"PLATONIC FANTASY" OR PLATONIC INSIGHT?:

CONTEMPLATING BEAUTY AND GENERATING VIRTUE IN THE *SYMPOSIUM*

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Contemporary virtue ethics has largely avoided the Platonic dialogues as sources of insight for thinking about (the) virtue(s). One key explanation, I contend, is the worry that Platonic ethics is overly demanding, and demanding in an unappealing way. In particular, Plato is committed to a view that I call *the wisdom thesis*. According to this thesis—as developed in various dialogues, but in a particularly interesting way in the *Symposium*—an agent's possession of wisdom, attained through contemplation of Forms (especially Beauty-Itself), is a necessary condition of that agent's possessing true virtue. On the *Symposium*'s account, as presented by Diotima, contemplation of Beauty-Itself provides an agent with a fundamental understanding of the beautiful. Such a (broadly metaphysical) understanding in turn enables an agent to "give birth" to a complete and stable kind of virtue, and thereby to lead the happiest life.[1]

Plato's views on the requirements for virtuous agency, however, might seem both overly intellectualist and unpleasantly elitist. Rosalind Hursthouse succinctly presents these worries:

> When philosophers start to imply that it is a necessary condition of virtue that the virtuous have reflected long and hard about what *eudaimonia* consists in and worked out a picture of what is involved in acting well so comprehensive and substantial that it can be applied and its application justified in every suitable case, we may be sure that they are falling victim to what could be called 'the Platonic fantasy'. This is the fantasy that it is only through the study of philosophy that one can become virtuous (or really virtuous), and, as soon as it is stated explicitly, it is revealed to be a fantasy that must be most strenuously resisted.[2]

According to Hursthouse, then, we should reject a model of virtuous agency according to which the truly virtuous agent must be (i) a philosopher, (ii) in possession of a substantive

[1] I agree that one should not too readily identify Plato's view with the views of any particular character in a Platonic drama. I do, however, take Diotima to present Plato's view, however. A full defense of this claim would require reference to the other speeches in the *Symposium* and the overall work's dramatic elements—both of which lie outside the scope of this paper. Even if one denies my attribution of the wisdom thesis to *Plato*, Diotima's teaching is an interesting view, of a broadly "Platonic" provenance, worth independent consideration.

[2] Hursthouse 1999, 137.

understanding of the human good, from which (iii) he or she can (or must) read off the right actions to perform.

In what follows, I examine how Plato develops the wisdom thesis in the *Symposium*. On this basis, I respond to Hursthouse's "Platonic fantasy" worry, and argue for the relevance of the wisdom thesis for contemporary virtue ethics. I grant to Hursthouse the dubiousness of the model of virtuous agency that she spells out. But I argue that, at least as developed in the *Symposium*, the wisdom thesis is more reasonable than Hursthouse allows and that acceptance of the wisdom thesis need not commit one to any manifest absurdities.

The Wisdom Thesis in the *Symposium*

In the *Symposium*'s famous "ascent passage" (210a-d), Socrates conveys the prophetess Diotima's teaching about the proper order by which a lover will be initiated into the highest mysteries of love. After leading us up the steps of the *scala amoris*, Diotima suggests that all that is beautiful is ultimately made beautiful by Beauty-Itself (αὐτὸ τὸ καλόν). Just as they loved lower beauties on lower rungs, then, initiates ultimately come to love the eternal, unchanging, unqualifiedly beautiful Form of Beauty (211a), contemplating it and having intercourse with it (θεωμένου καὶ συνόντος αὐτῷ: 211d-212a). In this way, initiates come to attain a *knowledge* of beauty, and learn what it is to be beautiful (210d7-e1; 211c6-d1).[3]

In, or through, such contemplation and intercourse, the initiate lover-philosopher becomes capable of "giving birth" to true virtue. Socrates conveys Diotima's teaching:

> "Do you think it would be a poor life for a human being to look there and to behold (θεωμένου) it by which he ought, and to be with it? Or haven't you remembered," she said, "that in that life alone, when he looks at Beauty in the only way that Beauty can be seen—only then will it become possible for him to give birth not to images of virtue (τίκτειν οὐκ εἴδωλα ἀρετῆς) (because he's in touch with no images), but to true virtue (ἀλλὰ ἀληθῆ) (because he is in touch with the true Beauty). The love of the gods belongs to anyone who has given birth to true virtue and nourished it (τεκόντι δὲ ἀρετὴν ἀληθῆ καὶ θρεψαμένῳ), and if any human being could become immortal it would be he." (211e-212a; trans. Nehamas and Woodruff)

[3] I assume that the steps in the ascent are ordered according to a causal progression. Thus, one stage on the ascent Y is higher than another stage X if beauty at Y causes the beauty at X. Cf. Sheffield 2006, 126; Scott and Welton 2008, 147.

In short, Diotima maintains that by contemplating Beauty through the power of intellect, the philosopher, unlike other agents, is in a unique position to generate and develop "true virtue"—and ultimately attain happiness, the love of the gods, and a share of immortality.

Diotima's claims, however, themselves "give birth" to multiple questions. For the purposes of today's talk, I bracket most of Diotima's tantalizing remarks about happiness, the love of the gods, and the sort of immortality open to the philosopher. Rather, I focus on two key questions about Diotima's view: (i) *What* is the "true virtue" to which the philosopher gives birth in, or through, contemplating Beauty-Itself? (ii) *How* exactly does contemplating Beauty-Itself enable the philosopher to give birth to true virtue?

In response to the first question (about the reference of "true virtue" at 212a), we should distinguish questions of *range* and *degree*. The question of range addresses which virtues are included in "true virtue." The question of degree addresses the extent of the perfection and excellence that a character trait requires to count (truly) as a virtue.

On the question of *range*, it is fair to say that the "true virtue" of the philosopher includes at least wisdom (and the virtue of the intellect). Such is the special virtue that the philosopher comes fully to actualize in contemplating the Form.[4] Yet there is reason for thinking that the range of "true virtue" expands beyond wisdom (and the virtue of the intellect) to encompass other virtues as well. Diotima, after all, suggests that it is fitting for a pregnant soul to bear and give birth to "wisdom and *the rest of virtue*" (my italics; φρόνησιν τε καὶ τὴν ἄλλην ἀρετήν: 209a3-4). And she suggests that the "rest of virtue" will include the ethical virtues of moderation and justice (209a8).

On the question of *degree*, Diotima's implies that the philosopher's (intellectual and ethical) virtue will *differ in kind* from the virtue generated by even the best of non-philosophers, viz., the poets and lawgivers (209a; c-e). Diotima says that philosophers generate "true virtue," while poets and lawgivers, at best, generate "images of virtue" (εἴδωλα ἀρετῆς: 212a4). Given Diotima's use of natalist imagery, with its attendant senses of gestation, growth, and

[4] Sheffield 2006, 134-135.

maturation, it is natural to construe "true virtue" as *fully developed virtue*, i.e., as complete virtue, virtue that has, so to speak, come to full term. Therefore, I take Diotima to mean that philosophers generate fully developed virtue, and that poets and lawgivers generate *approximations* of fully developed virtue. Philosophers generate virtue that, on an absolute scale, is perfectly developed. Poets and lawgivers, by contrast, develop virtue-like character traits that possess a relatively low degree of perfection (or completeness). The philosopher's virtue is truly *excellent*. The "virtue" of poets and lawgivers may be acceptable, and possibly even good. But it falls short of excellence. (From this view, I hasten to add, it need not follow that the philosopher is *utterly perfect or flawless* on an absolute scale—anymore than, say, an excellent term paper must be utterly perfect or flawless.)

I now consider to the second basic question that Diotima's teaching raises. This is the question of how contemplating Beauty-Itself enables the philosopher to "give birth" to true virtue. This is a tricky matter, for Diotima says nothing explicit here.[5] As an initial stab, I think that Frisbee Sheffield is correct to propose that the philosopher gives birth to (at least some) virtue *just in* contemplating Beauty-Itself.[6] Since contemplating the Form fully actualizes the virtue of the intellect, which exists for the sake of such contemplation, contemplation is required for fully actualizing at least one kind of virtue. Yet, as I have just argued, "true virtue" includes a complete range of virtues. And I take Diotima to hold that the philosopher, through contemplating Beauty-Itself, is in a position to generate "the rest of virtue" as well. So how, according to Diotima, does contemplation generate not just to true wisdom, but to true moderation, true justice, etc.?

In reply, I take it that, for Diotima, contemplation plays an *indirect* role in generating the rest of (true) virtue. More precisely, contemplation generates wisdom, which turns out to be at least a necessary condition for fully developed ethical virtue. The philosopher, having attained

[5] According to Hyland (2008, 59), Diotima leaves this issue as a problem for us.
[6] Sheffield 2006, 134, 149.

true wisdom through contemplation, is in a unique cognitive position for also giving birth to true moderation and justice as well. He occupies this position in two ways.

(i) The philosopher, in grasping what beauty is (ὃ ἔστι καλόν: 211c8-d1), is in a position to determine which traits of character *really are* beautiful (and thus virtuous). Attaining the fullest understanding of what virtue is, the philosopher possesses two key capacities. (a) He is in the best position to recognize virtue, and so, to recognize when the traits that he is cultivating (actually) are *virtues*, as opposed to non-virtues.[7] Hence, his judgments about virtue and virtuous action are *reliable* in a way that the non-philosopher's is not. Thus, when the philosopher and the non-philosopher face novel or difficult situations, the philosopher's action will be reliably good in a way that the non-philosopher's is not. Thus, the philosopher's character traits are more fully virtuous than are the similar traits of non-philosophers. (b) The philosopher, unlike other lovers, is capable of choosing virtue in a non-coincidental way. Only the philosopher can choose virtue for its own nature, and neither for qualities it lacks nor just for its non-essential qualities. In this way, only the philosopher seems capable of choosing virtue for itself.[8] But it is plausible, Diotima can say, that one constraint on being truly virtuous is that one *does* choose virtue for itself, and not primarily for its consequences or for its non-essential features.[9] Hence, the philosopher is in a position to give birth to true virtue. By contrast, the non-philosopher, relying, at best, on "correct opinion" (ὀρθὴ δόξα: 202a9) can give birth to traits that are coincidentally virtuous, i.e., "images of virtue."

(ii) The philosopher "correctly" (ὀρθῶς: 210b6) ascends the *scala amoris* and contemplates "beautiful things in the right order and correctly" (ἐφεξῆς τε καὶ ὀρθῶς: 210e3). Accordingly, the philosopher has the strongest grasp of the *causes* of virtue (in oneself and in

[7] See Sheffield 2006, 118: one grasping the *kalon* itself has sharpest discernment of where the *kalon* lies in any case.
[8] Irwin (1995, 234-236) argues that to choose virtue for itself requires one to choose it for its essential nature, which requires knowledge to grasp; cf. 194-195; 231-233.
[9] Consider Socrates' claims in the *Phaedo*. The courage of non-philosophers, says Socrates, is a facing of death pursued only for the sake of avoiding greater evils (68d); the moderation of non-philosophers is a restraint on pleasure pursued only for the sake of attaining greater pleasures (68b-69a). Such a virtue, pursued from an instrumental standpoint, is "only an illusory appearance of virtue" (69b). By contrast, "true virtue" (69b) lacks this instrumental aim. Cf. the passages in Irwin cited in n7.

others). He understands in a highly general way, of course, how the Form of Beauty is ultimately responsible for all particular beauties: the latter instantiate the former. But the philosopher also understands, more exactly, how beauties at higher levels of the ascent (e.g., beautiful kinds of knowledge) are (at least partly) responsible for, and so explanatory of, the particular beauties that one perceives at lower levels (e.g., beautiful activities and laws, beautiful souls, etc.). Hence, Diotima can say that completing the ascent and contemplating the Form enables the philosopher alone to attain systematic understanding of the causes of virtue. And this *systematic* understanding puts the philosopher at a distinct advantage when the philosopher attempts to cultivate virtue (in himself and others). The philosopher, unlike the non-philosopher, has the richest background understanding of how virtue comes to be, and so, of how to generate (and to preserve) true virtue—in himself and (potentially) in others.

Responding to the "Platonic Fantasy" Worry, I: Only Philosophers Can Be Truly Virtuous

Having offered this quick sketch of the wisdom thesis as Diotima presents it in Plato's *Symposium*, I now return to Hursthouse's "Platonic fantasy" worry. From initial appearances, it seems as if this worry is a pressing one for Plato, for Plato evidently accepts a strong version of the wisdom thesis. To see how Plato can respond to Hursthouse's worry, then, I break the "Platonic fantasy" worry into its component parts.

I begin with Hursthouse's *first charge*, viz., that the wisdom thesis implies that "it is only through the study of philosophy that one can become virtuous (or really virtuous)." In considering Diotima's development of the thesis, one should concede Hursthouse's point: to give birth to (one's own) true virtue, Diotima holds, one must be a philosopher and contemplate the Form of Beauty. It is not immediately clear, however, why Hursthouse finds Diotima's claim objectionable. Perhaps Hursthouse's worry is that restricting the truly virtuous to the set of philosophers is at once (a) overly narrow and (b) invidiously elitist. It may appear overly narrow because plenty of non-philosophers are evidently good people, even while they lack philosophical understanding. It may appear invidiously elitist because it may appear to restrict

the ranks of the truly virtuous only to those gifted by nature with sufficient intellectual capacities to complete the ascent, contemplate Beauty-Itself, and draw inferences in light of the understanding of Beauty that they thereby obtain. The wisdom thesis would seem to exclude great leaders, such as Winston Churchill, as well as Tolstoy's simple peasants, from the ranks of the truly virtuous.

In response to these worries, Plato can make two points in reply. First, accepting the wisdom thesis as developed in the *Symposium* is entirely consistent with accepting that plenty of non-philosophers are *decent people*, where being a decent person is to possess a basically honorable character, and a disposition to act reliably well in ordinary circumstances. It is also consistent with accepting that some non-philosophers are *very good* (and even world-historically influential) people, with a highly honorable character, and a disposition to act well in ordinary and even some difficult circumstances. For instance, inspired by the lower beauties, the best of the non-philosophers—the erotically inspired poets and lawgivers—give birth to approximations of fully developed wisdom (and moderation and justice) (209a). Such approximations of wisdom show up in the "speeches about virtue" with which these lovers are teeming (209b). But is telling that Diotima neither dismisses nor denies the value of these agents' approximations of wisdom. On the contrary, she observes that the literary works and laws that these agents create "provide their parents with immortal glory and remembrance" (209d). The offspring to which these agents give birth are "more beautiful and more immortal" than ordinary human children (209c; e). Such offspring, in short, are praiseworthy.

Likewise, after surveying the accomplishments of the great Greek poets and lawgivers, Diotima notes, "Other men in other places everywhere, Greek or barbarian, have brought a host of beautiful deeds into the light and begotten every kind of virtue" (209d-e). Although the virtue to which Diotima refers here is presumably not "true virtue," it nonetheless earns Diotima's praise. And such virtue includes more than the approximation of virtue that the great poets and lawgivers produce in themselves. Instead, it includes the approximation of virtue that these figures generate in others. For given the influence of great poems and laws, Diotima

evidently thinks that ordinary citizens are apt to attain ("or produce") a certain basic goodness of their own. Presumably, the approximation of wisdom manifest in the works of Homer, Solon, and the like plays an important role in ordering cities and households (209a5-8). While Diotima is not explicit, such "ordering" of cities and households will probably include that non-philosophical habituation in "demotic virtue" that Socrates discusses at *Phaedo* 82a-b. Thus, even the many share in a kind of goodness.

In short, it is true that Diotima is more restrictive than Hursthouse about who belongs to the ranks of the truly excellent. Given what one can say on behalf of Diotima's restrictions, however, it is not clear that Diotima is wrong to be so restrictive (or that Hursthouse is right to be relatively unrestrictive). A very good person is very good, and he will possess a kind of virtue. A very good person lacking the relevant knowledge of Beauty-Itself, however, is not reliably excellent in all kinds of cases, capable of choosing virtuous actions for their essential qualities, etc. Thus, Diotima can say, he will not possess the true excellence that he would possess if he possessed knowledge of Beauty-Itself. Yet, at the same time, Diotima seems willing to grant that non-philosophers can be decent, or even very good, people. Accordingly, it is not clear that Diotima's view is *excessively* revisionary. For Diotima's view allows one to attribute *a kind* of virtue, viz., an approximation of true virtue, to many of those whom we often call "virtuous." Diotima's view implies, however, that, we should perhaps be clearer about the requirements for possessing excellence, which include possessing a certain kind of metaphysical knowledge. When we are clearer about these requirements, Diotima can say, we will resist attributing excellence—i.e., *true* virtue—to those lacking such knowledge.

Second, in response to the elitism worry, there is no reason to think that, in the *Symposium*, at least, true virtue is open only to those who have been somehow gifted by nature with special cognitive powers (or "intelligence"). On the contrary, Diotima repeatedly calls attention to the role that *erotic desire* plays in the philosopher's progressive ascent toward the Form. So, it is true that the philosopher will (and must) be able to engage in fairly abstract thought. Yet Diotima's views are consistent with, and even supportive of, the claim that the

philosopher's high-level cognitive abilities are *developed (second-nature) capacities* that simply refine ordinary first-nature cognitive capacities belonging to human beings generally. In this way, the high-level capacities that Diotima's philosopher takes care to develop on account of *eros* for beauty are rather like the bulging muscles that Olympic athletes take care to develop on account of their drive to attain victory in the arena. (In other words, to use the language of contemporary psychology, it is entirely possible to attribute an "incremental" view of intelligence to Diotima, rather than a fixed "entity" account.[10])

It is true, of course, that Diotima occasionally seems to hold that whether one can be a truly virtuous philosopher is a matter of natural gift. For whereas some people are "pregnant in body," she insists, others are "pregnant in soul" with virtue (208e). Diotima might appear to maintain that while some (minority of) people have an innate potentiality for philosophical understanding, most do not; and whether one has the potentiality for true virtue depends on whether one happens to be one of the lucky few born with the right potentialities. But we should question here whether Diotima is really committed to any unpalatable elitism. First, Diotima also says that *all* human beings (πάντες ἄνθρωποι) are pregnant in body and soul (at 206c2-3). Second, in distinguishing those who are pregnant in soul from those who are pregnant in body, Diotima clarifies that "there surely *are* those who are even more pregnant in their souls than in their bodies" (208e). This latter claim suggests only that some people are *more prone* than others to develop true virtue. And it is entirely possible for Diotima to provide an environmental account of such greater proneness to develop true virtue, one that emphasizes early education and habituation. (At 210a, Diotima notes, the philosopher "must begin in his youth to devote himself to beautiful bodies.") Her view need not imply that the majority of people lack the capacity to develop true virtue.[11]

[10] See, e.g., Dweck and Leggett 1988; Shenk 2010.
[11] Cf. Sheffield 2006, 132, who argues that, for Diotima, the potentiality for wisdom and virtue is "part of our natural make-up as human beings."

Responding to the "Platonic Fantasy" Worry, Part II: Substantive Understanding of the Good

I now address Hursthouse's second charge against wisdom thesis. This is the claim that the wisdom thesis untenably insists that the virtuous agent acts virtuously on account of possessing "a picture of what is involved in acting well so comprehensive and substantial that it can be applied and its application justified in every suitable case."

Now, it is true that the wisdom thesis, as developed in the *Symposium*, implies that true virtue depends on a substantive, philosophical understanding (viz., of what is beautiful). The *Symposium*'s development of the thesis also implies that this substantive understanding guides the truly virtuous agent in acting well. But in accepting these claims, the wisdom thesis need not imply any absurdities.

First, while the philosopher who completes the ascent will attain the sort of philosophical understanding just mentioned, Diotima gives no indication that this sort of understanding will be anything like a comprehensive "blueprint" of the beautiful, a fully specified sketch from which one can simply read off the proper character traits to develop and deeds to perform (in any circumstance). Today, I wish to avoid controversial issues about whether the philosopher's knowledge of Forms is, or could, or must be, non-propositional. On a non-propositional reading, however, there is reason to doubt that the understanding of Beauty that Plato's philosopher attains *is* fully articulable or articulable in the way Hursthouse has in mind. And in favor of such a reading, one might point to (a) the philosopher's status as a finite mortal, not a perfectly wise god and (b) Diotima's largely negative description of Beauty-Itself at the end of the ascent (210e-211b).[12]

But even if the philosopher's grasp of Beauty were fully articulable, it would not follow that Diotima must hold that the philosopher's understanding admits of direct and ready *application*, or that this understanding serves as a constant reference point to be explicitly consulted in every choice and action (e.g., about what to do in this set of circumstances here and

[12] The extent to which the philosopher's knowledge of the Forms is propositional is a disputed matter. Sorabji (1983/2006, 142-144) emphasizes the propositional character of the philosopher's knowledge. Its non-propositional character is emphasized by Hyland 2008; Matson and Leite 1991; Sayre 1995; Scott and Welton 2008. Two key passages to consider are *Republic* 534b-c and *Seventh Letter* 341b-e.

now). On a more charitable reading of Diotima's view, the philosopher's understanding of Beauty informs and perfects the philosopher's judgment on a *dispositional level*, not on an occurrent one.

Consider a craft analogy. The expert doctor, in virtue of her medical schooling, possesses a fairly refined theoretical understanding of health and its causes. Yet the doctor need not explicitly appeal to this understanding when confronting this here patient in the examining room *now*. Rather, the doctor's theoretical understanding can remain in the background of the doctor's activity, simply regulating and informing her decisions. Similarly, one can hold that the philosopher's grasp of Beauty-Itself (and the causes of virtue) shapes and directs the philosopher's judgment, without also holding that the philosopher must explicitly refer to this understanding in every choice and action. Contrary to Hursthouse's second charge, then, the thought that contemplative insight plays a special role in the cultivation and exercise of true virtue does not require one also to accept an unpromising *mechanical* model of practical reasoning.[13]

Conclusion

So far, I have spelled out the wisdom thesis as developed in Plato's *Symposium*, and have argued that Hursthouse's "Platonic fantasy" worry fails to undermine it. Nevertheless, one might think that the wisdom thesis is open to a "Platonic fantasy" worry of a somewhat different variety. More specifically, one might think that the *Symposium*'s formulation of the wisdom thesis depends on the (different) "Platonic fantasy" that such objects as Forms actually *exist* to be understood.

[13] Tushar Irani has suggested to me that perhaps Hursthouse is (i) a kind of ethical particularist who (ii) thinks that Plato is committed to identifying context-independent rules for decision-making. If Hursthouse does have this worry, then one should note that Plato does not seem to think that the possession of expert judgment in other domains is reducible to the possession of context-independent rules. Consider Socrates' critique of rule-bound approaches to judgment in *Phaedrus* 267d-269d. Here, Socrates argues that possessing the arts of rhetoric, music, tragic poetry, and medicine is not reducible to grasping a set of context-independent rules. More generally, see Matson and Leite 1991.

This, of course, is a topic that I cannot address today. And as an inveterate Aristotelian sympathizer, I am inclined to accept this worry. Yet I think that the general structure of Diotima's view remains viable and worth taking seriously today, even if contemporary virtue ethicists reject some of the objects in Plato's ontology. For even if one rejects the claim that knowledge of what is beautiful, fine, and noble requires reference to *Forms*, it is open for one to argue that (i) fully developed virtue *does* require understanding of what is beautiful, fine and noble, and that (ii) such understanding can promote ethical development in more subtle ways than Hursthouse "Platonic fantasy" worry allows.

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