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

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The priestess Diotima was acknowledged by Socrates as his teacher in “matters of love [*ta erotica*]” (Symposium: 177). Diotima’s proto-Platonism echoes ancient Greek philosophy’s fixation on the ideal. The experience of love utilizes the phenomenal as a springboard to the noumenal: inspired by desire for the beautiful beloved, the lover aspires to transcendent Beauty and ultimately Goodness. Significantly, the creative flourishing is conveyed using images derived from experiences of procreation, pregnancy, and birth unique to women. This same imagery is found in Socrates’ self-designation as a midwife who assists others in bringing forth their noumenal insights; in the case of a true philosopher or lover of wisdom “at last the vision is revealed to him of a single science of beauty everywhere” (210).

Love, the offspring of Plenty and Poverty, bridges the divide between the mortal and divine realms, allowing the lover to cross over into immortality. Thus the love relationship that begins with a desire for a particular physical form, drives the lover to gradually abstract from mortal limitations and arrive at the universal. Love for a beautiful form expands into love for all that is beautiful, and ultimately knowledge of Beauty’s very essence. Just as procreation imparts genetic immortality—leaving “behind a new existence in the place of the old” (206–207)—the soul’s creative impulse insures its own immortality by basking in the light of the Good. The marriage of minds brings forth noumenal offspring more sublime than mere mortal children. In Diotima’s dualistic construct, self-realization can only occur within the higher sphere of the noumenal, abstracted from ephemeral mundane experience.

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