

Chapter 1

Plato's *Symposium*, particularly in conjunction with *Phaido*, is often viewed as giving one of the clearest explanations in all of Plato's work of the doctrine of forms. The *Symposium* is also generally recognized as one of the greatest literary masterpieces Plato produced. The purpose of the present essay is to suggest that, viewed from one perspective at least, the literary aspects of the *Symposium* suggest an interpretation of the philosophical side of the dialogue that is incompatible with the usual claims for the doctrine of forms. The literary side in particular will be discussed in the present chapter, and in chapters 2, 3 and 6. The philosophical side will be discussed in chapters 4 and 5.

1 Dionysos¹

The most obvious fact about the *Symposium* is that its dramatic setting is a party in celebration of Agathon's prize in the festival of tragedy. This was a Dionysian festival, and there should be no surprise in the discovery that Plato uses Dionysian symbolism throughout the dialogue, or that he plays on the traditional conflict between Dionysos and Apollo. Two of those at the party, Agathon and Aristophanes, are playwrights, obvious creatures of the god of drama. Another, Eryximakhos, is a physician, and therefore a creature of Apollo, god of medicine.

Dionysos was god of wine, of madness, of prophecy as well as of drama, and Plato plays on all these themes on a number of different levels. But Dionysos seems also to have been much more than these. An Orphic creation myth tells of the birth of a god from the cosmic egg. This god was Phanes who (Orphic fr. 60; Aristophanes' *Birds*, 693ff.) was called Eros—but who (Diodorus Siculus, I. ii. 3) was also called Dionysos.² Whether this traditional identification of Eros with Dionysos is accurate or not, Plato seems to have intended some such identification. As Nussbaum³ points out, "[Dionysos] is the god who dies. He undergoes, each year, a ritual death and rebirth, a cutting back and a resurgence. . . . Among the gods he alone is not self-sufficient, he alone can be acted on by

the world. . . . And yet, miraculously, despite his fragility, he restores himself and burgeons." Yet it is Eros who is described by Diotima as "neither immortal nor mortal,⁴ in the selfsame day he is flourishing and alive at the hour when he is abounding in resource; at another he is dying, and then reviving again. . . . yet the resources that he gets will ever be ebbing away." (203e).

On this level Dionysos was seen as the life force of the cosmos. He was run down by the Titans and devoured in the form of a bull (in the Orphic version, as a child). The Titans were then destroyed by Zeus, who incinerated them with his thunderbolts and scattered their ashes to the winds, thereby spreading the life force over the world (Olympiodorus on Plato's *Phaido*, 61c; Orphicorum fr. 220, p. 238 of Kern). Thus all living things may be regarded as manifestations of Dionysos.⁵

This was symbolized in the theater where one actor was expected to play many parts, and the audience knew which part only by the mask the actor wore. Symbolically then, Dionysos was god of masks. But as god of masks his essence is *to be masked*; there can be no Dionysos unmasked. Each living thing is a mask of Dionysos. As all living things, he is no one thing in particular. He has no individuality, no character peculiarly his own, so taking all the masks off Dionysos, like taking all the peelings off an onion, would leave nothing behind.

On these terms, each person is a mask of Dionysos. But if Dionysos' character is to be masked, self-knowledge must be viewed as a process of peeling one's mask away in order to discover not one's "true self," but the mask beneath, which in turn is to be peeled away. Since the act of removing a mask becomes an aspect, perhaps even a significant aspect, of the person who removed it, that act becomes an aspect of the mask that it reveals. In this way the removal of a mask is at least partly creative of the mask beneath. And the process of removing the mask is in actuality a process of growth in self-knowledge. This process can be brought to a halt only on the false supposition that what one has discovered is not a mask, but the "true self," an absolute self that underlies all the masks and will never change. That there can be no such immutable self is made clear in Diotima's speech.⁶

Only humans have the intellectual power to recognize such masks. Most humans have some skill in recognizing them in others, but they deeply resist recognizing those that they themselves wear. They must be persuaded that they are wearing them, and that

process of persuasion is the dialectic. On these terms the elenchus, that part of the dialectic that leads to the recognition of one's ignorance, is the discovery that what one thought one knew was in fact a mask. One may like Anytos, simply refuse to listen and thereby avoid the discovery altogether; or like Meno, having once discovered the mask, skate around it refusing to admit that it is there; or like Meno's slave, try to correct the ignorance one has discovered, removing the mask to find the belief—the mask—that lies beneath. To be fully human is to engage in this dialectical process—to seek always to discover the masks one is wearing and remove them. In this sense the dialectical process is one of self-discovery and of self-creation as well. Only thus can humans grow, and as will be argued below (ch. 4, sec. 7), love, Eros, is a process of growth. As pointed out in the Appendix, the dialectic requires both the knowledge of one's ignorance and the desire to learn. Anytos lacks both; Meno lacks the desire to learn; and the slave, lacking neither, is more fully human than either of the others.⁷

Humility was not regarded by the Greeks as a virtue. Pride, so long as it was restrained by moderation, and limited to what one could properly take pride in, was a virtue. Only when it went beyond what was proper did it become hubris. Thus, hubris, believed by the Greeks to be the source of all sin, is arrogance, or "overweening pride," the belief that one is something that one is not. In other words, hubris is rooted in the failure of self-knowledge.⁸ Thus, in the present framework the most common form of hubris would be the belief that there is such an immutable self, that there is some one level of discovery that is real, that is not a mask, some "knowledge" which, though open to question, remains unquestioned. Such a belief is necessarily beyond proof, since the most one could legitimately say is that *if* what I have now discovered is a mask I have not yet succeeded in stripping it away to see what lies beneath. One could not justifiably claim that the failure to remove it is evidence that it cannot be removed—still less that it is by nature such that it cannot be removed. The claim that there is a "true" or "immutable" self must therefore remain no more than a presupposition, and the claim that any self that happens to have been discovered is the "true" self must be a presupposition as well.

But to base one's claim for self-knowledge on the presupposition that one has it is so clearly circular as to approach the ultimate in self-deception, the failure of self-knowledge—the hubris from which springs all sin. True self-knowledge on these terms is a pursuit, not

a discovery, and it is grounded in the realization that one cannot know even that there is a self to be known. All one can discover—either in oneself or in another—is a mask. Although exactly what the mask happens to be may be important, there is an underlying suggestion that for humans, to be is to grow, and any mask may therefore be fleeting.⁹

Although a theme of masks is not mentioned explicitly in the *Symposium*, such a theme does seem to loom ever in the background. For the ancient reader, any mention of drama would call to mind the masks through which the audience identified the persona the actor was adopting at a given moment. In addition to this rather obvious fact, the dialogue itself is presented in the form of a drama. Plato tells the story in the persona of Apollodoros, who tells it through Aristodemos. Each character is himself a mask for Aristodemos, and each is presented as masked.¹⁰ The most important philosophical aspect of the dialogue is then presented through the character of Sokrates, who in turn puts it on the lips of Diotima—who apparently never existed.¹¹

The first direct mention of Dionysos occurs after Sokrates' late arrival at the party. There is irony in the fact that Agathon, after trying repeatedly to send a servant to badger Sokrates into coming on to the party instead of standing in a neighboring portico (175a-b, 175c), demands that Sokrates share his couch "so that by contact with you I may have some benefit from that piece of wisdom that occurred to you there on the porch."¹² Then with added unwitting irony he continues, "Clearly you have made the discovery and got hold of it; for you would not have come away before" (175d-e). In the banter that follows, Sokrates suggests that knowledge cannot be acquired merely by hearing something said, as water flows through wool from one container to another—a theme that is to become increasingly important as the dialogue proceeds.

In reply Agathon says, "you [are hubristic ('Υβριστής εἶ ἐφη)], Sokrates! . . . A little later on you and I shall go to law on this matter of our wisdom, and Dionysus shall be our judge" (175e).

From Agathon's point of view the reference to Dionysos is understandable. He has just received a favorable judgment from Dionysos in the awarding of the prize for tragedy, and is jokingly suggesting the god would award him another favorable judgment. The fact that Plato, the author, is not treating this merely as a passing remark becomes evident in the conversation that follows. Dionysos was god of wine, and a person who was drunk was regarded as

literally possessed by the god, who spoke through the person's lips.¹³ The Dionysian dictum reflecting this belief, "in wine, truth" (*οἶνος καὶ ἀλήθεια*),¹⁴ is to be paraphrased later by Alkibiades (217e). In context with this belief, then, the guests move almost immediately to deprive Dionysos of his role as judge when they agree "not to make their present meeting a tipsy affair, but to drink just as it might serve their pleasure" (176e). On the other hand their reason for not allowing the god to possess them is that Agathon, Pausanias and Aristophanes, described as "the stoutest drinkers" (176c) are hung over from the previous night's drinking, and the rest are described as "known weaklings" (176c)—suggesting that Dionysos has already passed one judgment on them, and it has not been favorable.

In contrast to this, Eryximakhos tells us, "Socrates I do not count in the matter: he is fit either way, and will be content with whatever choice we make" (176c). This appears to be an indication that Sokrates is unaffected by drinking—as is repeated later by Alkibiades (214a) and then acted out at the end of the dialogue.¹⁵ This, in terms of the symbolism, would imply either that Sokrates' behavior does not change because, drunk or sober, he is always possessed by Dionysos, or that drinking does not affect him because he is immune to such possession. The former would imply that he is a creature of Dionysos; the latter presumably, since Dionysos' traditional rival is Apollo, that he is a creature of Apollo, who protects him from Dionysian possession. Eryximakhos, however, as a physician, should also come under the protection of Apollo, and Apollo seems clearly to be unable to protect him. Eryximakhos in fact admits his inability to handle wine, branding himself as a "known weakling" (176c), then goes on to tell us that: "the practice of medicine, I find, has made this clear to me—that drunkenness is harmful to mankind; and neither would I myself agree, nor would I recommend it to another, especially when his head is still heavy from a bout of the day before" (176d). Thus, Plato seems to be suggesting that Sokrates is a creature of Dionysos.¹⁶

As if to emphasize the banishment of Dionysos from the party, Eryximakhos somewhat contemptuously dismisses the flute girl with the comment, "let her pipe to herself or, if she likes, to the womenfolk within, but let us seek our entertainment today in conversation" (176e). The flute, of course, was a Dionysian instrument, and the flute girl's presence at the party was in part a symbol of the presence of the god in the wine. Flute girls at such

banquets also were often expected to have sex with the guests,¹⁷ and Eryximakhos apparently does not want any erotic byplay—or at any rate any heterosexual erotic byplay¹⁸—to disturb the discussion of Eros he is about to propose.

Despite the attempt to banish Dionysos, the reader soon finds that the god is still present, and is taking a hand even in the ordering of the speeches. Aristophanes, as a dramatist, is in Dionysos' train. As a comic playwright satire is his stock in trade, and he could reasonably be expected to satirize whatever speech precedes his own. If he were to speak when his turn comes his victim would be Pausanias. At this point, however, he has a case of hiccoughs and is unable to take his turn. He had already admitted (176b) that he is hung over from the parties of the previous evening. This time they have agreed "to drink just as much as it might serve their pleasure" (176e). The combination of a hangover and a few sips of wine (or any other alcoholic beverage) resulting in hiccoughs is common enough not to need further comment. The result is that instead of satirizing Pausanias, he will speak after Eryximakhos, the attendant of Apollo. The details of his satire of Eryximakhos are discussed below.¹⁹ Part of the satire, however, arises directly from Dionysos in the form of the wine in Aristophanes' belly. Eryximakhos had given Aristophanes a prescription for his hiccoughs: "But during my speech, if on holding your breath a good while the hiccough chooses to stop, well and good; otherwise, you must gargle with some water. If, however, it is a very stubborn one, take something that will tickle your nostrils, and sneeze: do this once or twice and though it be of the stubbornest, it will stop" (185e).

Later we learn that the prescription was successful, but "not until it was treated with a course of sneezing" (189a). This latter comment, together with Eryximakhos' directive that this be done "during my speech," and Aristophanes' reply, "Start away with your speech . . . and I will do as you advise," (186a) emphasizes for the reader that all the while Eryximakhos is discussing Love as the binding force of the cosmos, bringing peace, and introducing harmony (or "attunement") into all levels of existence, Aristophanes is holding his breath (sputtering, no doubt, and belching), hiccoughing, gargling and finally sneezing, generally disrupting the harmony (or "attunement") of the discussion—as might be expected of Dionysos.

Or of a comic poet.²⁰

Later, as Sokrates is finishing his speech, Alkibiades enters—or more accurately, perhaps, Dionysos enters in the person of Alkibiades—and Dionysos' role as judge becomes more explicit.²¹ Alkibiades is described as "very drunken" and as "bawling" (*βοῶντος*) like a bull (212d), a Dionysian beast, and a form Dionysos himself assumed when he was pursued by the Titans. He is supported by a flute girl, just as the god is frequently portrayed as being supported in his drunkenness by maenads carrying and playing their flutes. And like the god and those in his train, Alkibiades is crowned with ivy (as well as violets; cf. ch. 6, sec. 1).

Agathon's original challenge to Sokrates was to allow Dionysos to judge which of them was wiser (176a). Now Alkibiades' initial request is, "will you admit to your drinking a fellow very far gone in liquor, or shall we simply set a wreath on Agathon—which indeed is what we came for—and so away?" (212e). The god, then, if we carry out the implied symbol, has again come to crown the tragedian as he had the previous day in the theater. Although he addresses Agathon as "the cleverest and handsomest" (212e), he has not yet noticed Sokrates.

After he crowns Agathon, he somewhat petulantly puts his drunkenness together with "speaking the truth:" "Ah, you would laugh at me because I am drunk? Well, for my part, laugh as you may, I am sure I am speaking the truth" (212e). Then with more than a little impatience, he adds: "Come, tell me straight out, am I to enter on the stated terms or not? Will you take a cup with me or no?" (212e–213a).

The impatience and the petulance are quite in character for Alkibiades, but in context with the previous effort to keep Dionysos out of the party, they are equally in character for the god, who is petulant because they fail to recognize that he speaks through the lips of the drunken Alkibiades, and impatiently demands that they decide whether or not to admit him, not just to the party—he has covertly at least, been there all along—but into their bodies in the form of wine, allowing him to possess them. Once admitted, Alkibiades and his train join the party (213a).

This is the point at which Alkibiades notices Sokrates. He immediately takes back the crown he had awarded to Agathon, splits it, and awards part of it to the tragedian, part to the philosopher, saying: "He [Sokrates] shall not reproach me with having made a garland for you [Agathon] and then, though he conquers everyone in discourse—not once in a while, like you the other day, but always—bestowing none upon him" (213e).

This appears to be one of the judgments of Dionysos.²²
It is not the last.

Although the guests, at Alkibiades' request, invited him and those with him to join the party, Alkibiades does not accept the role of party crasher, and those who invited him soon find, perhaps to their dismay, that instead of Alkibiades joining the party, the party in fact has joined the train of Alkibiades. This, of course, fits well with the character of the god, who in a number of the myths turns up uninvited, disguised as a human, then imposes his will upon the others.²³ Alkibiades takes more seriously than they may have wished their agreement to "take a cup" with him, and he takes over Phaidros'²⁴ office as symposiarch, or "master of the feast," all with the peremptory manner of the petulant god: "Now then, gentlemen, you look sober: I cannot allow this; you must drink, and fulfill our agreement. So I appoint as president [*ἄρχοντα*] of this bout, till you have had a reasonable drink—myself" (213e).

His idea of a "reasonable drink," we find, is to chug down a cooler full of wine—which he does. He then orders the others to do the same.

At this point Alkibiades unwittingly repeats what Eryximakhos had said at the beginning of the evening: "Against Socrates, sirs, my crafty plan is as nought. However large the bumper you order him, he will quaff it all off and never get tipsy with it" (214a).

Coming from Alkibiades this is both a prediction and a Dionysian judgment. Moreover, Alkibiades clearly shows Sokrates to be a creature of Dionysos, identifying him first with Silenos, then with Marsyas,²⁵ both of whom are satyrs, creatures of the god.

Yet another judgment is found in the fact that Alkibiades chooses not to praise Eros, but to praise Sokrates instead—even going so far as to say "I could praise none but you in your presence" (214d). Then, in the description he gives of Sokrates he goes on to say that Sokrates' speeches "are the only speeches which have any sense in them; and . . . [no others] are so divine, so rich in images of virtue, so largely—nay, so completely—intent on all things proper for the study of such as would attain both grace and worth." If this is the case, then no speeches written or produced by Agathon can measure up. The judgment of Dionysos again goes to Sokrates.

In the banter that follows Alkibiades' speech, Sokrates arranges the seating so that he will be in a position to praise Agathon (222e–223a). Since Sokrates has by this point been identified as the clay through which Dionysos speaks,²⁶ this would suggest that

Dionysos, through Sokrates, is about to praise Agathon. But Dionysos in another manifestation prevents this, "when suddenly a great crowd of revelers arrived at the door, which they found just opened for someone who was going out. They marched straight into the party and seated themselves: the whole place was in an uproar and, losing all order, they were forced to drink a vast amount of wine" (223b).

In the end, the judgment is given by Dionysos in the form of the wine itself when, at the end of the dialogue, we are told that Aristodemos, having passed out, "awoke towards dawn, as the cocks were crowing; and immediately he saw that the company were either sleeping or gone, except Agathon, Aristophanes and Sokrates [i.e., Sokrates and the two playwrights, the three dearest to the god], who alone remained awake and were drinking out of a large vessel, from left to right; and Sokrates was arguing with them" (223c).

The movement from left to right had been part of Eryximakhos' proposal for the second stage of the evening's entertainment, in which each was to "prescribe" for his neighbor on the right. The "prescription," then, is that each in turn drink from the "large vessel."

As to most of the talk, Aristodemos had no recollection, for he had missed the beginning and was also rather drowsy; but the substance of it was, he said, that Sokrates was driving them to the admission that the same man could have the knowledge required for writing comedy and tragedy—that the skilled tragedian could be a comedian as well [i.e., both are inspired by the same god, Dionysos]. While they were being driven to this, and were but feebly following it, they began to nod; first Aristophanes dropped into slumber, and then, as day began to dawn, Agathon also (223d).

Thus, both in argument and in wine, the judgment of Dionysos went to Sokrates.

The above account gives only the bare bones of the Dionysian symbolism that runs deep through the whole of the dialogue. The skeleton will be fleshed out in the pages that follow.

2 The Lovers

That Pausanias and Agathon are lovers is made explicit by Aristophanes who, as he ends his speech, says, "And let not

Eryximachus retort on my speech with a comic mock, and say I refer to Pausanias and Agathon; it may be they do belong to the fortunate few, and are both males by nature" (193b-c).

Although the evidence is less concrete, the same appears to be the case with Eryximakhos and Phaidros. They do appear together in *Protagoras*, but there is no mention there of their being lovers. The fact that they were both accused along with Alkibiades of the desecration of the herms may suggest something of the sort as well.

In the *Symposium* such a relationship is strongly hinted at in the initial exchange between them (176d-e) where Phaidros says, "why you know I *always* obey you, above all in medical matters" (emphasis mine). The use of "always" (εἰώθα—"in my customary manner") clearly suggests that their relationship is not just one of physician and patient. This suggestion is then strengthened when Eryximakhos says that Phaidros:

is *constantly* [ἐξάστροτε] complaining to me and saying,— is it not a curious thing, Eryximachus, that while other gods have hymns and psalms indited in their honour by the poets, the god of Love, so ancient and so great, has had no song of praise composed for him by a single one of all the poets that have ever been? . . . I recollect coming across a book by somebody, in which I found Salt superbly lauded for its usefulness, and many more such matters I could show you celebrated there. To think of all this bustle about such trifles, and not a single man ever essaying till this day to make a fitting hymn to Love! So great a god, and so neglected (177a-c, emphasis mine).

In addition to the improbability of such a claim, this is hardly the sort of remark one would make casually to a friend. That Phaidros would make such a complaint to Eryximakhos once is suggestive; that he would "constantly complain" to him in this way seems conclusive. Moreover, if we accuse Eryximakhos of embellishing Phaidros' complaint—or even of making it up—a statement such as he makes here would pass without comment only if the others present perceived them as lovers.

The fact that Agathon and Pausanias, Eryximakhos and Phaidros, are thus paired as lovers will cast a somewhat different light on their speeches.

3 The Symposiarch

Although Eryximakhos proposes the subject for the evening's discussion, the fact that he attributes it to Phaidros seems to be enough to give Phaidros the office of symposiarch,²⁷ the master of the feast. Although nothing is said directly of this, Phaidros is referred to as the "father of our debate" (177d), and is allowed to speak first, perhaps in order to clear the way for him to exercise his duties afterwards. At any rate, Phaidros merely presents his speech to the company at large ("So there is my description of [Eros]..." 180b), but a number of the other speakers present their speeches to Phaidros.

Pausanias begins by addressing a complaint to him: "I do not consider, Phaedrus, our plan of speaking a good one..." (180c). He ends by presenting his speech to Phaidros: "Such, Phaedrus, is the contribution I am able to offer you, on the spur of the moment, towards the discussion of [Eros]" (185c). Agathon, at the beginning of his speech addresses Phaidros directly, although this might be because he is criticizing a point made in Phaidros' speech: "Thus I conceive, Phaedrus, that [Eros] was originally of surpassing beauty and goodness, and is latterly the cause of similar excellences in others" (197c). As he closes, he formally presents his speech to Phaidros: "'There, Phaedrus,' he said, 'is the speech I would offer at his shrine'" (197e). Even Sokrates goes through a similar formality at the end of his speech: "This, Phaedrus, and you others, is what Diotima told me" (212b); then a moment later: "So I ask you, Phaedrus, to be so good as to consider this account as a eulogy bestowed on [Eros], or else to call it by any name that pleases your fancy" (212c).

The three speakers who do not address their speeches to Phaidros are Eryximakhos, Aristophanes and Alkibiades. Eryximakhos and Aristophanes have each spoken in place of the other, and that probably explains the fact that each presents his speech to the other. Alkibiades takes over the office of symposiarch, and addressing his speech to Phaidros would be inappropriate. This fact may also explain Eryximakhos' and Phaidros' early departure after Alkibiades' speech: "Then, as Aristodemus related, Eryximachus, Phaedrus and some others took their leave and departed" (223b-c)—thereby possibly (through the exit of the follower of Apollo) letting in the group of drunken revelers who broke up what was left of the party.

Finally, we get a hint of the symposiarch's duties when we see Phaidros exercising his authority at three points in the dialogue. The first takes place after Aristophanes' speech when Phaidros interrupts the conversation between Sokrates and Agathon, preventing the development of a philosophical dialogue in order to allow the agreed order of the entertainment to continue, even though he admits that he would be happy to allow Sokrates to continue the dialogue: "For my part, I enjoy listening to Sokrates' arguments; but I am responsible for our eulogy of Love, and must levy his speech from every one of you in turn. Let each of you, then, give the god his meed before you have your argument" (194d).²⁸

The second takes place after Agathon's speech when Sokrates complains to Eryximakhos that he misunderstood what was expected of him, and offers to withdraw from the entertainment: "I find I was quite mistaken as to the method required; it was in ignorance that I agreed to take my turn in the round of praising. 'The tongue,' you see, undertook, 'the mind' did not; so good-bye to my bond. I am not to be called upon now as an eulogist in your sense; for such I cannot be" (195a).

He then offers to speak anyway, but in his own way—an offer he addresses to Phaidros: "Nevertheless I am ready, if you like, to speak the mere truth in my own way; not to rival your discourses, and so become your laughing-stock. Decide then, Phaedrus, whether you have any need of such a speech besides, and would like to hear the truth about Love in whatsoever style of terms and phrases may chance to occur by the way" (199b).

The third occurs immediately after this. When "Phaedrus and the others" ask him to speak, Sokrates again appeals to Phaidros, this time almost formally, for permission to have a short dialogue with Agathon as an introduction to his speech:

"Then allow me further, Phaedrus, to put some little questions to Agathon, so as to secure his agreement before I begin my speech."

"You have my leave," said Phaedrus; "so ask him."
(199b-c).

Thus Phaidros seems beyond doubt to be the symposiarch. As such he has the duty—and the authority—to see that whatever entertainment has been agreed upon is carried out. He can "levy a speech" from each of those present, cut off conversation, and even

decide whether a speech about to be offered is admissable or not. Later, of course, when Alkibiades “elects” himself symposiarch, we find that the office carries the power to order everyone to get drunk—even after the physician has told them it is harmful to their health.