

Symposium

by Plato · Language: EN

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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 and Phaedrus's Speech

Apollodorus recounts the symposium to a friend, detailing the agreement to praise Love. Phaedrus begins, arguing that Love is an ancient and powerful god, inspiring courage and noble deeds in lovers. He asserts that an army composed of lovers and their beloveds would be invincible, as they would rather die than betray each other, demonstrating the moral force of love.

Pausanias's Speech

Pausanias distinguishes between two kinds of Love: Common Love and Heavenly Love. Common Love is base, directed towards bodies without regard for character, and is indiscriminate. Heavenly Love, however, is noble, directed towards the virtuous and intelligent, fostering a lifelong bond focused on moral and intellectual improvement. He advocates for a love that seeks virtue.

Eryximachus's Speech

Eryximachus, a physician, presents a scientific view of Love, extending its influence beyond human relations to the entire cosmos. He sees Love as a principle of harmony and balance, present in medicine, music, astronomy, and all natural phenomena. He argues that the physician's art is to discern and cultivate the healthy forms of love and harmony within the body.

Aristophanes's Speech

Aristophanes, the comic playwright, delivers a whimsical myth. He claims humans were originally spherical beings with two sets of limbs and heads. Zeus split them in two, and ever since, humans have been searching for their lost other half, driven by an innate desire to reunite and become whole again. This explains the intensity of romantic love and the longing for completion.

Agathon's Speech

Agathon, the host and tragedian, praises Love as the youngest, most beautiful, delicate, and virtuous of all gods. He attributes all good qualities – justice, temperance, courage, and wisdom – to Love, claiming Love is the source of all poetry, art, and creativity. His speech is highly rhetorical and aesthetically pleasing, focusing on Love's inherent perfections.

Socrates's Speech (Diotima's Teaching)

Socrates, claiming to relay the teachings of the priestess Diotima, refutes Agathon. He argues Love is not beautiful or good, but rather a spirit (daemon) mediating between gods and humans,

a desire for beauty and goodness. Love is the child of Poverty and Resource, always lacking but resourceful in its pursuit. Diotima introduces the 'ladder of love,' a progression from physical beauty to the Form of Beauty itself.

Alcibiades's Interruption and Speech

A drunken Alcibiades bursts in and, instead of praising Love, delivers an encomium to Socrates. He describes Socrates's unique character, his wisdom, self-control, and ability to charm and inspire. Alcibiades confesses his own frustrated attempts to seduce Socrates, highlighting Socrates's indifference to physical beauty and his unwavering commitment to virtue and truth.

Conclusion

As the night progresses, more revelers arrive, and the party descends into drunken chaos. Socrates remains sober, engaging Agathon and Aristophanes in a discussion about the nature of tragedy and comedy, asserting that a true poet should be skilled in both. As dawn breaks, Socrates departs, having outlasted all the other guests, demonstrating his remarkable endurance and philosophical dedication.

Themes

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

Notable Quotes

- "For of all creatures, man is the only one that has to be educated." — Phaedrus's speech, discussing the transformative power of love and education.
- "For neither is there any love of wisdom where there is no wisdom, nor any love of beauty where there is no beauty." — Socrates recounting Diotima's teaching, explaining that love is a desire for what one lacks.
- "Love is not a god at all, but a mighty daemon." — Socrates recounting Diotima's teaching, defining Love as an intermediary spirit.
- "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." — Socrates recounting Diotima's teaching, describing the 'ladder of love'.
- "He is always poor, and far from being tender and beautiful, as the many imagine, he is rough and squalid, and has no shoes, nor a house to dwell in." — Socrates recounting

Diotima's description of Love's true nature, as the child of Poverty.

- "The one thing that is true, is that I am a lover of men." — Socrates, in response to Alcibiades's praise, acknowledging his philosophical pursuit of human virtue.

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 an 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.