



Ascent in Diotima of Mantinea (ca. 440 b.c.e.)

Viktoria Bachmann

Christian-Alberts-Universität zu Kiel

The ascent is a central concept of philosophical and religious thinking: in a process of several stages of self-transformation (aesthetic, ethical and epistemic) the ascendant transforms their thinking, the ethics which guide their life and consequently their relationship to the world, God and their fellow human beings. In a philosophical context, ascent is introduced as a concept of a successful experience of transcendence by the mystery priestess Diotima and is adopted by Socrates in Plato's *Symposium* (210a-212c). It presupposes an erotic understanding of human existence. Love is understood as an expression of a fundamental lack of the beautiful and the good (201c) and aims to overcome this condition by creating what humans lack (206e-207a).

According to Diotima, ascent represents the highest form of love (210a): in the first stage, the lover is fascinated by a beautiful body and brings forth fair discourses. From experiencing the beauty of other bodies, they go on to realize that the beauty of one body is the same as that of all beautiful bodies (210a). In this abstraction, the initially sensual understanding of beauty is spiritualized and the fierceness of love for a single beautiful body is relativized. This leads to the discovery of the beauty of the soul. In the second stage, the lover brings forth instructive discourses. By extending their love further, to all beautiful souls, the lover realizes that the beauty of aspirations, customs and laws is the same (210b-c). This results in the lover's understanding of beauty and love becoming more objective. The third stage thus focuses on the sciences, where the lover brings forth noble discourses in their pursuit of wisdom. In this way, the lover's understanding of beauty becomes fully objective (210d) until, in the fourth stage, they see the beauty itself: "When a man has been thus far tutored in the lore of love, passing from view to view of beautiful things, in the right and regular ascent, suddenly he will have revealed to him, as he draws to the close of his dealings in love, a wondrous vision, beautiful in its nature; and this, Socrates, is the final object of all those previous toils" (210e). Beauty itself transcends all previous stages (211a-b). However, this experience enables the fulfilment of love by bringing forth "not illusions but true examples of virtue, since his contact is not

with illusion but with truth" (212a).

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