

Symposium Study Guide

In the *Symposium*, Plato narrates a most peculiar drinking party held in honour of the tragic poet Agathon. All the participants are hungover from the excesses of the night before and therefore decide to alternate in giving speeches in praise of love instead of drinking. These speeches reflect the interests and inclinations of those who give them. For example, Aristophanes, a comedic writer, comes up with a funny and passionate myth according to which we used to be conjoined in a sphere with our beloved, from whom we were separated by the gods. This ancestral union explains why we spend our lives in search of our other half. Eryximachus, a doctor, explains how medicine, guided by love, aims at restoring health, the correct equilibrium of the body.

A recurring theme in the interactions between the many characters and in their speeches is that being in love with someone can somehow lead us to become better or wiser people. Thus, Agathon suggests, with some innuendo, that Socrates might instil some wisdom in him by sitting close to him. Similarly, Pausanias argues that lovers improve themselves in front of their lovers because they want to show their best side in an attempt to impress. These suggestions, alongside many others, seem to make implausible claims about the link between love and self-improvement. It is of course not obvious that wisdom can be transmitted by physical vicinity, and we often do stupid or dangerous things in order to impress our lovers.

Socrates gives a speech too and, as we should expect, the speech reflects his character and inclinations. He declares to be an expert in the art of love (*ta erôtika*) at *Symp.* 177d8-9, but we immediately suspect that his way to understand this art might be different from ours: Socrates is a very peculiar lover, one who seems to be more interested in engaging in asking questions (*erotân*) to his lovers than in love (*erôs*) itself. Hence, the art of love he knows and practices might in fact be an art of questioning. The topic of Socrates' speech is a report of the teachings of Diotima, the priestess from whom Socrates himself has learnt the art of love. Diotima disagrees with Aristophanes that lovers seek their other half without qualification, for she thinks they seek another person only if they take this other person to be good. In general, lovers seek the good and they want it to be theirs forever. Some lovers are attracted by women and pursue the quest for the good by reproducing themselves and, presumably, ensuring that their successors keep whatever goods they possess. Other lovers are attracted by men and pursue the quest for the good by generating beautiful accounts of virtue, which can order cities and households, and also instil virtue in young men.

The lovers who end up generating accounts of virtue, for Diotima, go through a complicated ascent. First, they fall in love with the beautiful body of a young man. Then they realise that, if they are after beauty, the beauty of one body is interchangeable with the beauty of another, thus becoming lovers of all beautiful bodies. After this, these lovers realise that the beauty of souls is better than the beauty of bodies. Hence, they seek to improve the souls of the young men they love. This attempt will lead them to love knowledge and wisdom and, ultimately, Beauty in itself, i.e. an eternal and unchangeable entity that explains everything beautiful.

Diotima's speech may seem to more concerned with the acquisition of wisdom than with love. In fact, as many have noticed, in the ascent towards knowledge of Beauty itself, we start with an interpersonal relationship with a lover. This lover, however, is soon

dismissed and regarded as replaceable, because we realise that our quest for beauty can attach itself to any beautiful body, and then to any beautiful soul. Thus, it looks like Socrates' own take on the relationship between love and knowledge is that, while love can lead us toward knowledge, it does so not in virtue of the relationship with a particular lover, but at the expense of this relationship, which is meant to be overcome and discarded in the ascent.

Hence, if we took the dialogue to aim at showing us how loving another person improves our life or makes us wise, we are meant to be disappointed. Socrates in the *Symposium* seems to tell us a lot about the acquisition of knowledge and how it leads to a happy life, but very little about interpersonal love. As Frisbee Sheffield has argued (Sheffield 2012), however, perhaps this disappointment comes from the fact that we are misreading the dialogue. Socrates and Diotima are not telling us how we should engage in a loving relationship with another person. Instead, they are arguing that our desire for happiness can be satisfied by the acquisition of wisdom, and that this acquisition can involve understanding and explaining the beauty of bodies and of souls.

Even if the main concern of Diotima and Socrates is the acquisition of wisdom, and not interpersonal love, the dialogue is full of reflections on how interpersonal love can play a role in making us better people. One example is the relationship between Socrates and his lover Alcibiades, which is introduced at the very end. Alcibiades admires Socrates' wisdom and seeks to seduce him in order to exchange his favours with the knowledge that Socrates could impart him. However, Socrates refuses this sort of exchange, implying that love is not a transaction. Granted that interpersonal love is not a transaction, we are left with an open question about its nature. Perhaps it is to be understood as a joint pursuit of wisdom, but if so, the dialogue does not explain to us why we are better off acquiring wisdom jointly with our lovers than on our own. This, however, seems to be a promising suggestion, and perhaps one that the dramatisation of the *Symposium* will help us to explore.

Studying questions

1. What is the *Symposium* about? Is it about love, knowledge or both?
2. Why is Socrates a strange sort of lover?
3. What is wrong with the accounts of love proposed by those who sing its praises before Socrates?
4. Has Socrates misunderstood interpersonal love?

Bibliography

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato-friendship/>

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