

Jefferson Quick, Timely Reads

Plato on Love and Mysticism

By: Reverend Charles Brock

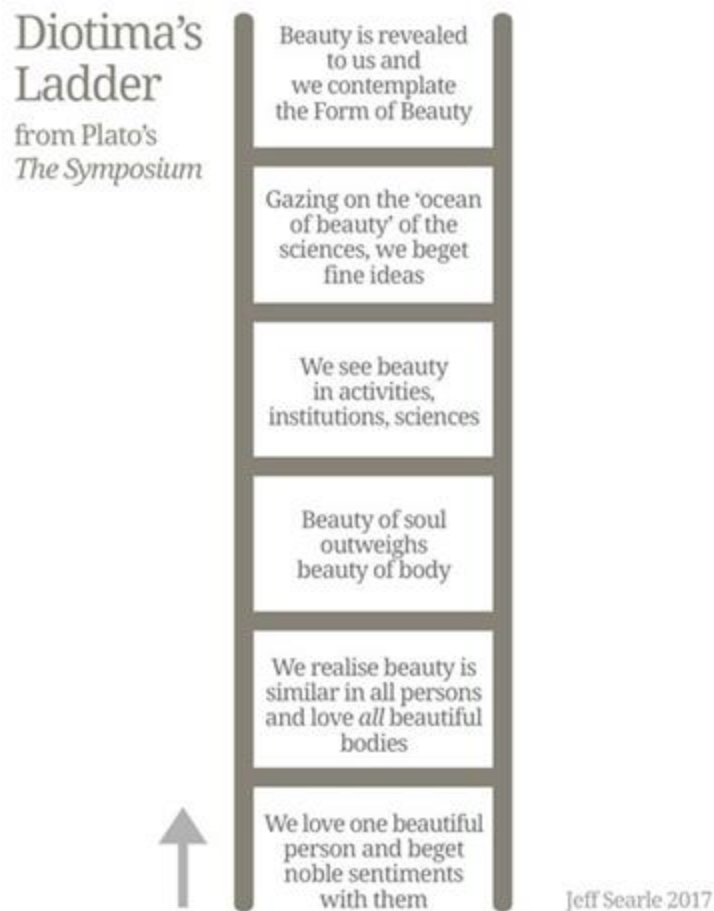
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Plato, who set the stage for all Western philosophy, once prompted the remark that “all philosophy in the West is but a commentary on Plato.”

He covered a huge range of thought and action. In this short piece I will look at love and mysticism, but he wrote on most every conceivable subject including government. *The Republic* is still a major source of political science thinking.

His ideas on love will be a shock to Westerners who haven't read him or about him. Roughly, he claims that love is a ladder – you move from the love of beautiful people through stages (see below) ending with a love of the truly beautiful. It is debated among his interpreters whether you can have your cake and eat it too, or must you give up the individual stages on life's way in order to arrive at the great mystical truth of being – the beautiful. In the *Symposium* Plato uses a female voice – his friend Diotima – to describe love and the ladder to the Beautiful.



Diotima argues that contemplating beauty is the best thing for of all life. Those who have ascended the ladder bring forth not mere images or reflections of goodness, but true goodness. Thus, the greatest lover is the philosopher, the lover of wisdom.

The final form or essence of Beauty (at the top of the ladder) is indiscernible and is essentially a mystical experience. It is variously named – Beauty, Beatific Vision, the Really Real, Beauty-Itself. What are we trying to grasp in this? To grasp the point, we need to appreciate what Plato is saying about reality and the Forms (Ideas; Essences). At the end of all life's tunnels is a Form or Essence of Reality that helps us understand the lesser manifestations of whatever we are talking about – for beauty there are many types on earth, but one complete and everlasting Form of beauty which is what we should strive for. Beauty is not just any Form. It bears close relationship to the good, even though Socrates argues that the two are distinct. It is therefore a Form above other Forms. But in *The Symposium* Plato never defines what Beauty is, but only some properties of its essence.

Diotima explains: “Now try to concentrate as hard as you can. Anyone who has been educated this far in the ways of love, viewing beautiful things in the right order and way, will now reach the goal of love's ways. He will suddenly catch sight of something amazingly beautiful in its nature; this, Socrates, is the ultimate objective of all the

previous efforts.”[1] Aspects of this are that Beauty always is, it doesn’t increase or decrease; it is beautiful to all, it is pure, unmixed, absolute.

The quasi-divine status that beauty has in the *Symposium* cannot be understood without appeal to divine action. We need more work on Greek religion here, but non-Greeks have taken Plato’s ladder and applied it in many and various ways to understand their own forms of mysticism and religion.

And what do we mean by love? Greeks have at least four words for love – *ego*, *philia* (brotherly affection), *eros* (various definitions but generally meaning desire) and *agape* (self-giving love). Plato is mainly interested in *eros*.

Eros as Diotima conceives it is a combination of self-involving and other-regarding motives that has great power. Although Diotima does not propose that we regard all humans as members of a single family, her theory of *eros* does rest on the idea that some sense of likeness to others (and not only to blood relations) elicits willingness to forego comforts, resources, and even life itself. There is something of *agape* in this form of *eros*.

At that highest point of the ascent, the lover arrives at an understanding of what beauty is. It is pure, unmixed, divine, uniform, and devoid of the great silliness that mars the beauty of human things; their beauty is a mere image of its true beauty. All of this suggests that the form of beauty, untainted by any imperfection, has a beauty that surpasses the sullied or short-lived appeal of all else. That is why the life of the lover who reaches this stage is greatly enhanced, so much so that it becomes mystical and godlike. She has gazed on the greatest beauty of all. It is an overwhelming and splendid experience, not to be compared with anything else in this life. From this one gives birth to true virtue and gains immortality.

How does this apply practically to our lives now? There are at least three features: unchanging stability of character; freedom from simultaneous pressure of opposites; truth being known by the mind and not the senses.[2] “Love needs to be turned into something more than an inarticulate yearning for a sexual life partner or a procreative force. It needs to become something better than the intense alliance of two people who care not at all for the larger world – or even for their own families (*Phaedrus* 252a)—but only for their own togetherness and satisfaction. For that to happen on a grand scale, Plato believes, we will need a new kind of political community.”[3] For that we need to read *The Republic*.

Plato’s famous “Cave” is described there. All mankind is in a metaphorical cave with shackles, and cannot see out, let alone understand the truth. “The prison house is the world of sight, the light of the fire is the sun, and you will not misapprehend me if you interpret the journey upward to the ascent of the soul into the intellectual world; in my view, at least, which, at your desire, I have expressed – whether rightly or wrongly, God knows. But, whether true or false, my opinion is that in the world of knowledge the idea

of good appears last of all, and is seen only with an effort; and, when seen, is also inferred to be the universal author of all things beautiful and right, parent of light and of the lord of light in this visible world, and the immediate source of reason and truth in the intellectual, and that this is the power upon which he who would act rationally either in public or private life must have his eye fixed.”[4]

Aspects of this idea are like the later New Testament concept of the *Descent into Hell* (I Peter 3) where Christ brings out the damned into God’s sun and light – which includes virtually the whole human race – led by Adam and Eve.

The ladder of Love was taken up by the early Church fathers, who recast it in Christian terms. This will be referred to in subsequent chapters. But suffice it to say, for now, that Plato suggests another way of mysticism, and it has power in itself.

[1] Plato, *The Symposium*, trans Christopher Gill, Penguin Classics, 1999, p 48

[2] T Irwin, *Classical Thought*, Oxford, 1989, p 90-91

[3] D. Nails, *The People of Plato* (Indianapolis, 2002)

[4] Plato, *the Republic*, Book 7, 317 Barnes & Noble, trans Benjamin Jowett, Barnes & Noble, 2004, p 227



Was Plato a Quietist? The question is – did Plato relate his mysticism to the state and politics – and the answer is yes. He had plenty to say about social life, politics, theory of the state, what was useful for the public, and what should be banned. *The Republic*, one of his greatest works, is about this. It is about justice and the rights of individuals. It is also about excellence, wisdom, courage, and temperance. It is related to his mystical works as well. It has formed the basis for more than two thousand years of political science, whether pro or con, there is much to learn from it on the major arguments today.

Some things we take for granted he wasn’t very happy about. He thought the state should ban poetry. Various reasons are given for this, and it is the content of the last chapter (Book 10) in *The Republic*. He Also does not like innovation in music. I leave it to the classicists to discuss.

The most worrying aspect is his view of the state is that it should be run by the educated elite as a governing class; an aristocracy of men called “philosophers.” The ideal state will come about when “philosophers are kings [and] the kings and philosophers of this world have the spirit and power of philosophy.”[5] There have been American presidents familiar and happy with this view, or at least what it is

driving at – an educated and talented group of people running the show, leaving the riffraff outside. John Adams comes to mind. Maybe it is better than having a Dumbo as head of state. Or perhaps there is something in between both extremes? James Madison thought so. Here we also note a Platonic relationship to the ladder of love. That starts from a base as we work our way up. That method is applied to the state here as well, and China today is the most “Platonic” in its view of an educated and worthy governing elite, taken originally from Confucius, but can be seen in Plato as well.

But, somewhat like China today as well, Plato also seemed to favor a form of communism as well and saw “private property as the principal catalyst for personal interests that will conflict with those of the community.”[6] As Plato begins Book 8: “And so, Glaucon, we have arrived at the conclusion that in the perfect State wives and children are to be in common; and that all education and the pursuits of war and peace are also to be common, and all the best philosophers and the bravest warriors are to be their kings.”[7]

Jesus, Mary, and Joseph – a mystic, a writer who celebrated same-sex male sexuality, and a commie already! No wonder they banned his books.

[5] *Republic* Book 5.473d-e

[6] Elizabeth Watson Scharffenberger, *Introduction to The Republic* by Plato trans by Benjamin Jowett, Barnes & Noble, 2004, p xlv

[7] *The Republic*, Book 8.543

Photo 1 from <https://www.thoughtco.com/plato-important-philosophers-120328>

Photo 2 from <https://peped.org/philosophicalinvestigations/handout-plato-the-cave-and-knowledge/diotimas-ladder/>

Photo 3 from http://www.fbcovers101.com/facebook-cover/id_13680/bt_p/Quotes_Sayings/Beautiful_Quote

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rev. Charles Brock, an Erie native, is an Emeritus Fellow, Chaplain, and Director of Ministerial Education at Mansfield College, Oxford, UK, where he taught for 35 years. He serves as the Director of the Institute on the American Dream at Penn State Behrend. Rev. Brock is acting minister of the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Girard, Pa., and he is a Founding Member of the Jefferson Educational Society. Rev. Brock serves as the Director of the Brock Institute for Mega Issues Education at the Jefferson and serves as Secretary of the Jefferson Educational Society’s Board of Trustees.

