Symposium

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Overview

Plato's "Symposium" is a philosophical dialogue set at a dinner party (a 'symposium') in ancient Athens, hosted by the tragedian Agathon, to celebrate his victory in a dramatic competition. The guests decide to forgo heavy drinking and instead deliver speeches in praise of Eros, the god of Love. The dialogue explores the multifaceted nature of love, desire, and beauty through a series of eloquent and often humorous or profound speeches by characters such as Phaedrus, Pausanias, Eryximachus, Aristophanes, Agathon, and finally, Socrates.

The speeches progress from more conventional and earthly understandings of love to increasingly abstract and spiritual interpretations. Socrates, recounting the teachings of the priestess Diotima, presents the most profound theory: the "ladder of love." This concept describes a journey from physical attraction to individual bodies, to love for all beautiful bodies, then to beautiful souls, beautiful customs and laws, beautiful knowledge, and ultimately, to the apprehension of Beauty itself – the Form of Beauty, which is eternal, unchanging, and divine. The dialogue culminates with the unexpected arrival of Alcibiades, who delivers a drunken encomium not to Love, but to Socrates himself, revealing the philosopher's unique character and his embodiment of true love and wisdom. "Symposium" is a foundational text in Western philosophy, offering deep insights into human desire, the pursuit of wisdom, and the nature of the good life.

Key Takeaways

- Understand that love is not merely a desire for beauty, but a desire to possess the good forever, leading to a form of immortality through creation.
- Recognize that there are different forms of love, ranging from physical attraction to intellectual and spiritual yearning, each with its own value and purpose.
- Ascend the 'ladder of love' by moving beyond individual beautiful objects to appreciate beauty in all things, then in souls, laws, knowledge, and finally, the Form of Beauty itself.
- Appreciate that true beauty and goodness are eternal and unchanging, distinct from the fleeting beauty of the physical world.
- Consider that the pursuit of wisdom and virtue is a manifestation of the highest form of love, leading to a deeper understanding of reality.
- Reflect on the idea that love inspires individuals to noble deeds and the creation of lasting works, whether physical or intellectual.

• Examine the role of rhetoric and persuasion in shaping understanding, as demonstrated by the diverse speeches on love.

Chapter Summaries

Introduction: Apollodorus's Account

The dialogue begins with Apollodorus recounting to an unnamed companion a story about a symposium (drinking party) that took place many years ago. He explains that he heard the account from Aristodemus, who was present, and has since verified details with Socrates himself. The setting is the house of the tragedian Agathon, who is celebrating his victory in a dramatic competition. The guests, including Phaedrus, Pausanias, Eryximachus, Aristophanes, and Socrates, decide to forgo heavy drinking and instead deliver speeches in praise of Love (Eros), as suggested by Eryximachus. This introductory section establishes the narrative frame and the central theme of the evening.

Phaedrus's Speech: Love as an Ancient God

Phaedrus, the instigator of the idea, delivers the first speech. He argues that Love is one of the oldest and most revered gods, a source of the greatest good for humanity. He emphasizes that Love inspires courage, honor, and self-sacrifice, particularly in lovers. He cites examples such as Alcestis, who died for her husband Admetus, and Achilles, who avenged Patroclus, as demonstrations of Love's power to motivate noble deeds. For Phaedrus, an army composed entirely of lovers and their beloveds would be invincible, as each would strive for honor and avoid shame in the eyes of the other.

Pausanias's Speech: Common and Heavenly Love

Pausanias follows Phaedrus, distinguishing between two kinds of Love: Common Love (Pandemian Eros) and Heavenly Love (Uranian Eros). Common Love is base, indiscriminate, and focused on physical gratification, appealing to both sexes and lacking discrimination in its objects. Heavenly Love, however, is noble, directed towards the male, and aims at intellectual and moral improvement. He argues that the pursuit of wisdom and virtue through a relationship with an older, wiser lover is the true form of Love, contrasting it with the vulgar pursuit of mere physical pleasure. He also discusses the social conventions and laws surrounding pederasty in Athens and other cities.

Eryximachus's Speech: Love as a Cosmic Force

Eryximachus, a physician, presents a scientific and cosmic view of Love. He expands Pausanias's distinction, arguing that Love is not just a human emotion but a universal principle of harmony and balance found throughout nature. He sees Love as the force that brings opposites together in medicine (health and sickness), music (harmony and discord), and the seasons (wet and dry). For Eryximachus, the physician's art is to discern and promote the 'good' Love that creates

balance and order, while avoiding the 'bad' Love that leads to imbalance and disease. He views Love as a fundamental force governing all things, from the human body to the cosmos.

Aristophanes's Speech: The Myth of the Original Humans

Aristophanes, the comic poet, delivers a humorous and poignant myth. He explains that originally, humans were spherical beings with two faces, four arms, and four legs, existing in three sexes: male, female, and hermaphrodite. These powerful beings attempted to assault the gods, leading Zeus to split them in two as punishment. Since then, each half has been perpetually searching for its lost other half, driven by a deep longing for completeness. This desire for reunion, Aristophanes argues, is what we call Love. He suggests that when two halves find each other, they experience profound joy and a desire to merge completely, which is the true essence of Eros.

Agathon's Speech: Praising Love's Beauty and Virtues

Agathon, the host and tragedian, delivers a highly rhetorical and poetic speech, praising Love as the youngest, most beautiful, and most delicate of the gods. He argues that Love avoids old age and ugliness, dwelling only in the softest and most beautiful places. Agathon attributes all virtues—justice, temperance, courage, and wisdom—to Love, claiming that Love is the source of all good things among gods and men. He describes Love as the creator of poetry, art, and all forms of human excellence, inspiring beauty and harmony in every aspect of life. His speech is met with great applause for its eloquence and style.

Socrates's Speech: Diotima's Ladder of Love

Socrates, after questioning Agathon's definition of Love, recounts a conversation he once had with Diotima of Mantinea, a wise priestess. Diotima taught him that Love is not a god but a 'spirit' (daimon) that mediates between gods and mortals, a child of Resource (Poros) and Poverty (Penia). Love is a desire for beauty and goodness, and ultimately, for immortality. She explains the 'Ladder of Love,' a progression from loving a single beautiful body, to all beautiful bodies, to beautiful souls, to beautiful customs and laws, to beautiful knowledge, and finally, to the apprehension of absolute Beauty itself—the Form of Beauty. This ascent leads to true wisdom and virtue.

Alcibiades's Interruption and Praise of Socrates

Just as Socrates finishes, Alcibiades, drunk and boisterous, crashes the party. He declares that he will praise Socrates, not Love. He describes Socrates's unique character, comparing him to Silenus figures and satyrs, outwardly ugly but inwardly full of divine wisdom and virtue. Alcibiades recounts several personal anecdotes illustrating Socrates's extraordinary self-control, courage in battle, intellectual prowess, and ability to resist all temptations, including Alcibiades's own attempts to seduce him. He expresses his frustration and admiration for Socrates, who constantly challenges him to improve himself, revealing Socrates as the embodiment of true philosophical Love.

Conclusion: The End of the Symposium

As Alcibiades finishes, more revelers burst into the house, leading to general drunkenness and chaos. Most of the guests fall asleep, but Socrates continues to converse with Agathon and Aristophanes, arguing that a skilled tragedian should also be a skilled comedian, and vice-versa. Eventually, Agathon and Aristophanes also fall asleep. Socrates, having outlasted everyone, rises at dawn, bathes, and goes about his usual day, demonstrating his remarkable endurance and philosophical discipline. The dialogue ends with Apollodorus reaffirming the story's authenticity and Socrates's unique character.

Themes

- Nature of Love
- Pursuit of Beauty
- Desire and Immortality
- Wisdom and Philosophy
- Rhetoric and Persuasion

Frequently Asked Questions

What is Symposium about?

Plato's "Symposium" is a philosophical dialogue set at a dinner party where guests deliver speeches in praise of Eros, the god of Love. It explores various facets of love, desire, and beauty, culminating in Socrates's account of Diotima's 'ladder of love,' which describes a ascent from physical attraction to the apprehension of absolute Beauty itself.

Is Symposium worth reading?

Yes, "Symposium" is highly worth reading for its profound exploration of love, beauty, and human desire. It offers diverse perspectives on these timeless themes, culminating in one of Plato's most famous philosophical concepts, the 'ladder of love.' It's a foundational text for understanding Western philosophy and human nature.

How does Symposium end?

Spoiler: The symposium ends with the arrival of a drunken Alcibiades, who delivers a passionate encomium to Socrates instead of Love. As the night progresses and more revelers join, the party descends into chaos. Socrates, however, remains sober and continues a philosophical discussion with Agathon and Aristophanes until dawn, then departs for his daily routine, having outlasted everyone.

Who should read Symposium?

Anyone interested in philosophy, the nature of love, ethics, or classical Greek thought should read "Symposium." It's particularly valuable for students of philosophy, literature, and anyone seeking a deeper understanding of human relationships and the pursuit of the good and beautiful.

How long does it take to read Symposium?

Reading "Symposium" typically takes about 2 to 3 hours for most readers. Its length is relatively short compared to some other Platonic dialogues, but its philosophical depth often encourages slower, more reflective reading.

Best Quotes

“And the greatest blessing of all is to have a lover and to be a lover.”

Phaedrus' Speech

Phaedrus argues that love inspires courage and virtue, making lovers and beloveds strive for honor. This line encapsulates his belief that love is the greatest good for individuals and society, fostering self-improvement and noble actions.

“For there are two kinds of Love, as there are two kinds of Aphrodite.”

Pausanias' Speech

Pausanias introduces his central distinction between "Common Love" (Aphrodite Pandemos), which is purely physical and indiscriminate, and "Heavenly Love" (Aphrodite Urania), which is noble, directed towards intelligence and virtue, and primarily homosexual. This dichotomy structures his argument.

“The one, the elder, is the Heavenly Aphrodite, who has no mother and is the daughter of Uranus only; she is that Love which is pure and noble, and inspires us to virtue.”

Pausanias' Speech

Pausanias defines Heavenly Love as a higher form, devoid of female influence, focused on the male beloved's intellectual and moral development. This love encourages lifelong commitment and the pursuit of wisdom, contrasting sharply with mere physical desire.

“For what is fine is good, and what is good is fine.”

Agathon's Speech

Agathon, in his speech, praises Love as being perfectly beautiful, good, and just. This line reflects his aesthetic and moral idealism, where beauty inherently equates to goodness. Socrates later challenges this premise, arguing that Love desires what it lacks.

“Love is of the beautiful, and not of the ugly.”

Socrates' Speech (dialogue with Agathon)

Socrates, questioning Agathon, establishes that Love desires beauty. This seemingly simple statement is crucial as it leads to the conclusion that if Love desires beauty, it must lack beauty itself, thus challenging Agathon's portrayal of Love as perfectly beautiful.

“Love is not beautiful, nor good.”

Socrates' Speech (Diotima's teaching)

Socrates, relaying Diotima's teaching, concludes that Love cannot be beautiful or good because it desires these things, implying it lacks them. This paradox reframes Love not as a perfect deity, but as an intermediary striving for what is good and beautiful.

“Eros is not a god, but a great daemon.”

Socrates' Speech (Diotima's teaching)

Diotima, through Socrates, explains that Love is not a god because it lacks perfect beauty and goodness. Instead, it is a "daemon" or spirit, an intermediary between gods and mortals, bridging the gap between the divine and the human, the wise and the ignorant.

“Love is born of Plenty and Poverty.”

Socrates' Speech (Diotima's teaching)

Diotima explains Love's parentage: his mother is Poverty (Penía) and his father is Plenty (Poros). This myth explains Love's dual nature – always lacking and desiring, yet resourceful and striving, never fully satisfied but always pursuing.

“He is always poor, and far from tender and beautiful as the many imagine him to be; but he is rough and squalid, and has no shoes, and no home; always lying on the bare earth, without a bed, at the doors and in the streets, he shares his mother's poverty.”

Socrates' Speech (Diotima's teaching)

This vivid description by Diotima (via Socrates) paints Love as perpetually needy and unrefined, reflecting his mother Poverty. It contrasts sharply with Agathon's portrayal of Love as perfectly beautiful and delicate, emphasizing Love's inherent lack.

“But, on the other hand, he is always plotting against the beautiful and the good, being bold, impetuous, and strong, a mighty hunter, always weaving some intrigue, and eager for wisdom, a philosopher at all times, a formidable sorcerer, enchanter, and sophist.”

Socrates' Speech (Diotima's teaching)

This complements the previous description, showing Love's resourceful and active side, inherited from his father Plenty. Love is a relentless pursuer of beauty and goodness, embodying the very essence of a philosopher – one who loves wisdom.

“Love is the desire for the perpetual possession of the good.”

Socrates' Speech (Diotima's teaching)

This is Diotima's fundamental definition of Love. It clarifies that love isn't just for beauty, but for the good, and not just for a moment, but perpetually. This desire for lasting good leads to the pursuit of immortality through procreation or creation of virtue.

“Love is the desire for immortality.”

Socrates' Speech (Diotima's teaching)

Diotima explains that the desire for perpetual possession of the good manifests as a desire for immortality. This can be achieved through physical procreation (having children) or through spiritual procreation (creating works of virtue, wisdom, and lasting fame).

“And the true order of going, or being led by another, to the things of love, is to begin from the beauties of earth and mount upwards, and go onwards from one to two, and from two to all fair forms, and from fair forms to fair practices, and from fair practices to fair thoughts, until from fair thoughts he arrives at the notion of absolute beauty, and at last knows what the essence of beauty is.”

Socrates' Speech (Diotima's teaching)

This describes the "Ladder of Love," Diotima's central metaphor for ascending from particular physical beauties to the contemplation of absolute, unchanging Beauty itself. It outlines the philosophical journey from the sensible world to the intelligible Forms.

“This is that life above all others which a man should live, in the contemplation of beauty absolute.”

Socrates' Speech (Diotima's teaching)

This line marks the pinnacle of the Ladder of Love. Diotima (via Socrates) declares that the ultimate human purpose and the most fulfilling life is to achieve direct intellectual apprehension of the Form of Beauty, transcending all particular beautiful things.

“For he who has been instructed thus far in the things of love, and who has learned to see the beautiful in due order and succession, when he comes toward the end, will suddenly perceive a nature of wondrous beauty.”

Socrates' Speech (Diotima's teaching)

This describes the transformative experience of reaching the highest rung of the Ladder of Love. The sudden perception of absolute Beauty is a moment of profound philosophical insight and spiritual awakening, the ultimate goal of the lover's journey.

“For a man is not a lover of beauty, but of the good.”

Socrates' Speech (Diotima's teaching)

Socrates, refining the earlier discussion, clarifies that while beauty often attracts us, the ultimate object of love is the good. Beauty serves as a pathway or manifestation of the good, but the underlying desire is for what is beneficial and perfect.

“For the lover is always a lover of something, and that something is what he lacks.”

Socrates' Speech (dialogue with Agathon)

This Socratic principle, applied to Love, states that desire is always for something one does not possess. It underpins the argument that Love, desiring beauty and goodness, cannot itself be perfectly beautiful or good, but rather strives for them.

“For the good man is the friend of the good, and the bad man is the friend of the bad.”

Pausanias' Speech

Pausanias uses this to distinguish between noble and base forms of love. Heavenly Love, he argues, leads good men to seek out other good men, fostering virtue. Common Love, however, can lead to indiscriminate and potentially harmful attachments.

Questions & Answers

What does the title "Symposium" mean and what is the setting of the dialogue?

The title "Symposium" comes from the Greek word "symposion," meaning "drinking party" or "feast." In ancient Greece, a symposium was a social gathering held after a meal, where men would drink, converse, and entertain each other. Plato's dialogue is set at such a party at the house of the tragedian Agathon, celebrating his victory in a dramatic competition. The guests decide to forgo heavy drinking and instead deliver speeches in praise of Love (Eros).

Who are the main speakers in the Symposium and what is the general progression of their arguments about Love?

The main speakers are Phaedrus, Pausanias, Eryximachus, Aristophanes, Agathon, and Socrates (who relays Diotima's teachings). Phaedrus praises Love as an inspiration for virtue. Pausanias distinguishes between common and heavenly love. Eryximachus sees Love as a cosmic force of harmony. Aristophanes tells a myth of divided human beings seeking their other halves. Agathon praises Love as perfectly beautiful and good. Socrates, through Diotima, refines these views,

defining Love as a daemon striving for the good through a "Ladder of Love." Alcibiades then interrupts, praising Socrates himself.

What is Aristophanes' famous myth about the origin of Love?

Aristophanes recounts a myth where humans originally had spherical bodies with two faces, four arms, and four legs. There were three sexes: male, female, and androgynous. These beings were powerful and attempted to storm Olympus, so Zeus split them in half. Since then, each half yearns for its lost other, seeking completion and union. Love, in this myth, is the desire for wholeness and the pursuit of one's original, complementary half.

How does Socrates, through Diotima, challenge Agathon's definition of Love as perfectly beautiful and good?

Socrates engages Agathon in a Socratic dialogue, establishing that Love desires beauty and goodness. If Love desires these things, it must lack them, at least in part. Therefore, Love cannot be perfectly beautiful or good itself, as Agathon claimed. This reframing is crucial, shifting Love from a perfect god to an intermediary, a "daemon" that strives for what it lacks. This sets the stage for Diotima's more complex understanding of Love's nature.

Who is Diotima and what is her significance in Socrates' speech?

Diotima is a wise woman or priestess from Mantinea, whom Socrates claims taught him "the art of Love." She is not present at the symposium; Socrates relays her teachings as a dialogue he once had with her. Diotima is the true philosophical authority in the dialogue, providing the most profound and influential account of Love, including the concept of Love as a daemon and the famous "Ladder of Love." Her role elevates the discussion beyond conventional praise.

What is the "Ladder of Love" and what are its stages?

The "Ladder of Love" is Diotima's metaphor for the ascent of the soul from particular physical beauties to the contemplation of absolute Beauty itself. Its stages are: 1. Love for one beautiful body. 2. Love for all beautiful bodies. 3. Love for beautiful souls/minds. 4. Love for beautiful practices and laws. 5. Love for beautiful knowledge/sciences. 6. Love for Beauty Itself (the Form of Beauty). This progression moves from the concrete and particular to the abstract and universal.

What is the ultimate goal of ascending the Ladder of Love?

The ultimate goal of ascending the Ladder of Love is to achieve direct intellectual apprehension of the Form of Beauty, or "Beauty Itself." This is a moment of profound philosophical insight where one perceives absolute, eternal, unchanging Beauty, independent of any particular beautiful object. Diotima describes this as the most fulfilling and worthwhile life a human can live, transcending all earthly concerns and leading to true virtue.

How does Diotima define Love (Eros) in terms of its nature and parentage?

Diotima defines Love as a "great daemon," an intermediary spirit between gods and mortals, rather than a god itself. She explains Love's parentage as the son of Poverty (Penía) and Plenty (Poros). This lineage explains Love's dual nature: always lacking and desiring (from Poverty), yet resourceful, cunning, and striving (from Plenty). Love is thus a philosopher, constantly pursuing wisdom, beauty, and goodness, but never fully possessing them.

What is the relationship between Love, beauty, and goodness in Socrates' speech?

In Socrates' speech, Love is fundamentally the desire for the perpetual possession of the good. Beauty serves as the primary pathway to perceiving and pursuing this good. We are initially drawn to physical beauty, which then leads us to appreciate moral, intellectual, and institutional beauty. Ultimately, the highest form of beauty is absolute Goodness itself, which the soul strives to apprehend. Love is the driving force behind this ascent towards the good.

What is Alcibiades' role in the Symposium and what does he reveal about Socrates?

Alcibiades, a drunken and famous Athenian general, bursts into the party after all the speeches on Love are done. He delivers an encomium not to Love, but to Socrates himself. He describes Socrates' unique character, his physical plainness contrasting with his inner divine beauty, his incredible self-control, his resistance to Alcibiades' seduction, and his profound philosophical wisdom, comparing him to Silenus figures and satyrs.

Spoiler: How does the Symposium end?

Spoiler: The Symposium ends with Alcibiades' drunken praise of Socrates, followed by more revelers bursting in, leading to chaos and heavy drinking. Most guests fall asleep, but Socrates, Agathon, and Aristophanes continue to converse until dawn. Socrates argues that a true tragedian should also be a comedian, and vice versa. Eventually, Agathon and Aristophanes fall asleep, and Socrates, having outlasted everyone, leaves for the Lyceum to bathe and spend the day as usual, before finally going home to sleep.

What can readers learn or apply from Plato's Symposium today?

Readers can learn about the multifaceted nature of love, moving beyond mere romantic or physical attraction to a profound philosophical pursuit. The "Ladder of Love" offers a framework for personal growth, encouraging individuals to seek higher forms of beauty and goodness in their lives, from appreciating art to pursuing knowledge and virtue. The dialogue also highlights the importance of self-control, intellectual rigor, and the transformative power of philosophical inquiry, as exemplified by Socrates.

What is the difference between physical and spiritual procreation as discussed by Diotima?

Diotima explains that the desire for the perpetual possession of the good manifests as a desire for immortality. For some, this means physical procreation – having children to ensure a legacy. For others, especially those "pregnant in soul," it means spiritual procreation: creating works of virtue, wisdom, and lasting fame, such as laws, poems, or philosophical insights. This spiritual

procreation is considered a higher and more enduring form of immortality, leading to a more profound connection with the good.

What is Pausanias' distinction between "Common Love" and "Heavenly Love"?

Pausanias distinguishes between two forms of Love, mirroring two Aphrodites. "Common Love" (Aphrodite Pandemos) is base, indiscriminate, and focused purely on physical gratification, often directed towards women or boys for their bodies alone. "Heavenly Love" (Aphrodite Urania) is noble, directed towards intelligence and virtue, primarily between an older man (lover) and a younger man (beloved). This love aims at the beloved's moral and intellectual improvement, fostering virtue and lifelong commitment.

How does Eryximachus, the physician, interpret Love?

Eryximachus, the physician, interprets Love as a universal force of harmony and balance, not just in human relationships but throughout nature and the cosmos. He applies his medical understanding to Love, seeing it as the principle that brings together opposing elements in a healthy way. He argues that a good physician understands how to instill love and harmony in the body, just as a good musician understands it in music, ensuring proper balance and well-being.

What is the main idea or central argument of Plato's Symposium?

The central argument of Plato's Symposium is that Love (Eros) is a powerful, complex, and transformative force that drives humans towards the good and the beautiful. It progresses from initial, more superficial understandings of love as a god or a simple desire, to Socrates' profound philosophical account, which defines Love as a striving daemon that motivates the soul's ascent from particular beauties to the contemplation of absolute Beauty and Goodness, ultimately leading to wisdom and virtue.

Why do the guests decide to give speeches in praise of Love instead of just drinking heavily?

The guests, having celebrated Agathon's victory the previous night with heavy drinking, decide to take it easy this evening. Eryximachus, the physician, proposes that instead of drinking to excess, they should each deliver a speech in praise of Love (Eros), a topic suggested by Phaedrus. This decision sets the stage for the philosophical exploration of love that forms the core of the dialogue, allowing for a more intellectual and structured discussion.

How does Socrates' character, as described by Alcibiades, embody the philosophical ideal presented in the Symposium?

Alcibiades describes Socrates as embodying the philosophical ideal by demonstrating profound self-control, intellectual integrity, and a relentless pursuit of truth, even amidst temptation and hardship. Socrates' physical plainness but inner divine beauty mirrors the idea that true beauty lies in the Forms, not in appearances. His ability to inspire others towards virtue, even while resisting their advances, reflects the higher, spiritual procreation of Diotima's Ladder of Love.

What is the significance of Love being described as a "daemon" rather than a god?

Diotima's description of Love as a "daemon" (a spirit or intermediary being) is significant because it explains Love's nature as neither fully divine nor fully mortal, neither perfectly beautiful nor entirely ugly, neither wise nor ignorant. As a daemon, Love bridges the gap between the human and the divine, constantly striving for the good and the beautiful that it lacks. This makes Love the very essence of a philosopher – one who loves wisdom but does not yet possess it.

How does Phaedrus' speech set the stage for the subsequent discussions on Love?

Phaedrus' speech, the first of the encomia, sets a foundational tone by praising Love as an ancient and powerful god, the source of the greatest blessings. He argues that Love inspires courage, honor, and self-sacrifice in lovers, making them strive for virtue and noble deeds to impress their beloveds. This establishes the idea of Love as a motivator for moral excellence, a theme that subsequent speakers will elaborate on and refine, leading to Socrates' more complex philosophical understanding.