2 AGATHON'S UNFULFILLED POTENTIAL

A Study of Agathon's contribution to the Symposium and its critique of Athenian Education

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1. INTRODUCTION

The unique construction of the *Symposium* has produced many different approaches to its characters and their roles. There have been countless interpretations of Socrates, Diotima, Alcibiades and Aristophanes's speeches and roles in the dialogue.[2] Scholars have also examined some of the less prominent speeches and characters. For example, David Konstan developed a powerful analysis of Eryximachus's speech that demonstrates its "intellectual rigor" and "the logic of the discourse" (Konstan, 1982: 44). Further, he shows how Eryximachus makes a legitimate move from "medical theory to some rather grandiose propositions about the cosmos and the gods" (Konstan, 1982: 44). However, even within these investigations, Agathon has for the most part, simply been set to the side, and consequently, interpretations have struggled to gain a coherent understanding of the dialogue.[3] At first glance, this inclination to dismiss Agathon cannot be faulted. He appears to be a rather uncontroversial and a useless character. His speech, for example, seems to be merely a

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2 For examples see: Reeve (2006), Nussbaum (1979), Ludwig (2002), Neumann (1965).

3 Sedley does give weight to the speech of Agathon, however, he does not attempt to unify Agathon's role with an understanding of *eros* or expand upon the relationship between Agathon and Socrates (2006).

showcase of his rhetorical skill and a list of his own apparent qualities. However, unlike many of the other symposiasts, Agathon plays a consistent role in the dramatic actions throughout the dialogue. Among other examples, he is the host of the banquet, shares a couch with Socrates and Alcibiades, is the object of both their pursuits and is the last one to stay up doing "philosophy" with Socrates. Most importantly, he is the cause and focus of Socrates's questioning and speech at the heart of the dialogue (199c-201e). Based on these thoughts, the focus of this paper is to help establish Agathon as a central character to the deeper philosophical context of the *Symposium*. This interpretation will subsequently help to refocus part of the common understanding of Platonic *eros* from thoughts on individual love to educational methods.

Despite a predominant lack of interest in Agathon, a few studies have utilised him in developing interpretations of the text. In particular, Luc Brisson's 'Agathon, Pausanias, and Diotima in Plato's *Symposium*: *Paiderastia* and *Philosohia*' demonstrates Agathon's role in understanding the dialogue as a pederastic critique. Overall, Brisson differentiates between common pederasty and *Paiderastia*; the latter being a more noble pursuit aimed at *Philosophia*, rather than mere sophistic knowledge or sexual pleasure (Brisson, 2006: 229). He, then, claims that *Paiderastia* is represented in the life long relationship between Agathon and Pausanias. Specifically, Brisson interprets Pausanias's speech as a passionate defense of this noble form of pederasty (Brisson, 2006: 240-45). Further, Diotima's speech develops a critique of *Paiderastia* (Brisson, 2006: 240-51).[4] Overall, Brisson's argument successfully demonstrates the need to incorporate ideas of education, specifically Greek thoughts on the appropriate ways to pursue knowledge, into our understanding of the dialogue. However, despite this success, we will see that Brisson ultimately underplays Agathon's significance to the whole dialogue.

My argument will begin by describing Agathon's role in the drama of the dialogue. Specifically, the first section will examine Agathon as a historical character and what effect that has on our understanding of Plato's literary characterisation. Further, the section will examine how particular parts of his biography have led previous interpretations to dismiss Agathon's importance in the dialogue. Finally, it will argue for a positive and substantial reading of Plato's Agathon that highlights his good-nature and moral intuitions. In the second section, we will turn to a close examination of Agathon's speech. Overall, the speech reflects moral and rational inclinations, but also youth, naivety and a lack of philosophical refinement. The third section will, then, demonstrate that Socrates develops both his questioning and speech as a response to

4 In addition, see (Nightengale, 1993) for an alternative understanding of the Platonic critique, namely dealing with the encomiastic discourse.

Agathon. On the one hand, Socrates exhibits a level of academic respect for the young man. However, there also seems to be an implicit criticism of the educational system that failed to develop Agathon's potentials. The fourth section will concentrate on the conclusion of the dialogue and argue that Alcibiades comes to embody Athenian education. Further, the focus will be on how the last few pages present a dramatic competition between Socrates and Alcibiades veiled by sexual contact, but actually representing two different educational paths. These pages of the dialogue will also be used to argue for a tragic reading of Agathon that reflects this educational interpretation. Overall, the paper is aimed at reexamining the role of Agathon and including this new understanding of his character to the many intriguing layers of the *Symposium*.

2. PLATO'S CHARACTERISATION OF AGATHON AND THE DRAMA OF THE *symposium*

We should first examine the elements of Agathon's historical biography in order to develop a better understanding of his characterisation in the dialogue. At the *Symposium's* dramatic date, Agathon is around thirty years old (Nails, 2002: 8). At this stage, Greek elite were expected to be married or, at least, no longer the *eromenos* of a pederastic relationship (Brisson, 2006: 233-4). However, Agathon was well-known for having been the lifelong beloved to Pausanias. In fact, this is how Plato introduces both of them in the *Protagoras* (315e). In the comedy *Thesmophoriazusae*, a play produced five years after the dramatic date of the *Symposium*, Aristophanes criticises Agathon for being effeminate and passive (29, 182-5, 217f, 247-50). In a recent interpretation, Peter H. von Blanckenhagen claims that, "In modern slang, Agathon is a drag queen" (1992: 59). Based on this evidence, it seems that Agathon's relationship was both visible to the public and open to some level of criticism. In addition to his reputation for being the constant beloved, Agathon was a successful tragedian. As Plato highlights, the whole reason for this symposium and Socrates's attendance is to celebrate Agathon's first victory in the Dionysia festival (174a). Also, Aristotle credits him with being one of the first tragedians to have developed his own plot: not based on received mythological figures (*Poet.* 1451b, 1454b, 1456a). In 407 BC, he was invited to live at the court of Archelaus, a Macedonian king, presumably under his patronage.[5] Although of a limited nature, these examples of Agathon's prolific playwriting career suggest a more complex picture

5 Pausanias was reported to have accompanied him. In addition, this is mentioned both in the *Symposium* (172c) and in Aristophanes's *Frogs*.

than Aristophanes presents. Therefore, we should examine what aspects of Agathon's historical background are highlighted in Plato's depiction.

Turning to the *Symposium*, Plato seems to develop a character that reflects the multiple historic dimensions of Agathon. Throughout the dialogue, Agathon is consistently referred to as the youth of the group, despite the fact that he is a fully matured man (223A). Furthermore, in the *Protagoras*, Agathon is mentioned for his youth and good looks, as well as, his relationship to Pausanias (315d-e). Therefore, Brisson rightly emphasises that Agathon assumes the role of the beloved among the symposiasts. The following passage clearly highlights how Agathon, despite his age, was still functioning in a pederastic mindset, "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" (175D). As Brisson argues, this passage "associates the transmission of knowledge from one man to another to that of a seminal fluid" (Brisson, 2006: 229). More specifically, Brisson demonstrates how he is part of the noblest or highest form of male-male relationships, in that his and Pausanias's pursuits are aimed, first and foremost, at *Philosophia*. For Brisson argues that Agathon's main purpose in the dialogue is his connection to Pausanias, and together, they subsequently develop a defense of *Paiderastia*. However, this is also where Brisson's essay demonstrates its limited perceptions of Agathon's character.

In analysing Plato's characterisation of Agathon, we should also notice how Plato emphasises Agathon's intellectual and moral intuitions completely independent of his relationship with Pausanias. Returning to the *Protagoras*, Plato describes Agathon as the young and attractive boy that shares a couch with his lover Pausanias. Yet, in the *Symposium*, from the moment Agathon enters the scene, he demonstrates a certain moral intuition that is not at all connected to Pausanias. For example, when Aristodemus shows up uninvited, Agathon graciously welcomes him and even provides an excuse for why he did not invite him in the first place (174e). As the host, Agathon also demonstrates a serious intellectual interest, as is evident in his choice to invite certain symposiasts. Mainly from the upper echelons of Athens, the group includes members of the aristocracy (Phaedrus and Eryximachus), and the intellectual elite (Aristophanes and Socrates) (Von Blanckenhagen, 1992: 60). Overall, this suggests that Plato clearly sought to portray Agathon in a positive light. Agathon is interested in intellectual pursuits and demonstrates a willingness to develop such attempts.

In addition to this positive characterisation, Plato develops an important relationship between Agathon and Socrates. First, they manage to share a couch with each other, despite the latter's late arrival. If the em-

phasis was on Agathon the beloved, as Brisson argues, why does he not share a couch with Pausanias, as he did in the *Protagoras*? This decision was certainly not an accident. It seems clear that Agathon specifically held the seat next to him for Socrates. In the passage quoted above (175d), Agathon reveals the reasons behind this desire, namely a pursuit of Socrates's wisdom. On the one hand, this statement reflects a pederastic background, by associating knowledge with physical contact. However, the decision also reflects a larger interest in the pursuit of knowledge. Pausanias does not seem to be offended by Agathon's decision, suggesting that Agathon's intentions are noble and intellectually driven. The statement should also be compared to that of Alcibiades's, later in the dialogue (218e-219a). This connection demonstrates how they both share an interest in gaining knowledge from Socrates, as well as the pederastic model they utilised for acquiring such wisdom. In addition, Socrates responds to both in a rather ironic way. On the one hand, Socrates claims his wisdom is but "a shadow in a dream" compared to Agathon's own wisdom (175e). On the other hand, Socrates claims that Alcibiades is trying to exchange a bronze standard of wisdom, "the merest appearance of beauty", for a gold standard, "the thing itself" (218e). However, it seems that Agathon understands Socrates's sarcasm and even responds with some of his own, "Now you've gone too far, Socrates" (175e). This playfulness suggests a certain level of respect between Agathon and Socrates that, as we will see, is emphasised throughout the dialogue.

This relationship between Socrates and Agathon also seems to structure some of the main philosophical and dramatic developments of the dialogue. Firstly, Agathon's speech is the only one to be given a more traditional Socratic refutation. Further, Socrates structures his entire depiction of Diotima's advice in relation to this interaction with Agathon, "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" (201E). While this statement will be examined in detail later for its philosophical importance, on a basic level, it deepens the importance of the connection between these two characters. In the final scene of the dialogue, Plato depicts a comedic display that once again emphasises this connection between Socrates and Agathon, "As if the real point of all this has not been simply to make trouble between Agathon and me!" (222D). Finally, of all the other characters, Agathon stays awake the longest doing "philosophy" with Socrates. Therefore, based on this evidence, it appears that Plato purposefully structured major pieces of the dialogue around their relationship.

Overall, the combination of Agathon's central role in the dialogue and his moral intuitions suggest some preliminary conclusions. Firstly, Agathon attempts to foster an environment focused on attaining wisdom, and he is particularly interested in what Socrates has to say. Further, it seems that by highlighting the relationship between Agathon and Socrates, we can begin to see some of the educational components to the dialogue. Therefore, we should try to comprehend how the connection between them affects the *Symposium's* philosophical program. Also, we should see what this interpretation of Agathon adds to the dialogue's conception of *eros*. Nevertheless, it seems that based simply on this examination of his character and relationships, Agathon has merited a closer analysis.

3. AGATHON'S SPEECH

In this section, we will examine how Agathon's speech helps develop the philosophical progress of the *Symposium*. For the most part, modern interpretation has dismissed his speech as simple and self-absorbed. Brisson describes the speech as "empty but magnificently constructed" (Brisson, 2006: 245). He argues that it is a showcase of his training in Gorgianic rhetoric and ability to use poetic citations, rather than a speech aimed at real intellectual pursuits. This criticism is furthered by Nehamas and Woodruff in their translation of the dialogue. They suggest that the speech really only reflects Agathon's connection to the god Eros, his youth, and physical beauty. For example, after he concludes his speech "everyone there burst into applause, so becoming to himself and to the god did they think the young man's speech" (198a). Here, Nehamas and Woodruff suggest that the 'to himself', "refers to him as the youngest and best-looking man present" (Nehamas et la, 1989: 37). Overall, interpreters seem to disregard Agathon's speech on account of his claim that Eros is happy, young, beautiful and delicate, (the reflection of the beloved). This sort of focus on individual beauty suggests that Agathon's speech is a digression from the intellectual atmosphere of the *Symposium* (Brisson, 2006: 245).[6] Thus, it does not seem to merit any further analysis.

However, despite these valid criticisms, it does seem that Agathon's speech reflects the same moral intuitions and intellectual potential that were established in the previous section. Firstly, we should draw our attention to comments Agathon makes just before he begins his speech: "Why, Socrates, you must think I have nothing but theater audiences on

6 This is also present in Von Blanckenhagen (1992: 62).

my mind! So you suppose I don't realise that, if you're intelligent, you find a few sensible men much more frightening than a senseless crowd" (194B). This reflects a common Socratic argument where "wisdom is the only really good thing and ignorance (lack of wisdom) the only really bad one. Because the majority are unwise, they cannot reliably produce the effects they want" (Reeve, 2002: 64). Specifically, the statement echoes the *Crito*, "But, my dear Crito, why do we care so much for what most people think? For the most reasonable men, whose opinion is more worth considering, will think that things were done as they really will be done" (44c-d). Although Agathon's statement does not directly refer to this Socratic idea, it does indicate that he, at the least, has an appreciation and respect for knowledge over mere approval of the masses. This example will help to establish a trend within Agathon's speech, namely that while Agathon has the right initial tendencies, his philosophical background is clearly at a novice level.

At the start of his speech, Agathon continues to develop a very "Socratic" approach to his praise of Eros, "what he is like (referring to Eros), no one has spoken about that" (195A). Further, he says, "Now, only one method is correct for every praise, no matter whose: you must explain what qualities in the subject of your speech enable him to give the benefits for which we praise him" (195A). Here Agathon establishes a philosophical methodology for his speech. On the one hand, this scheme for praising *eros* seems to refer back to some of the earlier Platonic dialogues, where Socrates is pursuing his famous definitions of piety or other virtues and trying to understand the what-it-is (*ti esti*). In fact, Agathon uses very similar language to the earlier Socratic dialogues. Further, Socrates then approves of this method later in the *Symposium*, even using the same *hoios* language multiple times, "Indeed, Agathon, I thought you led the way beautifully into your speech when you said that one should first show the qualities of Love himself, and only then those of his deeds. I must admire that beginning. Come, then, since you have beautifully and magnificently expounded his qualities in other ways [. . .]" (199c). This indicates that Agathon develops a correct method for understanding *eros* in his speech. However, since his philosophical training is not fully developed, he does not use the *ti estin* terminology.

On the other hand, this approach also seems to differentiate his speech from the speeches before his; Agathon is interested in the what-it-is, whereas the other speeches are interested in the benefits of Love for humans. For example, Aristophanes thinks that love should be praised for drawing people together (192e). In addition, this method seems to separate Agathon from some of Socrates's other interlocutors throughout Plato's works. For example, in *Meno*, Socrates asks Meno what virtue is (71d). However, Meno responds by listing a number of instances of

virtue, "There is virtue for every action and every age, for every task of ours and every one of us" (72a). In this example, we should notice that Socrates is using the more technical *ti esti* language. Nevertheless, it seems Agathon should be acknowledged for correctly establishing the task for Socrates's more in-depth and advanced philosophical discussion.

In addition to proposing a proper philosophical method, Agathon also develops a legitimate explanation of *eros* that focuses on its moral qualities. He claims that Eros is the most beautiful and the best of the gods. However, the god is not just young and beautiful, but also just, courageous, temperate and wise (196d). Overall, he sets up a picture of *eros* in its ideal state. In doing this, the speech has also produced the criticism's that were discussed earlier. Yet, Agathon also proposes that when loving, one is inspired towards the good and becomes happy and peaceful. For example, after Apollo was touched by *eros*, he "invented archery, medicine, and prophecy" (197a). In contrast, those who are not guided by *eros* end in oblivion (197a). This perspective on *eros* does seem to be rather naive and hopeful, but it does not seem to be mere fluff or self-absorbed.

However, in developing this naive perspective on *eros*, Agathon also demonstrates his lack of philosophical understanding. He suggests that when *eros* is involved the person is always directed to do good things, "That too is how the gods' quarrels were settled, once Love came to be among them; love of beauty, obviously, because love is not drawn to ugliness [. . .] But once this god was born, all goods came to gods and men alike through love of beauty" (197b-c). This picture is somewhat accurate, but only insofar as the love is directed to the good. It seems we could think of *eros* directing one's passions at bad goals. Perhaps a simple example is the case of Alcibiades and how his passions resulted in the virtual destruction of the Athenian empire (Wohl, 2002). The main problem with Agathon's speech is that it fails to appropriately define and defend *eros* in its entirety. Overall, his speech leaves open many unanswered questions that Agathon fails to recognise. Frisbee Sheffield well illustrates some of these questions in *Plato's Symposium: Ethics of Desire*. For example, how and why does *eros* engender the creation of or the possession of good and beautiful things? His answer is that since it is all of those good and beautiful things, its presence in other beings promotes those tendencies (196e). However, this runs into conflict with his notion that it is creative. If one already has these qualities within them, why should they bother with these pursuits at all? (Sheffield, 2006: 25). While there seems to be an easy solution to this question, namely that someone would want to create more of it, Agathon fails to account for this possibility. In addition, when Socrates refutes him on this topic, he

fails to utilise this answer in his defense. Overall, these criticisms seem to highlight both his naive goodness and a highly unrefined philosophical education.

Following these examples, it seems we can draw some preliminary conclusions regarding Agathon's larger role in the dialogue. On the one hand, Brisson suggests that "his speech echoes that of Pausanias, which is intended as a defense and illustration of *paiderastia* as an educative instrument that enables the achievement of excellence in all its forms, particularly in the area of poetry his Eros possesses all the virtues and can transmit them to everyone" (Brisson, 2006: 246). In fact, Agathon's speech does demonstrate an impressive use of meter, poetic citations and understanding of Gorgian style rhetoric.[7] However, Agathon's speech also reflects true philosophical progress on a number of important levels. These intellectual features of his speech and his overall set of moral intuitions suggest that Agathon represents more than just the product of his relationship with Pausanias. Further, in the next section of the dialogue, Socrates picks up on this philosophical progress both in his refutation of Agathon and in Diotima's speech. Therefore, an important question arises: how can we make sense of Agathon's speech within the larger context of the dialogue? It seems that his role is two-fold. On the one hand, Agathon does express a certain goodness that is reflected throughout the dialogue. However, on the other hand, these qualities are corrupted by his education. Throughout the speech, Agathon is consistently disrupted by his need to include references to poetry or utilise his rhetorical training, "I am suddenly struck by a need to say something in poetic meter" (197c). Further, we can see this complex role expressed within Socrates's refutation and Diotima's speech. Socrates demonstrates a level of respect towards Agathon, but there is also a serious criticism of him, as the product of Athenian education. Therefore, within this criticism, we can now see that even the "fluff" of Agathon's speech serves a larger purpose in the dialogue's philosophical development, namely a critique of Agathon's educational upbringing.

4. AGATHON, SOCRATES AND DIOTIMA

In the following section, we will see how Agathon's philosophical role helps develop the content of the more debated sections of the dialogue. To start, despite the large number of speeches presented before Socrates's turn, the philosopher decides to focus his response around and towards

7 Roberts provides a full discussion of the influence of Gorgias on Agathon's rhetoric. 1900.

Agathon. As we have seen, Socrates approves of Agathon's methodological approach (199c). Then, he "corrects" one of the major flaws of Agathon's argument by demonstrating Agathon's inability to defend his definition of *eros* against dialectic (199d-201c). However, unlike many Platonic dialogues, Socrates follows this elenchus by admitting to make the same mistakes Agathon has just made (201e).[8] This can then be read in context with his introduction of Diotima, "I shall try to go through for you the speech about Love I once heard from a woman of Mantinea, Diotima [. . .] She is the one who taught me the art of love" (201d). So that Diotima's speech becomes a mouthpiece for how Socrates was able to move out of the same state of *aporia* that Agathon now possesses. Thus, Plato seems to be indicating that Agathon is, at least, on the right philosophical track and that we can find partial truths within his speech. Further, this relationship between Agathon and Socrates helps express the positive and negative educational messages of the *Symposium*, namely an argument for the philosophical or examined life, and the negative critique of current Athenian educational systems.[9] Finally, if Socrates and Diotima are to be Plato's platforms for proposing this argument, then Agathon, the embodiment of both youth and pederasty, as well as intellectual desire and moral intuition, reflects the potential to lead the right type of life and the product of a system that failed to harness that potential.

First, in Socrates's questioning of Agathon, we can start to understand why Agathon is the prime candidate of focus for the instructions. We are not surprised when the refutation is quick and easy; however, it is also the only real "Socratic Dialogue" that we get in the *Symposium*, where Socrates proves the interlocutor to be mistaken by simply showing he believes two contradictory things about the topic. One possible interpretation is that the elenchus becomes the first step towards the Socratic concept of the examined life. The next step for the individual is to accept his state of *aporia* and try to resolve it in new ways. At the end of this section, Agathon almost seems perfectly primed to pursue this lifestyle, "I am unable to challenge you. Let it be as you say" (201c). This indicates that Agathon does not become defensive about this refutation, as many of Socrates's interlocutors. In the case of Thrasymachus, in the *Republic*, following his discussion with Socrates, he claims not to be satisfied with Socrates's account and that he could still argue his original point if Socrates would allow him to make a speech about it (350d). In contrast, Agathon claims to be unable to challenge Socrates. This implies that

8 Good examples are found in *Euthyphro*, and *Gorgias*.

9 I realise that I have not fully defined these general notions of Athenian education. Nonetheless, I have in mind sophistry, pederasty, etc. Further, it seemed outside the scope of this paper to further develop these notions.

Agathon has no other way of arguing with Socrates. Also, Plato uses the same verb in both Agathon's response to Socrates's questioning, "Let it be as you say" (201c) and Socrates' response to Diotima's questioning, "True, as you say" (202a). While this does not necessarily mean that Socrates's refutation is a good and accurate one, it does suggest that Agathon is a willing participant in the dialectic and brings the argument as far as he can.

Following the elenchus, we should notice Agathon would be in a similar state to Alcibiades when Socrates forced him to "feel shame", (216b) as well as when Socrates was corrected by Diotima for making the same mistakes (201e). Both of these comparisons will help better illustrate the role of Agathon in this central section of the *Symposium*. Firstly, Agathon seems to possess a far superior sense of the importance of wisdom than Alcibiades. Imagine being the "star" of the night and after delivering your speech, the person who you most respect and admire dismantles you in front of your closest friends. Would we expect the same calm and gracious reaction from Alcibiades? Therefore, at least in contrast to Alcibiades, Plato seems to continue to highlight Agathon's moral condition.

Following the questioning of Agathon, Socrates makes a crucial admission, "You see, I had told her almost the same things Agathon told me just now: that Love is a great god and that he belongs to beautiful things" (201e). In terms of the philosophical message, this statement seems to setup Diotima's speech as a response to the problems exhibited in Agathon's speech and even his character. Prior to this statement, Socrates commends Agathon for establishing the right type of methodology, "following your lead, Agathon, one should first describe who Love is and what he is like, and afterwards describe his works" (201d). Both of these statements suggest that Socrates was, at some point, in the same academic position as Agathon is on the night of this infamous symposium. Further, based on this interpretation, Diotima's speech becomes a way for Plato to express how Socrates moved from this level of intellectual potential to the fully actualised embodiment of the philosophical life.

As Brisson has argued, Agathon is involved in the most ideal form of pederasty; a relationship that is defended ardently by Pausanias earlier in the dialogue. But, in addition to this role, it also seems fair to argue that Agathon reflects a wider body of Athenian youth and their education. Perhaps one way of understanding Agathon's role is to think of him embodying the qualities of a youth that might be selected for further education in the Kallipolis of Plato's *Republic*. However, since Agathon is well-beyond the appropriate age to start the training of a philosopher-king, it appears that Plato is emphasising that Agathon's

education failed to fully utilise his good nature and intellectual potentials. Thus, Socrates and Diotima seem to have two tasks set before them: criticise the current educational systems and provide a positive alternative (e.g. the philosophical life).

The speech, however, does not provide the straightforward and direct type of response that we might like. For instance, it is odd that Plato would, in the midst of this "celebrity" event, bring in what appears to be a fictional character. Debra Nails argues that Diotima should be treated on her own as a representation of religion and mysticism and not conflated with philosophy (2006: 193). This sort of reading makes sense with the rest of the characters: a doctor, comedian, tragedian, and philosopher. In addition, we should remember that in the *Symposium* Plato is trying to reach out to a non-philosophical audience. Therefore, he must employ non-philosophical means of getting to a philosophical life. In this sense, Diotima is advising for the philosophical life inadvertently. Perhaps one understanding is that Plato is proclaiming a philosophical or examined approach to the many different topics that are present in the *Symposium*: medicine, tragedy, comedy, religion, etc. Therefore, the Socratic philosopher does not directly need their own speech. Rather, their task is to engage others and force them to participate in dialectical discussions to determine if their theories can lead to true wisdom. This is something that Socrates does directly with Agathon. Therefore, if Agathon is the product of the Athenian educational system, Plato is emphasising to his audience that the system is not fully developing its youth.

In looking at the text, the structure of Diotima's speech seems to follow a very set educative path. She starts by questioning Socrates in a similar way to Agathon's refutation. Then Diotima provides a mythical story for the creation of Eros that defines its role as the product of resource and poverty. Even within this mythical story, Diotima is providing an explanatory argument for her definition of *eros*, something that Agathon was not able to accomplish. In the next section of her speech, Diotima fully fleshes out her understanding of *eros*, "The main point is this: every desire for good things or for happiness is the 'supreme and treacherous love' in everyone" (205d). Firstly, this definition is more in line with Agathon's thoughts of creative passion than with Aristophanes's unique love of another individual. But, she also provides a more comprehensive definition than Agathon. *Eros* should be understood as desire, something that is not tied exclusively to matters of loving other individuals, but also something not tied exclusively to the production of good and beautiful things. Therefore, we should understand *eros* as something that has to be directed in a particular way, if it is going

to assist us in attaining all of the great things Agathon discusses in his speech.

In the next section of her speech, the ascent passages, Diotima develops both a criticism of current forms of education and a positive alternative account that seems to build off of Agathon's speech, refutation, and overall role in the dialogue. Firstly, the critique entails that there is a correct way to use one's erotic passions, and a wrong way. In one particular example, Diotima actually uses the verb *paiderastein* to describe what it means to love rightly, "When someone rises by these stages, through *loving boys correctly*, and begins to see this beauty, he has almost grasped his goal" (211B). This passage suggests that *paiderastein* is a necessary step to "loving rightly", but only insofar as it is used to move up the ladder towards beauty itself. While this example illustrates a critique of pederastic relations, there also appears to be a more comprehensive argument against Athenian education at large. In fact, it seems that *paiderastein* is just an immediate starting point to the ascent. Once one sees beauty within bodies, "The result is that our lover will be forced to gaze at the beauty of activities and laws and to see that all this is akin to itself, with the result that he will think that the beauty of bodies is a thing of no importance" (210c). Therefore, it seems that all sorts of earthly passions fall into stages on the ascent ladder. Thus, we can see that the criticism is that the standard forms of education do not promote the same type of upward movement as the philosophical life. Rather, by simply pursuing one of these educational routes, (rhetoric, politics, poetry, medicine, etc.) there is no incentive to move upward towards the beautiful. Thus, we will need a system that promotes this journey. In the case of Agathon, we see an example of someone who perhaps had the potential to come to the highest mysteries that Diotima discusses, yet, his education did not develop these capacities.

Still, Diotima's speech also develops a positive account of the philosophical life. To move up the ladder and eventually see beauty requires living an examined life, "but the lover is turned to the great sea of beauty, and, gazing upon this, he gives birth too many gloriously beautiful ideas and theories [. . .] until [. . .] he catches sight of such knowledge" (210d-e). In this passage, Diotima draws a distinction between ideas or theories, and fully developed knowledge. Therefore, the ascent to beauty, significantly reflects the examined or philosophical life. Through dialectic, one can turn their ideas into actual knowledge. However, as we have already seen, Agathon is not expected to be able to move up the ladder and see the highest mysteries. Diotima even warns Socrates that he might not move to that level (209e-210a). Nevertheless, it does seem that Agathon embodies the right type of character to which this sort of information would be useful. Even if Agathon is not expected to change

his life after this encounter, the youth that he represents, those with high moral intuitions and good intellectual passions, by reading this dialogue, might learn how to utilise their potential.

5. AGATHON, SOCRATES, ALCIBIADES, AND THE TRAGEDY OF THE *symposium*

In the last section of the *Symposium*, we get to see Plato's drama played out. On one side, you have Socrates (the embodiment of philosophy), on the other, you have Alcibiades (the embodiment of the political and honor-filled life), and, in between, you have Agathon (the embodiment of youth). In this reading, Alcibiades seems to also embody a method for attaining wisdom, e.g. the pederastic model, which cannot be detached from physical acts. Much like Agathon, he sees that Socrates has valuable 'information' that he would like to possess through sexual methods of transference. However, when Alcibiades is forced to "feel shame" by Socrates's refutations, and his weaknesses and shortcomings are revealed, he responds by rejecting philosophy and "caving into (his) desire to please the crowd" (216b). Therefore, we see that Alcibiades's speech serves as a temptation of pederasty and a warning against such Socratic methods of acquiring wisdom. Simply, Alcibiades was once intrigued by what Socrates seemed to possess, yet was, and still is, consistently disappointed. In a way, he seems to represent the common view of Socrates: intrigued, yet, frustrated.

Agathon seems quite content to deny Alcibiades and follow Socrates, "but he won't get away with it; I'm coming right over to lie down next to you" (222E). What is the difference between Agathon and Alcibiades? They are both young, beautiful, intelligent, and successful. Why does it seem that Agathon is eager to accept Socrates's methods? Further, as we have seen, it would not seem plausible that Plato felt Agathon was still in a position to turn towards the philosophical life. Therefore, why would Plato develop this humorous competition over Agathon, especially if his audience knew Agathon did not turn towards the philosophic life?

One of the most humorous sections of the *Symposium* comes in the final dramatic scene between Socrates, Alcibiades and Agathon. On the one hand, Alcibiades is clearly still in love with Socrates, yet, hates him at the same time. Further, the three characters play a game of cat and mouse as they switch seats on the couch. However, as Socrates claims in this last section, "the skillful tragic dramatist should also be a comic poet" (223d). Within this scene, we also find the ultimate tragedy of the *Symposium*. Many people have argued that the *Symposium's* tragic

element exists in the relationship between Socrates and Alcibiades.[10] In particular, we should keep its specific dramatic dates in mind, and view the tragedy as connected to the mutilation of the herms, and profanation of the mysteries that occurred in the following months. As well as, of course, Socrates's death in 399 BC (Nails, 2006: 200). As interpreters have pointed out, many of the *Symposium's* characters were involved in these events that led to the Athenian downfall, namely Alcibiades, Phaedrus and Eryximachus (Nails, 2006: 201). However, this sort of interpretation fails to address the dialogue as a whole. Therefore, by building the dialogue around the relationship between Agathon and Socrates, a new interpretation of this tragedy becomes possible.

After hearing Socrates's speech, demonstrating his own intellectual capabilities and moral intuitions, and resisting the temptation of Alcibiades, Agathon is sitting doing philosophy with Socrates and yet still falls asleep. After this point, it seems fair to assert that Agathon did not drastically change his life. He did not end his relationship with Pausanias, and he continued working as a playwright. Most importantly, he did not pursue a philosophical lifestyle. Certainly, we are meant to place this text in its appropriate historical context, and understand that the majority of the other symposiasts went on to take part in the destruction of their own society. However, in this subtle reading, even the good-natured and morally inclined symposiast is too corrupted by his society to lead the examined life. Following this dialogue, it should no longer surprise us that we begin to see the development of a strict philosophical educational program, specifically with the writing of the *Republic*. Perhaps there is no hope for the self-indulgent Alcibiades, but for all those like Agathon, "the good man", there needs to be a better educational system to guide them towards philosophy. The goal is not necessarily to generate good people out of bad material, but to develop a system that guarantees a full actualisation of one's potentials. The problem with pederasty or rhetoric, even at their most noble forms, are their failures in this regard, namely, truth and goodness are not their main concerns. Therefore, even the good-natured Agathon will not be able to circumvent societal values to achieve an understanding of the good.

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10 The tragedy of the *Symposium* is further discussed in (Nussbaum, 1979), and (Lear, 1998).

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