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The Portrait of Socrates in Plato's Symposium

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Introduction

Plato's dialogues offer us numerous portraits of Socrates. Some of these are dramatic depictions that show us Socrates in conversation with various interlocutors. Others are descriptions of Socrates, sometimes presented by others, sometimes by Socrates himself. One of these descriptive portraits occurs in Plato's *Symposium*. The portrait is complex, being made up of several contributions from several different characters. The relation among these various portraits is complicated. I believe that, taken together, they constitute a coherent description, when certain perspectival differences and other internal features of the individual portraits are taken into account. Thus, I shall speak in this paper of "the portrait" of Socrates in the *Symposium*, rather than of multiple portraits. I cannot prove, beyond what I say here, that the various portraits amount to a coherent whole. Nor can I establish that the portrait is coherent in every detail. Still, I think it is consistent in its main elements.

I am interested in this portrait for two reasons. First, I find it interesting in its own right. It is a central element in one of the most important Platonic dialogues, and on those grounds alone worthy of serious study. Second, I think it has a serious claim to be an accurate representation of the historical Socrates. I do not believe that this claim can be ultimately established beyond doubt; Plato gives us several rival portraits of Socrates in the dialogues, not all of which are consistent with each other, and we do not have the basis for choice among them.¹ Still, the portrait of Socrates in the *Symposium* makes as strong a claim as any Platonic portrait to be historical.

¹ The chief incompatibility, in my view, is between the portrait of Socrates as barren, as a philosopher who only questions others and who does not even express opinions of his own about philosophical questions, let alone issue claims to knowledge, and the Socrates who has such opinions and even, on occasion, makes

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I want to make it clear at the outset that I accept the fact that the portrait of Socrates in the *Symposium* is a Platonic portrait, a Platonic perspective on Socrates. I do not think that this fact disadvantages it in relation to other portraits of Socrates found in the Platonic dialogues. I do not accept the view of some scholars that a group of “Socratic” or “early” Platonic dialogues contains a portrait of Socrates that has uniquely strong historical credentials, and that in dialogues of a later period, including the *Symposium*, Socrates becomes a “mouthpiece” for Plato.² Nor do I accept the view, closely associated with this, that the “Socratic” dialogues are free of metaphysical theories.³ Moreover, I do not believe that the presence in or absence from a dialogue of certain metaphysical doctrines thought to be Platonic rather than Socratic can, by itself, determine the historical accuracy of the portrait of Socrates contained in the dialogue.

In my view there are no dialogues, however early, that present a purely historical portrait of Socrates, devoid of Platonic influence.⁴ In addition, there are no dialogues, however late, in which Socrates appears, of which we can confidently claim that the historical element in Plato's portrait is entirely absent.⁵ Even in the earliest dialogues

claims to knowledge. For more on this incompatibility see my “The Socratic Problem” in H. H. Benson, ed., *The Blackwell Companion to Plato* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, forthcoming).

² I follow the view of Charles Kahn in “Did Plato Write Socratic Dialogues?” [*Classical Quarterly* 31 (1981), 305-20; reprinted in Hugh H. Benson, *Essays on the Philosophy of Socrates* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, 35-52)]: “Even where the inspiration of Socrates is clear, the dialogues are all Platonic.” (47) See my “Why Did Plato Write Socratic Dialogues?” in Mark McPherran, ed., *Wisdom, Ignorance and Virtue: New Essays in Socratic Studies* (*Apeiron* 30, no. 4, 1997), 109-23.

³ See my “Socrates Metaphysician,” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 27 (2004), 1-14. There I argue, following R. E. Allen, that several “Socratic” dialogues contain an early version of the theory of Forms. I do not argue that these dialogues in general contain the same version of the theory that the so-called “middle” dialogues do. In the *Symposium*, however, Alcibiades attributes that “Platonic” theory to a Socrates who seems in other respects to be the Socrates of the “Socratic” dialogues.

⁴ I include here even the *Apology*, considered by many scholars the touchstone of historical interpretation. See my “The Historicity of Plato's *Apology*,” *Polis* 18 (2001), 41-57.

⁵ In my view one of the most important portraits of Socrates is one in which he is not named: the account of the “Sophist of Noble Lineage” in the late *Sophist*, at 229e-230e. Another is the portrait of Socrates as a “midwife” in the *Theaetetus*. A third is the portrait of Socrates in the late *Philebus*. Donald Davidson has argued that the Socrates of the *Philebus* ask a Socratic question and uses the elenchus to answer it in much the same way as did the Socrates of the “early” dialogues. [Donald Davidson, “Plato's Philosopher,” in

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Plato brings his unmatched literary imagination and philosophical genius to the interpretation of the philosophy of Socrates. Over the course of his career he offers a number of different portraits, not all of which are fully consistent; but it does not follow from the fact that one portrait is later than another that it is less faithful to the memory of Socrates. Plato did not forget what Socrates was like after writing the so-called early dialogues. He returned to the “problem” of Socrates again and again and offered portraits of his mentor. To understand Plato's view of Socrates we must consider all of these portraits, whatever period of composition they occur in.

Several scholars accept the claim that the portrait of Socrates in the *Symposium*, and in particular the portrait given in Alcibiades's speech, is historical in character. A. R. Lacey writes, “There are two places outside the *Apology* where Plato seems to be speaking of the real Socrates: Alcibiades' speech in the *Symposium* (215A ff.) and Socrates' ‘autobiography’ in the *Phaedo* (96A ff).”⁶ Brickhouse and Smith state that “Although the *Symposium* is generally regarded as a middle period work, the speech of Alcibiades is regarded by most contemporary Socratic scholars as compatible with the Socrates portrayed in the early dialogues.”⁷ Gregory Vlastos says, “Despite the provenance of this composition from a dialogue of Plato's middle period, its Socrates is unmistakably the philosopher of the earlier one.”⁸ Thus even scholars such as Vlastos, who defend a sharp distinction, indeed an incompatibility, between the historical Socrates

Terence Irwin and Martha Nussbaum, eds., *Virtue, Love, and Form: Essays in Memory of Gregory Vlastos* (Edmonton, Alberta: Academic Printing and Publishing, 1995), 179-194, esp. 188-9.]

⁶ “Our Knowledge of Socrates,” in Gregory Vlastos, ed., *The Philosophy of Socrates* (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, 1971), 43. Lacey is critical of the claim of the *Phaedo* passage to be historical, but not of the *Symposium* passage.

⁷ Thomas Brickhouse and Nicholas Smith, *Plato's Socrates* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 105, n. 5.

⁸ *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 35. For Vlastos, of course, the Socrates of the earlier dialogues just *is* the historical Socrates.

of the “early” dialogues and the Platonic Socrates of the “middle” dialogues (including the *Symposium*) have conceded that the portrait of Socrates in the *Symposium* is historical. I want here to defend only a weaker claim: that it *could be* a portrait of the historical Socrates, and not simply a Platonic creation.

Problems of Interpretation

It is a truism that every Platonic dialogue, however straightforward its structure, offers problems of interpretation to the reader. The basic difficulty is that Plato speaks to us only through his characters. Even a forensic speech, such as the *Apology*, or a simple direct dialogue such as the *Crito*, which purport to present Socrates' own words, give us Socrates as depicted by Plato. In an indirect dialogue the content of a conversation is transmitted through the voice of a narrator. In some indirect dialogues, such as the *Lysis*, the narrator is Socrates. In others, such as the *Symposium*, it is a third party. We cannot assume, as a general rule, that Socrates is a more truthful reporter, in particular concerning himself, than others. When Socrates claims a bad memory in the *Protagoras* (334d) as an excuse for ending the conversation, Alcibiades dismisses this remark as a joke (336c-d), alluding indirectly to a persistent issue in interpreting Socrates' remarks about himself: his irony. I shall return to this issue below.

The complexities of interpretation are particularly great in the *Symposium*. The outermost frame of the dialogue is a conversation between Apollodorus and an unnamed companion. This conversation contains a description of Socrates and his effect on his followers offered by Apollodorus, a devoted disciple. Within this outer frame there is an inner one: an account, credited to Aristodemus, of the symposium of Agathon, which Socrates attended. Within Aristodemus' account Socrates is described not only by

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Aristodemus but also by Alcibiades. Also imbedded in Aristodemus' account are some self-characterizations given by Socrates, amounting to a self-portrait. To make matters even more complex, Socrates offers a report of a conversation he had with one Diotima, a priestess of Mantinea. This report contains several remarks about Socrates. The interpretation of these remarks is made complicated by the fact that many interpreters, myself included, think that Diotima, or at least this conversation between her and Socrates, is a fiction. Within the context of the dialogue, she or it would be Socrates' fiction; when we examine the dialogue from the perspective of the author, she or it would be Plato's.

I do not have a general theory that would explain the complex structure of this dialogue. I would say this: the *Symposium* offers several characters the opportunity to comment on Socrates' wisdom, his character, and his effects on them. One of these characters is Socrates himself. The elaborate structure allows others to say things about Socrates, in some cases in Socrates' presence, that it would be out of character for Socrates to say about himself. (If Diotima is, as I think, an invented character, it gives Socrates a chance to offer a description of himself without appearing to do so.) The discrepancy between Socrates' self-reports and the reports of others is ultimately explained by an appeal to irony. I regard this appeal as highly significant.

The Opening Pages of the *Symposium*; Apollodorus, Aristodemus, and Socrates' "Trance"

The introductory conversation of the dialogue portrays Socrates as a charismatic philosophical teacher.⁹ Apollodorus, the narrator of the dialogue, relates to an unnamed companion a conversation he had recently had with one Glaucon, in which he told the story of an earlier symposium at Agathon's, on the occasion of Agathon's victory in a tragic festival. Apollodorus recites to his companion his comments to Glaucon concerning the change that becoming a disciple of Socrates has wrought in his life:

it's been less than three [years] that I've been Socrates' companion and made it my job to know exactly what he says and does each day. Before that, I simply drifted aimlessly. Of course, I used to think that what I was doing was important, but in fact I was the most worthless man on earth—as bad as you are at this very moment: I used to think philosophy was the last thing a man should do. (173a)

He then repeats the same thoughts to his companion:

my greatest pleasure comes from philosophical conversation, even if I'm only a listener, whether or not I think it will be to my advantage. All other talk, especially talk of rich businessmen like you, bores me to tears, and I'm sorry for you and your friends because you think your affairs are important when really they're totally trivial. (173c-d)

Neither the companion nor Glaucon is a convert to philosophy. Both are interested in hearing about Agathon's party, but neither is a follower of Socrates. Their response to Apollodorus' enthusiasm for Socrates is disbelief. Glaucon, after Apollodorus' remarks

⁹ "Teacher" is not the right word, but I know of no better. Socrates denied that he was a teacher, because he claimed to have nothing to teach, but his followers looked to him for something more important than philosophical theory. As I shall suggest below, the proper term for Socrates might be "mystagogos."

to him about the value of philosophy, says simply, "Stop joking, Apollodorus" (173a).

The companion's response is longer, but equally dismissive:

You'll never change, Apollodorus! Always nagging, even at yourself! I do believe you think everybody—yourself first of all—is totally worthless, except, of course, Socrates. I don't know exactly why you came to be called "the maniac," but you certainly talk like one, always furious with everyone, including yourself—but not with Socrates! (173d)

Both Glaucon and the companion urge Apollodorus to dispense with his Jeremiad and get on with his account of the party.

Apollodorus speaks the language of the convert: he has found his life's meaning in following Socrates. Glaucon has not seen the light, which is why Apollodorus says he is at that moment as bad as Glaucon was before his conversion. His companion describes him by a well-known nickname, *manikos* (173d6),¹⁰ to indicate that he is mad for Socrates and philosophy. It was one of the characteristics of the historical Socrates that he inspired this kind of loyalty in his followers. In the *Apology* Chaerephon is perhaps the outstanding but by no means the only example of such zeal. The *Crito* depicts Crito as a devoted follower of Socrates. Though Plato's dialogues feature adversarial arguments more than the friendlier conversations that Xenophon emphasizes, Plato by no means ignores the gentler aspects of philosophical conversation, especially with younger interlocutors.¹¹ In any case, it is an undeniable fact that the historical Socrates had a

¹⁰ For *manikos* in preference to *malakos* see R. G. Bury, *The Symposium of Plato* (Cambridge: W. Heffer and Sons Ltd.) 6, n.

¹¹ W.T. Schmid, "Socrates' Practice of Elenchus in the *Charmides*," *Ancient Philosophy* 1 (1981), 141-47; reprinted in W.J. Prior, ed., *Socrates: Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers* (London: Routledge, 1996, 4 v.) v. 3, pp. 20-27. Gregory Vlastos, no doubt thinking about the hostility of Callicles at the end of the *Gorgias*, overemphasized the adversarial character of Socrates' conversations when he wrote, "He has

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number of disciples who were unstinting in their admiration, indeed their love, for him; this is a point made not only in the *Symposium* but also in the *Phaedo*.

The conversation Apollodorus recounts was told him by one Aristodemus, who was also a Socratic acolyte. Apollodorus describes him as “obsessed with Socrates—one of the worst cases at that time” (173b; the Greek says he was one of Socrates’ lovers, using the term *erastes* at b3). Aristodemus went so far in following Socrates as to imitate him in what might be thought of as an inessential trait, his habit of going barefoot,¹² and when Socrates invites him to come along uninvited to Agathon’s dinner his response is, “I’ll do whatever you say” (174b). The response of these two followers of Socrates raises the question, what is it about him that elicits such a passionate commitment? Why does Aristodemus imitate even Socrates’ typical lack of footwear? Why does Apollodorus make it his job “to know exactly what he says and does each day?” (173a) How has Socrates managed to convince them, as he argues in the *Apology*, that they must put the care of their souls ahead of the pursuit of wealth (30b-c), that life without philosophical inquiry is not worth living (38a)? Alcibiades’ speech will later attest to this power of Socrates’ message on at least some of those who hear it.

The strangeness of Socrates is enhanced by what happens as he and Aristodemus head off to the party. Socrates becomes lost in thought and falls behind. Aristodemus arrives without him, and Agathon has to welcome the uninvited guest with a deft account of his attempt on the previous day to find him and invite him. When Socrates does not

to fight every inch of the way for any assent he gets, and he gets it, so to speak, at the point of a dagger.” “The Paradox of Socrates,” in Vlastos, ed., *The Philosophy of Socrates* (Garden City, N. Y: Doubleday and Company, 1971), 2. On the contrary, most of Socrates’ interlocutors follow willingly as he leads them down the garden path.

¹² It is said that Wittgenstein, among recent philosophers, had this effect on his students: they copied his mannerisms and his attire.

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appear, Agathon sends a slave out find him. The slave reports that he is lodged in a neighbor's porch and won't come. Aristodemus explains that this is Socrates' manner: he stands motionless from time to time, then returns to his previous activity. Eventually, Socrates arrives in the midst of the meal, and Agathon greets him with the following invitation: "Socrates, come lie down next to me. Who knows, if I touch you, I may catch a bit of the wisdom that came to you under my neighbor's porch. It's clear *you've* seen the light. If you hadn't, you'd still be standing there" (175d).

What is strange about this remark of Agathon's is that Aristodemus had not said that Socrates' "trances" had anything to do with seeking wisdom, or that he ceased them when he had found the answer to the problem that had perplexed him. [Apollodorus' narration does describe Socrates as "lost in thought" (174d), but Aristodemus doesn't say that to Agathon.] Agathon, based apparently on what he already knows about Socrates (who is, after all, a dinner-guest and presumably a friend), has inferred that the Socratic "trance" is an episode of deep philosophical thought, and that it has had a positive outcome. Socrates is apparently known, at least to Agathon, as someone whose thought does have, on occasion at least, a positive outcome; Agathon sees Socrates, that is, as the possessor of at least some philosophical wisdom. Socrates' response to Agathon, that wisdom cannot be transmitted by contact, as water can be transferred from a fuller to an emptier cup by means of a thread, is doubtless significant, because it raises only to leave open the question how, if at all, the kind of wisdom Socrates apparently possesses *can* be transmitted.

The opening pages of the *Symposium*, then, raise three interesting points about Socrates. First, we learn that he has a number of devoted disciples, people who have

become convinced that following Socrates and listening to his conversations is the best thing one can do with one's life—people Socrates has *converted* to the life of philosophical inquiry. We do *not* learn at this point what leads those disciples to follow him, apart from the fact that it is his practice of philosophy. Second, we learn that Socrates has the unusual habit of becoming distracted from the task at hand and entering into a meditative state, a trance, a point that will later be confirmed by Alcibiades (220c-d). Third, we learn that Agathon believes that Socrates is the possessor of at least some wisdom, though what the content of that wisdom might be we are not told. This last belief is confirmed by Socrates' own remarks in what follows. Each of these points will receive confirmation in Alcibiades' speech later in the dialogue.

Socrates' Self-Portrait: his Encounter with Diotima

Socrates himself confirms Agathon's judgment when he states that he has knowledge in at least one area: *ta erotika*, erotics. Readers of other Socratic dialogues will be familiar, as presumably were those who were acquainted with Socrates in life, with his denials of wisdom (cf. e.g. *Apology* 21b, *Laches* 186e, *Republic* I, 337e). They will also be familiar with his expression of interest in eros. When the symposiasts seek a conversational topic after dinner, and Eryximachus proposes that they offer encomia to Eros, Socrates agrees to this topic, saying that he does not claim to know anything except *ta erotika* (177e1). This passage is unusual, however, in that Socrates claims that *ta erotika* are an exception to his disavowal of knowledge.¹³ It is one more piece to the puzzle of Socrates developed in the first few pages of the *Symposium*. Exactly what the nature of his knowledge is, or how far it extends, are questions that must await later

¹³ Socrates describes his own wisdom as “lowly and disputable, like a dream” at 175e2-3, a passage dripping with irony—but he doesn't deny that he has some.

developments.¹⁴ At present, however, I would only note that this admission of knowledge is a significant departure from the stance of Socrates in the “Socratic” dialogues, whose disavowal of knowledge was unqualified.

When Socrates emerges from silence late in the dialogue, after several of the other speakers have offered their praises to eros, it is in the mode of the elenctic examiner familiar from the dialogues generally recognized as Socratic. Before the start of Agathon's speech he begins an examination of Agathon that Phaedrus puts an end to, stating (no doubt correctly) that once Socrates gets started asking questions it will be impossible to return to the encomia (194a-d). When Agathon has finished his speech Socrates begins a second examination of him, with Phaedrus' permission, on the content of his speech (199b-c). This time he is able to carry his questioning to conclusion, without interruption, and the result is one that readers of other dialogues will find familiar: “It turns out, Socrates” Agathon confesses, “I didn't know what I was talking about in that speech” (201c).

Now, however, we are introduced to another aspect of Socrates: his education in erotics at the hands of Diotima. According to Socrates, Diotima is a Mantinean woman, a priestess,¹⁵ by her own admission one who is knowledgeable about eros (202b-c).

Diotima conducts an examination of Socrates that recalls his examination of Agathon (201e). At the end of her examination of Socrates Diotima offers the famous account of

¹⁴ It might be that knowledge of erotics is simply knowledge of the nature of eros—knowledge that is, of the nature of the desire for the Good or the Beautiful, as Socrates variously describes the object of this pursuit. Since Love, *Eros*, is defined at 204b as love of wisdom, philosophy, and since the object of this love is all of reality, the domain of erotics would turn out to be the same as that of philosophy. Socrates' interest in erotics would thus be identical to his interest in philosophy. It might be, however, that erotics includes the object of eros as well as the desire. I shall argue below that Alcibiades describes Socrates as one who has attained knowledge of at least a limited range of Forms; nowhere, however, is Socrates portrayed as in possession of all philosophical wisdom. Only the Philosopher-King has that.

¹⁵ Though not explicitly called such, as Rowe notes (173); the word *Mantinike*, “from Mantinea,” echoes *mantike*, “the art of the prophet,” as Bury states (94 n.).

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the soul's ascent from the love of a single beautiful body to the love of the Form of Beauty itself. This ascent has several stages: the love of a single beautiful body, the love of all bodies, the love of the soul, the love of (ethical?) practices and laws, the love of knowledge, and finally the love of Beauty. During the course of this ascent the language of love is replaced by the language of (intellectual) vision. Diotima expresses doubt as to whether Socrates can follow her throughout the entire ascent: "Even you, Socrates, could probably come to be initiated into these rites of love. But as for the purpose of these rites when they are done correctly—that is the final and highest mystery, and I don't know if you are capable of it" (210a).¹⁶

Diotima describes this ascent in the language of the mysteries (209e-210a). In the Eleusinian mysteries the initiate, or *mystes*, is led through stages to the ultimate revelation by a *mystagogos*, a guide who has previously been initiated and who has seen the ultimate mystery. Diotima seems to be such a *mystagogos*. If so, this would imply that she has seen the highest beauty in the ascent she describes, the Form of Beauty itself. Interestingly, though Socrates claims to be the author of the theory of Forms at *Phaedo* 100b and *Parmenides* 130b, to the best of my knowledge neither he nor any other character in the dialogues, including Diotima, ever explicitly claims to have had the sort of experience of the Forms that the theory describes. Diotima's remarks strongly suggest that she has, however, and we may say, I think, that no one gives clearer indications of having seen a Form than she does.

It is not altogether clear, however, that she served as *Socrates'* *mystagogos*. It is possible that she did lead him on the upward path that culminates in the experience of

¹⁶ I believe that Diotima expresses doubt only about Socrates' ability to attain the summit of the ascent, the vision of the Form, and not about his ability to undertake the ascent at all. I shall discuss this point further below.

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Beauty. Socrates does state that Diotima taught him the art of love (201d), but the meaning if this claim is somewhat uncertain (see n. 14 above). As Socrates relates his education at Diotima's hands, he says that she described to him the nature of the pursuit of the ultimate object of love, but he does not claim that she actually led him to Beauty itself. Socrates says at the end of the ascent passage that he was persuaded by Diotima (*pepeismai*, 212b1). He does not say that he has made the ascent himself and had the ultimate experience of "seeing" Beauty with the eye of the soul.¹⁷ Thus, his status as an initiate into the mysteries is somewhat in doubt at the end of Diotima's speech. Diotima's speech gives us a picture of Socrates as one who has advanced from a state of ignorance under the guidance of a knowledgeable teacher to understanding of the nature of love and partial but probably not complete understanding of the nature of beauty. We cannot claim, on the basis of what Diotima says, that Socrates had direct, experiential knowledge of Beauty itself. It is this ultimate knowledge that Diotima describes as wisdom.

According to a well-known Socratic claim, the priority of definition principle, one cannot know the properties of an object until one knows that that object is. Without knowledge of the form of Beauty itself one could not know the properties of Beauty. Socrates on occasion makes use of this principle to disavow knowledge. The Socrates of Diotima's speech might be said to have "indirect" knowledge of Beauty, inasmuch as Diotima does transmit to him a verbal account of the nature of the Form (211a-d); but Plato's name for such a cognitive state would surely be not "knowledge" but "right opinion." The Socrates of the *Symposium* might be learned in comparison with the

¹⁷ That there is an experiential component to knowledge of the Forms, that the Forms are the objects of what Kant would call "intellectual intuition," is clear. Even if one were educated thoroughly in the nature of a Form by one who was herself knowledgeable, without the attainment of this intellectual vision one could not claim to have knowledge of the Form, but at most true opinion.

Socrates who disavows all knowledge, but he would not have attained wisdom, according to this interpretation.

The Historicity of Diotima

The reading offered to this point of the reported conversation between Socrates and Diotima has been a literal one, one that has taken for granted the existence of Diotima and the actual occurrence of her discussion with Socrates. Before I turn to the more positive account of Socratic wisdom contained in Alcibiades' speech, however, I must consider the question of the historicity of Diotima. Diotima, strictly speaking, does not appear as a character in the dialogue; it is Socrates who reports on his earlier conversation with her.¹⁸ Admittedly, Socrates gives no indication that she is anything other than a real person, or that her speech is anything but an actual speech. These claims, however, have been generally rejected by scholars, who have claimed that either Diotima or her speech are fictional.¹⁹ Now fictional characters are rare in Plato's dialogues; but there are powerful reasons for believing that this is an exception. The strongest reason is that if the speech and character are *not* fictional, this otherwise unknown person would have been in possession of the Platonic theory of Forms, and would have communicated it to Socrates, in which case the history of philosophy would have to be rewritten.

¹⁸ Of course, the same might be said of Socrates, whose words are recounted by Aristodemus and, ultimately, Apollodorus. Still, the impression created for at least this reader is that the outer frames of the dialogue fade from view, leaving us with Socrates and his companions at dinner. Even if Socrates is treated as an actual participant in the dialogue, however, Diotima does not quite attain that status. She is not a dinner guest, as even Alcibiades is (though an uninvited one), but someone whose views are recounted by a dinner guest.

¹⁹ Bury (xxxix) explicitly states that she is a fiction. Rowe says that her fictionality is established "beyond any reasonable doubt" (173). Dover brings out basis for this claim when he says that, though we cannot determine whether she is fictional or not, but it does not matter, because even if she existed she is hardly likely to have held the Platonic theory of Forms, which we find stated at the top of the ascent (137).

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Why would Plato have put a version of the theory of Forms in the mouth of a Mantinean priestess?²⁰ This is a question that must be examined from two perspectives: that internal to the context of the dialogue, and that external to it. I shall first consider the external perspective; that is, that of the author of the dialogue. I am aware that whatever I say here must be somewhat speculative. This much seems clear, however. Plato wanted to present a solution to the problem of the nature of love that is the theme of the dialogue. He believed that the theory of Forms, with the accompanying theory of desire, provided such a solution. Despite the fact that in the *Phaedo* and *Parmenides* Plato straightforwardly attributes the theory of Forms to Socrates, here, for whatever reason, he declines to do so. Thus, he uses Diotima as the propounder of the theory. Diotima functions, with one qualification, as a kind of *dea ex machina*, akin to Athena in Aeschylus' *Eumenides*. She is an expository device.

If Plato did not see fit to put this version of the theory of Forms in Socrates' mouth, however, he nonetheless put it in Socrates' ear. The theory, the dialogue tells us, was presented by Diotima to Socrates. Socrates is presented, if not as someone who has experiential, first hand knowledge of the form of Beauty, at least as someone familiar with the idea of a Form and the process of ascent to it. It is implausible in the extreme that so careful a writer as Plato would have lost sight of the dramatic context of the dialogue at this climactic point and not noticed that the expositor of the theory of Forms was expounding it to Socrates. If, as some scholars have suggested, Plato intended the Socrates of the *Symposium* to be the historical Socrates, then he intended the reader of the

²⁰ I say "a version" first because Diotima's account is limited to a single Form, that of Beauty, but second, because I do not think there is a definitive statement of the theory of Forms, as opposed to a number of variant formulations, in the dialogues. If we think there is a canonical formulation of the theory, it is because we have constructed it out of the several formulations Plato offers us.

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dialogue to see the historical Socrates as familiar with a version of the theory of Forms. Those scholars who reject the idea that the historical Socrates might have been familiar with the theory of Forms, on the ground that this theory is Plato's and that it would be an anachronism to make Socrates aware of it must reject the idea that the portrait of Socrates in the *Symposium*, or at least this part of it, is historical.²¹

Looking at this conversation between Diotima and Socrates from the perspective of the author, then, it appears to have been Plato's intention to portray Socrates as familiar with a version of the theory of Forms. The claim that Diotima was a fiction, from this perspective, means that she was a character devised by Plato to make Socrates aware of that theory. Diotima will be Plato's fiction, as the theory of Forms is his theory. Diotima will be Plato's device to insert his own solution to the problem of eros anachronistically into a dialogue with a particular historical setting and cast of characters. If Diotima is a surrogate for Plato, as she appears to be from the external perspective, then it would seem that Plato, through his surrogate, is inserting himself into the dialogue as the teacher of the person who, in life, was his mentor. One must wonder what his purpose was in doing this.

What happens when we examine the conversation from within the context of the dialogue itself? The suspicion that Diotima's speech, if not Diotima herself, is a fiction is first aroused by her elenchus of Socrates at 201d-202e. Socrates has just conducted a similar elenchus of Agathon, leading to Agathon's confession, noted above, that he didn't know what he was talking about. A less suave host than Agathon might have found this public discomfiture on the occasion of his great triumph somewhat embarrassing. One suspects that Socrates invented a similar conversation, with himself cast in Agathon's

²¹ As does Dover (10).

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role, to ease any embarrassment Agathon may have felt.²² This suspicion is increased by the fact that Diotima's refutation of Socrates takes the form of an elenchus. The arguments attributed to Diotima by Socrates resemble nothing so much as the kind of argument for which Socrates was famous. The elenchus is so closely associated with Socrates that the term "elenchus" is often found conjoined with Socrates' name. History in fact shows us one master of this practice, Socrates. Socrates, in his account of his conversation with Diotima, would have us believe that there were two. It seems more reasonable to believe that there was only one, and that the elenctic examination he attributes to Diotima is actually his own.²³

If the first part of Diotima's speech is a Socratic fiction, what can we say about the second part, in which Diotima lays out the path to Beauty? From the perspective internal to the dialogue, it would seem most reasonable to attribute it to Socrates. (If Diotima herself is a Socratic fiction, the attribution of the speech to Socrates would be inescapable.) This means that, again from the internal perspective, we should credit Socrates, if not with the entire theory of Forms, then at least with experiential knowledge of the Form of Beauty. This would reduce to nothing the difference between Diotima's understanding and Socrates'. (It would also make Diotima's remark about Socrates' inability to attain the highest revelation a case of Socratic irony.) The metaphysics of ascent Diotima expounds would be Socrates' metaphysics. Socrates himself would be, as

²² Thus Cornford: "By a masterstroke of delicate courtesy he avoids making his host look foolish. He pretends that he had spoken of Eros in similar terms to Diotima . . . and he represents the criticism as administered by Diotima to himself." "The Doctrine of Eros in Plato's *Symposium*," in Gregory Vlastos, ed., *Plato II: Ethics, Politics, and Philosophy of Art and Religion* (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, 1971), 122.

²³ This elenchus would be unusual, then, in that Socrates both administers and is the recipient of the elenchus. Perhaps, however, it would not be unique. The alter-ego Socrates introduces to examine him at *Hippias Major* 286c seems to be Socrates himself, thinly disguised. If the *Hippias Major* is authentic, this may be a parallel to the introduction of Diotima in this dialogue.

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he suggests Diotima is, a *mystagogos*, one who has seen the form of Beauty and can lead others to it. It is quite in keeping with the character of Socrates as portrayed in other dialogues that he would conceal this aspect of his philosophical ability behind the mask of another person, who may be his own creation.

Let me put my point in somewhat different terms. Diotima's speech shows the reader a two-stage process for the acquisition of knowledge. In the first stage, the *elenchus*, the interlocutor is relieved by his examiner of the pretence to knowledge and is made aware of his ignorance. In the second stage, the interlocutor is led by the examiner to knowledge or at least, since knowledge cannot be second hand, to true opinion. That is what Socrates describes Diotima as doing for him; that is what Socrates does for Agathon in particular and the other symposiasts as well. This two-stage process seems to me to be just the process described in the doctrine of Recollection. It is generally thought that this doctrine reflects a Platonic understanding of Socrates' philosophical activity. If the Socrates of the *Symposium* is the historical Socrates, then it must reflect a Socratic understanding as well. Socrates and Plato would be in harmony on the possibility of the acquisition of knowledge, at least to this extent. There is a further point. Knowledge isn't perfected until an experience of the object occurs. When Diotima expresses doubt about Socrates' ability to attain to a vision of Beauty itself, this is what she doubts. The ascent passage tells us that one must be led by a *mystagogos* to that vision, but it does not explain what the vision consists in. An intriguing, but admittedly extremely speculative suggestion would be that the kind of Socratic trance described both by Aristodemus (174d-175b) and Alcibiades (220c-d) culminates in the attainment of that vision. This

claim would tie the speech of Diotima both to earlier and later accounts of Socrates in the dialogue.

To sum up. The literal sense of the text of the speech of Diotima would attribute to Socrates at least a second-hand familiarity with the Form of Beauty. If Diotima, or her speech, is a fiction, he may have more than that. If Diotima is Plato's fiction, as the external perspective would indicate, that need not alter our understanding of Socrates' knowledge. If Diotima is Socrates' fiction, however, as the internal perspective indicates, the content of her speech would have to be attributed to him. Can these two perspectives be reconciled? Can we harmonize the view that attributes the theory of Forms to Plato with one that attributes at least some experiential knowledge of Forms to Socrates? To the exploration of this question I now turn.

Alcibiades' Speech

Alcibiades in his speech tells us a good deal about himself. He also tells us a good deal about the reactions to Socrates of his devoted followers. In this respect it recalls the introductory conversations of Apollodorus and Aristodemus. What I want to focus on here, however, is what the speech of Alcibiades tells us about Socrates. I shall say very little about the centerpiece of Alcibiades' encomium, his account of his attempted seduction of Socrates. Though this story tells us much about erotic practices in ancient Athens and the character of Alcibiades (as well as being a great story in its own right), its value for my purposes is that it corroborates Alcibiades' account of Socrates' virtue and enables us to locate him on Diotima's ladder of ascent. I want to focus instead on the central image that Alcibiades uses for Socrates: the image of the statues of Silenus that he

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says are for sale everywhere in Athens. These statues, as Alcibiades describes them, are ugly on the surface but carry *agalмата* (statues, images) of the gods within them:

I'll try to praise Socrates, my friends, but I'll have to use an image. And though he may think I'm trying to make fun of him, I assure you my image is no joke: it aims at the truth. Look at him! Isn't he just like a statue of Silenus? You know the kind of statue I mean; you'll find them in any shop in town. It's a Silenus sitting, his flute or his pipes in his hands, and it's hollow. It's split right down the middle, and inside it's full of tiny statues of the gods. (215a-b; cf. 216e-217a)

He applies the Silenus analogy both to Socrates and to his *logoi*: like Socrates himself, his *logoi* appear ludicrous, comical on the outside, but they contain images of virtue within:

even his ideas and arguments are just like those hollow statues of Silenus. If you listen to his arguments, at first they'd strike you as totally ridiculous; they're clothed in words as coarse as the hides worn by the most vulgar satyrs. He's always going on about pack asses, or blacksmiths, or cobblers, or tanners; he's always making the same tired old points in the same tired old words. If you are foolish, or simply unfamiliar with him, you'd find it impossible not to laugh at his arguments. But if you see them when they open up like the statues, if you go beyond their surface, you'll realize that no other arguments make any sense. They're truly worthy of a god, bursting with figures of virtue inside. They're of great—no, of the greatest—importance for anyone who wants to become a truly good man. (221d-222a)

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Alcibiades' account places Socrates at the very top of Diotima's ladder of ascent; it describes him as one who has knowledge of Beauty itself.²⁴ Alcibiades does not explicitly emphasize Socrates' wisdom; instead, he repeatedly stresses his divinity.²⁵ First of all, there is the comparison with the Silenus image itself, which contains within it divine images (215b, 216e-217a). Then Alcibiades compares Socrates' speech to the melodies of Marsyas: "his melodies have in themselves the power to possess and so reveal those people who are ready for the god and his mysteries. That's because his melodies are themselves divine" (215c). Socrates, in other words, is not only wise himself; he has the power to lead others to wisdom. This is the power of the *mystagogos*. In concluding his encomium he remarks that Socrates has no human parallel, but must be compared to Silenus and the satyrs (221d), and that his arguments are "worthy of a god" (222a).

Alcibiades' Portrait of Socrates and Diotima's Account of Wisdom

Alcibiades' description of Socrates is that of a wise man whose wisdom is cloaked in the ironic veil of a satyr. If we leave aside for a moment the apparent discrepancy between Diotima's placement and Alcibiades' placement of Socrates on the ladder of ascent, we can see that what Alcibiades says about Socrates corresponds very closely with what Diotima says about the acquisition of wisdom. Before she describes the ascent to the Form of Beauty Diotima offers an account of the human condition. All human beings are pregnant, both in body and soul (206c). Those whose pregnancy is more physical than psychological seek immortality through reproduction (206e-207a).

²⁴ This is where Paul Friedländer places him: *Plato: the Dialogues, Second and Third Periods* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1969) 30.

²⁵ It is only the person who reaches the top of the ladder of ascent and enters the presence of Beauty itself who attains divine status in Diotima's account (211d-212b), who is beloved by the gods and immortal (if any human can become so.)

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Those whose pregnancy is more psychological seek to bring to birth not physical offspring, but “wisdom and the rest of virtue” (209a3-4). The poets are included among those who fall into this category (at 209d Diotima mentions Homer and Hesiod as examples), as are statesmen and managers of households (here he mentions Lycurgus and Solon). The virtue of these people is referred to as “moderation and justice” (a8). All begetting, Diotima claims, must take place in the presence of beauty; the person who is pregnant primarily in soul therefore seeks beautiful souls in the presence of which he or she can bring forth virtuous deeds. When he finds such a person the psychologically pregnant person “tries to educate him” (209c1-2). The presence of a beautiful soul leads to the conception and birth of what the pregnant person “has been carrying inside him for ages” (c3). The person who has given birth and the beloved then nurture the offspring as those who are physically pregnant give birth to and nurture a physical child. But these psychological offspring are “more beautiful and immortal” (c6-7) than human children: anyone who could produce the poems of Homer or the Lycurgan constitution would rather do that than reproduce physically.

Now when Diotima says to Socrates that “even you” might be introduced into such mysteries, it is this account to which she is referring. The phrase “even you” seems like an insult, but it is not. For Diotima is placing Socrates, at least potentially, among the great educators of Greece. By saying that “even he” might be initiated into these mysteries she is saying that Socrates belongs with those whose pregnancy is more psychological than physical, that in the presence of a psychologically beautiful beloved he might give birth to “ideas and arguments about virtue—the qualities a virtuous man

should have" (209b8). She is claiming that Socrates, like everyone, is fertile, or at least potentially so: in the presence of beauty he will produce intellectual offspring.²⁶

This account, the one that precedes the description of the ascent, seems congruent with Alcibiades' description of Socrates. As Alcibiades describes Socrates, he was not overly interested in Alcibiades' physical beauty, but rather in his soul. As a result, he did not wish to have sex with him, but rather he "tried to educate him." Alcibiades describes Socrates as "containing images of the gods" within himself, images of divine virtue which are presumably represented by arguments; Diotima describes the psychologically pregnant person as teeming with ideas and arguments about virtue, ideas that he or she brings to birth in the presence of another. These arguments, Diotima says, are concerned with "the qualities a virtuous man should have"; Alcibiades says Socrates' arguments are "of the greatest importance" for anyone who wishes to become good.

The lower stages of Diotima's account of the ascent to the Form of Beauty recapitulate the account just given of physical and psychological pregnancy. In the lowest stage of the ascent, one falls in love with a single beautiful body (210a). From this stage one progresses to the love of all beautiful bodies (210b). Only at stage 3 (b-c), when one comes to appreciate the superior value of the soul and to love it in preference to the body does one leave the domain of physical pregnancy and enter the realm of psychological. Stage 4 (c) is concerned with "activities and laws," a phrase that recalls the earlier account of statesmanship, justice, Solon and Lycurgus. Stage 5, the stage immediately preceding the ultimate revelation of Beauty, is concerned with knowledge. The lover will "move on to various kinds of knowledge" and "see the beauty of knowledge" (c6-7). This

²⁶ This contradicts Socrates' claim in the *Theaetetus* (149a-151d) that he is a barren midwife of the ideas of others. Cf. Dover, 151, and Sheffield,

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stage is the first that lacks a parallel in Diotima's earlier account, unless we count the reference to "wisdom" at 209a3. That reference, however, was to *phronesis*, which we might think of as specifically *practical* wisdom. This one is to *epistemai*, kinds of knowledge; presumably this includes theoretical as well as practical knowledge. It is clear that at this stage we have entered the domain of the philosopher; the Socrates of *Republic* VI-VII, concerned with the mathematical sciences, belongs here. Unfortunately, neither Diotima's speech nor Alcibiades' gives us any indication of how we are to situate the Socrates of *this* dialogue with regard to this stage of the ascent.

In other respects, however, Alcibiades' encomium to Socrates gives us an indication as to where he would place Socrates on the ascent to the Beautiful. Alcibiades' story of his failed seduction of Socrates tells us that Socrates is above the initial stage of the ascent, in which one falls in love with a single beautiful body (though, as one pregnant in mind more than in body, Socrates would be expected to produce beautiful discourses rather than to be physically passionate; cf. 210a). Alcibiades tells us that Socrates has treated others in much the same way as he treated him (222b), so we must suppose that Socrates has risen above the second stage, in which one becomes a lover of all beautiful bodies. Socrates offers Alcibiades the promise of educational advice instead of sex, so we may assume that he has at least reached the stage of valuing a person's soul more highly than his body (218e-219b; note Alcibiades' comment at 216d-e that Socrates cares nothing for physical beauty). The next stage of the ascent, as we have seen, concerns practices and laws. If we connect the concern with laws to Diotima's comment about Lycurgus and Solon (209d-e), we may say that this stage is concerned with discourse about virtue. The poets and lawgivers of Greece were concerned with the

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education of youth. So, according to Alcibiades, is Socrates. Not only does Socrates have *logoi* about virtue to offer, however, he is uniquely virtuous himself.

Socrates' attainment of each of these stages is also attested by other dialogues. Socrates' discussion of virtue is the focus of too many dialogues to require comment. He is in addition presented by Plato as a uniquely virtuous person, especially (but not exclusively) in the events surrounding his trial. The *Charmides* shows us a Socrates bowled over by Charmides' physical beauty, but still with the presence of mind to ask whether the youth also has a beautiful soul (154d). At the start of the *Protagoras* (309b-d) Socrates tells an unnamed companion that the wisdom of Protagoras so eclipsed the physical beauty of Alcibiades that, though he was present when Socrates and Protagoras conversed, Socrates forgot about him most of the time. The picture Alcibiades presents of Socrates is thus far consistent with that of the other Socratic dialogues as well as with Socrates' self-portrait in his account of his conversation with Diotima, and would justify placing him fairly high up on the ladder of ascent. Up to this point, what Alcibiades claims is what Diotima concedes: that Socrates might be able to be initiated into the "lower mysteries." Diotima, in fact, puts Socrates on the threshold to the final stage; Alcibiades tells us that he crossed that threshold.

From Alcibiades' perspective, at least, Socrates has attained that life promised by Diotima to the one who successfully completes the ascent. He has attained favor with the gods and thus a kind of immortality. Not only that, but I think we may safely claim that Socrates played the role in Alcibiades' life that he describes Diotima as playing, or at least describing, in his: he served as Alcibiades' mystagogos. If Alcibiades was unable to complete the ascent, that was due to his own weakness (216b-c) and not, by his own

admission, to any defect in Socrates' arguments. Socrates speaks of Diotima as one who is unenlightened speaks of one who has attained enlightenment. Alcibiades speaks of Socrates in the same way. Socrates' does not object to Alcibiades' portrait of him, and since he has been invited by Alcibiades to correct him at any point if he disagrees with Alcibiades' description (214e-215a), his silence may be taken to imply his consent to the portrait.²⁷

Alcibiades' account of Socrates' wisdom makes it easy to locate him on Diotima's ladder of ascent. In evaluating his claims we must remember three things. First, Alcibiades has not heard Socrates' account of Diotima's speech and therefore cannot explicitly comment on it (though his speech does in fact constitute a kind of implicit commentary). Second, Alcibiades looks at Socrates as one who is at a lower position on the ladder of ascent looks at one higher up, while Diotima looks down at him, presumably, from above. Third, Diotima's view of Socrates pre-dates his instruction by her, whereas Alcibiades' must post-date that instruction. (If we think of the Socratic account of Diotima's education of him as fictional, we may say that Alcibiades' account of his relationship with Socrates must post-date Socrates' enlightenment, however and whenever it may have occurred.)

The Appeal to Irony

Diotima claimed that the person who attained to the intellectual vision of Beauty would have divine favor and would give birth to true virtue. Now there is a well-known paradox of Plato's portrait of Socrates in the "Socratic" dialogues that is based on three incompatible propositions:

²⁷ Given Socrates' earlier criterion for proper encomia, that the encomiast not heap on the subject all manner of praise but confine himself to the truth, (198d-199b) we could expect him to object if Alcibiades attributed to him properties he did not possess.

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- 1) Socrates appears to the reader to be virtuous (and perhaps uniquely so),
- 2) Socrates himself believes that virtue is knowledge, and
- 3) Socrates denies that he has the sort of knowledge that virtue requires.

Alcibiades resolves this conundrum not by denying that Socrates is virtuous, but by treating his disavowal of knowledge as ironic:

To begin with, he's crazy about beautiful boys; he constantly follows them around in a perpetual daze. Also, he likes to say he's ignorant and knows nothing. Isn't this just like Silenus? Of course it is. And all this is just on the surface, like the outsides of those statues of Silenus. I wonder, my fellow drinkers, if you have any idea what a sober and temperate man he proves to be once you have looked inside. Believe me, it couldn't matter less to him whether a boy is beautiful. You can't imagine how little he cares whether a person is beautiful, or rich, or famous in any other way that most people admire. He considers all these other possessions beneath contempt, and that's exactly how he considers all of us as well. *In public, I tell you, his life is one big game—a game of irony.* I don't know if any of you have seen him when he's serious. But I once caught him when he was open like Silenus' statues, and I had a glimpse of the figures he keeps within: they were so godlike—so bright and beautiful, so utterly amazing—that I no longer had a choice—I just had to do whatever he told me (216d-217a; my emphasis).

Alcibiades took Socrates' expression of erotic attachment to youths at face value, as an indication of sexual desire, and found, to his embarrassment but also to his admiration, that it was ironic. Socrates was not filled with sexual desire; rather, he was

filled with moral virtue. Likewise, he suggests, the famous Socratic profession of ignorance is ironic. He does not indicate here what Socrates contains within himself instead of ignorance, but it seems reasonable to claim that what Alcibiades has in mind, in parallel with the godlike virtue mentioned above, are the godlike *logoi* mentioned at 221d-222a. Again, though Alcibiades does not explicitly use the term “wisdom” here, Socrates’ possession of divine *logoi* should be seen as tantamount to his possession of wisdom.

The wisdom that Alcibiades attributes to Socrates is incompatible with the ignorance that Socrates professes in the so-called “early” or “Socratic” dialogues. Alcibiades’ reconciles the two Socratic stances, as noted above, by his invocation of irony. What is the nature of this irony? I think this question must be divided into two. First, there is the irony involved in Socrates’ disavowal of wisdom. This does not seem to me to be the complex irony Vlastos attributes to Socrates, which conceals one truth while expressing another.²⁸ Neither is it the even more complex irony of Alexander Nehamas, which conceals a question mark behind an ironic surface.²⁹ It is, rather, what Thrasymachus calls Socrates’ irony (*Rep.* I, 337a), which Vlastos³⁰ translates “shamming.” It is a tactic to lure interlocutors into stating their own position so that Socrates may practice the elenchus on it, as Robinson claimed.³¹ It does not conceal a truth within itself, as Vlastos’ complex irony does; it expresses a falsehood. According to

²⁸ Gregory Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), Ch. 1 (21-44); cf. Vlastos, “Socrates’ Disavowal of Knowledge,” in Vlastos, *Socratic Studies*, Myles Burnyeat, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), Ch. 2 (39-66). Vlastos discusses the irony of the speech of Alcibiades extensively in his 1991, Ch. 1 (33-44). My interpretation disagrees with his almost completely. I do, however, consider the possibility of a more complex irony in the interpretation of Socrates’ arguments below.

²⁹ Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998, *passim*).

³⁰ Vlastos (1991), 24-5.

³¹ Richard Robinson, *Plato's Earlier Dialectic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953) Ch. 2, esp. pp

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Alcibiades, Socrates is not “barren,” as the Midwife analogy of the *Theaetetus* indicates, but pregnant with divine *logoi*; his professions to the contrary are simply insincere.³²

The second question concerns the irony implicit in Socrates' arguments. On the surface, these *logoi* appear ridiculous; when one looks beneath the surface, however, they turn out to be the only *logoi* that make sense. The deeper meaning of the arguments are there for anyone to see, but perhaps only Alcibiades and a few others, like Apollodorus and Aristodemus, are able to see them. Perhaps Alcibiades did not need a mystagogos in any sense but that of a person who could state elenctic arguments, to see for himself the constructive philosophical conclusions suggested by Socratic *logoi*. This irony seems to be of a more complex sort than the irony involved in Socrates' disavowal of knowledge. One and the same argument, on this account, contains both a superficial, literal interpretation and a deeper, non-literal one. Socrates' arguments may meet Vlastos' criterion for complex irony: they conceal one truth while revealing another.

The appeal to irony is a dangerous one for scholars. If a scholar claims that a particular Socratic argument or proposition is ironic, he or she runs the risk of failing to take seriously what Socrates is asserting. So it is with Alcibiades: he may be failing to take the Socratic profession of ignorance seriously. Still, this is a claim that Alcibiades is putting forward in his speech, not one that a scholar is making on his behalf. As such it has to be dealt with, its meaning and implications examined. If Alcibiades is right, Socrates' profession of ignorance was a sham and the interpretation of Robinson (on this point, anyway) is correct.

³² Note that, apart from the reference in Alcibiades' speech to Socrates' irony, Socrates' account of his treatment at the hands of Diotima, and his own disparagement of the quality of his wisdom at 175e, this Socratic irony is largely absent from the *Symposium*. Socrates *admits* at the outset that he has knowledge of *ta erotika*, and speaks consistently with that admission throughout.

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Alcibiades' speech opens the door to a way of understanding the relation between the "early," "Socratic," or "elenctic" dialogues and the "middle," "Platonic," or "constructive" dialogues that is different from one common "developmentalist" picture. On this interpretation it is not that Plato's thought develops from a "Socratic" phase, in which Plato offers us a Socrates who lacks answers to the philosophical questions he raises and who therefore disavows philosophical wisdom, to a "Platonic" phase, in which he offers his own answers to Socrates' questions.³³ Rather, Socrates presents two faces to the world. His public face, which he presents to all but his most intimate disciples, is that of the ignorant questioner. His private face, which he reveals only to those disciples, is that of the constructive philosopher. We need not say that this Socrates is a theorist with completely articulate answers to philosophical questions. We might prefer to say that he is, by virtue of his intellectual vision of the Form of Beauty, a *mystagogos*, a guide to the highest mysteries of philosophy.³⁴ (If Diotima's account of psychological pregnancy can be invoked at this point, we might suggest that the reason Socrates revealed his inner images of virtue to Alcibiades and not to some others is that Socrates, like anyone else, could only procreate in the presence of beauty, whether that of the body or that of the soul.)

Charles Kahn has argued that the arguments of the early dialogues are proleptic, in that they lead to the solutions propounded in the middle dialogues.³⁵ Perhaps Socrates'

³³ Gregory Vlastos presented an influential version of this story in his (1991), 45-106. There are, of course, many variants of this view.

³⁴ David Sedley has suggested in *The Midwife of Platonism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 8-13, that Socrates, though not a Platonist himself, was the midwife of Platonism. My suggestion is that he may have been the *mystagogos* of Platonism. The person he would have led most famously to the metaphysical vision at the heart of Platonism would, of course, be Plato himself.

³⁵ Charles Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), esp. Ch. 2 (36-70). I am myself uncertain whether Plato intended them to be read proleptically, but at least several of them can be so read.

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arguments are proleptic in another sense, which is not, however, unrelated to Kahn's: perhaps they lead at least some interlocutors from the refutation of their cherished beliefs to the discovery of philosophical truth. Perhaps, once the false beliefs that are the result of cultural indoctrination are removed, the true beliefs that reflect the nature of reality (and that, according to the doctrine of Recollection, are innate in the soul) emerge almost spontaneously. Such arguments would not be merely negative, but implicitly constructive. They, and the person who propounded them, would be clever and ironic, but not merely so; the irony in question would be complex and deep, a simultaneous concealment and expression of a constructive philosophical vision underlying the critical elenctic examination. Perhaps, as the *Meno* suggests, the Socratic elenchus is merely the first stage in the process of recollection.

Assessment of the Speech

How seriously are we to take Alcibiades' portrait of Socrates? It is easy to reject or dismiss his claims on the grounds that he is very drunk, as he admits (212e), and that his drunken state reflects his intemperate character, which was notorious, and which marks him as a failed project in Socratic philosophical education. The seduction story is moreover told for comic effect, so why should we take seriously the rest of his speech? My response is, first, that the rest of the speech does not seem comical, but rather profound. The portrait of Socrates Alcibiades offers seems, on its merits, to be worthy of serious consideration. Second, Alcibiades, though clearly a morally ambiguous character, was regarded by the Athenian citizenry as the most able, most brilliant, and thus most dangerous Athenian political leader in the generation following Pericles. It was not for nothing that Socrates pursued and attempted to educate him. Third, this speech, even if it

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may be grounded in an historical event, must be seen as the composition, not of Alcibiades, but of Plato. Plato has offered, in the speech of Diotima, an account of the life of one who ascended to the Form of Beauty. He now follows that with a speech of Alcibiades that describes Socrates as one who has made that ascent and who lives that life. When Alcibiades describes the experience of looking inside Socrates and finding there divine *logoi* and images of virtue that others do not see, I think he speaks for Plato as well as for himself.

There is a fourth reason I think that Alcibiades' portrait of Socrates should be taken seriously. Socrates is portrayed in this dialogue as a charismatic philosophical teacher, a man who could earn the devotion of the ablest minds in Athens, one of which was certainly Alcibiades. I suggest that the idea of a Socrates who conceals the path to a life of virtue behind his apparently negative arguments is a figure more able to explain the attachment of an Alcibiades, or for that matter, of a Plato, than the barren, ignorant elenctic inquirer. I doubt that either would have long been interested in the latter character; but the person who offered glimpses of divine truth behind a veil of ignorance would have been, for both of them, endlessly fascinating. Every day that a disciple conversed with Socrates the possibility would exist that the veil would part, the Silenus open, and the divine vision might be revealed, if only for a moment.

The concept of Socrates' philosophical activity in Alcibiades' speech corresponds in part with the self-portrait Socrates offers in the Midwife passage of the *Theaetetus*. In one respect, as I noted above, the two portraits are opposites: the Socrates of the Midwife passage insists that he is barren, while Alcibiades describes Socrates as chock full of virtue and divine images. What the two comparisons share, however, is the idea that at

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least some of Socrates' companions "make progress" (*Tht.* 150d5), come to see, or at least to glimpse, the truth. I should note also that Xenophon, who has a much humbler view of the truths that Socrates conveyed to his disciples, shares the conviction that Socrates led his interlocutors out of ignorance and into moral wisdom (cf. e.g. *Mem.* I.2, IV.1). There is at most a hint of the Socratic profession of ignorance in Xenophon, but he repeatedly shows Socrates using his method of elenctic argument to improve his interlocutors morally.

For these reasons, therefore, I believe that it is plausible that the "fertile" Socrates of Alcibiades' portrait in the *Symposium*, filled with virtue and divine *logoi*, is in fact an accurate portrait of the historical Socrates. I do not think that this can be demonstrated, though. Plato offers us several portraits of Socrates, some of which are mutually incompatible, and this is but one. I do think that it is an important, and relatively neglected portrait of that Socrates, and I also think that its credentials are as good as any of its rivals. It is, however, only one Platonic portrait of Socrates, and it needs to be viewed in light of its rivals, including the portrait of Socrates as a midwife in the *Theaetetus*. Alcibiades' appeal to irony as a device for reconciling Socrates' professed ignorance with his hidden wisdom is an interpretation that deserves serious consideration by scholars. I think, moreover, that this portrait tells us something important about the way in which Plato perceived Socrates' influence on him: that Socrates led him to the discovery of the Forms. Socrates, as I have suggested above, was Plato's *mystagogos*.

Harmonization

It remains to harmonize the different individual portraits of Socrates in the *Symposium* into a single picture. This is, in some respects, relatively easy to do.

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Apollodorus and Aristodemus show us a Socrates who is capable of inspiring great loyalty in his followers, as does Alcibiades. They show us a Socrates who experiences extended trances, as does Alcibiades. Agathon's remarks link these trances with a reputation for wisdom that Socrates possesses, at least in his eyes. Socrates admits that he has knowledge of erotics; he also rejects Agathon's humorous suggestion that knowledge can be transferred from one who has it to one who does not by a process of osmosis. Diotima's speech indicates what the acquisition of that knowledge involves: the guidance of a *mystagogos* to the ultimate object of knowledge.

The difficult problem is to reconcile the portrait of Socrates in Diotima's speech with the portrait in Alcibiades' speech. I suggested three strategies above for harmonizing these two portraits: first, the strategy of treating Diotima, or her speech, as a rhetorical creation of Socrates; second, the strategy (which is explicitly adopted by Alcibiades) of treating Socrates' genuine wisdom as cloaked behind an ironic mask of ignorance; and third, the strategy of treating the speech of Diotima as representing an early, "pre-enlightenment" stage of Socrates' thought. The Socrates who emerges from these strategies is one who is in fact filled with divine images of virtue, images which he generally conceals but which he may, on occasion reveal to his disciples. According to Diotima, the effect of knowledge on the soul is the acquisition of virtue (212a-b); according to Alcibiades, Socrates is a uniquely, divinely virtuous man. All in all, this seems to me to be a generally coherent portrait. Diotima's speech places Socrates in the vicinity of the Form of Beauty without actually stating that he has direct, experiential knowledge of it; Alcibiades' speech affirms that Socrates has taken the final step in the ascent. All in all, interpreted in this way, the *Symposium* offers a "progressive revelation"

of Socrates' wisdom, from the first hints in the opening pages, through Diotima's portrait to the final account of Alcibiades.

Conclusion

I think it was Plato's intention in the *Symposium* to connect the historical Socrates to his own metaphysical and epistemological theories, to show that Socrates was the mystagogos who led him to those theories. He describes Socrates in terms his contemporaries would recognize as historically accurate: the philosopher with devoted disciples, practitioner of the elenchus, self-proclaimed expert in erotics. He has one of his most controversial disciples describe him as supremely, uniquely, divinely virtuous. Then he connects these traits with experiential knowledge of the Forms, or at least the Form of Beauty. A great majority of scholars will reject this connection as ahistorical. I have tried to make the case that it need not be taken as such. I do not think one can show that it *must* not be so taken. The idea of a Socrates lacking in metaphysical and epistemological doctrines may be too entrenched in contemporary Socratic scholarship to be dislodged. If it is possible to see this Socrates not as the definitive historical Socrates, however, but as just one of several Socrateses in Plato, it might be possible to consider the credentials of the alternative presented in this dialogue.