

# The Symposium: An Acoustic Illusion

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The relationship between *eros* (love) and beauty dominates a significant portion of the dialogue in Plato's *Symposium*, appearing most explicitly in the disagreement between Socrates and Agathon over whether *eros* itself is beautiful or whether it is of a beautiful object. Moreover, Socrates concludes his speech with a statement about the role this relationship plays in the life of the philosopher: he is enamored with the essence of beauty. Insofar as we are philosophically concerned, therefore, with the teaching that the dialogue offers about *eros*, we would do well to ask ourselves what makes it beautiful. For it is a beautiful dialogue. At times one is even overcome with madness and jealousy for this beauty; for the account that Apollodorus gives us, by which we are twice removed from the original symposium at which the dialogue purportedly takes place, reminds us that these words were not meant for us, but for the ears of another.<sup>1</sup> As readers we stand in an erotic relation with the dialogue: we expect that the dialogue holds answers for us, and we must find them.

So we must concern ourselves with the beauty of the dialogue, insofar as we perceive this beauty and wish to follow Socrates to its form, the supreme object in the philosopher's development. Thus it would be natural for us to ask, "What form does the dialogue take, and what does this "form" teach us about *eros*?"<sup>2</sup> One answer to this question takes its bearings from the visual metaphor that *eidōs*<sup>3</sup> form suggests, positing geometrical representations of the dialogue's form. Accordingly, one figure typically used is a step-pyramid, and<sup>4</sup> another possible figure is the circle. While I will ultimately reject these representations, I will nonetheless present their outlines in order to identify features of the dialogue that are indispensable to understanding Socrates' teaching of *eros*.

A pyramid suggests a finite ascent; likewise, the speeches proceed in an apparently dialectical manner towards a higher and more refined *logos*<sup>5</sup> of *eros*. According to the pyramidal representation, each speech ascends by overcoming to the contradictions of its predecessor. At the base, Phaedrus praises *eros* for its usefulness: *eros* provides the motivation necessary for the accomplishment of great and virtuous deeds. The

lover wants to appear virtuous in the eyes of the beloved, while dreading the shame of appearing vicious (178d). Here, however, Phaedrus neglects a crucial distinction: the lover acts out of vanity, since the desire to appear virtuous motivates him to act virtuously. But since the appearance that the lover project depends upon the beloved's conception of the good, the lover might actually act wrongly, in an effort to impress his beloved, such as one in love with a thief might act when robbing a store. In other words, the lover wishes to appear virtuous, but whether he appears so depends upon the one to whom he appears. Thus ethical norms are wholly absent from Phaedrus' account.

Precisely this ethical component becomes Pausanias' addition. *Eros* is not one, but of two kinds (180c): a "heavenly," noble, and good kind, and a "popular," crude, and bad kind. According to Pausanias, the factor that determines the ethical character of *eros* is described by the following rule: "for every action it may be observed that as acted by itself it is neither noble nor base" (181a). But as this ethical principle threatens to devolve into relativism<sup>6</sup>, Pausanias must later abandon it, favoring instead the object of *eros* for its ethical determinant: love of the *soul* characterizes the good and heavenly love, while love of the *body* characterizes the bad and popular love (183e). Eryximachos, perhaps perceiving the relativistic tendency in the ethical principle that Pausanias introduced, attempts to give *eros* a non-relativistic basis in his natural-scientific worldview: the heavenly *eros* and the popular *eros* comprise two opposing, natural forces that, moreover, can be known (objectively) and controlled.<sup>7</sup> In this way he introduces the possibility of gaining knowledge of *eros*, rather than simply offering eulogies. Medicine under this conception of *eros* is just knowledge of the methods by which the practitioner may balance and harmonize these two forces.

However, in extending the domain of *eros* to encompass all natural phenomena, Eryximachos diminishes the distinctly human aspect of love, namely, that it consists in a relationship between two persons. Hence Aristophanes begins his speech by limiting the domain of *eros*, recommending that the other speakers begin with the "nature of man and its development" (189d). Following his own recommendation, Aristophanes relates a *mythos* (myth) and *istoria* (history) of humankind that purports to explain why love is as we know it currently: each person longs for his other half, and love is just this desire to restore one's wholeness (193a). In this way Aristophanes includes Eryximachos' contribution (knowledge) to the discussion, since he offers a definition of *eros*, but also refines it by limiting it to human relationships. Yet Aristophanes' *mythos* seems to endorse a bleak view of *eros* and the human condition. *Eros* was contrived by the gods as a punishment for humanity's predecessors after they stormed the heavens (190c-d). Hence in contrast with Aristophanes, Agathon praises love for its *beauty*: love itself is beautiful, and as such only the talents of a poet can properly reveal its nature.<sup>8</sup>

According to the pyramidal representation of the dialogue, Socrates' speech would correspond to the peak in virtue of its references to every preceding speech: *eros* is useful because it provides the basic, vital energy for all of our pursuits (Phaedrus);<sup>9</sup> at the proper stage in his development, the lover will feel compelled to prefer the

soul to the body, and undertake the development of another soul (Pausanias);<sup>10</sup> at a still higher stage in his development, the lover will behold the beauty in “different branches of knowledge” (Eryximachos);<sup>11</sup> the telling of a story about the birth of *eros* from *Poros* and *Penia* suggests that *Mythos* is an appropriate means for relating the nature of *eros* (Aristophanes);<sup>12</sup> *eros* itself is not beautiful, but its object is (Agathon).<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, the ascent passage (210a—211d) seems to function as a miniature of the form of the whole dialogue. Just as each speech ascended to a higher stratum of the pyramid by overcoming the contradictions of the previous, so too does the lover continually push the object of *eros* to a higher plane by recognizing the temporal imperfection in the original object. The beauty of one particular body will fade, and so upon recognizing the universality of beauty in beautiful bodies, the lover will seek beauty at a higher temporal plane, namely, the soul (210b). But, as the soul only endures one lifetime, the lover will seek beauty in the *nomoi*, or laws and institutions of the *polis*, which endures beyond the life of any particular individual (210c). Knowledge likewise represents an advance to a higher temporal plane, since knowledge at best is true at all times, that is, eternally true; but, being forgetful creatures, we must constantly preserve knowledge in memory (208a). Thus at the peak of this ascent, the lover seeks an eternal object—the essence of beauty—which never perishes or changes (211a-b). So regarded, Socrates’ speech is like the golden capstone of the pyramid: it requires the lower strata for its support, but, being enthroned in gold, we behold it as more precious and wondrous than the rest.

Nonetheless, there are difficulties in the dialogue which the pyramid schema cannot overcome. For one, the speeches do not proceed as continuously as the pyramid would have them. For example, Aristophanes incorporates almost nothing explicit from the previous speeches into his own, and in fact prefaces his own by dismissing of the seriousness of Eryximachos’ speech, saying that he “unsays all that [Eryximachos] has said” (189b). In other words, the development of the speeches may only be apparent; they are primarily the contributions of individual personalities.<sup>14</sup> The second difficulty is Alcibiades’ speech, which criticizes, and in many ways undermines, Socrates’ speech. Nor can we dismiss the difficulty in Alcibiades’ speech as a dramatic flourish meant to show Plato’s fondness for his teacher, at least not if we intend to contemplate the teaching of *The Symposium* seriously. It is worth noting that, besides Socrates,<sup>15</sup> Alcibiades is the only other character in the dialogue who professes to speak truly (213a). This profession puts him in competition with Socrates for the truth—a competition in which Socrates later partakes when he agrees (upon Alcibiades’ suggestion), to interrupt wherever Alcibiades speaks falsely about him.<sup>16</sup> More significantly, Socrates never once interrupts. Given these details, we must regard Alcibiades’ words as true, and consider them in relation to whatever teaching *The Symposium* contains.

Alcibiades begins his praise of Socrates with “*eikones*,” or “representations.” Socrates is *hubristes* (215b); he is like the satyr Marsyas (215b), who, also in a hubristic manner, challenged Apollo’s supremacy in the musical arts and incurred due punishment for it.<sup>17</sup> So there is a kind of arrogance in Socrates’ pursuit of the universal: like Marsyas,

Socrates challenges the divine, perhaps even seeking to become divine himself. Later, however, Alcibiades abandons these *eikones*, claiming that Socrates is “unlike any other person, ancient or modern” (221c). Moreover, Socrates gives no value to beauty, wealth, honor—or even his fellow men.<sup>18</sup> In Alcibiades’ praise, therefore, Socrates is a radical particular—he has no comparison. But precisely this peculiarity undermines Socrates’ ascent. In his attempt to know universals, to abandon the procession of time for the eternal, Socrates forgets that the object of *eros* is not universals, but particular individuals. Thus Alcibiades presents us with the paradox of Socrates’ personality for which the pyramid cannot account. Socrates seeks to live his life entirely as an expression of the universal, but in doing so, he makes himself a radical particular.

Even if the pyramid fails as a general representation of the dialogue, it nonetheless captures one crucial detail about the teaching of the dialogue: the philosopher thinks of dialogue as a process of dialectical ascent. He wants to stand atop the pyramid with the universal, and from those heights survey all of the various kinds of individual *beings*: bodies, souls, the *polis* (city), the different branches of knowledge, etc. *Eros* is the energy that propels the philosopher upward in his ascent. Hence whatever representation we adopt, it must allow us to pursue the objects of *eros* to their heights.

However, another geometrical figure is available that might account for Alcibiades’ speech. We might represent the form of the dialogue as a circle with *eros* at the center. The details of the dialogue in fact suggest this figure, in that the speakers have arranged themselves in a circle. This representation, moreover, would seem to account for a conspicuous feature common to every speech: each speaker praises *eros* for precisely those attributes that each identifies in himself. Eryximachos posits *eros* as a natural-scientific force because he himself is a doctor and natural-scientist; Aristophanes relates the nature of love through *mythos* because he himself is a teller of myths; Agathon assigns the task of revealing the nature of *eros* to the poet because he himself is a poet; Socrates places *eros* between ignorance and wisdom, and describes him as “shoeless and homeless” (203d1) because he himself is a philosopher. Thus construed, we as readers of the dialogue continually view *eros* from a new perspective as we move around it; but, precisely because we cannot advance towards the center, we feel like a man who by some misfortune could not point directly at any one thing, but was constantly forced to circumscribe whatever he wanted to identify. In this way *eros* exerts a kind of gravitational force upon each of the speakers. Each is in love with himself, and the force of this self-love is inescapable. Thus with each speech we merely circumscribe *eros*; our *logos* of it remains somehow always incomplete. This, moreover, would seem to suggest that some aspect of the dialogue’s teaching cannot be expressed by words, that something about *eros* compels us to compose *logoi*, but that this “something” must always remain an unsaid “something.”

Of course, this representation too has its weaknesses. Socrates seems to synthesize the insights of the previous speakers into his own speech. Also, in representing the dialogue as a circle, we must grant an equal status to the perspective of each speaker; yet we want to acknowledge the ascent of philosophical dialogue. On the other hand, the circle seems to remind us that our *logos*, no matter how refined, nonetheless re-

mains incomplete. In other words, each geometrical representation seems to illuminate something about the teaching of the dialogue. Hence we might seek a different representation of the dialogue, under the condition that it allows the dialogue to ascend in pursuit of the supreme object of *eros* (the pyramid), but simultaneously acknowledge the incompleteness of the *logos* of *eros*.

Might we find this representation in a musical analogue? This is not as implausible as it sounds, considering the comparison of Socrates to the flute-player Marsyas. Music begins just where words leaves off, and in this sense it might supply the “something” that was missing from the *logos* of *eros*. Just as the flute-player enchants us with the beauty of his music, so too does Socrates enchant us with the music of his words. Harmony, moreover, expresses ascension, in the sense that the ear naturally inclines towards the higher pitches in a chord. Incidentally, there is a musical phenomenon that should be familiar to anyone who knows a little bit about harmony. This phenomenon is the acoustic illusion. The acoustic illusion is the result of perfect harmony, occurring when the pitches in a chord are so perfectly attuned that they reproduce themselves in a higher register. Though the pitches are present in the chord, the resonance they create at the higher octave can be regarded as an illusion, since they have no corresponding origin in the instrument that sounded them.

Given the musical analogue of Socrates with Marsyas, we might consider whether the acoustic illusion could be extended to moments in Socrates’ speech, specifically the ascent passage (210-211d), where Socrates relates the ascent of the initiate towards more temporally perfect objects of *eros*. In order to produce the acoustic illusion, we must identify two pitches in the passage. By 204d, Diotima has defined the basic structure of *eros*. *Eros* consists in the *epithumia* (desire) for an object which one lacks, and inhabits a space in between ignorance and wisdom. So understood, *eros* consists in a relation between the one who desires and the object which he lacks. In the sections that follow, Diotima attempts to locate the object of *eros*, claiming in different passages that *eros* is of the beautiful, the good, of “engendering and begetting upon the beautiful” (206e5) and “of immortality” (207a4). The key to explaining the variance among the objects of *eros*, and identifying the pitches in the acoustic illusion, lies in the features of the structure of *eros* given above. The lover and the object never unite, but are constantly related *through* love. It is precisely this separation which constitutes the erotic relation; if the object and the lover are united, then the erotic relation collapses into itself. In order to understand the variance among the objects of *eros*, as well as their parallel to the acoustic illusion, this basic structure of the erotic relation must constantly be held in mind.

At 204d, following Diotima’s definition of the basic structure of *eros*, Socrates asks what “use” love could be to mankind. In an effort to guide him to an answer, Diotima asks him what one who loves beautiful things expects to acquire upon possessing them. Socrates, apparently confused, confesses that he cannot answer. Socrates’ silence thus indicates something significant about the relation he bears to Diotima; namely, that it is erotic. Socrates lacks answers, and Diotima alone can supply them. So, the substitution of the good for the beautiful is not at all arbitrary on Diotima’s part, but

rather her way of increasing the tension in their relation in a way that actually propels Socrates forward.

The object undergoes a second transformation in Diotima's hands (from the good to begetting and engendering upon the beautiful) when she asks whether men who love the good want the good "merely to be theirs" or "theirs always" (206a6). Thus Diotima places a new strain upon the erotic relation. If the lover came into possession of the object, then the erotic relation would collapse; so in order maintain the erotic relation even in the moment of possession, the two terms must be repelled from each by some other means. This new aspect of the erotic relation is temporal: the object must be present at all times.

By stressing the temporal aspect of the erotic relation, Diotima propels the object of *eros* to a higher mode: the lover no longer finds satisfaction in the temporary possession of the object, so he transforms the object and seeks it on a higher plane. "Begetting and engendering upon the beautiful" becomes the new object of *eros* precisely because it promises what the lover lacks, namely, to reduce the strain of the temporal on the relation: through the begetting of offspring, mankind vicariously experiences immortality. (207a1) On the other hand, the transformed object retains a feature of the original by the addition of the words "in the beautiful." This addition would seem to suggest a confusion of the object at this stage, if it were not for the fact that Diotima later reveals that the beautiful provides the *occasion* for begetting: "Therefore when a person is big and teeming-ripe he feels himself in a sore flutter for the beautiful, because its possessor can relieve him of his heavy pangs. *For you are wrong, Socrates, in supposing that love is of the beautiful* [emphasis added]" (206e1-3). Understood as the occasion for begetting, beauty is not restored as the object of love, but instead creates a secondary tension in the erotic relation that propels the lover towards the object (begetting and engendering upon the beautiful).

Since harmony requires at least two pitches, it can be viewed in two different ways: as resolution or as tension. On the one hand, when the two pitches sound together in harmony, they please us, and we say that they are resolved. On the other hand, the pitches must remain at a distance from each other, or else they will converge and thereby become one and the same. In Socrates' account of *eros*, the two terms that are the conditions for the erotic relation are *epithumia* and *chronos*. When *epithumia* comes into conflict with *chronos*, it must constantly fight against *chronos* to come into possession of its object. But if *epithumia* defeats *chronos*—if it finds its object in eternity—then the erotic relation between the lover and the object collapses; likewise, if *epithumia* is annihilated, the relation collapses. Hence the irony of *eros* consists in the fact that if it succeeds, it fails; if *epithumia* defeats *chronos*, the lover's relation to the object is no longer erotic. Expressed in terms of the acoustic illusion, we might identify *epithumia* and *chronos* as two musical voices of Socrates' speech. Their pitches may sometimes vary, and accordingly the harmonies they produce will determine the location of the object; however, they may never converge upon the same pitch.

The pitches of these two voices in the acoustic illusion produce their most brilliant resonance in the ascent passage. As mentioned above, the ascent consisted in propelling

the object of *eros* to a higher temporal plane. Hence we see the same acoustic principles at work in the erotic relation described above in the ascent passage: the object of *eros* at the first step of the ascent is a beautiful body. However, upon acquiring the body, the lover realizes the temporal imperfection of its beauty, whereupon the predicate “beauty” sheds its subject and acquires a new one on a higher temporal plane, namely, the soul. The object continues to ascend in this same manner, with the predicate “beauty” shedding its subject in favor of one more temporally perfect, until it comes upon the essence of beauty, where the harmony between *epithumia* and *chronos* resonates at its highest register. The object of *eros* is thus propelled by the epithumatic and temporal strains on the basic erotic relation until it comes to the stage in its development at which it becomes supremely erotic, precisely because it has no physical or temporal medium.<sup>19</sup> So regarded, the essence of beauty is an acoustic illusion: having no physical or temporal characteristics, it does not correspond to any worldly origin; but emerging from the epithumatic and temporal forces essential to the erotic relation, we perceive it as the resonance of a perfect harmony.

Unfortunately, a thorough application of the acoustic illusion to the entire dialogue is outside the scope of this paper, since this task would require a vast analysis of both the individual speeches and the structure of the dialogue. Nonetheless, I will present a few leads that might be followed in this application. One lead can be found in the speeches of Phaedrus and Pausanias. It is worth noting that all of the stories in Phaedrus’ eulogy of *eros* celebrate the death of the lover.<sup>20</sup> In this respect, what Phaedrus praises in *eros* we might call the immediacy of time, and we could imagine him saying to Achilles: “the past is forever gone, and the future uncertain, except for death; Do not hesitate, Achilles, for at least this moment of glory you have, at least in death you conquer time, and death is but an instant.” So for Phaedrus, *eros* actually despairs over time; it tries to abandon time in the immediacy of the moment. Thus we might say that the voice of *chronos* in Phaedrus’ speech is least distinct. In Pausanias’ speech, however, the distinction between the young and the old appears: heavenly *eros* consists in the proper relation between a man and a boy, with the man undertaking the intellectual development of the boy, and the boy sexually gratifying the older man. So Pausanias recognizes the maturation of personality, and this change invokes time. Thus in Pausanias’ speech, the voice of time becomes more distinct. Accordingly, the acoustic illusion might be extended across the structure of the entire dialogue by following the development of the voice of *chronos* until its culmination in Socrates’ speech.

Despite the difficulty in extending it over the structure of the entire dialogue, the acoustic illusion retains the aspects that the step-pyramid and the circle taught us about *eros*. Like the pyramid schema, it allows us to ascend in pursuit of the supreme object of *eros*. It denies us the completion of our *logos*, since Socrates can apparently say nothing positive about the essence of beauty; he can only define it negatively. The language Socrates uses to talk about the form of beauty is particularly revealing in this regard. The form of beauty “neither comes to be nor perishes, neither waxes nor wanes; next, it is not beautiful in part and in part ugly, nor is it such at such a time and other a another, nor in one respect beautiful and in another ugly” (211a-b). Ap-

parently, then, the form of beauty not only stands apart from the spatio-temporal world, but also outside the capabilities of *logos*. But this form Socrates expresses musically, by means of the acoustic illusion: when he speaks of forms and essences, we simply hear a harmonic resonance. From the perspective of the acoustic illusion, Alcibiades' speech actually serves as a kind of chamber that sounds the harmonic resonance of Socrates' speech in our ears. Just as Alcibiades undermines Socrates' ascent towards the universal by pointing out Socrates' radical particularity, so too does he attune our ears to the music of Socrates' words. Socrates, like the flute player, enchants us with the music of his words. We listen to him because the tones he produces are so deceptively simple—"he talks of pack-asses, smiths, cobblers, and tanners" (221e)—and yet so perfectly harmonized that we are prepared to follow them, in the pursuit of truth, to their highest and most sublime resonances.

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## ENDNOTES

- 1: Apollodorus purportedly relates the version of *The Symposium* that he heard from Aristodemus. The "madness" for the beauty of philosophy is not as implausible as it sounds, considering that Apollodorus has earned himself the title "*manikos*," i.e., "manic" or "crazy."
- 2: Before the reader continues, I would like to inform him that this paper places more emphasis on the latter part of this question. I am not interested in representing the entire dialogue with a comprehensive schema; such a task I consider, if not impossible, very difficult. rather, I am more interested in the different aspects of *eros* that the dialogue can teach us about if we posit such-and-such a form.
- 3: *Eidos* is cognate with *eidein*, the second aorist of the verb *ὄραω*, which means "to see."
- 4: In the commentary to his translation of *The Symposium* C.J. Rowe refers to the apparent ascent of each speech as a kind of "capping," which to him indicates that the speeches "represent a single whole, culminating first in the speech by Agathon [...] and then in Socrates' contribution." While Rowe rejects the possibility of continuous development of a more refined account of *eros*, he nonetheless identifies the temptation to view the speeches in an ascent, as is apparent in his choice of the verb "culminate." The pyramid schema captures just this feature of the dialogue. See: C.J. Rowe, *Plato: The Symposium* (Aris & Phillips, 1998), 8. All Stephanus numbers cited herein refer to this translation.
- 5: Rational account or speech.
- 6: Under Pausanias' principle, it seems acceptable to say that murder, so long as it is done excellently, can be good.
- 7: "For the art of medicine may be summarily described as a knowledge of the love-matters of the body in regard to repletion and evacuation; and the master-physician is he who can distinguish there between the nobler and baser loves, and can effect such alteration that the on passion is replaced by the other; and he will be deemed a good practitioner who is expert in producing Love where it ought to flourish but exists not, and in removing it from where it should not be" (186c-d).
- 8: *Eros* according to Agathon is "κάλλιστον" (195a6), or "most beautiful" of all the gods, and "requires

a poet such as Homer to set forth his delicacy divine” (295c9).

- 9: In response to Socrates question at 204c9, “of what use is love to mankind?” Diotima leads Socrates through a series of arguments, at whose conclusion she suggests that just as the broader meaning of *poiesi* is production in general, so too is *eros* “generically [...] all that desire of good things and of being happy” (205c-d). Apparently, then, *eros* is useful because it generally directs us towards the good.
- 10: See Socrates’ speech at 209b-c.
- 11: According to Diotima, at the higher stages in the ascent, the initiate will behold the beauty of various “branches of knowledge (ΤΑΣ ΕΠΙΣΤΗΜΑΣ)” (210c).
- 12: Diotima relates the story of the birth *eros* in order to describe its nature as constantly in between mortality and immortality, ignorance and wisdom, etc (203b-e). *Eros*’ parents are “resource” (*poros*) and “poverty” (*penia*).
- 13: See sections 200-201 for the questioning by which Socrates forces Agathon to admit that *eros* is not itself beautiful.
- 14: I draw this from another insightful comment from Rowe: “It is in any case hard to construct any joint account that might emerge from the sequence from Phaedrus to Agathon. All five are essentially individual contributions, with each attempting to go one better than the one before in an apparently haphazard way” (Rowe 1998, 8).
- 15: See 199b4-6, where Socrates says “decide then, Phaedrus, whether [...] you would like to hear the truth told about love in whatsoever style of terms and phrases may chance to occur by the way.”
- 16: See the dialogue between Socrates and Alcibiades at 214e-215a.
- 17: According to the myth, Marsyas was skinned alive.
- 18: “All of these possessions [wealth, fame, beauty] he counts as nothing worth, and all of us as nothing” (216e3-4).
- 19: The essence of beauty is “ever existent and neither comes to be nor perishes” (211a1) and is “not infected with the flesh and colour of humanity, and ever so much more of mortal trash” (211e3-4).
- 20: These examples include Alcestis, who died for her husband (179b7), and Achilles, who died to avenge Patrocles’ death (179e).