



Plato's Philosophy of Love: The Symposium Frederick Mayer

[The best exposition of Plato's treatment of love is found] in the *Symposium*, where there are two types of love: one, sacred; the other, profane. Aristophanes, who is present in the *Symposium*, tells us in a satirical manner how at first human beings had double features; thus they had two faces, four eyes, and four legs. He says that Zeus, believing man would become too powerful, consequently severed the forms and gave to us our present constitution. This explains why we are forever in search of consummation, and why physical love is such a strong and impelling motive.

The climactic exposition in the *Symposium* is given by Socrates, who explains that love can be compared with a ladder. Real love, which involves a search for transcendence, is emancipated from all acquisitiveness. We start this process first by love for the physical body, but we realize its imperfection, for we know the beauties of the body do not last long and are impaired by age and external circumstances.

Second, we love all physical loveliness; but again something is lacking, for our mind searches for immaterial entities, and when we become mature we want to go beyond material things.

Third, we love the beauties of the mind and the soul. Now we have achieved a higher state. We have turned away from fleeting and trivial concerns, and we have gone beyond the veil of appearances. Yet we are not completely emancipated from the senses, and we are caught by temporal and spatial limitations. Thus, we finally love the essence or Idea of loveliness. This involves complete identification; we are no longer conscious of separateness.

As the *Symposium* describes it:

He who has been instructed thus far in the things of love, and who has learned to see the beautiful in due order and succession, when he comes toward the end will suddenly perceive a nature of wondrous beauty ... a nature which in the first place is everlasting, not growing and decaying, or waxing and waning; secondly, not fair in one point of view and foul in another, or at one time or in one relation or at one place fair, at another time or in another relation or at another place foul, as if fair to some and foul to others, or in the likeness of a face or hands or any other part of the bodily frame, or in any form of speech or knowledge, or existing in any other being, as for example, in an animal, or in heaven, or in earth, or in any other place; but beauty absolute, separate, simple, and everlasting, which without diminution and without increase, or any change, is imparted to the ever-growing and perishing beauties of all other things. He who from these ascending under the influence of true love, begins to perceive that beauty is not far from the end. And the true order of going, or being led by another, to the things of love, is to begin from the beauties of earth and mount upwards for the sake of that other beauty, using these as steps only, and from one going on to two, and from two to all fair forms, and from fair forms to fair practices, and from fair practices to fair notions, until from fair notions he arrives at the notion of absolute beauty, and at last knows what the essence of beauty is.

Such absolute beauty is completely independent of the senses. It cannot be described according to physical models. It is a beauty “which if you once beheld, you would see not to be after the measure of gold, and garments, and fair boys and youths, whose presence now entrances you; and you and many a one would be content to live seeing them only and conversing with them without meat or drink, if that were possible— you only want to look at them and to be with them. But what if man had eyes to see the true beauty— the divine beauty, I mean, pure and clear and unalloyed, not clogged with the pollutions of mortality and all the colors and vanities of human life— thither looking, and holding converse with the true beauty simple and divine? Remember how in that communion only, beholding beauty with the eye of the mind, he will be enabled to bring forth, not images of beauty, but realities (for he has hold not of an image but of a reality), and bringing forth and nourishing true virtues to become the friend of God and be immortal, if mortal man may.”

Such a view of love is truly inspiring. We can think of it only according to the process of artistic creativity, for it is quite certain that when the artist produces his best, he loses consciousness of his surroundings and becomes part of the subject matter with which he is working.

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