

Images for the Sake of the Truth in Plato's *Symposium*

(2975 words, excluding notes and bibliography)

After arriving drunk (“plastered” in one translation¹) at Agathon’s party, Alcibiades offers to praise Socrates instead of love, the object of the other characters’ praise. In praising Socrates, Alcibiades says that he will have to use images (εἰκόνων) (215a4-5). He assures his companions, however, that this “is no joke: the image will be for the sake of the truth” (ἔσται δ’ ἡ εἰκὼν τοῦ ἀληθοῦς ἔνεκα, οὐ τοῦ γελοίου) (215a6). Alcibiades goes on to present his famous images of a Socrates who is full of divine images (ἀγάλματα), and who casts spells with his words (λόγου). Later, Alcibiades describes those words themselves as “bursting with images of virtue (ἀγάλματ’ ἀρετῆς)” (222a3-4).

This focus on Socrates’ images seems in tension with the view that Socrates exemplifies the proper lover earlier described. The successful lover gives birth “not to images of virtue,” but to “true virtue” (212a). How can Socrates burst with images and yet exemplify the lover who generates not images, but true virtue? This question urges us toward a firmer grasp of this unique Socrates (221c-d) and his exemplary character. Despite the apparent tension in the text, Socrates does indeed model true love: Socrates is filled with images, but those images engender true virtue in others.

One might fear that Alcibiades’ own flaws—not to mention his inebriation—mar his account of Socrates,² but I shall trust his claim that there’s truth in wine (217e). He is obviously not the most reliable speaker, but I’d like to think that Socrates was right to find promise in him. Furthermore, as has been often remarked, Alcibiades tells Socrates to correct any false assertions

¹ Nehamas and Woodruff: I rely heavily on their translation throughout my discussion, though most translations are ultimately my own. I have also consulted translations by Howatson and Rowe. All citations refer to Dover’s Greek text.

² Reeve comes close to this view at p. 131.

(214e, 217b, 219c);³ the fact that Socrates never interrupts seems to be an endorsement of Alcibiades' claims. Perhaps Socrates, though, is an incomplete philosopher, one who has not reached the highest mystery, as Diotima feared might happen.⁴ A third possibility is that Diotima's own view of philosophy, which cannot accommodate Socrates and his images, is flawed—perhaps she presents too much mystery and not enough philosophy.⁵ In the present discussion, however, I shall attempt to treat Socrates as well as possible. In other words, I shall show that Alcibiades correctly places Socrates at the top of Diotima's stairs, a placement which shows him to be the ideal lover and philosopher. Socrates, then, appears as a source of images, in Alcibiades' account, and yet, following Diotima's description, he gives birth not to images but to true virtue.

The tension, then, is only on the surface. Socrates' images, like those in Alcibiades' speech, are for the sake of the truth—his images produce true virtue in others. Although images must be distinct from true virtue, true virtue arises from Socrates' images. Such images bring forth the true virtue that is the successful lover's offspring.⁶

I

Socrates presents his account of love after Agathon and his other guests have all spoken.

Although Socrates claims that the art of love (τὰ ἐρωτικά) is the only thing he knows

³ For recent attention to these injunctions, see Blondell, p. 158 and Reeve, p. 124.

⁴ Hyland suggests such a reading at 61 ff.

⁵ See Nails 2006, especially pp. 184-5 and 192-4.

⁶ Part of my account depends upon treating the words εἰκόνες, εἶδωλα, and ἀγάλματα as synonyms, all referring in some sense to what in English I call "images." The first two terms are often treated as related in Plato's works, and at times they are clearly synonymous. Although in some contexts it is useful to separate ἀγάλματα from them, the *Symposium* does not appear to be such a context. Reeve explains that usually in Plato's works "an *agalma* . . . is a figurative statue . . . of any sort—the puppets which cast their shadows on the walls of the cave in *Republic VII* are *agalmata* (517d7)" (p. 125). Reeve himself finally treats "ἀγάλματα" as synonymous with "images" in the *Symposium* (see especially p. 138). This treatment appears reasonable, especially given the standard view of images in Plato's works, as expressed by Theaetetus in the *Sophist*: an image is "something that's made similar to a true thing and is another thing that's like it" (τὸ πρὸς τὰ ληθινὸν ἀφωμοιωμένον ἕτερον τοιοῦτον) (240a7-8). In the context of the cave image it is necessary to separate the puppets from their shadows; it nevertheless appears true that both the puppets and their shadows—both the ἀγάλματα and the εἰκόνες—can be seen as kinds of images.

(ἐπίστασθαι) (177d8), he does not present his own account, but instead recounts what he claims is the “speech about love I once heard from a woman of Mantinea, Diotima” (201d1-2). She assures Socrates that despite his former opinion, love is “neither beautiful nor good” (201e-7). Diotima tells Socrates, in fact, about a love that resembles Socrates—ugly, poor, shoeless, but also clever and resourceful (203c-e and 215b, 220b-c)⁷—and then goes on to explain the purpose of this love. Love, in order to be happy, desires to possess good things forever (204d-205a). Since humans are not immortal and so cannot possess anything forever, their best hope is to pursue reproduction and birth in beauty:

Pregnancy, reproduction—this is an immortal thing for a mortal animal to do, and it cannot occur in anything that is out of harmony, but ugliness is out of harmony with all that is godly. Beauty, however, is in harmony with the divine (206c7-d2).

In beauty, therefore, reproduction occurs, and that reproduction brings humans as close as possible to eternal possession of good things: it brings us as close as possible to true happiness. Although some reproduction is physical, the superior reproduction involves giving birth both to virtue and to beautiful words (λόγοι):

Everyone would rather have such children than human ones, and would look up to Homer, Hesiod, and the other good poets with envy and admiration for the offspring they have left behind—offspring, which, because they are immortal themselves, provide their parents with immortal glory and remembrance (209c7-d4).

After introducing this idea of psychic pregnancy, Diotima finally explains the “highest mystery” to Socrates, although she fears he’ll be unable to follow (210a). The successful lover moves from one to many beautiful bodies, then to beautiful souls; from souls to customs, and from customs to various kinds of knowledge, and eventually to beauty itself: “one goes always upward for the sake of this beauty, starting out from beautiful things and using them like rising stairs” (211c1-3). Throughout the preliminary stages, the lover generates λόγοι, as in the case of

⁷ For a more thorough account of the relation between Diotima’s claims about love and Alcibiades’ claims about Socrates, see Bury, pp. lx-lxi.

the lover of beautiful souls, who is “content to love and care for [the beloved] and to seek to give birth to such λόγοι as will make young men better” (210c1-3).

When the lover reaches the last stage, however, he no longer gives birth to any λόγοι.⁸

The successful lover, who has come into contact with beauty itself, gives birth to virtue itself, which he alone can produce:

only then will it become possible for him to give birth not to images of virtue (οὐκ εἰδωλα ἀρετῆς), because he’s in touch with no images (οὐκ εἰδώλου ἐφαπτομένῳ), but to true virtue, because he is in touch with the truth (212a2-5).

The lover’s goal, as always, is reproduction; the successful lover, however, reproduces something different from all other lovers: he produces true virtue. Diotima no longer speaks of λόγοι—the generation here apparently has an entirely new character. The ascending lovers generate λόγοι, but the lover who completes the ascent produces virtue, “and when he has given birth to true virtue and nurtured it, the love of the gods belongs to him, and if any human could become immortal, it would be he” (212a5-7).

It is, of course, not at all clear what it means to “give birth to true virtue”: some readers understand it as the transformation of the lover into a genuinely virtuous person;⁹ others envision a virtue produced in another—the truly successful lover, on this account, would bring forth the excellence of others.¹⁰ Frisbee C. C. Sheffield has recently defended the view that contemplation itself is genuine virtue. She argues that since Diotima says that a life spent “beholding beauty itself (θεωμένῳ αὐτὸ τὸ καλόν)” (211d) is the best life for humans, and since true virtue entails true happiness, the activity of contemplation must be equivalent to true virtue.¹¹

⁸ I use the masculine pronoun because Diotima does so; I assume that her presence here shows that this achievement is beyond gender.

⁹ See for example Hyland, p.59; Blondell, p. 159.

¹⁰ See Hackforth, p.44. Rowe bridges these, arguing that the successful lover produces virtue both in himself and in others (p. 201). See White 2004, p. 374 n.37 for further possibilities and citations.

¹¹ See Sheffield 2008, p. xxii, and 2006, p. 134; Gerson has a similar view at pp. 65-6.

As F. C. White has pointed out, however, Diotima treats contemplation not as an end in itself, but instead as desirable “because in the life of contemplating Beauty, and in that life alone, the lover will beget true virtue.”¹² The grasp of beauty itself makes possible the reproduction of true virtue. As Diotima says at 212a, the successful lover gives birth to “true virtue, because he is in touch with the truth (ἀληθῆ, ἅτε τοῦ ἀληθοῦς ἐφαπτομένῳ).” On White’s account, that true virtue takes the form of the discourses, the λόγοι that the true lover leaves behind—discourses which turn others toward what is important in life.¹³ White, however, must then make the odd claim that the discourses are themselves virtue, rather than simply things that lead to virtue. In a more recent piece, in fact, she says that Socrates’ discourses “are the offspring that ensure his immortality,”¹⁴ even though the discourses consist, as White herself notes, of images of virtue (ἀγάλματα ἀρετῆς) (222a4), rather than the true virtue that Diotima promises the true lover (212a).

I am in no way qualified to speak on the generation of virtue, but Diotima’s account does suggest another explanation: the successful lover should produce the sort of thing that the ascending lover tries to generate, but the successful lover should, of course, succeed. The lover of beautiful souls, recall, will “seek to give birth to the kind of speeches (τίκτειν λόγους τοιούτους καὶ ζητεῖν) that will make young people better (βελτίους)” (210c1-3). Although some commentators would excise the word ζητεῖν (“to seek”) here,¹⁵ the ascending lover must be seeking and inquiring—indeed, that very activity compels him upward.¹⁶ The ascending lover seeks beneficial speeches; the successful lover actually generates the kind of speeches that make

¹² White 2004, p. 373.

¹³ White 2004, p. 377 ff.

¹⁴ White 2008, p. 79.

¹⁵ Bury, p. 126; Dover, p. 156.

¹⁶ See Rowe, p. 195.

people better.¹⁷ Once the lover reaches the top, he should be able to give birth to speeches that will truly improve others.

Socrates produces such speeches, speeches which teem with images of virtue (222a). Socrates exemplifies the successful lover, who generates virtue in others by means of images and λόγοι. The fact that Socrates is “bursting with images” does not therefore conflict with Diotima’s claim that the true lover generates virtue, since Socrates’ images, like those in Alcibiades’ speech, are for the sake of the truth—they are for the sake of others’ true virtue.

II

Although at the time of Diotima’s speech Socrates cannot follow her to the top, there are compelling reasons to think that he later completed the ascent. Socrates’ behavior, as Alcibiades describes it, suggests that he becomes the successful lover Diotima discusses, as Ruby Blondell and William J. Prior have both recently argued.¹⁸ His indifference to physical things—ranging from Alcibiades’ beautiful body (218b-219d) to the cold at Potidaea (220a-c)—bespeaks of a character who has left “mortal nonsense” (φλυαρίας θνητῆς) (211e3) behind. Further, the episodes where he stands motionless (175a-e, 220c-d) seem to imply that he has reached the sort of understanding promised in Diotima’s account. Socrates in these moments speaks to no one, and Blondell argues that “in so far as Socrates . . . treats philosophical inquiry as something to be undertaken . . . with other human beings, what he is doing in the doorway *cannot* be ‘seeking,’ or solving a problem. . . . [i]t seems plausible to infer that he is, instead, gazing on the Form of Beauty.”¹⁹

¹⁷ As Rowe explains, the “difference between phantom and reality here [sc. 212a] in fact seems to be essentially a matter of degree. . . . But then it is an *extraordinary* difference of degree” (Rowe, 201—emphasis original).

¹⁸ Blondell, pp. 155-160; Prior, pp. 156-7. Blondell, however, ultimately argues that Socrates is at all and none of the stages on the line at pp. 174-178. See Blondell, p. 156 n.34, for other readers who place Socrates at the top of Diotima’s stairs; and Blondell pp. 160-174 for other placements of Socrates.

¹⁹ Blondell, p. 159.

Alcibiades' emphasis on Socrates' relation to virtue also reinforces this reading, since the successful lover generates true virtue, according to Diotima (212a). Alcibiades repeatedly praises Socrates' virtue, as at 219d, where he says he admired Socrates for "his nature, his self-control and courage—here was a man whose wisdom and strength went beyond my wildest dreams!" Socrates does not only display virtue, according to Alcibiades, but he also is full of λόγοι that make people better (222a). Socrates clearly fits Diotima's account of a person who gives birth to true virtue (212a). His generation of virtue, his apparent contemplation of beauty itself, and his disdain for "mortal nonsense" together suggest that Socrates is indeed a lover who has reached the top of Diotima's "rising stairs" (211c).

III

One problem with this reading is that we have to take Alcibiades very seriously, and treat his comments about Socrates as reliable. Doing so, however, requires giving credit to all of Alcibiades' speech. In particular, we must attend to Alcibiades' claim that Socrates' produces λόγοι "bursting with images of virtue (ἀγάλαματ' ἀρετῆς)" (222a1-5). And so again our bind: it appears either that Alcibiades is wrong in suggesting that Socrates produces both true virtue and images of virtue, or that Diotima is wrong to oppose true virtue and its image. I hope to show, nevertheless, that the difficulty can be resolved: since Socrates' images give rise to virtue in others, he is full of images but gives birth to truth.

Alcibiades appears just after Socrates ends his account of Diotima's claims about love. Preceded by drunken revelry and the shrieks of a flute-girl, Alcibiades is half-carried into Agathon's house, but then "he managed to stand by himself, crowned with a wreath of violets and ivy and ribbons on his head" (212d7-e2). After a brief spat with Socrates, Alcibiades downs nearly half a gallon of wine (214a) and offers to give a speech in praise of Socrates.

In praising Socrates, Alcibiades says that he'll “have to use images (εἰκόνων)” (215a4-5). His images, though, are not designed to amuse: “the image will be for the sake of the truth (ἔσται δ’ ἢ εἰκὼν τοῦ ἀληθοῦς ἕνεκα)” (215a6). Whereas Diotima appeared to contrast images and truth (212a), Alcibiades brings them together.

One of Alcibiades’ images is of Socrates charming others with his words just as Marsyas charmed with his flute; the other image matters more for us, though, since with it Alcibiades compares Socrates himself to an image, a sculpted Silenus (γεγλυμμένος σιληνός) (216d6). A Silenus is a satyr, described by Howatson and Sheffield as “lewd, drunken, and mischievous” mythical creatures: not perhaps the most flattering comparison, though satyrs do resemble Socrates in being “snub-nosed and with protuberant eyes.”²⁰ This Silenus image has further images inside of itself: each is “split right down the middle, and inside it’s full of tiny images (ἀγάλματα) of the gods” (215b2-3).

Just like the Silenus statue, according to Alcibiades, Socrates appears rough and licentious on the outside, but is full of inner beauty. Socrates acts boy-crazy and ignorant (216d), but Alcibiades once saw Socrates open like a Silenus: “I had a glimpse of the images (αγάλματα) he keeps hidden within: they were so divine and golden, so utterly beautiful (πάγκαλα) and amazing” (216e6-217a1). Alcibiades seems to have glimpsed Socrates’ virtue—or rather, images of that virtue, since he calls them ἀγάλματα. Alcibiades wished to consummate his love with Socrates physically, but not because of sexual attraction to Socrates; he seeks Socrates’ embrace for the sake of virtue. Alcibiades thus explains his position to Socrates: “Nothing is more important to me than becoming the best man I can be, and no one can help me more than you to reach that aim” (218d1-3). The images in Alcibiades’ speech are

²⁰ Howatson and Sheffield, pp. 85-6.

for the sake of the truth; similarly, the images in Socrates are such as to move people to true virtue. Further, when Socrates refuses to have sex with Alcibiades, the latter was “deeply humiliated, but also . . . couldn’t help admiring [Socrates’] nature, his self-control and courage,” along with his wisdom and strength (219d3-7). Even Socrates’ apparently hurtful actions turn Alcibiades’ thoughts to virtue! Those utterly beautiful images in Socrates are in fact for the sake of others’ virtue.

Why images, though? Why must Socrates bring forth Alcibiades’ virtue through images? As C. D. C. Reeve has recently explained, Socrates cannot place virtue in Alcibiades or contemplate the truth for him: “One must see the forms for oneself.”²¹ Images necessarily point beyond themselves, toward what they are not—they point toward their models, toward the originals of which they are images. To recognize an image is to recognize something that falls short, something that calls its model to mind, though the image itself is not the model. Socrates cannot force Alcibiades to be virtuous, and he cannot show him virtue itself; images of virtue, though, might turn Alcibiades toward the truth. Socrates’ images of virtue point Alcibiades toward genuine virtue—they are images of “what is itself necessarily beyond images.”²² By presenting Alcibiades with images, Socrates urges him toward virtue.

It is not only Socrates’ actions and nature, though, that give rise to such virtue. Beautiful images appear inside of Socrates’ λόγοι, which also resemble Silenus statues, according to Alcibiades:

If you were to listen to his λόγοι, at first they’d strike you as totally ridiculous 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 ways. . . . But if you see them when they open up, if you go behind their surface, you’ll realize that no other λόγοι make any sense. They’re truly worthy of a god, bursting with images of virtue (ἀγάλματ’ ἀρετῆς) (221e1-222a4).

²¹ Reeve, p. 138.

²² Reeve, p. 138.

Again images: Socrates' words burst with images of virtue, not with virtue itself. Those words, nevertheless, are of "great—no of the greatest—importance for anyone who wants to become truly beautiful and good (τῶ μέλλοντι καλῶ καγαθῶ ἕσσεσθαι)" (222a4-6). Socrates and his λόγοι are bursting with images, but those images help bring forth virtue. Diotima had described the true lover as giving birth not to images of virtue, but to true virtue. The fact that Socrates is filled with images does not distance him from that true lover, but rather confirms his success: Socrates' images bring forth the virtue of others. Just like the images in Alcibiades' speech, Socrates' images are "for the sake of the truth," for the sake of true virtue.

IV

Alcibiades, of course, leaves us one more problem: on his way to ignominy, sacrilege, and assassination, he, of all people, clearly lacks virtue.²³ If the true lover brings forth true virtue in others, must Alcibiades' failure not show that Socrates has failed? Many have considered this question, and I would join the majority in appealing to Alcibiades' own words:²⁴

[Socrates] makes me admit that my political career is a waste of time, while all that matters is just what I most neglect: my personal shortcomings, which cry out for the closest attention. So I refuse to listen to him; I stop my ears and tear myself away from him . . . (216a4-7).

Would Alcibiades only have listened, he here seems to admit, he might have avoided tragedy and instead come closer to virtue. If it is indeed Socrates' images that turn us toward virtue, then our best hope is to follow Alcibiades not in his life but in his speech, and keep our eyes on those images that are for the sake of the truth.

²³ I'll not recite the details of his life or its shortcomings here, but see the entry in Howatson and Sheffield's "Glossary of Names," pp. 71-2 and the entry in Debra Nails' *The People of Plato*, pp.10-20. Although Alcibiades may not have been guilty of all he's charged with, his reputation is certainly not that of a virtuous person.

²⁴ See Cleary, p. 146; Jirsa, pp. 289-292, and Rowe, pp. 205-6 for recent affirmations of this reading. The classic dissent is Gagarin, but see also Hyland, who comes close to indicting Socrates at pp. 61-3.

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