



Beauty in Diotima of Mantinea (ca. 440 B.C.E.)

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Socrates recognizes the priestess Diotima as the one who taught him about love (*eros*) in his youth. Her theory of love is in turn inextricably linked with beauty—in both a physical and a noumenal form. Diotima considers erotic desire for the phenomenal as a means to rational desire for the noumenal; in each case, desire is indicative of a deficit, a lack that needs to be satiated. The physical beauty that attracts one to the beloved serves as an enticement to transcend physicality itself, and enter into an exalted realm that promises immortality in the midst of ideal Beauty. The philosopher, as a lover of wisdom, excels in this regard inasmuch as “wisdom is a most beautiful thing, and Love is of the beautiful” (Symposium: 204). Enamoured of beauty, the lover is led to the Good.

However, the highest standard is required: “beauty absolute, separate, simple, and everlasting, which without diminution and without increase, or any change, is imparted to the ever-growing and perishing beauties of all other things” (211). Our initial attraction to mere earthly beauty evolves into a growing appreciation for ideal abstractions, moving from beautiful forms to beautiful practices and beautiful concepts, culminating in beauty that is universal and absolute, the ideal/idealized essence of beauty. The energizing role of the physical parallels the chariot allegory from *The Phaedrus*, in which the mismatched horses of spirit (mind) and appetite (body) are able to propel the psyche toward the divine under the control of reason. Beauty is the means to a much higher end, self-transformation.

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Keywords:

beauty, desire, good, ideal, love, wisdom, Socrates, Plato