor’s world-view is to be preferred to Aristophanes’, in that Eryximachus, “fighter of eructations,” is the provider of the successful cure for Aristophanes’ hiccups. In this way it does make sense that the incident subordinates the poetry of Aristophanes to the technism of Eryximachus. But it is difficult to see how the hiccupping incident is supposed to indicate a preference for Aristophanes.

Oddly enough, Allen takes a position very similar to Rosen’s. He thinks that the purpose of the incident is to call attention to the drinking habits of Aristophanes and the medical knowledge of Eryximachus, and at the same time to emphasize the importance of Aristophanes’ speech by mentioning it and deferring it. The incident does indeed serve the former function. But it seems very unlikely that Plato would hope to emphasize the importance of a speech through an incident making its speaker appear drunken and foolish. Surely the speaker’s being portrayed as a buffoon would tend to downplay the seriousness of his presentation.

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17 Brentlinger, pp. 12-3.
18 Rosen, pp. 91-2.
19 Allen, p. 20.
Finally, Dorter claims that the speech of Eryximachus is body-oriented and the speech of Aristophanes is soul-oriented, and that the hiccupping incident is intended to illustrate the superiority of soul over body. But if Eryximachus’ speech is intended to represent a bodily orientation and that of Aristophanes a spiritual orientation, then it would make more sense for Eryximachus to be the victim of hiccups: he would then be the one experiencing corporeal failings. Instead, it is Aristophanes who loses control over his body. He is made to look the fool and must be rescued by Eryximachus. Also, as I shall discuss below, Dorter’s characterization of the orientation of Aristophanes’ speech is inaccurate.

The dialogue makes clear that the physical arrangement of the speakers determines the order of the speeches. Socrates’ late entry, and Agathon’s subsequent and deliberate placement of him to his right, for example (175c-d), ensures that Socrates will be speaking last. The hiccupping incident disrupts the order determined by the seating arrangements. Aristodemus is careful to note that Aristophanes was “supposed to speak” after Pausanias (185c), just as Eryximachus is careful to make clear what the disruption entails: “I’ll take your turn speaking, and you take mine when you stop” (185d). I tentatively suggest that the hiccups could be intended, in part, to help emphasize the non-accidental nature of the order of the speakers by highlighting the fact that it takes an accident—Aristophanes’ ailment—to disrupt the intended order. Note also the almost obsessive concern over seating and speaking order after Alcibiades arrives (222e-223b).

The hiccupping incident, by itself, could mean any number of things; the proposed ascent context is the best reason for the proposed reading. That Aristophanes’ speech is the one that, from the point of view of a formal order of

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20 Dorter, p. 262.
speeches, is intended to be considered after Pausanias’ is most strongly indicated by the nature of Aristophanes’ and Eryximachus’ speeches and their relation to the other speeches. Like the speeches of Phaedrus and Pausanias, and unlike any of the other speeches, Aristophanes’ speech focuses on sex. The speeches of Phaedrus and Pausanias explain sexual attraction by reference to the creation of images in the eyes of others. Aristophanes’ speech explains sexual attraction by reference to bodily characteristics: the physical separation of the circle-beings explains our desire for physical intimacy with others (191a-b). His is a grotesque farce that includes three visceral metaphors for the initial physical separation—the beings are sliced like serviceberries (190d-e), eggs (190e), or flatfish (191d)—and an explicit description of the various surgical operations performed by Apollo (190e-191a) and Zeus (191b-c) to reconfigure the physical shapes and genitalia of the new half-beings. Aristophanes explains sexual attraction by reference to this physical event: erotic desire stems from the urge to experience a bodily reunion. Desire for kinship or friendship, along with other forms of attraction, is caused by, and secondary to, physical attraction (192b-c). *Pace* so many strained readings to the contrary, it is just so much more straightforward to read Aristophanes’ speech as having a strong orientation towards bodily attraction!

Eryximachus, by nature of his profession, is also concerned with bodily matters. However, his speech represents a higher stage of human capability than that of Aristophanes because of his craft-knowledge in the field of medicine. Rather than a thoughtless instinct, his Eros is associated with an informed quest for health and balance. For him, good health is the attunement of Eros in the body, Eros representing the good and bad desires of the body (186b-c). He speaks of bodies generally, and of general laws concerning the harmony or disharmony of the
conflicting desires of the body (note especially 186b and 187b). Eryximachus’ speech represents the type of mental activity in which general laws are derived from hypotheses based on experience and empirical models. He is concerned with bodies, but from the point of view of a scientist: Allen notes that doctors at the time were quite sophisticated, with some knowledge of effective pharmaceutical remedies and the importance of diet and exercise.\(^{21}\) Note also that Eryximachus associates himself with Asclepius, who (along with the “sons” [=followers] of Asclepius) is spoken of very highly by Socrates in Book Three of Republic (408b).

For the first time in Symposium, Eryximachus’ speech directly relates Eros to fields that do not have to do with bodily functions (186e, 187c-e, 188b-c). For Eryximachus, Eros represents often-conflicting desires, which must be attuned in the body by medicine or in the soul by “education and culture” (187d). He also notes (drawing a parallel between medicine and music) “when one needs to apply rhythm and attunement in men…here there is indeed difficulty, and need for a good practitioner” (187c-d). Effective medical practices require knowledge—the knowledge of the scientist, founded on experience and used to develop widely-applicable methods of treatment.\(^{22}\) Compare this to the concern with image in the speeches of Phaedrus and Pausanias, and the blind, physical urges of Aristophanes’ account. The contrast between Eryximachus’ serious call for internal harmonizing and Aristophanes’ silly description of uncontrollable urges is striking. As C.D.C. Reeve observes, Eryximachus “praises orderly, harmonious, pious, temperate love,

\(^{21}\) Allen, p. 30.
\(^{22}\) Socrates argues in Charmides 156b-157d that the ideal doctor wouldn’t treat the body in isolation from the soul, and the failure to appreciate this makes the physicians of Hellas much less effective. Eryximachus focuses on treating the body, but does not ignore the need to harmonize desires in the soul via education. My thanks to Emily Austin for drawing my attention to this passage.
while condemning “the Pandemotic Eros of the many-tuned Muse Polyhymnia.” Comedy, which Aristophanes represents, is thus presented as a backward turn, a step in as anti-philosophical direction as the “satyr play—or rather Silenus play” of Alcibiades (222d3-4).”

IV. Agathon: Eros as educator

In addition to identifying the proper role of Aristophanes’ speech, the other major obstacle to an ascent interpretation of Symposium is Agathon’s speech. His speech does not, at first, seem a likely candidate for a speech that is to represent something close to a Platonic ideal. Agathon is a tragedian and poet. His speech is considered by many commentators to be insignificant, or sophistic and superficial. In fact, Agathon’s speech is extremely important to Plato’s goal in Symposium. It represents a point of view that is very advanced from the standpoint of Republic’s theory of mental development. Agathon’s speech serves a dual role in Symposium: it serves to foreshadow and prepare the way for Socrates’ speech, and it expands the role of Eros into several important areas described by Socrates (through Diotima) in Symposium and by Socrates in Republic. As Sheffield notes, Socrates explicitly states at 201d that “the nature of Eros is clarified on his own account on the basis of things agreed between himself and Agathon.”

The first part of Agathon’s speech (194e-196b) is a poetic encomium to Eros’ beauty. This prepares the way for Socrates’ elenchus of Agathon, in which it is demonstrated that Eros is love of the beautiful (as Agathon has stated), but is not himself beautiful. Yet Agathon foreshadows Socrates’ position by explaining Eros’s

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23 Reeve, p. 146.
24 See, for example, Guthrie, p. 385, Bury, p. xxxv, and Dorter, pp. 253-4.
25 See, for example, Allen, p. 40, and Brentlinger pp. 3-4, 18.
26 Sheffield, pp. 41-2.
beauty and goodness by reference to his love of the beautiful: Eros seeks the young (195b), and chooses to dwell only in those whose “bloom” is not “faded or gone” (196a-b). Grube notes that Agathon anticipates two crucial points made by Socrates by emphasizing that “Eros is always concerned with beauty, and it resides in the souls of men.” As Ferrari explains,

Eros for Agathon is beautiful and good, not because his effects are, but because he is love of the beautiful and good...now this is a most serious conclusion....It is what enables Socrates, next to speak, to introduce Diotima’s teaching that all love, ultimately, is love of the good, and for that reason commendable.

The second part of Agathon’s speech (196b-196d) concerns Eros’ virtues. These virtues mirror the cardinal virtues as identified by Socrates in Republic (427e, ff.): Agathon argues that Eros exemplifies the virtues of justice, temperance, courage, and wisdom. This is a novel development on his part. Phaedrus spoke of courage, but only in the sense of courage in the eyes of one’s beloved. Pausanias subsumed all virtues under erotic attraction, and even claimed that any base behavior is acceptable when in the throes of such passion. Aristophanes did not speak of virtue at all, and Eryximachus (188c-d) spoke only of “gratifying” or “fulfilling” the orderly Eros through knowledge, temperance, and justice (omitting courage, and not actually ascribing these virtues to Eros). In Republic, Plato is deeply concerned with the question of how souls can be encouraged to exemplify all the virtues mentioned by Agathon. Thus the ascription of precisely these four virtues to Eros in Agathon’s speech is an indication of the seriousness with which we are to consider his account.

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27 Grube, p. 100.
28 Ferrari, p. 252.
The third section of Agathon’s speech is a continuation of his discussion of Eros’ wisdom, and concerns Eros as educator and motivator to education. Eros teaches all poets, because only and everyone Eros touches become poets:

we may fittingly use this as proof that Eros is a poet who is, in sum, good in respect to all creation over which the Muses preside; for one could not give someone else or teach another what one neither has nor knows. (196e)

Note that this echoes the reasoning behind Socrates’ criticism of mimetic artists in Republic (598b-600e). There Socrates reasons that, if artists like Homer really had knowledge of the things they described, they would be revered as educators of virtue, rather than as artists. Because they are not educators, they must not have knowledge that can improve men’s souls. Agathon’s Eros is not subject to this criticism, because he is a teacher as well as an artist. First, Agathon has shown himself (195 b-c) capable of critically examining claims by poets like Hesiod and Phaedrus (rejecting their claim that Eros is older than Kronos and Iapetus), preferring instead to reason out Eros’ age by the philosophical principle that “like attracts like.”

Second, Eros is the “teacher” of the divine experts on archery, medicine, metalworking, weaving, and even the “guiding of gods and men” (197a-b). Note that, in Republic, the highest calling for men, beyond the contemplation of the Forms, is the guidance of the city (539e-540c). Agathon’s description makes Eros a kind of guardian. Furthermore, the duties of the guardians described in Republic are said to be secondary to their duty to look after the education of the young (423d-e). In light of the importance of education in Republic, Agathon’s description of Eros as a teacher—the ultimate teacher, really—strongly suggests that his views are intended to be read as relatively sophisticated.

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29 As pointed out in Corrigan and Glazov-Corrigan, p. 87.
Agathon’s immediate predecessor in the original order, Eryximachus, also relates Eros to all human practices; however, Agathon’s connection between Eros and human practices is more sophisticated, from a Platonic standpoint, than Eryximachus’. The latter’s Eros manifests itself in the form of good and bad desires that can be moderated by these human practices. He does not explain, however, what guides these practices in their moderative functions; without such guidance, all kinds of bad practices may issue. Doctors, for example, need to be taught how to heal, or “balance the body’s desires.” Otherwise, they could do more harm than good. Agathon’s Eros is perfectly suited to fulfill this educational function for Eryximachus and his peers.

*Republic* centers on the development of a guardian class whose members exemplify Plato’s four cardinal virtues, and whose function is to supervise the practices of the citizens. Compare this to Agathon’s Eros, who exemplifies Plato’s four cardinal virtues and who is a teacher of human practices, including the guidance of men! Agathon’s speech clearly presents an Eros who, from Plato’s standpoint, is more sophisticated than the Eros of the previous speakers. His speech, furthermore, echoes several central doctrines expressed in *Republic*, and closely foreshadows Socrates’ speech in *Symposium*. If the order of speeches in *Symposium* represents an ascent, it makes perfect sense that Agathon’s speech should immediately precede that of Socrates.

V. The ascent recapitulated

Socrates’ conception of Eros displays many similarities to Agathon’s. As quoted by Socrates, Diotima characterizes Eros as a lover of knowledge (204b)—a characterization that is suggested by Agathon’s conception of Eros as knowledgeable in all fields of human endeavor. In defining Eros, Diotima, like Agathon, links the
god with poetry and then to other pursuits, like money-making, athletics and philosophy (205c-d). For Diotima, Eros involves creation and “begetting in beauty” (208c-209e). Men can be creatively pregnant with respect to their body or soul (208e-209a). Pregnancy of the soul leads to “practical wisdom and the rest of virtue—of which, indeed, all the poets are procreators, and as many craftsmen are said to be inventors” (209a); note that Agathon had mentioned specifically that Eros is the teacher of poets and craftsmen. Diotima continues by saying that the highest form of practical wisdom is “that concerned with the right ordering of cities and households.” This right ordering is called “temperance and justice” —virtues Agathon also ascribes to Eros. Diotima then works toward the idea of Eros as love of beauty and what is good, and, in its most pure form, love of Beauty and the Good itself (211c-d).

To this end, Diotima describes a “ladder,” where the preceding speeches find their proper place (210a-e). If one ascends this ladder, one attains that for which love truly exists—the Beautiful itself (211a-212a). The ladder represents how one is to proceed “rightly” to the highest kind of knowledge (210a), and dealing in imagery and imagination is no part of this process. In Republic, the education of the guardian excludes many kinds of poetry, and education in dialectic is delayed until the student is old and wise enough not to be tempted to use that skill degenerately (539b-c).

As in Republic and Phaedrus, the ladder is a metaphor evoking an ascent to virtue via development of character. Diotima’s ascent moves from “bodily beauty, through spiritual and intellectual beauties, to the contemplation of Beauty itself.” We now see that this perfectly recapitulates the preceding speeches. The first three speakers in Symposium—Phaedrus, Pausanias, and Aristophanes—all tie Eros to sex and carnal desire. Aristophanes’ conception is more sophisticated than those of Phaedrus and Pausanias: he departs from their focus on appearance, and, although he
sees sex as the primary symptom of love, he also sees sex as a means to a feeling of spiritual wholeness, in addition to the satisfaction of physical desire. Eryximachus suggests a relationship between bodily beauty and spiritual or intellectual beauty. As a doctor, he is concerned with craft-knowledge of bodies in general. His task, and the task he prescribes for medicine, is to moderate good and bad desires in the body so to preserve its health and beauty. In addition, he recognizes that this manipulation of eros occurs in educational and cultural pursuits. Thus Eryximachus’ speech serves as a bridge between the corporeal and intellectual/spiritual realms. Agathon is the first to see Eros as primarily concerned with the soul. For him, Eros’ primary function is that of an educator leading its students to knowledge and proficiency in the arts and in politics. This conception strongly anticipates Socrates, who sees Eros as the motivating force behind the various human arts and practices, as well as the search for knowledge. Eros is linked by both Agathon and Socrates with the Platonic cardinal virtues. Agathon holds that Eros is wise and beautiful, even as Socrates describes him as a lover of wisdom and beauty. Agathon’s Eros is involved with beautiful practices and so reflects the penultimate step on Diotima’s ladder, the ultimate goal of which is the appreciation of the beauty of knowledge and the contemplation of the Beautiful itself. This ascent, which reiterates the speeches of Symposium, in the same way reiterates the ascents described in Republic via the divided line and the cave: from immersion in bodies and the material world, to sciences and studies, up to contemplation of the Forms.

The first stage of Diotima’s ascent concerns bodily attraction (210a). This stage—where most of us are stuck—is represented by Phaedrus, Pausanias, and Aristophanes. Next comes appreciation for what makes bodies in general beautiful (210b), as is required for a physician like Eryximachus, with his craft-knowledge of
bodies; he identifies illness with disharmony and internal erotic conflict. After this, according to Diotima, one realizes that “beauty in souls is more to be valued than beauty in bodies” (210b-c). Owing to this realization, one will turn to the young (as Agathon says Eros does [195b]) and encourage them to “contemplate what is beautiful in practices and laws.” The person at this stage of development, pregnant in soul and inspired by Eros, teaches the young about human practices: the arts, crafts, and politics. Agathon, recall, describes Eros as a teacher of all these practices. Eros, for him, exemplifies the Socratic virtues, and is the educator of the Gods in the various arts and crafts and in politics. His Eros thus matches this stage of development. For Diotima, this is the stage that comes just before “beautiful studies”—exemplified by Socrates and the elenchic method he deploys in correcting Agathon—and the final ascent to contemplation of the Beautiful itself (210c-212a). One thus ascends to Beauty

as though using the steps of a ladder, from one to two, and from two to all beautiful bodies, and from beautiful bodies to beautiful practices, and from practices to beautiful studies, and from studies one arrives at the end at that study which is nothing other than the study of that, the Beautiful itself (211c).

The one who masters this final study is the philosopher, who alone gazes upon the Forms and the Beautiful itself. Diotima’s ladder thus serves much the same function as the divided line and the cave metaphor in Republic.

The coda of Symposium is the wild and desperate contribution by an intoxicated Alcibiades, followed by his interaction with Socrates. There is a very nice parallel between this interaction and the last element of Republic’s cave, wherein the philosopher returns to the cave to guide the unenlightened.30 Alcibiades enters and

30 As proposed in discussion by Isaac Nevo.
describes the erotic gap between himself and Socrates, as well as the corresponding
difference in virtue (215a-222b). He undertakes to praise Socrates “through images”
(215b); recall that understanding through images is, for Plato, the only means of
understanding available to the corrupted who have not even begun the path to
knowledge. Alcibiades recognizes his deficiencies in self-examination and the virtues
of the philosopher; he is “ashamed” before Socrates, whose words make him realize
how much he lacks the proper virtues (216a-c). At the same time, he recognizes how
Socrates exemplifies these virtues (219d, 220d-221c, 222a). He wants to ascend to
Socrates’ level, but apparently does not have the willpower to do so. In an attempt at
a shortcut, Alcibiades attempts to seduce him (217a-219d). Socrates, however,
recognizes his intent (218e-219a). He sees Alcibiades as attempting to exchange
“beauty for beauty”; though in Alcibiades’ case the beauty in question is mere
“comeliness of form,” the appearance of beauty. In Socrates’ case, of course, the
beauty in question is what is “truly beautiful.” To exchange the one for the other,
Socrates says, would be like exchanging “bronze for gold”—the image of beauty for
the reality. Though humiliated by this rejection, Alcibiades realizes that Socrates is
correct, and that what is truly beautiful is not something that can be won through
physical means. The superiority of contemplation over the body is further illustrated
by what follows (219e-220d), wherein Alcibiades describes Socrates’ transcendence
of physical hardship. He characterizes Socrates as impervious to physical threat, cold,
lack of food, and drunkenness (see also 214a, 223d). Alcibiades’ speech thus
eloquently and dramatically illustrates the difference between the realm of images
and corporeal things and the intellectual realm. It wraps up the dialogue by
comparing the virtuous, serene, and godlike Socrates (219b) with the tortured soul of
one who partially appreciates his point of view but who has been unable to follow his lead.

This interpretation of *Symposium* as a reflection of the Platonic ascent to understanding and virtue has the advantage of being much simpler and more plausible than other ascent interpretations. In taking seriously the whole of a carefully crafted work, it has an inherent advantage over the many readings that ignore the hiccupping incident or Agathon’s speech. This reading of the structure of *Symposium* construes it as an aesthetically appealing elucidation of the core message of *Republic*, and a companion to Plato’s dialogues—*Republic* and *Phaedrus*—that focus on the path to virtue.  

### Bibliography


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