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The Generalization of Diotima’s Ladder

When reading through Plato’s *Symposium*, I will point out the general pattern that humanity seems to follow when moving up Diotima’s ladder. Additionally, a few flaws will be highlighted within her generalization with regards to individual exceptions. I believe Diotima’s absolute ideals of reproduction as a divine and immortal function and love’s progression through different stages to reach true virtue generally rings true, but I will also prove that it fails to account for individual exceptions to her ladder. In Diotima’s argument, she states that Socrates, much like Agathon, thought that Love was a god: an immortal being, “the happiest of all” who was the most beautiful and innocent of all of the other deities.[[1]](#footnote-1) However, she refutes this claim by stating that if Love loved or desired beautiful things, he is himself not beautiful, as he would not have required beautiful items in the first place. Thus, Love is no god. Rather, he is a spirit that settles somewhere between the realm of true wisdom and complete ignorance.[[2]](#footnote-2) In essence this middle ground will make it feasible for humans to comprehend. To achieve this sense of Love, Diotima argues, we must reproduce physically and spiritually. The physical reproduction cycle will ensure that attributes and virtues are passed throughout generations, while spiritual pregnancy emphasizes the breeding of knowledge or true beauty within the individual.[[3]](#footnote-3) In order to gain true beauty, each person must progress through each stage or “rung” of Diotima’s ladder. The individual first finds beauty in the physical body of a single person, and after spending time with him or her and learning from them, advances to loving the beauty of all physical bodies. After the appreciation of all physical beauty, the individual moves on to the love of a soul, followed by the love for all souls.[[4]](#footnote-4) What matters now is not if someone appears to be ugly or beautiful, but rather if their souls are pure. When the recognition of all souls has reached its peak, the lover begins to find beauty in the customs of the world, such as traditions, laws, and cultures. The person not only admires his or her immediate surroundings and different laws, but the world as a collective whole. Last but not least, Diotima states that when this last stage is completed by learning wisdom from this love, the lover reaches the “great sea of beauty”, achieving an “unstinting love of wisdom”.[[5]](#footnote-5) I believe that for the most part, Diotima’s ladder concept generally rings true as humans age over time. Physical attraction for a body can be traced to the early stages of adolescence. Most teenagers and young adults seek out others who appear physically beautiful. Love can develop for other bodies either while the individual is still admiring the physicality of one body, or while the individual is searching for a relationship with a new body after a breakup or failed connection. He or she may then begin to see physical beauty in different yet equal forms when looking for more relationships. The concern for a pure soul, code, or personality does not seem to develop until after the person is first attracted by physical features, or by the time the individual is around the mid-20s. The reason for a more introspective analysis can be attributed to the lover’s focus on long term commitments such as marriage and/or raising a family, in which it is essentially to find traits that would be frequently seen for the remainder of his or her life. The adult then develops a love for his surroundings through consistent activity with his loved one, as well as the key components of society that he sees in his daily life through outlets such as his career and the time spent around his local community. By this time, I believe that the individual can be considered elderly. After reminiscing about all of his positive experiences he encountered throughout his life, the man develops a positive outlook on the world. Thus attaining true beauty. Diotima’s additional comment against the love of material items such as “gold or clothing or beautiful boys” is also an honorable stance to me, as it refutes the most tempting instinct to love physicality and wealth.[[6]](#footnote-6) However, I believe Diotima’s explanation also fails, as the generalization she formed seems to assume multiple things of different individuals. For example, Diotima states that in regard to physical reproduction, humans primarily engage in the act “for the sake of immortality…this zeal, which is Love”.[[7]](#footnote-7) I do not agree with her in that everyone reproduces for immortality’s sake. I believe that humanity does so simply for happiness and desire to start a family; not with the intent to preserve virtues passed down hopefully for decades or centuries. Diotima also assumes that to find true beauty, people must start at the lowest “rung” and follow all of the others in a precise order. I also think that this concept can be seen as vague due to the fact that people seem to change the order of rungs or skip stages entirely and yet still claim that they found true beauty. What if a person first falls for the physical body, but immediately, yet unintentionally, skips love for all bodies to love the soul of a single person? Or if a person truly loves the world for all its faults and imperfection before loving the soul of an individual? In essence, Diotima’s ladder provides a general guide for humanity to find immortality through spiritual pregnancy, yet assumes that everybody will follow the same route.

Bibliography

Plato, Alexander Nehamas, and Paul Woodruff. *Symposium*. Indianapolis & Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1989.

1. Ibid., 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid., 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., 57-58. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., 58. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)