## Caricature of a Socratic Self-Examiner

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Plato's *Symposium* is a masterpiece, an enigmatic story containing humor, tragedy, irony, skepticism, and metaphor all contained within a 'dialogue' concerning the characteristics of Eros, the Greek god of Love. This work is unlike nearly all of Plato's other dialogues; it does not merely portray Socrates interviewing one or more interlocutors about a specific virtue. Instead, we are subject to a plethora of speeches, each uniquely concerning the speaker's conceptions of Love. Yet we also learn a great deal about Socrates the man: his manner of speech, what others thought of him, and some of his strange tendencies. Upon reaching Socrates' speech devoted to Eros, our first reaction is to write it off as just another explication of Platonic forms. But with a deeper understanding of Socrates' new portrait, we can recognize a different set of beliefs within his peculiar oration. What is expressed is a completely new definition for philosophy as a whole, one in which a philosopher is not a person with wisdom trying to teach others, but someone who does not have the answers, and attempts to search for them during their lifetime. First, I shall attempt to explain an interpretation of Diotima/Socrates' section that leads one to believe that self-examination, or self-reflection, is the way to lead a joyous life. Then, I will show how Socrates' various manners within the *Symposium* exemplify this notion, including how the form of the story creates an examination, and how Alcibiades reaffirms Socrates' speech.

Of course, Socrates does not just give us his own beliefs. Just like a Pyrrhonian Skeptic, Socrates employs the core beliefs of others in order to create an argument. Since his turn to speak comes right after Agathon, the host of the party, Socrates must gather Agathon's thoughts in order to provide a speech that pertains to this situation: "'Well then, Phaedrus,' said Socrates, 'allow me to ask

Agathon a few little questions, so that, once I have his agreement, I may speak on that basis.'" (199c) Following a small performance of the elenchus, Socrates begins his speech by explaining who Diotima is, and how she taught him. But Diotima, just like Socrates, had to confront Socrates' 'beliefs' before furthering the discussion: "I shall go through her speech as best I can on my own, using what Agathon and I have agreed to as a basis… I think it will be easiest for me to proceed the way Diotima did and tell you how she questioned me. You see, I had told her almost the same things Agathon told me just now… And she used the very same arguments against me that I used against Agathon…" (201d-201e). Socrates is almost explicitly claiming that Diotima's speech may have never occurred, or that he is twisting it in such a fashion that it no longer resembles the original. The 'beliefs' that he had held in the past are actually those of Agathon's in the present. Socrates is not telling a story of the past, but he is helping Agathon come to more correct conclusions of his current understanding of Eros.

After Diotima executes the elenchus upon Socrates, she begins to tell the true story of Eros. Socrates (Agathon) had believed that Eros must be one of the most beautiful Gods, and loved all things of beauty. Diotima (Socrates) points out that this is false, for people only love things that they do not have, thus Eros must not be beautiful. So Socrates asks who and what Eros is, and Diotima responds with Eros' creation:

> As the son of Poros and Penia, his lot in life is set to be like theirs. In the first place, he is always poor, and he's far from being delicate and beautiful (as ordinary people think he is); instead, he is tough and shriveled and shoeless and homeless, always lying on the dirt without a bed, sleeping at people's doorsteps and in roadsides under the sky, having his mother's nature, always living with Need. But on his father's side he is a schemer after the beautiful and the good; he is brave, impetuous, and

> intense, an awesome hunter, always weaving snares, resourceful in his pursuit of intelligence, a lover of wisdom through all his life, a genius with enchantments, potions, and clever pleadings. (203c-203d)

Although this is supposed to be a description of Eros, these characteristics fit Socrates. He is a poor, ugly, wandering philosopher, who is yet still alive. His hunting abilities refer to his mental traps that he sets, to snare an idea within certain contexts. Socrates is basically making the claim that he, himself, "is by nature neither immortal nor mortal." (203e). By being such a great philosopher, enduring these hardships, he has transcended our normal mortality, yet is not as great as the gods. With an even stronger affirmation that Socrates is Eros, Diotima criticizes the current understanding of philosophy in Ancient Greece:

> He is in between wisdom and ignorance as well. In fact, you see, none of the gods loves wisdom or wants to become wise – for they are wise – and no one else who is wise already loves wisdom; on the other hand, no one who is ignorant will love wisdom either or want to become wise. For what's especially difficult about being ignorant is that you are content with yourself, even though you're neither beautiful and good nor intelligent. If you don't think you need anything, of course you won't want what you don't think you need. (204a)

Once again, the claim is made that Socrates has no wisdom, for if he had wisdom, he would be a god, and would no longer need to search for it. But unlike prior occasions where he has made this claim, he gives more explanation as to what it means. If one does not have wisdom, it does not mean that one knows nothing. Instead, one is in between knowing and not-knowing, wisdom and un-wisdom. Only those that are not wise and not ignorant can be philosophers, for one cannot attempt to achieve wisdom if one already has it, and one cannot strive for wisdom if one does not

even think that one needs it. This quote is an insulting remark to all of the sophists at the time, who had always claimed that they had wisdom, so that they could teach wisdom. Here, Socrates says that they are not gods, but mortal men. Since they are mortal, then they must not have wisdom, for those that obtain wisdom are immortal. Socrates is blatantly stating that the sophists are lying to the public, and he feels pity towards the common people who do not think they need wisdom: the ignorant craftsmen, the politicians, and the general populace. Thus, in order to become a philosopher, one must embark on the ongoing journey of wisdom seeking. This is a never-ending exploration, for mortals can never achieve immortality in life, and only those with immortality can have wisdom. And as such, those seeking wisdom are godlier than those who claim to know wisdom, or those who do not know to seek it.

The purpose for this search is to achieve *eudaimonia*: blissful, tranquil, ultimate happiness. Now, the method to strive for wisdom is a new form of philosophy. It begins by the description of reproduction:

> All of us are pregnant, Socrates, both in body and in soul, and, as soon as we come to a certain age, we naturally desire to give birth. Now no one can possibly give birth in anything ugly; only in something beautiful. That's because when a man and a woman come together in order to give birth, this is a godly affair. Pregnancy, reproduction – this is an immortal thing for a mortal animal to do, and it cannot occur in anything that is out of harmony, but ugliness is out of harmony with all that is godly. Beauty, however, is in harmony with the divine… That's why, whenever pregnant animals or persons draw near to beauty, they become gentle and joyfully disposed and give birth and reproduce; but near ugliness they are foul-faced and draw back in pain; they turn away and shrink back and do not reproduce, and because they hold

> on to what they carry inside them, the labor is painful. (206c-206e)

Pregnancy in the body is, of course, normal reproduction, used to create children that pass along our genetics and our heritage. Pregnancy in the soul, however, is our ideas, our concepts, and our beliefs. They require affirmation to survive and live on. An idea cannot live alone in one body, for once that body perishes, so, too, does the idea. Thus, in order for their survival, ideas flow from one subject to another, allowing for immortality within a constant base of people.

And as children replace their parents, new ideas replace the old:

> For among animals the principle is the same as with us, and mortal nature seeks so far as possible to live forever and be immortal. And this is possible in one way only: by reproduction, because it always leaves behind a new young one in place of the old. Even while each living things is said to be alive and to be the same – as a person is said to be the same from childhood till he turns into an old man – even then he never consists of the same things, though he is called the same, but he is always being renewed and in other respects passing away, in his hair and flesh and bones and blood and his entire body. And it's not just in his body, but in his soul, too, for none of his manners, customs, opinions, desires, pleasures, pains, or fears ever remains the same, but some are coming to be in him while others are passing away… And in that way everything mortal is preserved, not, like the divine, by always being the same in every way, but because what is departing and aging leaves behind something new, something such as it had been. (207d-208b)

Our body changes as we grow, constantly creating new cells, be it skin or blood. Our old cells die off, and are replaced by these new ones, only appearing as if we have stayed the same. This also applies to our ideas. We hold certain beliefs, and our everyday lives reaffirm these beliefs many times during a day. For example, I believe that if I open a door, there will be something like a room or hallway, etc. on the other side. But I may come across a door that has a brick wall behind it, like in an amusement park. My once staunch belief was not reaffirmed to be true, thus I have to reevaluate my old idea in the light of a new one: in this case, that nearly all doors have space behind them, but some trick or joke doors do not. So if our knowledge and beliefs and customs are always shifting and altering, how do we proceed to philosophize?

While we go about the normal process of replacing old ideas with the same ones, however altered, we have many chances to strive for truly newer and greater ideas. This is through the birthing cycle of discourse, dialogue with another person with a beautiful soul:

> When someone has been pregnant with these in his soul from early youth, while he is still a virgin, and, having arrived at the proper age, desires to beget and give birth, he too will certainly go about seeking the beauty in which he would beget; for he will never beget in anything ugly. Since he is pregnant, then, he is much more drawn to bodies that are beautiful than to those that are ugly; and if he also has the luck to find a soul that is beautiful and noble and well-formed, he is even more drawn to this combination; such a man makes him instantly teem with ideas and arguments about virtue – the qualities a virtuous man should have and the customary activities in which he should engage; and so he tries to educate him. In my view, you see, when he makes contact with someone beautiful and keeps company with him, he

> conceives and gives birth to what he has been carrying inside him for ages. And whether they are together or apart, he remembers that beauty. And in common with him he nurtures the newborn; such people, therefore, have much more to share than do the parents of human children, and have a firmer bond of friendship, because the children in whom they have a share are more beautiful and more immortal. (209b-209d)

When we are pregnant with ideas, we contain a beautiful soul. Since we must give birth to these ideas, we seek another beautiful soul to create a child. Just like human children need two parents, great ideas and thoughts also need two parents. This is much like Hegel's theory of synthesis: one person offers a thesis, another person offers an antithesis, and after much discussion, they both leave with a synthesis. But these vi**e**ws need not conflict, nor do both participants need to leave with the same idea. They only need the parts of a new idea to mesh with parts of their old ideas. This is the dialectical method that Socrates had used during his life in Athens, either for his own birthing process, or to help others find their own children within them; this would explain why he considers himself a mid-wife in the *Theaetetus*. One is meant to search for others teeming with great ideas and confront them with one's own. This creates a dialogue, a discourse causing fusion between two beautiful souls, allowing for fantastic offspring to be born. But people's souls are hermaphroditic. Like earthworms, souls create a transfer of both eggs and sperm to each other, allowing their genetic material to be carried on within the other. Yet unlike earthworms, the child that is created from this intercourse does not leave the body, but stays within the mind, allowing transfer to yet another subject. Through this process, knowledge, belief, wisdom, etc. are disseminated throughout a population, causing these children, these ideas, to outlive their original parents, and to live on throughout the ages. Thus, the

works of Plato survive in our minds today, along with many other great philosophers, for their seeds have always bore fruit in the soil of our minds.

Self-examination is this process of discovering one's own beliefs, then keeping them, altering them, or discarding them, by discovering what others believe around them. This process is methodologically both social and individualistic. One normally engages in such activity for private uses, but once one possibly obtains a 'higher thought,' then one may wish to share such a discovery throughout their society, thus improving the populace as a whole. Therefore, it may be both political and apolitical, depending on individual preferences. Since how one benefits from this search is subjective, no objective truths can be reached. Objective 'truths' are but children of ideas that have flourished throughout the minds of society. This method is reminiscent of pragmatism, perspectivism, and Robert Scharff's "vital understanding":

> This "vital understanding" is, I believe, the "life" to which Socrates is referring when he says he cares only for an "examined life." It has three fundamental features: First, it is at any given moment the total, concretely (but always to some extent implicitly) *given* sense of things which constitutes Socrates' outlook and in terms of which specific beliefs, theories, and actions are questioned. Second, it is this given sense of things, and not just specific beliefs and theories, which is *continually re-examined* in his inquires. And third, inquiries may thus improve his understanding, but it remains essentially *incompletable*. "Socrates' Successful Inquires" page 317.

This process does not require a direct challenge to one's understanding, as Scharff explains, but such a challenge does initiate an almost immediate self-examination response. His

example is that of the Oracle's prophesy that Socrates is the wisest man:

> Of course, he cannot simply divest himself to that proposition and accept Apollo's message. He does not *understand* the message; and he will not accept propositions which do not reflect his understanding… He combines the propositions "I lack wisdom" and "No one is wiser," not into another contradictory proposition, but into an *appropriate question*, viz., "I am the wisest??" This question brings into focus precisely what *appears* to be the problem, viz., the contrast between Socrates as he now understands himself and all those other allegedly wiser Athenians around him. And it is this question which enables him to confront all those apparently wiser people in such a way that he can eventually learn the oracle's true meaning. "Socrates' Successful Inquires" pages 319-320.

This is why Socrates is ironic, and it explains as to why some may view him as a skeptic, as I will explain below.

Now, the reason Socrates uses Diotima to explain this theory, rather than himself, is fairly simple. Diotima is most likely a real person, since Plato uses real characters as templates for his own ideas, and all the other characters in the *Symposium* were real people, like Aristophanes, Agathon, etc. For Socrates, as a person who claims to have no wisdom, he must have someone else demonstrate his beliefs for him. In order to create greater verification for these wise ideas, he uses Diotima specifically. As mentioned in his speech, the closer a mortal is to immortality, the more beautiful, wise, etc. this person is, in other words, they possess more *arête*. Diotima, being a priestess, is closer to the gods than normal citizens, or she actually allows the gods to speak through her. This makes her an incredibly wise person with truly wise words. By using such a person, whom is likely known for her

great piety, he makes his already profound speech into a transcendentally magnificent story, thus encouraging more followers to believe in this new form of philosophy.

Plato uses a frame for the *Symposium* similar to that of the *Theaetetus*, which is his primary work on skepticism. In the *Theaetetus*, many concepts of knowledge are discussed and dismissed by Socrates, and like many other Platonic dialogues, ends in aporia, leaving the reader clueless as to whether an acceptable form of justified belief is even possible. The *Theaetetus* opens in a specific style to create even more disbelief: the entire conversation of Socrates is just a story, told from one person who heard the story to another. The *Symposium* also begins in this manner: Apollodorus is telling a friend about the circumstance in which Glaucon asked about the Symposium that took place with Socrates. The Symposium had taken place many years before Apollodorus had told Glaucon the story, and it has been a few more since then. And to top it all off, Apollodorus was not even *there* at the Symposium. He had heard the story from Aristodemus, who, just like everyone attending the Symposium, was imbibing alcohol. And as a note, Glaucon mentions that he had heard a story from Phoenix, who had butchered the story (much like a game of "Telephone"). And Phoenix, of course, also heard it from Aristodemus. Although Apollodorus had checked the validity of the story with Socrates, and Socrates gave it the 'okay,' we cannot trust Socrates' answer. For one, Socrates is known for saying ironic things, and this could be one of them. Second, since Socrates could be explaining self-examination, which could be contrived as self-interpretation, if Apollodorus' story was 'close enough' to the truth, Socrates would have accepted it because that was Apollodorus' interpretation of what had happened. And third, Socrates, too, was drinking, and once Alcibiades busted into the party, he intentionally made Socrates drink large quantities (although it may have had no effect on him).

So what does all this mean? We cannot trust the story entirely. It may all be false (and actually is, because it is just a story invented by Plato). But we have to determine what we should believe from this story, and what we should disbelieve. This is a moment, as Scharff would say, that conflicts your "vital understanding," and makes you re-examine what you are given as true. Much like urban legends of children, we must face what people tell us, gather all our past thoughts and beliefs, and measure the validity of the announced story. For example, there is the story about a kid who ate Pop Rocks, then drank soda, and exploded, or about a kid who was swinging on a standard swing-set, but went so fast, that the kid went up and over the pole many times, getting tied to the swing set. These stories are always told to us by a friend who "knows a kid whose cousin's friend's brother saw it happen." We never meet anyone who actually saw it happen, or who it happened to, because these things do not actually happen. As children, we may believe them, since our understanding of the world is underdeveloped, and we do not know all the laws of physics, or the biology of the human body, or the chemistry of candy. So we can accept these as truths. But when we grow older, and gain more understanding of the world around us, we reevaluate these old stories, and come to the conclusion that they could not have happened. This is why the *Symposium* is written in this framework: it forces us to question the validity of the story, the value of what has been said, and how it all fits into our understanding of the world.

The purpose of this ambiguity caused by partial skepticism is reflected in Socratic irony. One must understand irony in order to interpret it. For instance, Euthyphro never understands that Socrates may be ironic. If Socrates really is mocking Euthyphro by asking his scholarly knowledge about piety, then Euthyphro never gets the joke. In order to be ironic, someone else must be able to understand that you mean something other than what you are saying. If this

does not happen, your statement is taken at face value, with its true meaning lost forever in the void. An intelligent and aware audience is required for irony. Socrates makes ironic statements so that his interlocutor must reinterpret his words to unveil the actual meaning. As Socrates enters Agathon's house, Agathon asks Socrates to sit next to him, causing an ironic retort from Socrates:

> "Socrates, come lie down next to me. Who knows, if I touch you, I may catch a bit of the wisdom that came to you under my neighbor's porch. It's clear *you've* seen the light. If you hadn't, you'd still be standing there."
>
> Socrates sat down next to him and said, "How wonderful it would be, dear Agathon, if the foolish were filled with wisdom simply by touching the wise. If wisdom were like water, which always flows from a full cup into an empty one when we connect them with a piece of yarn – well, then I would consider it the greatest prize to have the chance to lie down next to you. I would soon be overflowing with your wonderful wisdom. My own wisdom is of no account – a shadow in a dream – while yours is bright and radiant and has a splendid future. Why, young as you are, you're so brilliant I could call more than thirty thousand Greeks as witnesses." (175d-176a)

Once again, Socrates makes claim to no wisdom. Instead, he holds Agathon up high on a pedestal, glorifying Agathon's first place victory for his latest tragedy. Socrates states that Agathon's play was so amazing, that the whole assembly of thirty thousand, instead of just the seventeen thousand that could be held in the theatre, should be witness to this play. Agathon simply responds, "Now you've gone *too* far, Socrates," (175e-176a) because he understands that Socrates gives him too much praise. Although Agathon knows that Socrates does not mean what he says, he may not know the initial meaning of the joke. Was Socrates mocking him? Was

Socrates actually serious? Was Socrates just giving him praise? Or could Socrates have been 'hitting on' Agathon, since Socrates is known to love young men? These are just a few ways to interpret Socrates phrase, and there may be many more. This ambiguity leads to our own understanding of his words. We must uncover the treasure of meaning under all the dirt by digging through all the words. Once confronted with an unknown, we must shine the light of our understanding into the depths to discover our own understanding, our own interpretation. Socrates' ambiguity is meant for interpretation. It is meant to create discussion. That is why we must discover for ourselves what we believe Socrates means, and what he teaches, hence the various versions of Socrates that we have today.

Alcibiades is one of the 'corrupt youths' that had gotten Socrates indicted, which had eventually lead to his death. However, these corrupt youths were corrupt before Socrates had come into contact with them, and Alcibiades' speech supports this claim. He never understood Socrates. This is easily shown by how Alcibiades reacts when he discovers that Socrates had been discussing love. He says to Eryximachus, "And anyway, my dear fellow, I hope you didn't believe a single word Socrates said: the truth is just the opposite!" (214d) By claiming that Socrates only says the opposite of what he means, Alcibiades is completely missing why Socrates uses irony, and also misses that there are forms of irony that only have an ambiguous meaning, where the opposite is also not true. Before Alcibiades knew this 'noble truth' about Socrates, he still listened to what Socrates said. But he could not accomplish his task:

> He always traps me, you see, and he makes me admit that my political career is a waste of time, while all that matters is just what I most neglect: my personal shortcomings, which cry out for the closest attention. So I refuse to listen to him; stop my ears and tear myself away

> from him for, like the Sirens, he could make me stay by his side till I die. (216a-216b)

And yet, even when Alcibiades attempts to do as Socrates says, he wavers, "I know perfectly well that I can't prove he's wrong when he tells me what I should do; yet, the moment I leave his side, I go back to my old ways…" (216b). Alcibiades fails every test Socrates gives to him. This is why Socrates begins to reject "teaching" Alcibiades. He no longer goes to his house, avoids having meals with him, etc. But Alcibiades continues to pursue Socrates, because he finally saw the inner beauty that Socrates contained.

When Alcibiades makes the offer of his outer beauty for Socrates' inner beauty, Socrates believes this is preposterous, and remarks, "You seem to me to want more than your proper share: you offer me the merest appearance of beauty, and in return you want the thing itself, 'gold in exchange for bronze.'" (218e) This remark does not only mean that physical beauty is subordinate to spiritual beauty, but he is also referring to Alcibiades' inner beauty, for it is inferior to Socrates'. The exchange of ideas that could happen between them would be infertile. Their idea-offspring could not survive in the barren wasteland that is Alcibiades' soul. Socrates would receive nothing with an exchange of ideas with Alcibiades, and Alcibiades is so entrenched in his ways that he would be unable to accept anything Socrates could give him. Therefore, nothing important could come from their discourse. And later, Alcibiades mentions that Socrates has "trapped" others with his whimsical soul. He specifically names Charmides, and Euthydemus. These two are also corrupted youth that could not be changed. Charmides was one of the Thirty Tyrants, who had instigated a bloody coup within Athens, while Euthydemus may have been a lover of Critias, the leader of the Thirty Tyrants, who was also considered a corrupted youth. Although Socrates attempted to see whether or not his ideas might flourish in the gardens of their souls, he soon discovered that the soil could

support no life, for weeds had stripped the land of nutrients. This is why Socrates left them behind, searching for others that may help him in the search for wisdom.

Now my interpretation of the *Symposium* is a spore, floating throughout the air of ideas, planting itself within the minds of others. And through this creation, others may be "challenged" by this claim, and come to either understand or reject my thesis. By doing so, they incorporate my ideas into their own, through this process of self-reflection, self-examination, self-understanding, etc. Socrates' (and Plato's) ambiguity allowed for such an interpretation, so that others may follow in their path, or follow the instructions to create their own path. Throughout this ongoing search for wisdom, we find our way to live. By always changing, always adapting our ways of thought, we can proceed to look into the future, surviving both mentally and physically, throughout the eons.

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